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Living as an Inuk in Montreal : Social Networks and Resource Sharing

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Living as an Inuk in Montreal:

Social Networks and Resource Sharing*

Nobuhiro Kishigami

1. Introduction

During the 1980s many Inuit born in the Canadian Arctic began to move to southern cities (Kishigami 1999 a, b, c; cf. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1993; cf. Frideres 1999:235-247). By 1991, there were 8,305 Inuit living in Canadian cities with a population of 100,000 or more (The Centre for International Statistics at the Canadian Council on Social Development 1996 table 1). The word "Inuit" here refers to persons who claimed a full or partial Inuit identity at census time. Since the overall Canadian Inuit population was 49,000 individuals in 1991, this means that about 17% of these people lived in southern metropolises.

The Inuit population in Canadian cities in 1991 was 1,895 in Toronto, 840 in Edmonton, 775 in Montreal, 725 in Ottawa-Hall, 630 in Calgary, 570 in Vancouver, 515 in Winnipeg, 360 in Halifax, 345 in Saint Johns, and 260 in Victoria (The Centre for International Statistics at the Canadian Council on Social Development 1996 table 1). Thus, Montreal has the third largest population of urban Inuit in Canada.

In the summer of 1997, I interviewed 54 Inuit in Montreal (see Kishigami 1999a, b, c; 2000; 2001). In this paper, I will describe and discuss about social networks and resource sharing of the Inuit in Montreal.

2. Inuit of Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Montreal is the second largest city in Canada, with Toronto being the largest. The total population of the Greater Montreal District is about 3.1 million. According to the 1991 census, the ethnic composition of the population is approximately 1.8 million (59%) French, 206,000 (6.7%) English, 166,000 (5.4%)

Italian, 77,000(2.5%) Jewish, and 550,000 (26.4%) from various other ethnic groups. Montreal thus comprises a multi-ethnic society, although because French Canadians numerically, politically and culturally dominate the city, French is the primary language.

Montreal Inuit may be divided into three occupational categories: students, workers, and jobless persons. While Inuit workers or students can live well in Montreal, those without jobs only manage to survive by recourse to charitable organizations and government welfare. Many of the jobless Inuit encounter severe socio-economic problems in the city (Kishigami 1999 a, b).

Given the urban setting, Montreal Inuit are unable to undertake traditional pursuits such as hunting and fishing. However, they do speak with their northern friends in Inuktitut, and sometimes share native foods that have been sent or brought from the north. This meat and fish is either portioned out to other Inuit, or the Inuk who possesses it invites other Inuit to share meals. As there are very limited quantities of Inuit native foods in the city, food sharing and invitations to meals occur only occasionally. Although some Inuit produce soapstone carvings and other Inuit handicrafts in Montreal, there are few other ethnic and cultural distinctions between urban Inuit life-ways and those of other city-dwellers. Most of the Inuit accommodate existing urban institutions rather than attempt to maintain their northern way of life in the city.

Inuit women in Montreal tend to live with or marry non-Inuit partners, and their children tend not to speak Inuktitut or retain an Inuit cultural identity. The urban setting of multi-ethnic cities lack the social conditions for maintaining Inuit culture and language.

My research of 1996 and 1997 indicates that young Inuit raised in Montreal and Inuit whose spouse or parent was non-Inuit tend to regard themselves as indigenous people of Canada, Canadian of Inuit descent, or indigenous people of Quebec, rather than as Inuit (cf. Lambert 1986; Fienup-Riordan 2000:151-168). According to the 1991 Aboriginal census, 455 of the 775 Montreal Inuit listed multiple ethnic identities. Inter-ethnic marriage over one generation and city dwelling in multi-ethnic situations make Inuit's intergenerational succession of their language and culture difficult and they lose their taste for native food (cf.

Fogel-Chance 1993; Sprott 1994; Fienup-Riordan 2000:151-168; Lee 2000).

3. Social Networks and Resource Sharing in Montreal

3-1 Social Networks and Resource Sharing

Almost of all the Inuit in Montreal informed me that they preferred their native food such as caribou meat, arctic char, maqtaq, etc. to Euro-Canadian food. The majority of 54 Inuit said that once they ate seal or caribou meat, they did not get hungry for a long period.

There were clear differences in meal content and meal consumption location between employed and unemployed. There was a tendency for employed Inuit to eat frozen caribou and seal meat, and arctic char more regularly and frequently than unemployed Inuit.

Homeless Inuit as well as other unemployed Inuit depended on several missions, the Salvation Army, a women's shelter "Chez Doris" and the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal for almost all of their meals. For example, a homeless Inuk had his suppers at the Salvation Army and lunches at a church in downtown from Monday to Friday. He sometimes had nothing to eat or drink except water on Saturday and Sunday when many charitable organizations were closed.

Regarding native foods, unemployed Inuit sometimes obtained food when they visited Inuit friends or relatives in hospitals or boarding houses in Montreal or Dorval. They sometimes made phone calls to their parents, siblings, relatives or friends requesting that native foods be sent to them in Montreal by air cargo or mail. Sometimes, their friends brought some food with them to Montreal. On those occasions, the unemployed Inuit in Montreal would acquire native foods. Also, at Chez Doris, on two Wednesdays each month Inuit dishes were served to Inuit visitors.

The employed Inuit had most of their meals at home. In Montreal, they had many more opportunities to eat native food than unemployed Inuit and Inuit students. Although some employed Inuit ate native food almost every day, others ate native food only few times a month. Although there was some variation in food preference among the employed Inuit, most of them regularly obtained native food

from the north and ate it at least once a week. When they wanted to obtain native food, they made telephone calls to their parents, siblings, relatives or friends to request that the food be sent to them by air cargo. Also, employed Inuit voluntarily sent, or brought, native food to unemployed Inuit. The Montreal Inuit kept the seal and caribou meat and fish in small freezers at home and ate the food in small portions at a time. Also, some of them ate caribou meat and arctic char at lunch in the offices of the Makivik and Kativik School Board several times a month. Most of the Inuit preferred native food to other types in Montreal. However, non-Inuit spouses and their children tended not to eat the native foods in Inuit ways.

In sum, most of all the Montreal Inuit originally from the northern communities had a tendency to prefer the native to other food types. But the employed Inuit regularly enjoyed native food, while the unemployed Inuit seldom did so. As there were very limited quantities of Inuit native foods in the city, food sharing and invitations to meals occurred only occasionally. Food sharing was less frequently practiced in Montreal than in northern communities (cf. Kishigami 1994; 2000a).

3-2. Social Ties to Native Communities

Inuit of Montreal had not formed their own community in the city by the mid-1990s. They also did not have any voluntary associations of their own there. An Inuk had a variety of friends, including French Canadians, English Canadians, First Nations and others, in addition to Inuit. He/she could see other Inuit at his/her working places, and at The Native Friendship Centre of Montreal, Chez Doris, colleges, universities, bars, and public parks in the city. The urban Inuit had primarily ego-centric social networks in each of them.

As to relationships between the Inuit of Montreal and those residing in northern native villages, the Inuit of Montreal maintained their relationships to their family, kinsmen or/and friends in their homes through telephone calls or by visiting each other (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of Telephone Calls to One's Native Places, 1997

Living as an Inuk in Montreal: Social Networks and Resource Sharing

	Unemployed Inuit	Employed Inuit	students	Total
2 or more a week	4 (16.6%)	5 (22.7%)	3 (37.5%)	12 (22.2%)
once a week	6 (25%)	4 (18.1%)	3 (37.5%)	13 (24.0%)
a few times a month	4 (16.6%)	4 (18.1%)	0 (0%)	8 (14.8%)
once a month	1 (4.2%)	7 (31.8%)	0 (0%)	8 (14.8%)
sometimes	4 (16.6%)	2 (8.7%)	1 (12.5%)	7 (13.0%)
no phone call	5 (20.8%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	6 (11.1%)
	24 (100%)	22(100%)	8 (100%)	54 (100%)

Source: (Kishigami 1999a: Table 5 in P. 97)

75% or more of the Inuit made telephone calls to their home villages once a month or more. There were some differences in the frequency of telephone calls between unemployed Inuit, employed Inuit, and Inuit students in Montreal. While about 21% of the unemployed Inuit did not make any telephone calls to their home village from Montreal, the others did contact their family, kinsmen or friends by phone. As the unemployed Inuit usually did not have any money, they used a free telephone at The Native Friendship Centre or made a collect call.

In terms of frequency of visiting one's native village, there were clear differences between the unemployed Inuit, employed Inuit and Inuit students (Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of Visiting One's Native Villages, 1997

	Unemployed Inuit	Employed Inuit	Students	Total
Very frequently	1 (4.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.9%)
twice or more a year	0 (0%)	11 (50%)	6 (75%)	17 (31.5%)
once a year	1 (4.2%)	5 (22.8%)	1 (12.5%)	7 (13%)
occasionally	6 (25%)	5 (22.8%)	0 (0%)	11 (20.4%)
no visiting	16 (66.7%)	1 (4.5%)	1 (12.5%)	18 (33.3%)
	24 (100%)	22 (100%)	8 (100%)	54 (100%)

Source: (Kishigami: Table 6 in P.98)

About 50% of the employed Inuit visited their home 2 or more times a year. Those people could make the trips to the northern communities because the Makivik(Northern Quebec Inuit Association) and Kativik School Board provided their employees a special bonus for travel to the north during holidays.

Most of the Inuit students spent their holidays in their native village. Thus, 75% students answered that they made a return trip between Montreal and the north twice or more a year.

As air fares between Montreal and northern villages in Nunavik or Nunavut were very expensive, the unemployed Inuit seldom paid for their fees. Instead, only on special occasions, such as attending one's family funeral, they could travel to their native village with the special assistance of the Native Friendship Centre and Air Inuit. 25% of the unemployed Inuit visited their home village to attend their kinsmen's funerals with their assistance. In sum, employed Inuit and Inuit students regularly visited their home villages in the north. On the other hand, the unemployed Inuit rarely saw their kinsmen and friends in their home villages

3-3. Creation of the Association of Montreal Inuit

Until the late 1990s, there were few places for Inuit to meet and exchange information in Montreal. As Montreal Inuit did not have any voluntary association and did not form a spatially separate community, they had to create individual social networks amongst themselves. This resulted in a lack of extensive food sharing and only occasional use of Inuktitut. Generally speaking, most Montreal Inuit could not create and maintain Inuit culture and cultural identity primarily because they lacked strong social solidarity and because their social networks were too weak.

In 1998, a number of Montreal Inuit became concerned about the situation and held several meetings to discuss the establishment of an urban Inuit organization. When they held a native food feast at the hall of St. Paul's Anglican Church in Lachine one Saturday in November, 1999, about 120 Inuit attended. The group decided to voluntarily hold monthly community-style Inuit native food

feasts. Such feasts are prevalent in northern villages during special times of the year, such as Christmas and Easter (Mesher 2000).

On the 29th of March, 2000, a volunteer organization, the “Association of Montreal Inuit” was officially established (Mesher 2000). This organization aims to function as a center for information exchange, socializing, and to provide a monthly supper, for urban Inuit. If this organization is successful, the Inuit of Montreal may be able to maintain their cultural identity and create a new sense of a Montreal Inuit community.

4. Discussion

In the following, I hope to discuss about social networks, food sharing, and social ties to native villages of the Inuit living in Montreal.

4 – 1 Social Networks

Franz Boas was one of the first researchers who recognized socio-economic significance of kinship in central Inuit society of Canada in the 1880's. He stated: “The social order of the Eskimo is entirely founded on the family and the ties of consanguinity and affinity between the individual families”. While Inuit society in the Canadian Arctic has been changing, the individual household and the extended family are still most important in hunting and fishing activities, summer camping, food and meal sharing, and so on in the contemporary arctic village (eg. Wenzel 1994; Kishigami 1995, 2000). With a few exceptions, arctic villages have less than 1,000 and are physically isolated from each other. Social interactions among the Inuit within each arctic village are much more frequent and intense than those within Montreal.

The results of my research on social change in Akulivik (Kishigami 1998, 2000), indicate that hunting and fishing activities have been drastically declining since the 1980's. However, those also indicate that food sharing practices on an individual basis, and food distribution with use of the hunter support program, contribute to the reproduction of the extended family and neighbor relationships as well as to a sense of being a villager and being the Inuit. On the other hand, Inuit in Montreal are dispersed throughout the city and rarely are their neighbors

other Inuit (Kishigami 1999a, b). Each of the Inuit has very few kinsmen in the city except in cases which an entire family has moved to Montreal from the north. In these situations, a “traditional” native food sharing system is seldom employed in daily life in the city. A characteristic of Inuit social networks in Montreal is that friend relationships are socially and economically more important than kinship relationships. Furthermore, friends of Inuit are not always other Inuit, and in the case that an Inuk does have some Inuit friends, those friends do not always come from his or her village and region. In The Native Friendship Centre of Montreal and at other organizations, Inuit from different localities establish friendships.

4-2. Social Ties to Native Villages

Most Inuit living in Montreal maintain some relationships with their families, kinsmen and friends in their native villages by occasional or regular visiting and phone calls. As discussed previously, there is a clear difference between employed Inuit and unemployed Inuit in terms of the frequency of visiting and telephone calls. The relationship between an Inuk in Montreal and his or her kinsmen and friends in their native village function primarily as a network for sending frozen caribou, arctic char and seal meat, south to the Inuk in Montreal.

4-3. Food Sharing

Food sharing is less frequently practiced by Inuit in Montreal than in arctic villages. However, the urban Inuit occasionally practice food sharing. One feature of food sharing among the urban Inuit is that they share their native food with not their kinsmen but their Inuit friends from other villages. While food sharing practices in the arctic villages are deeply related to reproduction of family and kin relationships, those in the city are connected to that of friendship among Inuit from various villages.

Furthermore, a new type of food sharing, that is, a regular feast organized by the recently established Montreal Inuit Association, has the potential to produce and reproduce social relationships within the Montreal Inuit community, based not on kinship but on friendship and a shared experience of living as an Inuk in

Montreal.

5. Conclusion

In this short paper, I discussed food sharing practices of the Inuit in Montreal and social ties to their native communities. First, as Inuit obtain only small amounts of native food such as caribou meat and arctic char from their native villages and live dispersed throughout the Montreal area, they shared their native foods far less frequently with other Inuit in Montreal than Inuit do in arctic villages. Second, most of the Inuit living in Montreal maintain some relationships with their family, kinsmen and friends in the arctic by visiting and making telephone calls. Those relationships function as networks for native food sent to Inuit in the south.

Until the late 1990s, there were few places for Inuit to meet and exchange information in Montreal. However, in March, 2000, a volunteer organization “the Association of Montreal Inuit” was officially established (Mesher 2000). This organization started to offer a monthly supper to the urban Inuit. This resulted in the formation of a sense of a new Inuit community. This kind of social change among the Inuit in Montreal indicates that urban Inuit are not necessarily passive subjects, but are instead active in responding to a given set of social situations and in attempting to organize their life on urban environment.

While the Inuit in Montreal still maintain social relationships with the Inuit in the north, they are creating a new community and social relationships on the basis of friendships and a shared experience of being Inuit and living in Montreal. This organizing focus of Montreal Inuit is very different from that of arctic Inuit, whose community is still based on kinship and place, in addition to their shared experience in the Arctic. I think that if the Association of Montreal Inuit functions effectively, an Inuit community in Montreal, as well as a sense of being Montreal Inuit, will emerge. But this community will be organized primarily along friendship ties, rather than “traditional” kinship ties.

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Living as an Inuk in Montreal: Social Networks and Resource Sharing

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