

The Children of Nunavut

Nunavut Territory, one of the great aboriginal land claims, is now home to about 125,000 Inuit people in northern Canada. These are people whose lives have been shaped by the landscape- tough, nomadic, living off the land and sea, able to deal with adversity and totally attuned to their environment. My penchant for extreme travel took me just below the Arctic Circle to Baffin Island last summer as part of a Canadian trip, that focused on Inuit culture. What I saw was a culture perched on the cusp of old world and new. Villages on the rocky coastline have replaced the traditional nomadic way of life but travel between them still requires dog sleds, snowmobiles or planes. All-terrain vehicles (ATVs) buzz about stirring up the dirt streets where even weeds find it tough to grow in summers that linger only fleetingly. Shamanism has given way to Anglican and Pentecostal churches. However, the mythology of the Inuit lives on in their art, which reflects their sense of oneness with animals and a belief that animals and people are interchangeable. Animals are thought to have souls and are treated with great respect, including giving thanks before taking their lives then making sure no part of the animals go wasted.



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Unemployment is high and many families are on government assistance. Yet, the arts thrive, and in villages such as Cape Dorset and Pangnirtung about 15% of the populations work as sculptors or print makers and their art is promoted through cooperative art centers. There is a strong sense of community and almost everyone is related in some way. There is also a dark side about which the people do not like to speak- spousal and child abuse. Traditionally, these problems have been handled locally and dealt with as a community not just a family problem, with an emphasis on restorative justice. Now that the Inuit have gained territory status they find themselves in conflict with

some Canadian laws, which, for instance, might insist upon incarceration over community rehabilitation for an offender.

In the capital "city" of Iqaluit there is a fledgling law school designed to produce native attorneys and judges who are familiar with Inuit tradition and to satisfy terms of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, which demands "representative employment." Inuit culture has always stressed consensus as a means of resolving conflict rather than reliance on the adversarial system. I had the opportunity to speak with one of the 13 law students and the director of the law school. When I asked what the Inuit response to domestic assault was, they shared an actual case in which the village elders gave an abusive man a new wife who would not put up with his ways! His rehabilitation was apparently effective and he has not re-offended. Regarding child abuse and neglect, families readily adopt children whose parents are unable to care for them and apparently the adoption process is fairly straightforward.

In the five villages we visited, curious, smiling children would greet us. Their dentition was poor as a diet high in sugar has replaced "country food" (that which is hunted locally) but they appeared otherwise healthy. One small child was wearing a Gap t-shirt and another a sweatshirt that said Hollywood. Young girls carried baby siblings or huskie pups in the hoods of their *amauti*, jackets specially designed for this purpose. Teens smoked and

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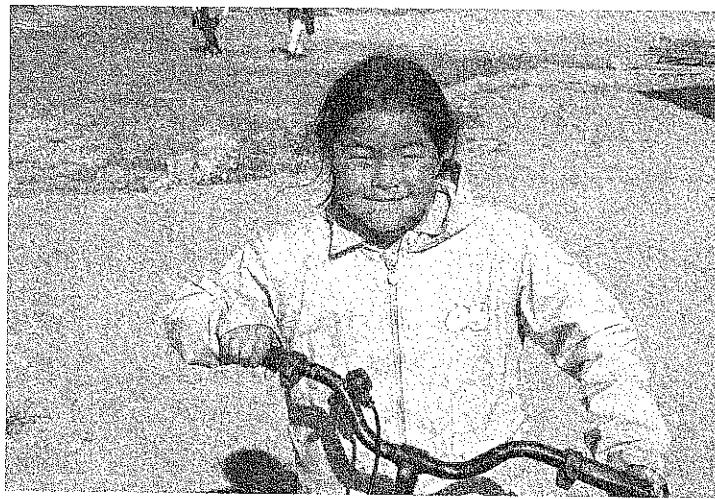
raced about on ATVs often without helmets. One has to be 16 years of age to drive them but young kids pile on board with older family members. Body piercings and tattoos were refreshingly absent. A school social worker told me that there is not much substance abuse among teens other than cigarettes and that the major problem she deals with at school is truancy.

I was struck by how very socialized the Inuit children seemed to be. They played happily together improvising games and had considerable independence given their small communities where relatives are never far away. An old boat in a school playground kept several children giggling and content as they created their own scenarios. I saw no war toys, no fighting, or bullying and rarely saw tears. Their communities seemed to encourage cooperation rather than competition. For instance, we were invited to participate in a "baseball game" played with a cricket bat in which people of all ages were included and everyone remained at bat until they got a hit. Demonstrations of Arctic games in community centers showed remarkably strong and agile teens encouraging one another in their difficult feats. Failure did not seem to lead to shaming. Yet another value stressed in this culture, is respect for the elders who preside at community gatherings and are consulted on important decisions within family and community government.

Most all of the children speak English as well as Inuktitut, which is not the case with many of the elders other than those who spent years in TB sanatoriums "down south" in Manitoba. Sad tales were shared about long separations from parents during institutional care and not recognizing them upon return home years later. It was easy to engage most of the children in conversation. Little boys shared hopes of becoming hunters or fishermen when they grew up. Enterprising teenagers sold impressive sculptures they had made and spoke of

wanting to attend college but planned to return to their communities afterwards. One wonders what jobs will await them if they do return.

Incongruities abounded in the village of Pangnirtung, which lies nestled under mountains in southeastern Baffin Island at the end of a beautiful fiord. The new community center there has a fine museum, library and a special room designated for the elders where they can socialize while taking in a



An Inuit girl plays on Cape Dorset in the Nunavut Territory of Northern Canada.

spectacular view of the fiord. Curious about the audio-visual room, I peeked in and saw a girl who appeared to be about four-years-old, curled up on a couch watching the Spice Girls on TV. The next oddity was meeting two boys with golf clubs but no balls. It seems that some time back a famous golf player had come to town bestowing golf clubs on the community and presumably golf balls which had long since been sent flying into the fiord. One of the boys, Scott, who was practicing his swing, said he wanted to learn to play golf but the village store did not stock golf balls. The fact that grass won't grow here doesn't deter these aspiring golfers. I was shown the village golf course: two rectangular pieces of canvas tacked down with holes cut in their centers. I offered to send Scott some golf balls and he beamed. The final amazing sight of the day was someone in a red wet suit water skiing on the fiord where the water temperature was 34° F.

I pondered the parallels that exist in so many indigenous cultures where traditions wane in the face of "progress," economic realities and assimilation into the homogenized culture of the majority. An added force in the Inuit communities is the impact of global warming on native populations of wildlife and the fragile ecosystem, which in turn impacts their economy. Yet, these people have managed to hold on to many of the values that are so endangered in our culture: respect for elders and wildlife, care and compassion, the importance of art in daily life and the importance of maintaining community, and finally, tools for conflict resolution. Undoubtedly, living in small communities in a harsh environment fosters cooperation without which these remarkable people would not have survived. Physical isolation also helps them preserve their culture though it remains to be seen what the impact of Spice Girls and other TV fare will be. We have much to learn from the cherished values of the Inuit.

When I returned home, I received an e-mail from Scott's mother thanking me for the golf balls. She explained that Scott (I also have a Scott) was not his real name but that his given Inuit name was too difficult to pronounce. She said that she was in the process of adopting him and that he had come from a very abusive home in another community. He is not yet reading or writing and is still adjusting to his new community. He was not used to anyone giving him anything and she said that he has been all smiles since receiving the golf balls I sent, which have logos of New York City on them. His stature had risen in the community with his prized possessions. His mother is now delighted when he comes home wet and muddy from being outside playing golf with new friends knowing that he is learning to be a kid, which was not allowed in his past life. Scott will soon have his 15th birthday. It will be the first time anyone has given him a birthday party. ■

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