

Everyday Life among the Inuit

by Mary Jane Sweetland and Fernando T. Gomez

Like other indigenous peoples, the Inuit have experienced accelerated cultural change in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Nonetheless, they maintain their traditional identity and seek out ways to retain customs and practices that emerged during their pre-contact history.¹ In effect, the Inuit straddle a gap between the modern world in which they must cope each day and a culture that is thousands of years old. This binary aspect of their culture is also reflected in images from the 2009 Cape Dorset Annual Print Collection.

Once a nomadic group which found sustenance through hunting and gathering, the Inuit now live in permanent settlements, with prefabricated housing, supermarkets, and other trappings of modern commercial life.² Kananginak Pootoogook's print (fig. 1), *Dorset at Twilight*, depicts one such settlement, its rows of houses lit by electricity.



(fig. 1)

¹ Louis-Jacques Dorais, *Quaqtaq: modernity and identity in an Inuit community* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 4.

² *Idem*, p. 28.

On the technological front, changes in Inuit society are obvious. For modern home construction and other purposes, electric tools have replaced traditional stone or animal bone tools.³ Also, motorized forms of transportation are in use, such as ATVs, cars, motorboats, and snowmobiles. One of the latter is put to use as a family car in Tim Pitsiulak's print, *Family of Eight* (fig. 2). Their communities belong to larger energy grids in their use of electricity, oil and water reservoirs.⁴ And not surprisingly in this computer age, televisions and digital media have been adopted by the Inuit, and many of their communities are fully connected with wireless Internet.⁵

Modern medical practices have also been adopted, moving the Inuit gradually away from traditional natural remedies.⁶ In dress, many Inuit combine both modern, ready-made clothing and traditional outerwear made from seal and walrus skins.



(fig.2)

³ Webpage, "Traditional and Modern Inuit Way of Life." <http://www.ansgar-walk.de>, 5 May 2010. <http://www.ansgar-walk.de/uploads/html/trad_eng.htm>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Webpage, Nunavut Department of Economic Development and Transportation, 2 May, 2010. <<http://www.edt.gov.nu.ca>>. 2008. Web. 2 May 2010.

⁶ See n. 3.

There are also significant changes in the working lives of the Inuit. Today, most households are supported by wage earners, and although some continue the traditional hunt (though through more modern means), their numbers are dwindling.⁷ To prepare the Inuit community for new careers, they receive institutionalized forms of education from early childhood.

A further trend in this changing, increasingly globalized society is the increasing use of the English language. As the lingua franca of global communications, English is threatening the survival of the native language, Inuktitut.⁸ In each community, there are Inuit who strongly identify with their cultures and yet cannot speak their native language. Those who use “foreign” languages do so out of practicality, as opposed to the choice of modernity over tradition. Still, many cannot seem to reconcile the transition, or rather the dual presence of modern and traditional Inuit culture. This seems to be one reason for the recent increase suicide and drug dependence among the Inuit, as many young people feel unprepared for life caught between cultural traditions and the modern world.⁹ Beyond this, with the loss of a language comes the loss of innumerable aspects of a culture’s oral traditions, beliefs and worldview. Even given these crises, the Inuit are resourceful and resilient. Adapting to the modern marketplace, they have found new forms of cultural expression in the sphere of contemporary art, through print studios and sculptural ateliers. And further, the use of the Inukshuk for the 2010 Olympic emblem made an indigenous form into a global symbol.

⁷ Dorais, p. 3.

⁸ Vivian Elias, "The Implications of Modernity for Language Retention and Related Identity Issues: Applying the Thought of Charles Taylor," *International Congress on Arctic Social Science* (2008), p. 6.

⁹ Mason, Charles, "In Native Alaskan Villages, a Culture of Sorrow," *The New York Times*, 14 May 2007: n. pag. (web, May 2010).

Many of these changes signal a fundamental shift in the economic systems of Inuit communities. The website for Nunavut's Department of Economic Development and Transportation greets visitors with the words, "We put people first, helping to build healthy communities and the infrastructure they need to link to each other, to the rest of Canada, and to the world."¹⁰ The economy of the Nunavut territory has made great strides in recent years, with transportation and technology continually expanding in the once nomadic land of the Inuit. Just this month, two Inuit-owned Canadian helicopter companies merged and will now offer transportation services to Nunavut.¹¹ Ventures like this one will surely bring more business to these Arctic communities.

Much of the economy in Nunavut involves the arts and crafts sector, tourism, transportation or motor vehicles, and mining. Cape Dorset's website names as its leading source of revenue art-related professions (mainly printmaking and carving, along with the Kinggait Co-operative which exports artists' work around the world), followed by hunting marine mammals and game, and finally tourism.¹² According to Nunavut Tourism's website, twenty-two percent of Cape Dorset residents are employed in the arts in some way. In its business directory, telephone and fax numbers appear for a number of different retailers and services, ranging from a general store and a bakery to mechanics and a Cablevision company. It appears that much has changed for residents of Cape Dorset since their grandparents' generation, when the single meeting point in town was a trading post.¹³

¹⁰ See note 5.

¹¹ Webpage, CBC News, "Nunavut Helicopter Firm Launches," <http://www.cbc.ca>, May 4, 2010.

¹² Webpage, "Cape Dorset Municipal Website," http://www.capedorset.ca/en/business_business_opportunities.asp.

¹³ Webpage, Nunavut Tourism, "Nunavut: Untamed, Unspoiled, Undiscovered," <http://www.nunavuttourism.com>, April 30, 2010.

Suvinai Ashoona's *Summer Sealift* (fig. 3), a lithograph from the 2003 Cape Dorset collection, depicts a vessel anchored in the summer Arctic waters near a settlement. The vessel shown here is most likely a member of the Nunavut Eastern Arctic Shipping (NEAS) fleet. Though other sealift companies exist for smaller deliveries such as Cape Dorset, the NEAS is a large part of the Nunavut economy as it is the major cargo carrier to the area because air travel is not always reliable. The melting ice and summer tents depicted in the print indicate that Nunavut has reached its summer months. This is the season when sealifts have the most access to shore, and their schedules are busier in summer months.¹⁴



(fig 3)

The print by Suvinai is significant in the Cape Dorset collection as a representation of everyday life and the economy because it symbolizes the growing importance of trade for contemporary Inuit. The size of the sealift makes it dominate the larger scene of people, tents, houses, and small boats, and it seems like a comment on the impact of modern trade on the

¹⁴ Webpage, "NEAS: Nunavut Eastern Arctic Shipping, Inc," <http://www.neas.ca/mission.cfm>, May 2, 2010.

culture, which had sustained itself through a local, barter-based hunter/gatherer lifestyle until the twentieth century.

Though Cape Dorset has relatively few businesses, the settlement, along with the rest of Nunavut's small towns, has grown significantly since the days of its nomadic past, 1000 years ago.¹⁵ Its population of 1,300 live mostly in prefabricated houses, some of which are government-owned and rented to families or individuals. The homes have electricity, heating, cable, telephone, Internet (though it is costly), and a service for the delivery and pick-up of water and sewage. As for shopping, there are two locations where groceries, household items and even Skidoos may be purchased: the Northern Store and the West Baffin Co-op. The supplies in these stores generally cost more than they would in southern Canadian stores. For this reason, families may place orders with the two local sealifts to bulk order supplies of items that are expensive in Cape Dorset: for example, canned goods, paper and cleaning products, and other non perishable items, including alcohol, which requires a permit.¹⁶ Cape Dorset does not have a bank, but it does have a post office, a medical center, the Hamlet office, which acts as a general store for goods and services, and two schools. The schools are divided by grade. Kindergarteners through seventh graders attend the Sam Pudlat School, while eighth through twelfth graders attend Peter Pitseolak School, where the enrollment is 160 students. Students learn English, French and the native Inuktitut. Recreational facilities include a classroom that doubles as a workout room in the Sam Pudlat School and an arena with natural ice for winter

¹⁵ See note 13.

¹⁶ Webpage, Kivalliq School Operations, "Cape Dorset, Nunavut," *Qikiqtani*, <http://mailhub.edu.nu.ca/qikiqtani/orientation/CapeDorset.html>, May 2, 2010.

sports. There is a coffee shop, and the schools put on fundraising and social events for entertainment as well.¹⁷

Dorset at Twilight, *Family of Eight*, and *Summer Sealift* are among a variety of works from Cape Dorset print collections that reflect upon everyday life in Nunavut. These works highlight some of the daily encounters Inuit have with the balance of tradition and modernity, the entrance of new technology, and expanding economic and community interactions. Contemporary life is an ever-changing concept among the Inuit, and these artistic representations help to document the stages of their evolution.

¹⁷ Ibid.