
Inuit in Canadian Society

Inuit are one of the most readily identified minorities in the world thanks to images of the snow-house or *iglu*, the fur parka, the long winter periods of darkness, and the great white expanses of snow and ice. These clichés are as prevalent in Canada as abroad, and many Inuit resent them as well as the more recent image of the "smiling Eskimo". While southern Canadians are proud of Inuit sculpture and graphics, which are the most readily identified Canadian artworks internationally, and although they often choose Inuit words for domestic and international public use as Canadian symbols, Inuit society and culture remain little known or understood. The fact is that Inuit language and culture are extremely different from any others in Canada, and they are accessible only to a very few outsiders who take the time and have the patience necessary to know them.

The intrusion of industrial society and the social welfare state into an ancient society has forced Inuit to respond in unaccustomed ways. A young publicly schooled corps of politicians and spokespersons has replaced the traditional leadership of elders, at least in representing the Inuit to the outside world. The Inuit leadership has won high praise from governments and others for its practical, moderate, and unsentimental style, and its ability to reach agreements on problems and grievances. On the other hand, the Inuit traditions of unwillingness to confront overtly, and belief that a mature person always compromises, have left them vulnerable at times to outsiders, including governments, who want to drive a hard bargain.

The costs of change have been high. Despite significant material advantages ultimately gained through public programs for health, housing, and social assistance, there have been many adverse effects on child care, family fabric, mental health, and nutrition, especially through the ravages of alcohol and drug abuse. The disruption of the old social and leadership structure, with the move from scattered camps to concentrated bungalow villages, and the overturning of old roles and duties, has left Inuit society disoriented at a moment of great stress.

It is hoped that restoring control to Inuit through new institutions will re-establish stability. While very few Inuit want to return to the old life with its material hardships, many long for its social and cultural values. The question facing Inuit today is what their culture means and how it can be realized and strengthened socially in the face of an unceasing tide of alien material change, fads, and values.

For Canadians generally, the Inuit are a source of romantic pride. They have given Canada a model of stoic courage and enduring calm in