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Inuvialuit History

The Inuvialuit chose to settle and concentrate along the coast line of the Arctic Ocean. They limited their travels in the geographical area, as we know it now, from Herschel Island to Cape Bathurst, and bartered and traded with the Inupiat of Alaska and the central Arctic Inuit. The Inuvialuit developed this society in this area for several reasons.

1. There was a land base to build permanent community centres, the major centres being Herschel Island, Tununuk, Kittigazuit, Tuktoyaktuk, Warren Point, Atkinson Point, Dalhousie, Anderson River, and Baillie Island. From the migrating Blue Nose and Porcupine caribou herds as well as from moose harvested from North Yukon, the Mackenzie Delta, and Anderson River, they got what was needed for their society — food, clothing, accommodations, and other items. Grizzlies were also harvested.

2. The Mackenzie River is one of the largest in the world. The delta area is used by migratory birds not only for nesting, breeding, and moulting but as a staging area both when they arrive in the spring and when they get ready to leave in the fall. The land around the river is rich and produces plants, berries, and roots that were edible by humans as well as by wildlife.

3. The Arctic Ocean had migratory mammals as well as fish and polar bears. The mammals harvested were bowhead and beluga whales, seals, and *ugyuk*s (bearded seals). The richness in wildlife, fish, and migratory birds was the attraction for the Inuvialuit to settle in the area.

The next reality they had to face was the environment. They had to adapt to climatic conditions, learn by trial and error, which at times was costly, even to the point of some people perishing. They had to rely on one another and share their experiences. Under these conditions the Inuvialuit developed a pattern for their society, which I will try to piece together based on the stories of Inuvialuit elders.

"Inuvialuit" means the real people or a people that identify themselves to an area. In our dialect "Inuit" means any human being or people. Inuvialuit understood that there were other people outside their concentration areas and they respected them.

The Inuvialuit followed a yearly cycle or pattern. Things were discussed by a recognized leader and subleader and their trainees, but the overall decision was made by the leader. These discussions were pursued when the Inuvialuit gathered together as a collective group at the Kittigazuit area during the winter months. Discussions focused on what the terrain was like; the animals, fish, and birds, how early or late the migration of various species started, when they left or would arrive again. Each subleader reported on his

area while the leader listened. These kinds of discussions were heard by all present so that everyone had the same information — nothing was held back because if that happened it would jeopardize the social order or lives of the people. The leader, by end of March, dispersed the parties with the subleaders in charge to go to their harvesting locations and use their expertise for the health and welfare of the people as a whole. Each party or community varied in size. The total population of the Inuvialuit numbered in the thousands (5,000–6,000) during this pre-contact time.

Inuvialuit Leaders

Inuvialuit at that time knew the responsibility that came with leadership. Any decision made by a leader would affect the welfare of everyone. A leader is recognized by his wisdom or understanding of the environment and wildlife and by his being able to use this knowledge to make life easier for himself and his family. Those around him see this and usually consult him for his opinion in decisions they plan to make. Thus is started the process of consultation, and the one so recognized by others has no choice but to take the leadership role. The other members of the party thank and reward him from the fruits of their labour because of the guidance he provides. Because of his initial unselfishness he not only benefits from his own labour but also from the labour of others. He also takes stock of those he has become responsible for and picks out those others who are fulfilling similar responsibilities and works closely with them.

The leader and his subleaders had to administer or distribute responsibility to the parties for which each subleader was responsible. If there were seven parties or small communities, there were seven subleaders. They had to decide what, where, and when small hunting and fishing parties should be sent out to the surrounding areas so there could be more variety in their diet. In times of scarce food supply along the coastal areas and in case of a consequential raiding Inupiat party, the enemy had to be carefully located and repelled, and subleaders had to be able to respond to a call for help from other Inuvialuit camps when necessary. Each subleader had to make sure that in his community those with patience and communication skills were used to teach and train the young. Community leaders had the ability and skills to do the things each subleader was responsible for, so there was no time wasted in understanding a problem or a process. He was there to make sure that there were enough people in each party to meet the overall requirement of the Inuvialuit.

When it was time to gather at Kittigazuit area, the leader was responsible for what could be taken for showing and barter/trading purposes with the other community leaders and their members. He was responsible to report to the ultimate leader of the Inuvialuit on their activities and the concerns of his community.

Community leaders were responsible for the Inuvialuit in the concentration area. They made sure that sufficient numbers of people with distinct abilities and skills were committed to each community. This leader circulated himself between each community to better understand the local concerns, and he also had the opportunity to do some things out of the ordinary that he wanted to try out for himself. He was able to do this because his needs were met by the various communities.

Travel

During the spring and fall travel was done by walking, by sleighs pulled either by the people themselves or by dogs (one dog per sleigh). During the summer and early fall, kayaks and *umiaks* were used. Men had two types of kayaks — one for speed for hunting; another for hauling freight so that, for example, they wouldn't have to drag their catches over long stretches. During some travels they backpacked themselves or used dogs to backpack. When it came to traveling with *umiaks*, the woman paddled with a man responsible for the rudder. *Umiaks* hauled family members and camping gear. Men followed or led in their kayaks. For passing messages they had runners on land, and these used kayaks during water seasons.

Community Activities

Each community had a specific species it concentrated on harvesting. They did not have to worry about any other major species because they knew that another community was harvesting it, just as they had the responsibility for looking after the need of the Inuvialuit people through the wildlife harvesting they were entrusted with. And each species of wildlife harvested was prepared differently for food and other uses.

Each community was close to the migration route or habitat area for the migratory species of wildlife, fish, or birds it was responsible for, although a community never was set up on the exact route or in the heart of a habitat area. During the hunts the leader was followed with no questions asked.

At his sign the hunt was started. Anyone who disobeyed was disciplined by not being allowed to take part in other hunts. Usually disciplinary action of this kind lasted for one year, after which time the disobedient individual was allowed to try again. The disobedience was thus not only an embarrassment to himself but he jeopardized the welfare of his community and the Inuvialuit as a collective group. This action reflected negatively not only on himself but also on his community.

After the hunt the workload was shared by all, since what was harvested was gotten in large quantities. Food was stored in the permafrost, was dried, or a fermenting process was begun. All usable by-products were cleaned and prepared for tools, clothing, or shelter. Bones were broken and

the marrow stored. For permanent shelter sod houses were built, usually for three to five families, depending on the size of the house built. There were compartments built and each compartment was used by one family. Sod houses were built using the driftwood that came down the Mackenzie, Kuglulik, and Anderson rivers as framing material, along the coast of the Arctic Ocean, over 300 miles of shoreline has driftwood. A wood frame was built, clay was used as chinking between the cracks, then sod was laid over the wood and clay.

Tents were made and used also. Poles were of driftwood and caribou or seal skins sewn together with the fur on the outside were wrapped around the wooden poles. When traveling in early spring and fall the people built snow houses when necessary. Caribou skins sewn together were used for blankets and mats. Polar grizzly hides were often used as mats under the caribou mats.

The centre of the sod house was a common area where cooking and dining took place, and where storytelling and socializing transpired. Stories told about the results of both the good and bad that happened to an individual. Children were taught by these stories how to live, keeping in mind those around them, especially how to listen to and respect the leaders' words and what they had said. A person's words at that time were considered to be a contract, only it was not written. Words were not taken lightly — "I will," "I'm going to," "I'm ready to," "I'll do" were words that drove the Inuvialuit. That's why, before a decision was made, there had to be a lot of thought and discussion about the matter being contemplated.

For fishing and hunting small game every member of the community knew how to take part. The children and young people developed their skills through such fishing and hunting, under the eyes of adults. Small game varied around each community and fish of all species were plentiful. Fish traps were used and nets were made with sinew tied together for catching both fish and ptarmigan.

When a young member of the community for the first time brought home game for food, the family and close relatives celebrated with him. When the food was eaten it was shared by all except the youth who got the game. They would share the game even though it may be just a nibble for each member. To top it all off the whole community would hear of the success and show their respect to him, because one of their members had just started his maturity process.

Every member of the community knew how to sew and build a snow house because it was required for warmth and shelter. After all, there could be times when one would be alone for long periods of time. Woman and young girls specialized in sewing, house and lantern keeping, caring for young infants and children, berry picking, and gathering roots and other edible vegetation. As well, the womenfolk often waited expectantly for the return of their loved ones.

→ Food

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some got so they could see and recognize objects from a long distance. This closeness of love brings with it an unanny invisible tie, to the point where if there is something happening out of the ordinary or an endangerment to a loved one it is felt in some way by those at home. This may be because there is more time to think about (and pray for) them.

Men, when not hunting for harvest, were exploring or searching out new areas that would make life easier for the community. Any new discovery would be recognized by the community and thereby the individual's knowledge would be seen to be worth seeking out. A lot of this "research" or "studying" was done during the months when wildlife was plentiful in the area. Anything noticed in the behaviour of the wildlife would be shared back home and the meaning of that behaviour had to be evaluated until understood (at times answers could take years). Men's lives were dedicated to trying to understand the wildlife and environment.

Food was eaten raw, cooked, fermented, or dried. A lot of oil — whether fat, blubber, or rendered blubber — was eaten. Not only were the meat, blubber, and marrow eaten but also the intestines. After game was cleaned, it was cooked or dried for food. Berries were collected when ripe and were eaten or stored in sealskin bags. (Sealskin bags were used to store berries, fermented meat, and rendered blubber and were also used as water bags.) Roots and other plants were washed and eaten.

Clothing was made of caribou, seal, whale, *ugyuk*, muskox, polar/grizzly bears, and bird skins. Fish skins were used, as well as other skins of small game, for added decoration on clothing. There were winter clothes as well as spring/summer fall clothing. Sinew, usually from the back spinal cord of caribou, was used as thread. Besides the ordinary clothing, there was also ceremonial dress made for special events.

Tools and equipment for harvesting and preparing by-products included *ulu* knives, lamps, needles, bone drills, stones/bones for scraping, snow goggles, snow knives, shovel, bone/stone picks, fish hooks, seal/whale/bowhead harpoons and lances, bows and arrows, slings, three-stringed slings, sticks for fish traps, nets, and kayaks.

Permafrost and Its Uses

From Herschel Island to Cape Bathurst there are recorded depths of permafrost of anywhere from 60 to 1,000 feet in places. Permafrost is a permanently frozen substrate of rock and soil, which is overlain by an active layer of soil that may thaw and refreeze. Here, along the Arctic coast, there are several locations where this is kept from melting by a layer of over-burden, usually peat moss and lichen and in some places clay, sand, or gravel pockets that make a hill or mound. Because of the permafrost pingos form or grow out of the ground. What happens is there is an underground

lake just below the permafrost. These lakes vary in size. The water that has contact with the permafrost (ice) begins to freeze slowly, the freezing causes expansion, and thus the permafrost and over-burden begin to heave and lift up, creating a pingo. This process takes place until the underground lake is completely frozen over, at which point the pingo quits growing. These pingos were used as landmarks by those out on the ice floe or travelling by boat across large, open stretches of water. Pingos are a solid cone or core of ice.

The Inuvialuit used this permafrost to their advantage in other ways. They dug into it and made space to store and freeze food. To make coolers they dug to the level of the permafrost and built a shelter with wood frame, clay, and sand. These coolers kept the fermentation of food-processing controlled during the summer months, when at times it gets rather hot and meat/fish can rot quickly. In the summer an ice house dug into the permafrost is very cold and in the winter it's just a few degrees below freezing. This is because, during the summer, the surface of the land or tundra isn't frozen in many places so the coldness of the permafrost escapes and replaces the warmer air in the ice houses. During the fall and winter, the ground surface is frozen and acts like a blanket, so there is no air of any kind escaping. The storage space in the ice house thus warms up and the air becomes stationary and stale. Hence, the food stored during the summer stays in excellent condition but if kept in the ice house in the fall and winter the surface of the food becomes mouldy. To keep the food from getting too mouldy they hauled it to the surface and put it on stages when the ground had been frozen over for a few days and they were certain it was going to stay cold.

Other Aspects of Inuvialuit Life

Games within a community were encouraged when there was time. Various games were played by different age groups. Non-competitive games were played by groups. Competitive games were played by individuals with others watching. The purpose was to develop themselves by practising against each other to be ready for competitions with the other communities. For children, games were developed to teach them to work and think together. Skill, concentration, and strength were to be developed through their games.

Elders were revered within the community, for they had lived the longest and therefore knew more about life. In their own time they kept the community together by listening to *their* elders. Now it was their turn to give council and advice about personal and family matters. The physical strength of old men, for example, was lacking, but they had learned to put to use for the community the strength of young men. At one time, after all, they were the young ones, so they knew the limitations of these young people.

Elderly women, likewise, worked on the character and personality of young women and girls as well as showed them the duties of a wife.

Finally, adoption was important in the community, both to the ones adopting a child or a person and to the one being adopted. Adoption occurred when the natural parents died. Priority was given to childless couples and to the elderly who were living alone and needed help. Adopted persons usually produced more for their parents because they were not only treated like real family but they were grateful and wanted to please them. As they were growing up the adopted people in some ways could better understand how to help others that were in need because they were filling a need and were getting the first-hand experience of being helped themselves. Because of that attitude of going one step further in their duties and by their work pleasing others, they gained respect from those around them.

Adoption

