

English Expose: “7 People and a Mayor: Westernized Communities, Social Change and Violence among Inuit of Nunavut”

Canada’s geographic centre lies in the Territory Nunavut. From here the distance to the geographic North Pole is as far as to the US border. Nunavut takes up about 1/5 of the Canadian land mass but has by far the smallest population with currently about 38,000 residents. 85% of its population are Inuit whose culture dramatically changed within the last 70 years.

As a result, the territory is dealing with several generations of Inuit that are traumatized or at least severely affected by cultural and economic changes that started after World War 2 with the resettlement from the land into permanent communities. No matter if we are talking about the actual elders, mid-age adults or pre-teenagers, each of this generation experienced and still experiences various personal and cultural challenges of identity, financial and housing insecurity, food insecurity, substance abuse education, change of social values ranging from inter-generational and gender relationships to the introduction of a foreign political and legal system.

On the other side, a lot of the traditional societal values are still being practiced in Inuit families. Despite all the tragedies that several generations of Inuit have experienced by now, the society keeps generating the strength and cultural pride that allows many Inuit both, as individuals and as a collective under the umbrella of either Inuit Land Claims or not for profit organizations to advocate on behalf of Inuit culture, to fight for more acknowledgement of Inuit culture and to enhance pride in the historic and present day cultural achievements of Nunavut’s indigenous population.

The social issues, inter- and intra-cultural processes described in my thesis are not exclusive to the situation in Nunavut or to Inuit. Studies from other regions, in Canada or from around the world (LaPrairie 1987; Jensen 1986; Nunatsiaq News 6/30/2010) reveal similar challenges.

Though many structural similarities can be identified by comparing these studies with each other, e.g. marginalization of the indigenous local population, colonization, paternalism and

resulting issues like personal and cultural identity loss, it is important to have a more in depth look into the single cases to determine which individual events and developments causes and maybe still cause such a devastating social situation as it is found among many indigenous peoples across the world. From my perspective effective improvements of the situation of a group, a respective community or region can only happen when particularities of socialization, communication and philosophy in the single cultural entities are being considered.

That is why my thesis will exclusively focus on developments in Nunavut and use various case studies of communities. The case studies shall help to identify local differences in historic and recent developments and thus provide starting points for explanations of different developments in different Nunavut communities.

The thesis is looking at both, historic and recent root causes for the many issues in Nunavut.

The data that my my thesis is based on are a combination of literature and about 60 formal and informal interviews that I conducted in three Nunavut communities (Iqaluit, Whale Cove, Kugluktuk) during my 18 months of field work between October 2008 and March 2010. Many more spontaneous unstructured conversations between me and community members added to the pool of first-hand information that I gathered.

Since my field work is limited to those three communities it has a very strong qualitative character. The quantitative side, which allows me to confidently apply my research analyses to entire Nunavut, comes from literature research as well as many informal conversations and a few formal interviews that I conducted with people who had some experience in other communities than Iqaluit, Kugluktuk and Whale Cove.

Furthermore, while I was living at the old residence of the Nunavut Arctic College in Iqaluit, I spend time with college students from across Nunavut. Through them, I obtained „case studies “from following communities: Iqaluit, Qikiqtarjuaq, Kimmirut, Pangnirtung, Clyde River, Pond Inlet, Igloodik, Repulse Bay, Cape Dorset, Chesterfield Inlet, Baker Lake, Rankin Inlet, Whale Cove, Arviat, Taloyoak, Kugluktuk.

My general categorization of “early contact period”, “contact”, “1st generation” and “2nd generation” is very similar to Damas’ terms of “early contact phase”, “contact – traditional”,

“resettlement” that he uses to create a timeline that describes the major phases of impact for Inuit society (Damas 2002: 7, 17).

Chapter 2 is meant to provide an inventory of the key aspects of current social issues in Nunavut. In this context I am looking at the four major aspects that in my opinion shape Nunavut’s society:

- 1) violence and other forms of social dysfunctions
- 2) the associated services and delivering agencies that try to address those matters
- 3) Education
- 4) Inuit cultural particularities in communication and socialization

Those four areas are forming the foundation for the rest of my work. The following chapters will guide the reader through the historic transformation process of Inuit pre-colonial semi-nomadic society to a society that is living in permanent settlements, strongly influenced if not in many ways dominated by Euro-Canadian culture. Each of those chapters will be referring to the social and cultural changes that happened in the different time periods that I labeled with “Pre-settlement, First, Second, and Third Generation”. The relevance of violence and other social dysfunctions, their context and strategies how each generation dealt with those matters will be analyzed while I will be also referring to the impacts that non-Inuit, primarily Euro-Canadians and Euro-Americans had and have on Inuit society.

Much of the thesis centers on the understanding of culture beyond the aspects that a foreign observer could identify at first glance, unlike material culture, spoken language and customs that are performed for tourists or celebrated at public events.

Instead, I intend to point out that a huge identificatory aspect of culture is embedded in an extensive set of social practices and co-notations that communication implies that is often culturally specific and not directly applicable to another culture. This means that the foreign observer might recognize social practices that seem very familiar to him – like a handshake or a conversation between two people – but the meaning and implications of these practices do not necessarily have to be the same ones as in the observer’s own cultural background. They can slightly vary or even mean the total opposite as in the case

of a traditional Inuk who in a conversation might respond with the words “I don’t care.” Whereas in western society “I don’t care” could easily be interpreted as a disinterest in a certain topic, in South Baffin Inuit culture it means that the speaker does not claim “authority” over the topic. Maybe he was not sanctioned by his community to speak about that field of expertise or maybe he has a socially higher status than his conversation partner and demonstrates to him that the other person does not need to ask for any further permission, guidance or any other sanction from him in order to deal with the whatever matter the two were talking about (IQR 8 2009).

Hereby, I am focusing on three aspects of culture: a) implications of verbal and non-verbal communication patterns, b) family structure and authorities, c) cultural value system with social values, rules, and sanctioning mechanisms.

Most of the cultural change of the last 70 years in Canada’s North did not get initiated by Inuit society but was forcefully brought onto it. Consequently, many cultural particularities are not only jeopardized in their existence but since the change happened and happens without a fair social discussion and major consent from Inuit, the indigenous culture experiences it as very disruptive. My thesis will explain and reference to Inuit cultural particularities and contrast them to the dominant Euro-Canadian culture to illustrate the painful impact that the introduction of western culture had and has on Inuit society.

In pre-colonial Inuit society certain adults of the extended family were the main institutions for acquiring skills and knowledge whereas today formal institutions like schools, colleges and other agencies that offer workshops on particular subjects largely take on the role of passing on knowledge and skills which shoves the traditional teachers aside and significantly shifts the understanding of identity, intergenerational roles and interdependencies within families. Since the shift of the educational system is directly connected with individual, gender based and intergenerational identity crises I decided to dedicate some sub-chapters to it.

Suicide, even though it is an extremely important aspect in the discussion about social issues in Nunavut is a topic that I widely avoided in my work. At the time of my research the Government of Nunavut was in the process of doing an extensive suicide prevention study with a private consultant (Jack Hicks: 2010) who had lived many years in Nunavut and had done similar research in Greenland already. It would have felt inappropriate to

approach various agencies and individual with suicide related questions when most of them would already participate in Mr. Hicks' more in-depth suicide study. Furthermore, I felt that my thesis and the GN suicide study could be seen as complimentary documents that each have their own focus but when brought together round up picture of the situation in Nunavut.

Consequently, in my thesis I am limiting myself to the listing of the key findings of an earlier suicide study that will already prove that my interpretation of the dynamics for roots causes of social issues can also be applied to suicide. More details on the particular issues of suicide can be found in Hicks' work (2010; 2015) and other studies (WGSPSN 2009).

All of my professional and non-professional interviewees agreed that most of the social issues that are described in my thesis are very prevalent in Nunavut, must be taken very seriously and should be key points on the agendas of territorial politics and community development.

The circumstance that there are so many more and social issues in Nunavut compared to the rest of Canada leads to the conclusion that a larger percentage of Nunavut's society is affected. The more people are affected the less healthy people are left who could assist the others to change their situation and heal. It is not my intention to portray Nunavummiut as helpless people who are stuck in their misery but I would like to present the hypothesis that the high percentage of Nunavummiut currently effected by the territory's social issues creates a collective trauma (similarly to the historical trauma that got passed on intergenerationally by the first and second generation).

Of course, there rests a lot of potential in Nunavut's population to overcome their social problems. The many recommendations from agencies and individuals in Nunavut on how to tackle the existing problems reveal that. The resume of my thesis is dedicated to present and discuss their voices.