Wage Employment and Cultural Retention
The Case of the Canadian Inuit

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This paper is concerned with the range of types of employment available to the Inuit or Eskimo peoples of the Northwest Territories of Canada, and the consequences that devolve from these various opportunities for retention of traditional Inuit culture. First a brief sketch is provided of the major themes in the traditional culture, and the history of the acculturative contacts to which the Inuit have been exposed is outlined, together with a summary of significant indications of cultural retention. The variety of types of employment currently available to Inuit in the Canadian Arctic is then described, and the consequences of each alternative for cultural retention are discussed. The paper ends with a consideration of the relevance of this Canadian experience to aboriginal and minority groups in other parts of the world.

Abstract

IN THIS PAPER WE TAKE it as given that an appropriate level of cultural retention is contributive in facilitating the adaptation of traditional band and tribal societies to more developed/industrialized conditions of existence. Information is presented on the relative acculturation of Canadian Inuit, the kinds of employment experience they have had in recent years, and the consequences of various employment options for cultural retention. We conclude that the conditions of cultural retention among non-literate indigenous people are quite different from those among literate immigrant ethnic communities. Implications for similar groups in other developing societies are discussed briefly.

The Traditional Culture and Early Acculturation of the Inuit

The traditional culture of the Inuit was ill-adapted in many ways to the kind of industrialization experience common throughout the western world. In pre-contact times Inuit in the Central Canadian Arctic lived in very small bands which fluctuated in size as individual family groups joined forces, or
struck off on their own. There was no institutionalization of social controls, or even of leadership beyond the role of the angakok, the religious shaman, and a general tendency to follow the suggestions of the most successful hunter. Competitiveness and authoritativeness were discouraged. Orders were communicated indirectly, through suggestion or inference. While Inuit worked hard to survive, their attitude toward nature was ultimately stoical, involving fatalistic acceptance of whatever fate might be imposed on them by natural forces they were powerless to affect. Displays of emotion and anger, as well as direct questioning or expressions of curiosity were seen as childish behavior. This bottling up of emotions made for even-temperedness within crowded snow huts ("igloos") but does not facilitate easy relationships between ("childishly") emotional Euro-Canadians and controlled Inuit. They were strongly familialistic, not individualistic, in orientation, and were preoccupied with the present, rarely concerned with any but the most immediate future prospects, and then prefacing their observations with the phrase "If we live..." (Ray, 1962).

It is accurate to say that until 1950 the administration of the Canadian Arctic was in the hands of the missions, the Hudson’s Bay Company, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (Jeness, 1964). Each left its mark on the early acculturation of the Inuit. The earliest of these influences was the Hudson’s Bay Company, and other fur traders. The trade goods that they brought—iron tools, guns, a few foods (flour, sugar, lard, tea), cloth fabric, were less consequential than were the changes induced in the social organization of the Inuit by their encouragement of trapping for furs. This tended to induce more atomization of the scattered populace than had existed previously, weakening the bonds of social groupings.

The technological superiority of the Euro-Canadian missionaries ensured that the conceptions of deity that they sponsored would be speedily adopted by the Inuit. Thus the traditional cosmology, gods and meaning systems of the Inuit were speedily swept away. Traditional moral practices, such as wife lending and situationally specific infanticide and the angakok’s magical efforts to improve the game supply were defined as evil, trafficking with the Devil, and shamefully denied. The minimal but important leadership that the angakok offered was discredited. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police furthered undercutting of traditional normative practices and social controls. The "welfare" subsistence subsidies that the RCMP provided were necessary to forestall the severe hardship and starvation that Canadian Inuit periodically experienced, but were morally debilitating as well. By the 1950’s the traditional Inuit feelings of pride, competence, and autonomy had been greatly weakened. Dependency was widespread.

During the late 1950’s the Canadian government embarked upon a comprehensive series of programs designed to improve the quality of Inuit life, and to eventually make the main streams of Canadian society more accessible to the Inuit. As in the case of Greenland, this involved attracting people from their nomadic and semi-nomadic widely scattered existence into emerging set-