

Inuit Peoples and the Arctic Landscape

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Abstract

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Introduction

A central feature of Indigenous peoples throughout the world is their profoundly strong, close, and historic relationship with the land and its resources (Sejersen, 2004). This paper examines the relationship between Inuit peoples and the vast Arctic landscape. For most, the Arctic is a frozen and virgin landscape that appears to be barren, desolate and empty. Contrastingly, it is full of meaning, opportunity, and social structure for Inuit who call it home; a region where they feel connected to ancient history, stories and meanings (Jacobs, 1996; Aporta 2009). Through insight into Inuit cultural and ecological knowledge, social interaction, community well-being, and connections with the land, the idea of the Arctic as a barren, empty land inhabited by remote and isolated communities is refuted. Upon closer inspection of an empty appearing Arctic, extensive and clear evidence of past Inuit activity and systematic use of the land is revealed (Stewart et al. 2000). Ethnographic and historical evidence proves the existence of a well-established trail network that acted as a channel of communication and exchange among Inuit. It connected distant neighbours, settlements, prime hunting and fishing grounds, and significant associated places across the Arctic (Aporta 2009). Inuit have an inseparable attachment to the land and sense of place, and rely on the Arctic's natural environment for economic, spiritual, social, and cultural purposes (Willox et al. 2012). For centuries, Inuit have successfully interacted with the landscape through use of extensive traditional cultural and ecological knowledge that is inherent to their identity (Aporta 2009). This paper argues that the Arctic is not a virgin, lifeless or barren landscape but one in which Inuit peoples have thrived in for centuries with an appreciative, inseparable, and interactive relationship to the land.

Inuit: The People of the Arctic

Ancestors of modern-day Inuit, the Thule culture originally developed in Northern Alaska, between ca. AD 1000-1600 (Issenman, 1997; Woollett 2007). All Inuit groups are Thule's biological and cultural descendants, and by AD 1200, the pre-historic Inuit culture occupied the low, middle, and high Arctic environments throughout Northern Canada and Greenland (Savelle and McCartney 1988). Thule settlement systems were systematically positioned along diverse and productive coastlines, harvesting sites or inland. Regional surveys, land use patterns, and resource distributions suggest that these settlements were directly located alongside animal migration routes, close to the sea (seaward edge of coastal land fast sea ice) or close to polynyas (water holes amidst sea ice that fails to freeze in winter due to winds, currents, or upwelling). Each of these locations meant sea mammal habitats and suggests that Inuit specialized in marine hunting and subsistence economies based on winter settlements. It is observable that Inuit settled themselves in ecologically and socially diverse Arctic regions that allowed for a variety of travel routes and rich local resources (Woollett 2007). Generally, for Thule Inuit whom are characterized by nomadic lifestyles, the land, sea, and ice were crucial fields of travel, settlement, and harvesting activity (Savelle and McCartney 1988; Whitridge 2004). Since time immemorial, Inuit societies, economies, and identities have been unbreakably tied to the land and its resources (Sejersen 2004). The concept of what is referred to as Thule Imaginaries means that people do not move throughout abstract, biophysical matrixes, but through meaningful and cultural landscapes within socially variable envelopes. Personal and cultural knowledge molds these envelopes within larger social networks, and the landscapes are shaped by ongoing histories of placemaking (Whitridge 2004). On a similar basis to Thule Imaginaries, Inuit cultural, societal, and identity-based relationship to the land is explored (Sejersen, 2004).

Inuit Cultural Knowledge: Oral History and Place Names

In many settlements, there was often at least one building used as a community festival house where technical knowledge embedded itself into myths, stories, songs, histories, dances, and experiences (Whitridge 2004). Songs were used to portray emotional longings of the land while incorporating topological and biophysical detail of it. For example, in Unalakleet, place names were formed into rhymes, tongue-twisters, or phrases that children recited as quickly as possible. Each rhyme was a mnemonic of the sequence of places along a travel route beginning at the village, and when combined, the rhymes created a network of

intersecting paths in Unaalirmiut (Whitridge 2004). Intersecting paths were understood by most Inuit travelers because Elders did not teach trails as isolated and discrete entities. The landscape and trails were well-established because they were described using place names that each member of each community was significantly knowledgeable of (Aporta 2009). Place names were made up of myths, proverbs, legends, history, and stories of encounters with people, animals, and other beings while living and traveling on the land.

Experienced travelers often held knowledge of hundreds of names around their settlements, hunting or fishing grounds, and trails because all connected to sequences of place names. Inuit peoples held the substantial capacity to memorize a diverse collection of knowledge, personal meanings to topography, and mnemonic creations to navigate the Arctic landscape (Whitridge 2004). In travels to unfamiliar and distant places, Inuit pulled from their range of knowledge that may have included names of distant places that connect to long trails. If they felt their own knowledge was not enough, they would acquire it from neighbouring communities because knowledge is what enabled social and physical survival. Due to traveling's importance to Inuit identity and as a result of their nomadic or seminomadic nature, place names were almost everywhere that Inuit dwelt and traveled and were essential to the way Inuit talked about travel and activities (Aporta 2009). After the extensive recitation of historical and environmental information, the Arctic topography was mapped into Inuit memory. The oral and experiential knowledge that made up this memory of the landscape and trails included an individual and collective memory of previous travel, place names and environmental information such as topographic features and ecology.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge

The ability of Inuit to have coped with and adapted to biophysical changes came from their extensive knowledge of Arctic ecosystems, hunting skills, and land, known as traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). TEK included seasonal cycles of hunting and resource use, hazard avoidance, emergency preparedness and response, changing weather, ice, and snow conditions, alternative travel routes, and the ability to travel and hunt in unfamiliar locations (Pearce et al. 2011 and 2015). It encompassed technical skills required to survive as well as personal traits of patience, forbearance, observational, control of physical and emotional reactions especially under pressure, and the ability to develop and execute effective strategies to overcome adversity. It was a tool that Inuit drew upon that allowed them to adapt, respond and increase resilience to changing conditions.

Experienced hunters would consult with Elders and closely observe the weather, clouds, and wind, looking for warning signs that are precursors of dangerous conditions before embarking on land or ice travel (Pearce et al. 2015). The creation, accumulation, and transmission of TEK among generations enabled Inuit to draw upon past knowledge, lessons, oral tradition and experiences under any circumstance. Inuit, as nomadic people, followed the seasonal wildlife migrations over vast distances for food sources, meaning that subsistence hunting was synonymous with living (Pearce et al. 2015). They built shelters using materials from the land and sometimes moved as frequently as every two weeks (Jacobs 1996). Inuit held elaborate sets of navigational concepts and skills for moving through Arctic space, including weather forecasting and wayfinding techniques such as determining direction from snow drifts or wind patterns, landform memory, discerning configuration of distant land, ice, and water, and deciphering the “sky-map” of clouds, stars, or constellations. Additionally, knowledge of multiple routes assisted travelers to find refuge or their way home (Whitridge 2004; Pearce et al 2011). Natural occurrences such as blizzards or ice melt forbade permanent trails. Regardless of trail disappearance, the spatial itinerary remained in people’s memory and materialized at the next trip (Aporta 2009). The term memory-scape has been used in an attempt to emphasize the intrinsic relationship between Inuit and the land. Memory-scape encompasses how Inuit related to the landscape through memory and usage of mental images of the environment and remembrance of particular places (Sejersen 2004).

Over centuries, Inuit have managed to transfer TEK with exceptional precision because the journey (or story of) was the main instrument to transmit it. Journeys consisted of the literal and figurative (in narratives) experience of traveling routes. The narrative included the literal, precise and geographic description of the route along landscapes and icescapes and more importantly, the memory of personal anecdotes and stories related to the trip(s) (Aporta 2009). For routes and trails, they had to be shown through people’s individual, collective, present, and past memory or through use of physical maps to abstractly represent topography and the route. Representation of topographic features such as coastlines or lakes was through drawings or sculptures in the snow or sand or sketched in the air to provide visual aids for those requiring travel directions. The physical map would be accompanied by a detailed description of relevant factors such as wind and sea conditions, landmarks, spatial markers, resources, travel time, and place names (Whitridge 2004; Aporta 2009). This sort of mapping provided opportunity for Inuit to internalize the epistemology between

themselves and the land, which is fundamental to their identity (Douglas 2008). For Inuit, it was a way to demonstrate identity with and knowledge of the land, which was more meaningful than the map itself.

Inuit experienced health-enhancing aspects from the land that were contingent on the Inuit concept of *ippigusutsianik*, which combined knowledge, skills, preparation, and mindset (Durkalec et al. 2015). The Inuit/environment relationship represented the achievement of a culturally distinct and socially appropriate Inuit science that was based on verifiable ways of understanding and critical resources usage (Whitridge 2004). It included explicit ecological, geographical, and technical knowledge that was communicated through teaching and experiential learning. It was a rich body of spatial conceptions that were place-based technical practices that enabled space, an abstract concept, to become concrete and meaningful. The knowledge was complex mix of the real and ideal, and the natural and cultural (Whitridge 2004). The knowledge to safely interact with the Arctic allowed for successful food harvesting and nutrition, psychological benefit, cultural bonding, and positive social interaction (Whitridge 2004; Pearce et al. 2011).

Social, Individual, and Cultural Well-Being

While there was an emphasis on ecological knowledge alone, social values, environmental stewardship, community dynamics and beliefs all contributed to Inuit knowledge (Pearce et al. 2015). There was an individual and collective connection between Inuit and the environment that included place-specific socio-cultural activities that contributed to health and well-being. These activities included hunting, fishing, trapping, foraging, and camping. In a case study of the West Greenland town of Sisimiut, the community perceived and defined the landscape as a source of life and identity. This belief was seen across Arctic Inuit communities as a collective and place-based identity that displayed intimate attachment and sense of belonging to the landscape (Sejersen 2004; Willox et al. 2012). The trails and surrounding areas were places of great significance regarding social interactions during the transfer of news, goods or assistance of other travelers. The interaction across the spatial network created a sense of community that existed and that was strengthened through marriage, kinship, and visitation among Inuit settlements (Aporta 2009).

Community was vital for Inuit and sharing food within and across communities displayed generosity as well as their obligations to kindred and overall well-being of the whole community. Community cohesion was maintained

by strong cultural values and enjoyable social practices (Collings et al 1998). The acts of harvesting, sharing, and consuming foods were important to Inuit for health, food security, household economy as well as fundamental to their culture and identity. Food sharing and trade between communities were crucial strategies to account for differences in food availability, and to nourish the overall culture of self-worth, independence, and reciprocity that characterized Inuit's community cohesion (Pearce et al. 2011 & 2015).

In a focus group study in a small community in Nain, Northern Labrador, Canada, Inuit's close, intimate, and positive relationship with the environment and sea ice was highly evident. The study demonstrated a strong positive link between travelling on sea ice and health benefits that ranged from mental, emotional, spiritual, physical, economic, social, and cultural. When asked about traveling on sea ice, focus group interviewees answered with "good for your spirit", makes your "soul feel better", lets you "be freely who you are", "clears your mind", "is relaxing", provides "relief from all the stressors", with one interviewee stating that it provided motivation and a sense of purpose. In contrast, when interviewees were asked how they would feel if they could not use the ice, they responded with "have no health", feel like they "can't breathe", "get sick", "be very sad", "be lost", "go crazy", and that their "appetite and mind would go." The answers demonstrated that their identity and health was extensively linked with the Arctic landscape because it allowed cultural well-being, connections to history, traditions, and ancestors. Many described the land as their cultural way of life that provided integrated and holistic benefits that ranged from social connections with friends and family, the place they love and live for to the land having medicine properties; each contributed to their overall well-being (Durkalec et al. 2015). The land, ice, and trails were distinctive aspects of Inuit cultural identity (Aporta 2009).

Inseparable Connections

Traveling and moving was a holistic journey for Inuit that was a way of life and a sense of identity. The journey itself was more important than the route, and there were no constraints to arrival or departure time besides those related to critical environmental features such as seasons, timing of ice break ups, or caribou migrations. As a result, it was rare to believe that an Inuk traveler was in any sort, "delayed."

Inuit socially and cognitively invested meaning in particular places that emphasized the experience of the given place, each connected by networks of paths and trails. Inuit socially and economically accommodated to the

environment; the lands owned the people and not people the land (Whitridge 2004; Sejersen 2004).

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated Inuit people's ability to extraordinarily exercise all aspects of life in the Arctic using their intimate and inseparable relationship with the landscape. This historic relationship is discussed in past tense; however, Inuit culture is alive and strong, and much of what has been discussed is applicable to modern day Inuit (Pearce et al. 2015). Inuit people's way of life challenges the popular belief that the Arctic is without life, virgin, and empty. All that characterizes Inuit peoples is closely knit to the environment. Cultural and ecological knowledge, social interaction, individual and collective well-being are each inextricably connected to the land. The Arctic's natural environment is the basis for Inuit economic, spiritual, social, and cultural health (Wilcox et al. 2012). Oral transmission of traditional ecological and cultural knowledge has resulted in an appreciative, inseparable, and interactive relationship to the land that makes up Inuit identity (Aporta 2009).

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