

Stepping Stones



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE INUIT

Planning your learning journey

Who are the Inuit, and why are the Inuit land claims agreements significant to all Canadians?



ISTOCK IMAGE

Inuksuk means “to act in the capacity of a human.” Traditionally, the Inuit erected inukshuit to aid them while hunting caribou as cairns to identify the locations of stored meat caches and as navigational landmarks.

FIRST STEPS



Inuit is the collective term for the different groups of Indigenous Peoples who originally inhabited the northernmost regions of Canada, Alaska and Greenland. The word *Inuit* is plural and means “the people”; the singular form is *Inuk*. *Inuvialuit* means “the real people” and is the term for Inuit who live in the western Canadian Arctic. The singular form is *Inuvialuk*.

In Canada, the Inuit and Inuvialuit live in four regions collectively known as *Inuit Nunangat*, a Canadian Inuit term that includes the lands, waters and sea ice, all of which are integral to the Inuit culture and way of life. The Inuit and Inuvialuit are both distinct from other Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The Inuit speak Inuktitut. The Inuvialuit speak Inuvialuktun.¹





LAND CLAIMS AGREEMENTS

The Canadian *Constitution Act* (1982) recognizes the Inuit as one of the Indigenous Peoples in Canada and affirms their Indigenous and Treaty rights, which include rights that may be acquired through land claims agreements with the Government of Canada. The four Inuit regions of the Canadian Arctic are Inuvialuit (the real people), Nunavut (our land), Nunavik (place to live) and Nunatsiavut (our beautiful land). Each region has a regional government or association that represents local Inuit in land claims negotiations and implementation. The 1984 Inuvialuit Final Agreement was the first comprehensive land claims agreement signed north of the 60th parallel and only the second in Canada at the time.

The principles expressed by the Inuvialuit and recognized by the Canadian government in the agreement include

- preserving Inuvialuit cultural identity and values within a changing northern society;
- enabling Inuvialuit to participate equally and meaningfully in the economy and society of Canada's north and of the nation; and
- protecting and preserving the wildlife, environment and biological productivity of the Arctic.²

The 1993 Nunavut Land Claims Agreement and the *Nunavut Act* were negotiated concurrently, which resulted in Nunavut officially separating from the Northwest Territories on April 1, 1999, to become Canada's newest territory. Other area-specific land claims agreements have also been signed with Nunavik and

Nunatsiavut. In 2003, the modern Treaty holders joined together to form the Land Claims Agreements Coalition to ensure that land claims and the associated self-government agreements are respected, honoured and fully implemented to benefit all Canadians.³

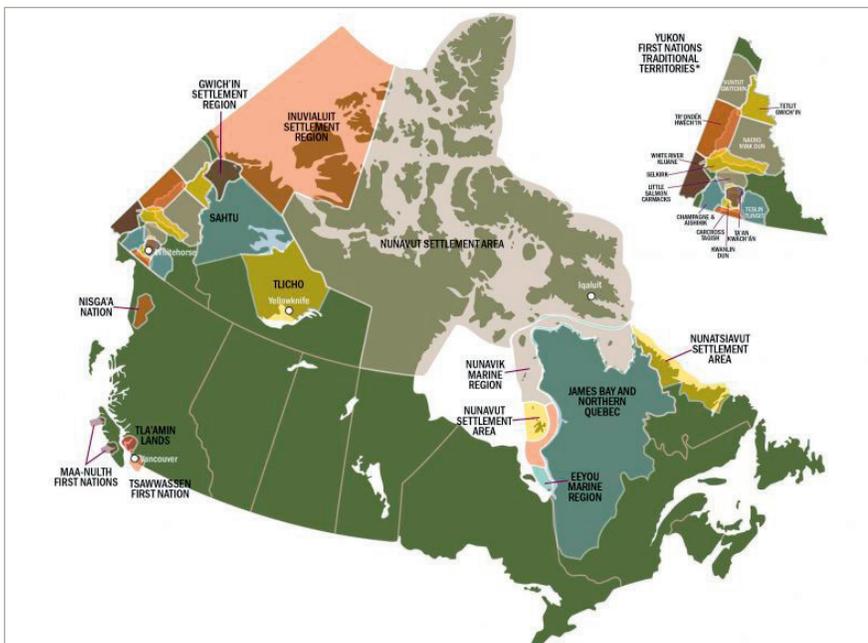
CULTURE

Cultural traditions, language, family, Elders, community and the Land are all important aspects of Inuit identity and well-being. The Inuit and Inuvialuit were nomadic people who survived in the harshest climate with limited resources. They developed an intimate knowledge of the Land and marine plants and animals to sustain themselves. Traditional "country food" (as it is called today) continues to form an essential nutritious and culturally valued staple for many Inuit families.

Elders are regarded with great respect for their knowledge, wisdom and storytelling abilities. People with extensive knowledge of the Land are also considered Elders. They teach young people respect for animals and the Land, and the importance of sharing and reciprocity.⁴

As in many other Indigenous cultures, the circle represents seasonal cycles, marking changes in lifestyle, food, social activities and ceremonies. Inuit women are keepers of the *qulliq*, an oil lamp that was the only source of light and heat throughout the long winters. The *qulliq* is now used in ceremonies to remind the Inuit of the strength of their ancestors.

Children hold a special place in Inuit life and in the hearts of everyone in the community, not just the birth parents. The love of children is reflected in *aqausiq*, which means



Source: <https://landclaimscoalition.ca/interactive-modern-treaty-map/>

loving babies and creating a special song for each infant out of that love. Children are also bonded to adults through the *tuqlluraniq*, a namesake. Traditionally, the Inuit believed that naming a child after someone who recently died would allow the spirit of that person to live on in the child. This practice is still common today.⁵ The Inuit do not practice the traditional or ceremonial use of the pipe ceremony, smudging, tobacco or the sweat lodge.

INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGIT

Inuit Qaujimagajatuqangit, or *IQ*, is the term used to describe Inuit knowledge and world view. The term translates directly as “that which Inuit have always known to be true.” The Inuit world view is one in which all living things are in unity: humans, Land, animals and plants. All are considered equal in terms of respect and consideration. IQ is a set of teachings that Elders call the “Inuit law.” Four big laws that form the guiding principles, beliefs and values of Inuit culture are working together for the common good, respecting all living things, maintaining harmony and balance, and continually planning and preparing for the future. These laws contribute to the Inuit being creative at overcoming interpersonal challenges and maintaining harmony. Conflict and disruption are seen to use up energy needed for survival.⁶

INUIT TODAY

Many aspects of Inuit tradition and culture exist to this day: respect for individuals, a concern for Inuit collective well-being, a willingness to share and living in harmony

with the environment. Changes in the environment, including global warming, are having a significant impact on northern Indigenous Peoples, the Land and animals. In 1971, the Inuit formed the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK). *Tapiriit Kanatami* means “Inuit are united in Canada.” The ITK represents and promotes the interests of the Inuit in Canada on environmental, social, cultural and political issues.⁷ Another strong Inuit voice is the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), founded in 1977. The ICC is an international nongovernmental organization that represents approximately 160,000 Inuit in Canada, Alaska, Greenland and Russia. The ICC has consultative status with the United Nations, and it advocates for the environmental, political, economic and social well-being of the Inuit in the circumpolar regions.⁸

In her foreword to *The Inuit Way: A Guide to Inuit Culture*, Martha Greig made the following observations about the resilience of the Inuit and their culture despite the challenges that they have faced:

As a people, we have undergone immense changes in a generation. Despite the many changes our society has encountered, we retain strong ties to the land and our traditions. People coming to the north today see Inuit taking part in many aspects of modern life—working in an office environment, watching hockey on television, shopping at local stores, making political speeches. What they may not see at first is that Inuit continue to have a strong, unique culture that guides us in our everyday life, our close ties to the land, a dedication to community and a strong sense of self-reliance.⁹

NEXT STEPS



Teachers are required to understand and apply foundational knowledge of the Inuit in their professional practice. Although most Alberta schools will not have many students who self-identify as Inuit, teachers do play an important role in reconciliation with Inuit communities in Canada. The regional land claims agreements, incorporating Inuit traditional knowledge, or IQ, provide the foundation for governance and social well-being in the northern communities. Understanding the principles of IQ offers teachers a unique framework for exploring the many contemporary societal issues and environmental challenges facing Canadians today.



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The ulu is a traditional women's tool used in the preparation of meals and in the preparation of animal skins for clothing construction.

Continuing Your Learning Journey

a) How do Inuit land claims agreements differ from Treaties with First Nations?

b) What is the Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, or IQ, and how might it be incorporated into your school or classroom?

NOTES

1. Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, "Inuit." <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100014187/1534785248701>.
2. Indian Affairs and Northern Development, *The Western Arctic Claim: The Inuvialuit Final Agreement* (Ottawa: Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1984). Also available at <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.838893/publication.html>.
3. Land Claims Agreements Coalition, "Modern Treaties." www.landclaimscoalition.ca/modern-treaties/.
4. Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, *The Inuit Way: A Guide to Inuit Culture* (Ottawa: Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2006). Also available at <https://the-irg.ca/kb/the-inuit-way-guide-to-inuit-culture/>.
5. Deborah Chansonneuve, *Reclaiming Connections: Understanding Residential School Trauma Among Aboriginal People* (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2005). Also available at <https://firstnationspedagogy.com/healing&trauma.pdf>.
6. Shirley Tagalik, *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Supporting Wellness in Inuit Communities in Nunavut* (Prince George, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2009/10). Also available at <https://www.ccsa-nccah.ca/docs/health/FS-InuitQaujimajatuqangitWellnessNunavut-Tagalik-EN.pdf>.
7. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, "What We Do." www.itk.ca/what-we-do/.
8. Inuit Circumpolar Council of Canada, "About ICC." www.inuitcircumpolar.com.
9. Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, *The Inuit Way: A Guide to Inuit Culture* (Ottawa: Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2006). Also available at <https://the-irg.ca/kb/the-inuit-way-guide-to-inuit-culture/>.



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