

Social Hierarchy and Societal Roles among the Inuit People

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Markers of social hierarchy are apparent in four main aspects of traditional Inuit culture: the community as a whole, leadership, gender and marital relationships, and the relationship between the Inuit and the peoples of Canada. Due to its presence in multiple areas of Inuit everyday life, the theme of social hierarchy is also clearly expressed in Inuit artwork, particularly in the prints from Kinngait Studios of Cape Dorset and in sculptures.

The composition of power in Inuit society is complex, since it is evident on multiple levels within Inuit culture.¹ The Inuit hold their traditions very highly. As a result, elders play a crucial role within the Inuit community, since they are thought to be the best source of knowledge of the practices and teachings that govern their society. Their importance is illustrated by Kenojuak Ashevak's print entitled *Wisdom of the Elders*, which she devotes to this subject.² She depicts a face wearing a hood from a traditional Inuit jacket in the center of the composition with what appears to be a yellow aura, and contrasting red and green branches radiating from the hood.

Generally, the oldest family members are looked upon as elders because their age is believed to reveal the amount of wisdom that they hold.³ One gets the sense that the person portrayed in this print is an elder, based on the wrinkles that are present around the mouth. In Inuit society, men and women alike are recognized as elders, and this beardless face would seem

¹ Janet Mancini Billson and Kyra Mancini, *Inuit Women: their powerful spirit in a century of change*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 56.

² Kenojuak Ashevak, *Wisdom of the Elders*, 2009, Stonecut & Stencil, 75 x 86.7 (2009 Cape Dorset Portfolio).

³ Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays, Yup'ik Lives and How We See Them*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 199.

to be a woman's.⁴ Perhaps Kenojuak Ashevak has even represented herself in this print. She is an elder member of the Kinnegait community and of the group of artists who have achieved international recognition through the Kinnegait Studios.

While elders are not literally regarded as the leaders of their community, the elders' philosophy forms the foundation for Inuit society. Elders hold an esteemed position within their communities due to the knowledge they are believed to possess, and the yellow aura surrounding the face in this image seems to allude to this high level of respect. The primary duty of the elders is to pass their wisdom on proper societal ways to the younger generations.⁵ The red and green motif in Kenojuak Ashevak's print seems almost like "branches of knowledge" that extend from the elder's mind to the other members in the community. It is interesting to note that aside from the yellow aura, these branches are the only other part of the print that is in color, drawing attention to this motif of wisdom. Customarily, the elders communicate their knowledge orally.⁶ The elder's mouth in this print even appears to be open, as if speaking to the viewer.

On the other hand, the actual leaders of Inuit communities do not necessarily have special spiritual powers, and they are not necessarily the best hunters or warriors.⁷ However, they tend to be good public speakers, and they are able to communicate the teachings of the elders to the entire community.⁸ The anthropologist Geert van den Steenhoven described the leader Aulatjut as follows: "Everything he did was done quietly and without pretensions but with natural poise and dignity, and he acted so much in a matter-of-fact manner that this leadership went almost

⁴ Ibid., 200.

⁵ Ibid., 199.

⁶ Ibid., 209.

⁷ Ibid., 203.

⁸ Ibid., 202.

unnoticed.”⁹ As one might infer, Inuit society is very communal and its governing is regulated by consensus. Accordingly, leaders act merely as spokespersons rather than decision makers.¹⁰ The Inuit have no obligation to obey the judgments set forth by the leaders, and it is considered completely justified to disagree with them.¹¹ However, the majority of the time, decisions made by the leaders are respected because they usually have the elders’ teachings and the best interests of the community in mind. Simon Tookoome’s print, *Decision by the Group*, clearly illustrates this point. Inuit faces are shown surrounding two central faces in this image, which are face-to-face and inscribed in a circle. These dominant faces can be interpreted as being the leaders of this Inuit community. The circular composition conveys the idea that decisions for the Inuit community are made by the community as a whole and that they have an effect on all of its members, even the dogs that are seen at far right and left in this image.

The leaders in the area of traditional Inuit spirituality are the shamans, who are believed to be able to cross the boundary that separates the physical and spiritual worlds.¹² Some have the power to act as healers within their communities, as well. Others, such as Kenojuak Ashevak’s grandfather Alareak, were said to predict future events and help those in need with their special powers.¹³ One of the main skills that Inuit shamans possess is the ability to transform themselves into animals, including walruses, bears, birds, wolves, and caribou. This shamanic ability is depicted very frequently in Inuit artwork. Pudlo Pudlat’s special release print of 1987

⁹ *Uqalurait: An Oral History of Nunavut*, ed. John Bennett and Susan Rowley, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 96.

¹⁰ Simon Tookoome, *Decision by the Group*, 1998, 21.25 x 29.5 inches, (www.nunuvutgallery.com).

¹¹ Billson and Mancini, *Inuit Women*, 57.

¹² *Uqalurait*, ed. Bennett and Rowley, 176.

¹³ Jean Blodgett, *Kenojuak*, (Toronto: Firefly Books, 1985), 8.

for the 2009 Cape Dorset portfolio, entitled, *Transformation of a Shaman*, depicts a shaman and his metamorphosis into what appears to be a variety of animals, including a bird, a bear, and a horned animal.¹⁴ The linear design along the jacket that this shaman is wearing portrays the movement of the shaman transforming and crossing over to the other world. Only parts of these animals are shown from beneath the jacket, so it is as if Pudlo Pudlat is offering the viewer a glimpse into the exclusive spiritual world that can only be accessed by shamans. Alareak himself was known as the walrus spirit, since he was able to change himself into a walrus and swim to the depths of the sea to get food for his community.¹⁵

The strong communal spirit of the Inuit is also evident in the relationships among the larger community, for example, during the hunt. As in other areas of traditional life, decisions and actions are performed with the benefit of the community in mind. As Adamie Nookiguak of Uqqurmiut said, “The first hunter that sees an animal is the hunter for that animal, whether it is bearded seal or a walrus, caribou or polar bear. The hunter that saw it first has the first shot.”¹⁶ The Inuit hunt is also considered to be sacred to their beliefs. By tradition, the first prey of a young boy is strictly shared with his entire community to reinforce in him the understanding that he is to hunt for the well being of his society rather than for himself. He has learned that it is a great honor to be able to provide for the rest of his community.¹⁷ This is an example of how the Inuit instill their societal mores in their children during their earliest years.

Peace and harmony lie at the foundation of Inuit society and the main teachings of Inuit

¹⁴ Pudlo Pudlat, *Transformation of a Shaman*, 1987, Stonecut, 55 x 71.

¹⁵ *Uqalurait*, ed. Blodgett and Rowley, 186.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁷ David F. Pelly, *Sacred Hunt: A Portrait of the Relationship Between Seals and the Inuit*, (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2001), 54.

elders. The Inuit value kinship and cooperation within their community at all costs. Any conflict that occurs within the community is resolved even if violence is the solution. Often, a member who poses a threat to their communal structure and function of society is expelled from the community, sometimes by death. This issue directly affected Kenojuak Ashevak when her father was murdered in the winter of 1933. She says:

I am not certain, but possibly my father made hasty threats against our hunters, for he was a spirited and impulsive man. Many men agreed that tension existed in the camp because of my father's presence...One bitter winter's day will be forever ingrained in my memory. That morning, my father...had a bitter argument with another man...Abruptly, he left the house. Several shots echoed...A few minutes later, I watched my father's blood seep into the snow.¹⁸

She watched the fellow members of the community murder her father, yet she still remained loyal to them. Kenojuak Ashevak may be reflecting on social conflict in her print, *Curious Intruder*, which portrays two geese flanking an owl.¹⁹ Confronted with the alien bird of prey, the geese seem to express surprise or confusion.

The issue of gender is a unique one within Inuit culture. Even today, there is a tension between traditional and modern gender roles. In a traditional society, while the men would leave for periods of time to hunt, women would be in charge of the decisions that affected their households from day to day. The skills that each group typically learned were different, yet they were still seen as equal and balanced. Both men and women contributed to the hunt; thus, both were responsible for the survival of their society. While the men engaged in the hunt itself, the women would take care of the men and the children by sewing warm clothes from the animal

¹⁸ *Uqualurait*, ed. Bennett and Rowley, 104-105.

¹⁹ Kenojuak Ashevak, *Curious Intruder*, Etching and Aquatint, 2009, 50.5 x 50.

skins, cooking meals, and performing other tasks in order to survive.²⁰ In addition, women were free to learn the skills that men traditionally practiced.²¹ These ideas are reflected in *Woman Enjoys Fishing*, a sculpture by Adamie Ashevak.²²

When the Inuit people were resettled by the Canadian government, traditional Inuit society underwent a radical change. The Inuit no longer lived in camps, depending on hunting for survival. Now they lived in more “modern” communities, and hunting was no longer an economical way to secure food to eat. Modern wage-labor jobs became the norm for Inuit societies, and this has had a major effect on the roles that each gender group plays within their communities. Women have found that their traditional duties have undergone a profound expansion. For many families, it has made more sense for the woman to take a wage-earning job so that her husband might still be able to hunt occasionally.²³ This has led to instability within families, in cases in which men have become chronically unemployed and therefore see themselves and are seen as having lesser value within their families and communities. Thus, women have in many cases become the primary providers within their households, a very different scenario from the traditional way of life. At the same time, they remain primarily responsible for domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. This means that some women find themselves with a “double burden” of work inside and outside the home.

This change in gender roles affects many of the attitudes about power relations found among Inuit men and women. For example, many women think that their traditional social roles should be modified to reflect their changing society, and they also recognize that these roles

²⁰ Billson and Mancini, *Inuit Women*, 36.

²¹ *Ibid*, 43.

²² Adamie Ashevak, *Woman Enjoys Fishing*, 2004, serpentine, 28.5 x 16 x 10, (www.spiritwrestler.com)

²³ *Ibid*, 210.

often limited the power of women within the community.²⁴ This creates a tension that is felt by both men and women in a culture in which gender roles were and are fundamentally distinct.²⁵ The idea of equality poses potential conflicts with the communitarian ideals of Inuit society, and holds the potential for alienation.²⁶ Moreover, among the Inuit, opinions on gender equality are divided among generations: older women are more likely to embrace traditional gender power relations, while younger women, who grew up exclusively after the resettlement, are more likely to challenge the idea that men have the ultimate authority.²⁷

In traditional Inuit societies, marriage itself was not an option but rather a necessity for survival.²⁸ Young men had the right to determine whom to marry and when. If the parents of a young woman agreed that she should marry, a wedding would take place, even if their daughter was unwilling.²⁹ In post-resettlement Inuit society, however, many couples choose to remain unwed. This is ultimately a practical decision: some women worry that they will find themselves trapped in an unhappy marriage, witnessing around them cases of alcohol abuse and domestic violence.³⁰ Other couples resist marrying because of economic conditions that make marriage seem undesirable. Economic instability, lack of housing and wage-paying jobs, and the decline of hunting all play a part in the low number of marriages.³¹ In addition, because of their

²⁴ Billson and Mancini, *Inuit Women*, 220.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 221.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ Billson and Mancini, *Inuit Women*, 221.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 35.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 260.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

³¹ *Ibid*.

increasing participation in the workplace, some women report that they are unable to find men with comparable educational and professional backgrounds.³² A further important reason for avoiding marriage is the stigma of divorce. Women feel that they might face rejection from their communities if they divorce their husbands, even if the reasons for divorcing are valid. Common among older generations is the misconception that if a marriage fails, it is the fault of the woman---because men are always right.³³

The relationship between Inuit society and Canada has had a significant impact on the social fabric. In 1999, Canada created the Inuit majority territory, Nunavut, which means “our land.” In the words of Jose Kusugak, an Inuit leader who played a large role in creating Nunavut, “The creation of Nunavut will not shelter us from problems, but will allow us to make our own decisions about how best to confront and take on those problems.”³⁴

The Nunavut agreement ultimately gives the Inuit people more control over their land. For example, the Inuit have been given equal membership within the government agencies created to manage the land, waters, and wildlife of the area, as well as a commitment to ensure that there is equal representation of Inuit populations with the government.³⁵ One of the goals of Nunavut is to allow the Inuit to gain back property rights, which may help the Inuit become more economically self-sufficient. Overall, however, the creation of Nunavut shows that the Inuit people are no longer simply a “colonized people.” They have begun to regain control of their land, culture, language, and values.³⁶ A former Inuit leader set up an advisory council of eleven

³² Ibid, 261.

³³ Billson and Mancini, *Inuit Women*, 281.

³⁴ Jens Dahl et al., *Nunavut*, (Skive, Denmark: Centraltrykkeriet Skive, 2000), 15.

³⁵ Ibid, 21.

³⁶ Ibid, 28.

elders to help the region maintain knowledge of traditional customs and culture. These measures are sure to be felt by the residents of Nunavut, who now have much more power within Canada. Kenojuak Ashevak was asked to create a print about Nunavut for the land agreement.³⁷ The result was *Nunavut Qajanartuk (Our Beautiful Land)*.³⁸ The print depicts hunters fishing through ice with mountains lit from behind by a glowing sky. This shows the beauty of the land through the eyes of the Inuit.

The many changes that have occurred in the past half-century show that Inuit culture is not static but is constantly evolving. Inuit artists attempt to make sense of these complex matters through their artwork, which allows them to express how this intricate social hierarchy affects their lives.

³⁷ Leroux, Odette et al, eds., *Inuit Woman Artists: Voices From Cape Dorset*, (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994), 109.

³⁸ Kenojuak Ashevak, *Nunavut Qajanartuk (Our Beautiful Land)*, 1990, lithograph.