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Inuksuk: Icon of the Inuit of Nunavut

Nelson Graburn*

Résumé: L'inuksuk: icône des Inuit du Nunavut

Les Inuit de l'Arctique canadien ont longtemps été connus par le biais des rapports écrits par les explorateurs, les baleiniers, les commerçants, ainsi que les missionnaires. Célèbres pour leurs igloos, traîneaux à chiens, kayaks et vêtements de peau, ils sont devenus les principaux «durs» de l'Arctique américain comme l'a montré le film «Nanook of the North». Maintenant qu'ils apparaissent sur la scène mondiale dotés de leurs moyens propres, leur singularité allégorique est aujourd'hui menacée. Ces dernières années, parés de leur fier héritage, les Inuit se représentent aux étrangers en mettant en exergue quelques items, tels que l'inuksuk, la *qulliq* et l'*amautik* qui sont ainsi passés de l'ordinaire à l'extraordinaire. Cet article explore l'apparition de l'inuksuk comme icône des Inuit au Canada et considère son développement, sa réintégration, sa commercialisation et sa diaspora.

Abstract: Inuksuk: Icon of the Inuit of Nunavut

The Inuit of the Canadian Arctic have long been known to the outside world through the accounts of explorers, whalers, traders, and missionaries. Famous for their igloos, dog sleds, kayaks and skin clothing, they became the quintessential hardy people of the American Arctic as portrayed in the film "Nanook of the North." Now that they have emerged with their own agency in the world, their iconic distinctiveness is threatened by their near disuse of these traditional markers. In the past few years, the Inuit have combined their visibility to outsiders with their pride in heritage to select and foreground a few items, such as the inuksuk, the *qulliq* and the *amautik*, which have gone from the ordinary to the extraordinary. This paper explores the emergence of the inuksuk as an icon both for and of the Inuit in Canada, and considers its development, reintegration, commercialization and diaspora.

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Introduction

On 1 April 1999, the new Inuit-majority Territory of Nunavut was created in Canada. At the opening ceremonies in the capital of Iqaluit (Frobisher Bay) on Baffin Island, the new territorial flag, coat of arms, and other insignia were first made public after a long and secret selection process. Those of us watching from afar on television saw the flag for the first time, held aloft by the Governor General and the new Premier. The Nunavut flag, approved by Canada's chief herald and by Queen Elizabeth II of Canada, was unveiled by Governor General Roméo LeBlanc. It consists of two fields—a sky of brilliant yellow and a field of snowy white with the Pole Star, the constant guide, divided by the figure of a simple red inuksuk. What does that represent?

Traditional inuksuit

In the Canadian Arctic, traditional historical inuksuit (*inuksuit* is the plural of inuksuk in Inuktitut language) had many functions (see Hallendy 2000): they were guides to travelling Inuit, for directions, and were usually built on rising ground, so that they showed above blowing snow (Figure 1). Rows of inuksuit were built to look like rows of human beaters, to frighten caribou into a certain path where the hunters are waiting for them with bows and arrows, or across water where the hunters were waiting in kayaks with spears. But they were not necessarily always functional. Many times, Inuit while stopping for tea or some other reason on the trail, may gather stones and pile up an inuksuk, just as “Something to do,” as a record that “I was here” just as people in the south sometimes scrawl “Kilroy was here.” In one trip along the shore of the Hudson Bay, we waited while a pair of mating dogs in our team became unstuck so we built an inuksuk near the shore to pass time¹.

It is amazing that the Inuit have the capability of erecting what looks like a pile of rocks close up, but which, at a great distance, looks like a human being. This is important when using inuksuit as hunting blinds or beaters. In fact, one could say that the meaning of the term is: “Like a human” (Nunavut Government n.d.a). Another contemporary source explains:

Created hundreds of years ago, the Inuksuit take on numerous different shapes, each with a particular cultural significance and meaning. The term means, “to act in the capacity of a human,” hence many of these cairns assume a human shape. Depending on their configuration and size, these Inuksuit can serve as navigational markers, drop off points for messages, memorials, objects of veneration, or storage facilities. Still being erected today,

¹ I don't have a photograph because the sled had come over a ridge sharply down onto and through the sea ice, which jerked it to a stop throwing my camera into the water. We pulled the sled back out and rearranged things to dry, hence the enforced wait of 10-15 minutes! It has been observed (Anonymous reviewer) that in Nunavik, the construction of inuksuk was sometimes incorporated into a game. As part of a race, rocks were carried from shorelines atop hill faces where inuksuit were made—the game was based on the size of the rocks carried (testing physical strength) as well as the speed in which inuksuit were constructed

they are a lasting symbol of resilience in a harsh, often unforgiving climate and have evolved into a uniquely Canadian art form (Department of Canadian Heritage 1999: 12-31).

There is a line of inuksuit near the Puvirnituk River, which are decoys to frighten a herd of caribou into the water, where hunters would be waiting for them in kayaks. In the Arctic winter, with blowing snow, very little at ground level can be seen, and something on slightly raised ground acts as a marker to guide the traveler's way. An inuksuk is basically a pile of rocks placed carefully on top of each other that stand up to form a post or pile. One kind of pile of rocks is used to keep kayaks high off the ground so that the dogs do not eat them. An early explorer (Klutschak 1881: 23) mentioned finding *tuktusuks*, stone models of caribou, perhaps also decoys or targets, in the Netsilik area of the Central Arctic. However, no such evidence is extant today in the Eastern Arctic.

Cairns and white man's fascination

White explorers and other visitors to the Arctic have always been fascinated by inuksuit. Early explorers built cairns themselves, often to leave messages for other Whites. Europeans did this in many parts of the world, even the uninhabited, such as in Antarctica, but one can easily tell the difference between a "Whiteman's" cairn, which is usually a tapering pile of rocks, perhaps in imitation of a mountain, and an Inuit-built inuksuk, which looks like a human.

Inuksuit have remained a mysterious attraction to whites, some of whom may travel specially to see them these days. This "mystery" or "enchantment" stems from a combination of their "exotic" nature and their evocation of nostalgia for the old ways of dog sleds and winter camps, which no longer exist. As Marshall McLuhan put it (to paraphrase): "All obsolete technology becomes art." Some Whites have written articles, and more recently books, about them, usually couching them in such nostalgic terms as "old-time, ancient, spiritual."

Carvings and model inuksuit

Ever since Whites have been visiting the Arctic, they have wanted souvenirs of what is unique, to take back and show those at home. Therefore these souvenirs have been specifically chosen for "difference" and otherness—typical of modernity (Graburn 1976; MacCannell 1976). The White people visiting and living in the North have changed from the old time sailors, explorers and lone traders—who were probably more familiar with cairns, piles of stones, inuksuit—to modern urbanites, schoolteachers, nurses, governments clerks, and so on. "Cairns" and suchlike have been absent from the latter's background experiences and inuksuit are thereby more fascinating.

One result is that Inuit, who have been making souvenir sculptures for sale and export in large numbers since 1949, have at various times been asked to make model inuksuit. This has proven very difficult because although one can balance a large pile

of stones on top of each other, it is uneasy to make a small pile of pebbles without them falling down—and impossible to transport out of the north in one piece. There have been three solutions:

1. Make the stones square like bricks of rectangular blocks. Such inuksuit do stand up, but they don't look like any real inuksuk, which is invariably made out of rough unworked stones.
2. Carve a whole inuksuk out of one piece of stone, creating slits or indentations to the surface in imitation of the cracks between separate rocks (Figure 2). This looks a little better from a distance or certain angles, but not when examined close up. Model inuksuit made out of bone or ivory used, for instance, as jewelry are invariably made of one piece of material, but accurate fidelity is not a primary requirement in such uses.
3. Use rough stones but glue or peg them together. That is the best solution, as the models can look really like inuksuit, and yet can be carried and packed without falling apart.

This latter method has become the main way of making the thousands of models, which go on sale everywhere these days. They are, of course, found in stores in the North, but they are also quite common in art, craft and souvenir stores in the major cities of southern Canada.

Hyper-inuksuit the world over

I want to emphasize that this general fascination with inuksuit started decades before there was any thought of the Inuit self-government in Nunavut. Canada has, like many other ex-colonial nations, had difficulty in creating a unique identity that is different both from the mother country, Britain, and from its neighbour ex-British colony, the United States (Graburn 1987a). The sources of differentiation can be history or nature, or the “people of nature” (the non-immigrant population). For instance, by the mid-1960s Toronto Metropolitan Airport had a large “Eskimo” inuksuk to welcome people to Canada.

Though Indians have long been used as symbols of both the United States and Canada, with feather-headdresses, tomahawks, tasseled skin clothing, etc., Canada has successfully used the unique igloo-dwelling Canadian Inuit, especially their stone sculptures and graphic prints, in the last 50 years. Many Canadian Government Departments have commissioned inuksuit.

At the World Fair EXPO '86 in Vancouver, the world's largest Inuksuk graced the official pavilion of the Northwest Territories (see Graburn 1987b). More recently, Canada has adopted as national icons the inuksuit which are unique stone figures of the Barren Lands (see also Heyes 2002: 142). In the 1990s, this has become common, much as North West Coast Indian artists are often commissioned by companies and



Figure 1. Close up of traditional inuksuk, near Puvirnituq, Nunavik (photo: N. Graburn).



Figure 2. One piece inuksuk model (photo: N. Graburn).

governments (and wealthy individuals) to carve and erect wooden totem poles in the USA and even in Europe.

In Ottawa, the Governor General of Canada commissioned an inuksuk at Rideau Hall in Ottawa, from the famous Cape Dorset artist Kananginak Pootoogook (see the Governor General's web site). Since then, the commissioning of inuksuit has gone multinational, with governmental and semi-private concerns having these monuments erected by Inuit invited to far flung venues such as St. Petersburg and Switzerland. We could say that this represents the globalization of the Inuit presence in today's global village.

Nunavut and ritualization of symbols

From 1997 to 1999, there was a widely publicized open competition in Nunavut, asking for ideas for the Nunavut flag and for its official coat of arms. They got more than 500 ideas for the flag and 300 symbols as ingredients for the new coat of arms. A selection committee of seven Inuit artists and politicians (Kananginak Pootoogook, Meeka Kilabuk, Thomas Ipsirak, John Amarualik, Jose Kusugak, Nick Sikkuark and Robert Watt) selected a short list of 10 ideas for the flag, then later narrowed it down to two. These two were given to an Inuk artist and print-maker, Andrew Qappik of Pangnirtung to work up, in consultation with the Chief Herald of Canada in Ottawa.

Andrew Qappik played the leading role in designing the flag of Nunavut². That was not surprising, since he and Nunavut's Premier, Paul Okalik, had been childhood playmates in Pangnirtung. More importantly, however, several of Qappik's initial submissions of drawings were well received among the 800 or so considered by the Nunavut Implementation Commission's symbols committee (chaired by Meeka Kilabuk and including Bill Lyall, George Qulaut, and Peter Ernerk). As the committee winnowed the submissions, several of Andrew's made the short-list of ten. There was another review by three artists (Kananginak Pootoogook, Thomas Iksiraq, and Nick Sikkuark), each representing one of the three regions. By that time, color and context had become important, and both the committee and Canada's Chief Herald Robert Watt were impressed by not just Andrew's drawings but the meanings behind them. Consequently, Qappik was asked to spend several days on two separate occasions in Ottawa to work with Watt and Canada's official artist, Kathy Bursey-Sabourin. Andrew commented: "There were all kinds of drawings put together to portray Nunavut"; consequently: "There was a lot of playing around with different drawings." Andrew favoured the traditional two-legged inuksuk but eventually simplicity of style won out (Figure 3). He also designed the coat of arms which includes a miniature of the flag inuksuk. In June 1998, the Nunavut Implementation Commission made its final selection and three months later accepted the final renderings. There is a good account of these events in *Nunatsiaq News* (Bell 1998; Bourgeois 1998).

² The information in this paragraph was kindly provided by H. G. Jones, Professor Emeritus of History, University of North Carolina. Jones has visited Pangnirtung every summer for more than 25 years and has become particularly familiar with the print shop where he befriended the artist Andrew Qappik who was then a teenager.

On Nunavut Foundation Day, 1 April 1999, the secret flag and the coat of arms (Figure 4) were finally displayed at the opening ceremonies, in the capital of Iqaluit. The official Nunavut web site describes the symbols of the coat of arms as follows:

Blue and Gold symbolize the riches of the sea and sky. Red refers to Canada. The inuksuk represents the stone monuments which guide people on the land and mark sacred and special places. The *qulliq* stone oil lamp, is the light and warmth of the family and the community. The North Star, *Nirqitsuituq*, was traditionally used as a guide for navigation; and now represents the “unmoving guidance from our elders.” The *igloo* (snow-block house) represents the traditional life and means of survival. The *tuktu* (caribou) and the *qilalugaq tugaalik* (narval) represent respectively the riches of the land and sea. The official motto is *Nunavut Sanginivut* = “Our Land, our strength” (Nunavut Government n.d.b).

Inuksuit of all sizes and shapes can be found all over the North, particularly in the towns and villages of Nunavut where they are invariably recently built. The word *inuksuk* is almost ubiquitous as a symbol of “things Inuit.” For instance, the capital Iqaluit has the Inuksuk High School. In the same town, there are two newly built rows of inuksuit in front of the hospital and the Arctic College. In addition, there are many new inuksuit found in southern Canada, expressing solidarity or perhaps “ownership” of those in the South towards the North. Even some private houses in southern Canada have inuksuit in their garden. There are inuksuit outside commercial buildings in Montreal, and at museum displays. Even in the USA there are newly built inuksuit. Hence there is one at the Hearst Museum of the University of California, Berkeley, which was designed and built under the guidance of co-curator Roz Tunis (Tunis 2001) for the exhibition of the present author’s “Research in Inuit Art” in 2001-2002.

I have also seen some commercial uses of the inuksuk in brochures in southern Canada, for instance that of an outdoors gear company in Montreal, and of a transportation and Inuit art export company in Ottawa. The web site of the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto invites you to come and “Build your own inuksuk,” a “traditional Inuit stone structure.” It says: “Mary Wallace, author of *The Inuksuk Book*, will help you build your own mini-inuksuk which you can take home with you. You can be inspired in your creations by the Science Centre’s very own inuksuk created by native artist Oshaweetuk” (Ontario Science Centre n.d.). There is now a growing scholarship on inuksuit, often nostalgically mourning their lost traditional uses, while encouraging their new appearances in new places for celebratory functions (Hallendy 2000).

Contemporary Inuit and the inuksuk

The Inuit are naturally very proud to have their own territory and their own government, in which they are a majority. They have the power through the democratic vote, and they fill most of the higher positions and the political and bureaucratic structures. In the foyer of the parliament building in Iqaluit, there is a gigantic carved “mace” depicting Inuit figurines, there are cases displaying the official animal (the Husky dog), the official plant, bird, and so on. There are also a number of government



Figure 3. Flag of Nunavut (source: Government of Canada, QS-6133-001-HB-A1).



Figure 4. Nunavut's coat of arms (source: Government of Canada, QS-6133-002-HB-A1).

pages; male and female youths dressed up in cloth versions of “fancy parkas”; *qulittaq* for the men and *amautik* for the women. They are pleased that white people admire them, their (past) way of life and their land. More and more outsiders are drawn to Nunavut as tourists, and think of the place in terms of the “traditional” motifs that media and museums have constantly shown to the outside world.

However, many Inuit were quite surprised by the various symbols selected for the flag (as they see it, because they didn’t know about all the other 499 discarded designs). One Inuk said to me that the Yellow and White look like “Snow and snow *that has been peed on!*” Some Inuit especially disliked the narrow, wobbly looking inuksuk, and said it looks like “A lady inuksuk in a red dress!” Others said it was “ugly” and asked whether it was possible to make changes in the flag and coat of arms, and were told: “No.” Many people said that it resembled a cross (*sanningajulik*) with its one “leg,” rather than a proper inuksuk, which is supposed to resemble a human with two legs (there is an inuksuk in the form of a cross at Pelly Bay). Others retorted that it was fine, because “We Inuit are all Christian now. There are no continuous vestiges of the old shamanic religious practices, even if White people would like to believe that.”

Other Inuit, however, liked the selection of the inuksuk for the flag and the coat of arms. Some have included inuksuit in their drawing of landscapes for graphic prints. Inuksuit are often portrayed along with other recent favorite modern icons, like the drum dancer (in an area where drum dancing disappeared about 80 years ago). Others used the image at a more personal level. For instance, in the Halloween face-painting competition among children in the village of Pangnirtung in 2000, someone painted a wonderful likeness of the flag inuksuk on a young girl’s face.

The relationship between the Canadian Inuit and their globalized political icon is still one of ownership and pride. Some attempts by commercial companies, such as Magnotta Brewery in Toronto who put a picture of an inuksuk on their beer cans, have been repulsed by official representatives of the Inuit. Others have been allowed or welcomed: the Office of the Interim Commissioner “agreed that Coca Cola could use the inuksuk to display their products, providing they promoted Nunavut [...]. Owl Children’s Books wanted to write an inuksuk book for the purpose of better understanding and promoting Inuit culture [...] later contributed \$1,000 to the Nunavut Literary Council” (Irniq 1999). More recently, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami supported the use of the inuksuk as a “truly Canadian symbol” when Canadian soldiers erected one in Afghanistan in memory of their four comrades killed by “friendly fire” (*Nunatsiaq News* 2002).

Conclusions

The situation of the inuksuk in Canada corresponds to the recent analyses of Inuit identity put forward by Jean Briggs (1997) and elaborated by Nobuhiro Kishigami (2000) in his comparison between identity of Inuit in the North (Akulivik) and those living in the south (Montreal). He states:

Cultural identity is an important frame of reference for social interaction in arctic villages, while ethnic identity is the frame of reference in urban settings and political arenas. The former is reproduced through socio-cultural practices in Inuit ways and the latter is maintained through interaction with others and the use of ethnic symbols in multi-ethnic situations (Kishigami 2000: 9).

Obviously the new flag is an icon of “urban and political arenas” and “multicultural situations.” Briggs (1997: 228) differentiates *traits* which are cultural symbols derived from daily life and *emblems* which are “emotionally charged markers” chosen from among the cultural traits, which Kishigami applies to “ethnic” identity. The inuksuk is but one, though perhaps the most important, of many symbols put forward/used by Inuit in multi-ethnic situations which are increasingly common in northern towns and in delegations and conferences outside the North. Among the others, very common are: the use of the Inuktitut language (*e.g.*, opening statements and prayers), contemporary forms of parka and *amautik*, made of textiles, skin boots and mitts, the lighting and use of an oil-burning *qulliq* (lamp), and eating Arctic foods, especially if raw or accompanied by *misirag* (the common rancid seal-oil condiment). Depictions in Inuit commercial art also emphasize certain themes, nowadays particularly men and women drum-dancing, *angakkuit* (shamans), and spiritual or transformation figures, all of which hark back to a spiritual life that was pretty well destroyed by the missionaries 50 to 90 years ago (Graburn 2000)!

Thus, we can see that the events and objects of what used to be ordinary lives—symbols of “cultural” identity such as inuksuk, lighting *qulliq*, wearing *amautik*, using *qamutiit* (dog sleds), have all been raised from the mundane to the special, from the ordinary to the potent, from the cultural to the ethnic. These have been selected by Inuit because (a) they are remarked on, admired and sought after as exotic by the *qallunaat* (whitemen,) who are the major outsider-reference group, and (b) they maximally express difference and “otherness” in situations where ethnic recognition is of prime importance. When the young woman Taqralik Partridge of Avataq, the cultural organization of Nunavik, was asked why she wore a cloth *amautik* with shiny textile inserts and metal accoutrements as her “official dress” at the Conference on Arctic Clothing held at the British Museum in March 2001, she replied that Inuit did not have to use their traditions unchanged for ever, all they had to do was to continue to be “different.” Touché.

In a previous paper, I suggested (Graburn 1970) that the nations of the Americas, like settler colonies everywhere, use the distinctive arts, handicrafts or other obvious “traits” of the indigenous peoples whom they have conquered, to build an iconic distinctiveness for themselves vis-à-vis the home country (see also Phillips 1999) and vis-à-vis other nearby or competing colonies. While most of my evidence for those assertions was based on Latin American situations, I later suggested the same for Canada and the United States (Graburn 1986, 1987a, 1987b). Yet, in the present case, it is the recently empowered Inuit who have chosen the inuksuk as a distinctive icon of their cultural and political independence. Can these two suggestions be reconciled?

In this short paper, we have actually seen at least two seemingly independent choices of the inuksuk as an icon of identity. The prior choices were made by *qallunaat* at least as long ago as the 1960s and for two purposes:

- 1) Model inuksuit were requested by white people visiting the Arctic, probably since Inuit sculptures became the souvenir of choice and a routinized export art form more than 40 years ago. However, these models were very rare because of the problem of constructing faithful and stable models in the absence of glue. Through this process, and most likely through land travel with *qallunaat*, the Inuit must have learned the awe and alterity with which the visitors regarded what to the Inuit were one of their quotidian constructions. But it was also 40 years ago that Canadians in the South decided to erect inuksuit not just as icons of Inuit ethnic identity but as icons of Canadian identity. Welcoming foreigners at Toronto International Airport was an inuksuk which served as a metonym of Inuit and northernness which in turn were larger metonyms of Canadianness, much as were the Inuit sculptures commonly given to foreign dignitaries.
- 2) We do not know exactly when Inuit first used inuksuit as a conscious marker of themselves vis-à-vis outsiders, though experiences in the North as described above could have encouraged such practices. However, one of the first “public” constructions of this kind was the giant inuksuk which stood outside the Northwest Territories pavilion at Expo ‘86 in Vancouver. Here, it served as an icon for both the Inuit which not only constituted the primary ethnic group of the territory but who were present in numbers at that pavilion, as well as serving as a metonym of the Northwest Territories themselves vis-à-vis, not Canada (as in the case of Toronto Airport) but the other Canadian provinces at Expo. This was at a time when Inuit land claims resulting in Nunavut were being negotiated and this instance was probably a forerunner of the choice of the inuksuk for the massive outpouring of inuksuk-making, large and small, that surrounded the emergence of Nunavut.

While a cynical point of view might lead us back to Edmund Carpenter’s assertions (1973) that when indigenous peoples are brought onto the world stage, they perform the dance (the role) that the dominant nations give them, we must also take into account the agency of the Inuit who chose which among many associated symbols to foreground and who were in complete command of the contexts and combinations where the inuksuk appeared in their political representations (Scott 1985). Thus we have here a case of synergy or perhaps even convergence, where the external demand for recognizable icons of alterity have coincided or encouraged the internal need for distinctive and visible markers. Others, among Inuit, might include *kamik* (hand sewn leather boots), *qimutsiit* (dog teams and sleds) or igloos. And these are, in interethnic and international venues, paralleled by totem poles from the Northwest Coast Indians/First Nations, or the snowshoes and skin tents of the Subarctic peoples of Canada and Alaska. No one has forced these peoples to choose their political symbols and the Native peoples in turn have chosen symbols which stand for their traditions of which they are proud and yet are known and admired by the outsider reference group.

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