The Role of Language and Culture in the
Promotion and Protection of the Rights and Identity of Inuit

Compilation of Research

Submitted to:
UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights for Indigenous Peoples

Submitted by:
Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) Canada

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Preface

This document is a contribution by the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) Canada. It compiles research relevant to the role of language and culture in the promotion and protection of the rights and identity of Inuit. It is prepared as a contribution to the United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ study of the role of language and culture in the promotion and protection of the rights and identity of indigenous peoples, as mandated by the Human Rights Council, resolution 18/8. The Inuit Circumpolar Council represents Inuit across the circumpolar world, and to this end maintains national offices in Greenland, Canada, Alaska and Russia. The current submission is intended to reflect the state of research into language and culture, rights and identity in Canada specifically. We recognize that a great deal of other relevant research and activity is also occurring in Greenland, Alaska and Russia.

In our search for relevant work, we took into account any language or culture-focused research with application to any aspect of Inuit rights (as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) or Inuit identity (personal, cultural, social, ethnic). Our search is limited primarily to work pertaining to Canadian Inuit, published in the past two decades (1991-2012). The documents listed were identified in academic databases, government and organizational websites, and bibliographies of Northern research. They include academic publications (books, chapters, journal articles), research reports, publications of Inuit organizations and other NGOs, government legislation, working papers, and conference presentations. They reflect the expertise of academic researchers and on-the-ground community members and practitioners. A few key theoretical pieces on the importance of language and culture to rights and identity are also listed. Wherever possible, hyperlinks to online versions of the documents are included in the bibliography, or an electronic version is attached to this submission. Electronic copies of unpublished documents (or those no longer otherwise available) can be made available.

ICC Canada welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Expert Mechanism’s report. Language, culture, rights and identity are a strong focus in ICC Canada’s work. This focus is evident in many of our initiatives, including an Arctic Council-endorsed project (2011-2015), Assessing, Monitoring, and Promoting Arctic Indigenous Languages, led by the Inuit Circumpolar Council with the support of other Arctic indigenous peoples organizations. It is hoped that this summary of the state of research on language and culture, rights and identity among Inuit in Canada will provide relevant insights and content for the report delivered to the fifth session of the Expert Mechanism in July 2012.
Key Points

Inuit have the right to life, liberty and security of person.

- Cultural and linguistic continuity are protective factors against the high risk of suicide in indigenous communities (Chandler and Lalonde 1998, 2008).

Inuit have the right to maintain a distinct identity.

- The Inuit language is a powerful symbol of Inuit identity (Dorais 2010).
- The Inuit language is a necessary instrument for enculturation into (acquiring) Inuit identity and for acting out Inuit identity; it is a pragmatic backbone to Inuit identity, especially in communities where it is still widely used. (Dorais; Tulloch 1999, 2004)
- English (or French) are also important parts of modern Inuit identities (Dorais 2010, Tulloch 2004)

Inuit have the right to be free from discrimination.

- New language legislation in Nunavut protects against discrimination against individuals who only speak the Inuit language (who do not wish to or are not able to work in English) (Nunavut 2008, 2011)
- There is some concern that new language legislation in Nunavut may lead to discrimination against Inuit who do not speak the indigenous language. (Nunavut 2011)
- Inuit children, educated in Inuktitut, are discriminated against in Nunavut schools (Aylward 2007)

Inuit have the right to an education: to all levels of education; to education in their own language; to education following their own cultural and learning styles.

- Children educated in their mother tongue have higher self esteem, greater cultural pride, and higher school achievement (Bougie et al. 2003, Taylor and Wright 2003, Wright and Taylor 1995)
- Inuit-centred teaching and curriculum is key to children’s educational success (ITK 2011)
- Bilingualism and biculturalism are supportive factors in post-secondary success (Fuzessy 1998)
- Despite recommendation and adoption of strong bilingual models of education in Nunavut (Corson 2000, Martin 2000, Nunavut 2008), ineffective implementation of bilingual education models is hindering Inuit from succeeding in school, and subsequently effectively integrating into the workforce (Aylward 2007, Berger 2006).
• Despite positive advances in the implementation of Inuit knowledge and ways of learning, dominant assimilationist discourses persist in schools (Aylward 2010).
• Insufficient learning opportunities for individuals who are disengaged from formal schooling (Tulloch et al. 2009).
• Inuit are working together at the national level to pursue bilingual, bicultural schooling for Inuit children across the country (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami 2011)

Inuit have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures.

• Some Inuit dialects in Canada are highly endangered (Johns 2002)
• All Inuit dialects in Canada are under pressure from English (Batstone 2000, Dorais 1996, 2010)
• Maintaining and enhancing use of written Inuktitut is a particular challenge (Hot 2009)
• Inuit youth who feel criticized for the way they use Inuktitut sometimes prefer just to use English (Tulloch 2004).
• Inuit youth value their indigenous language and wish to take the lead in bringing it to the next generation (Coley and Tulloch 2008, Schuerch 2007, Tulloch and ICYC 2005)
• Knowing and using the Inuit language is essential for youth in Inuktitut-speaking communities to fully participate in their families and communities and to feel that they belong (Tulloch 2004, 2008).
• Inuit are not fully aware of how quickly their language is declining (Batstone 2000, Tulloch 2004)
• Inuit are legislating protection of their language (Nunavut 2008, 2011)
• Inuit are being creative and innovative in creating programs and tools to enhance opportunities to learn Inuktitut, e.g. Pirurvik n.d.
• Inuit are cooperating at the circumpolar level to share best practices and revitalize Inuit languages (Arctic Indigenous Languages Symposium 2008, Nunavut 2010)

Inuit have the right to fully participate in their governance and in decisions that affect them.

• Policy and legislation in Nunavut sets out use of the Inuit language so that all can participate (Nunavut 2004)
• Nunavut Land Claims Agreement sets out federal and territorial obligations for communications in the Inuit language (and Canada’s other official languages) to ensure Inuit are able to fully communicate and participate (Tulloch and Hust 2000)

Inuit have the right to practice their spiritual and religious traditions.

• Inuit traditional spirituality is not being passed on to the next generation. Some elders feel that traditional spirituality, in complement to Christianity,
could help guide and respond to social and justice issues in the communities (Oosten and Laugrand 2002).

Inuit have the right to maintain a distinctive culture and distinctive cultural values, to practice their cultural traditions (including literature).

- In addition to a distinct writing system, Inuit have other, traditional literacies that are not always recognized or respected as “literacy” (Balanoff and Chambers 2005)

Inuit have the right designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

- see Alia 2007, Collignon 2004

Inuit have the right to establish their own media.

Selected Bibliography of Research on Inuit Language and Culture


*Alia addresses the process of introducing new names, and the non-Inuit tradition of having last names, and the persistence of traditional Inuit naming practices.*


*Alia highlights the challenges of Canadian (and international media) which does not adequately represent the North outside of the North, nor bring to the North coverage of what is most relevant to Northerners.*


“As reinforced by the teachers who participated in my own study (Aylward, 2006), there exists a wide range of issues of grave concern regarding Nunavut’s bilingual education program including: the levels of teacher competency, home and school language gaps due to language loss, lack of leadership and support, ambiguous standards and systems of accountability, discrimination against Inuit language stream students, and denial of minority language rights.” (p. 6)


*Key findings include: Nunavut teachers are working to implement bilingual, bicultural education, but efforts are hampered by the persistence of historical assimilationist discourses.*


*Key findings: Inuit have distinctive forms of traditional literacies (ways of interpreting and recording the world) that are not recognized by those who privileged western-style reading and writing.*


*Key finding: Inuttitut is in decline in Labrador. Individuals are not necessarily aware how quickly it is declining.*


Key findings include: the major barrier to full Inuit participation in employment in Nunavut, and the factor hindering Inuit from truly benefiting from the creation of Nunavut is the lack of effective bilingual schooling in Nunavut.


Although this research does not address Inuit specifically, it provides statistical evidence of the link between linguistic/cultural maintenance and personal/community well-being.


The Languages of the Inuit provides comprehensive documentation of developments in Inuit language (particularly in Canada) over the past twenty years. It includes research on oral literature, literacy, education, bilingualism, and identity.


Although Fishman’s work is not with Inuit, this accessible paper highlights some of the many risks to identity and rights when language is lost.


In this quantitative study of Inuit students in Quebec Cegeps, the researcher divided students into three groups: 1. those who associated most closely with Inuit traditions and language (“traditional” Inuit); 2. those who associated most closely with English or French traditions and language (“mainstream”); and 3. those who associated with both Inuit and non-Inuit traditions and language (“bilingual/bi-cultural Inuit”). The study found that the bilingual, bi-cultural Inuit had greater success integrating into southern post-secondary education than did the more “traditional” or more “mainstream” Inuit peers.


This Canadian federal apology acknowledges the past assimilationist policies of the federal government, enacted through the residential school system, and their enduring negative impact on indigenous families.


This national Inuit strategy sets proficiency in Inuit language and culture as a desired outcome of Inuit education. Too few bilingual educators (i.e. Inuit-language-speaking educators) is identified as a barrier to providing quality education to Inuit children. Inuit-centred teaching and curriculum is key to success.


