

INUIT ART:

Markers of Cultural Resilience



of European culture. Aboriginal communities in southern Canada had undergone several centuries of intensifying Western European colonization and missionary involvement, but Inuit communities were relatively unaffected by outside contact until the early 20th century. Within only a few decades, however, the pre-contact way of life underwent dramatic changes. Inuit were “settled” into communities created around trading posts, often leading to the over-hunting of wildlife in the immediate area and an increasing dependence upon preserved food and packaged goods imported from the South (Mitchell 1993:336). Such diseases as smallpox and tuberculosis spread quickly throughout these new settlements. In Nunavik and Nunatsiavut, several Inuit communities were entirely relocated; the consequences were devastating since the relocated populations often lived in overcrowded and difficult conditions (Tester and Kulchyski 1994; Dussault and Erasmus 1994; Brice-Bennett 2000).

Christian missionaries had been despatched across the Arctic and Subarctic in the late 19th century — and much earlier in Nunatsiavut — but it was not until the 1910s and 1920s that great numbers of Inuit converts were made. Conversion was usually to the Catholic or Anglican faiths and sometimes occurred in advance of missionary involvement (Tungilik and Uyarasuk 1999). To save their souls, missionaries prohibited Inuit converts from practicing spiritual customs and cultural traditions, believing that these were heathen and savage rituals (Norget 2008:222).

It was in the midst of this cultural turmoil that residential schools were introduced across the North with the rationale that they would be “the most effective way of giving children from primitive environments experience in education along the lines of civilization leading to vocational training to fit them for occupations in the White man’s economy” (National Archives of Canada 1954: part 7). Inuit children were taken

from their homes in large numbers and forced to learn a foreign way of life at the expense of their own. The northern Federal Day School system, the government residential school system for Inuit, housed students in adjacent dormitories and hostels; sometimes, they were boarded with families in the small communities. The dormitories housed anywhere from 8 to 250 students at a time (King 2006:1–2). Prior to 1955, fewer than 15 per cent of school-aged Inuit children were enrolled in residential schools; within a decade, this number climbed to over 75 per cent (*ibid.*,10). Many parents also relocated in order to be near their children, forcing families into permanent settlement. As artist and author Alooook Ipellie wrote in his 1992 essay, *Nunatsiaqmiut: People of the Good Land*, parents moved to communities to provide support for their children so that they could learn, but in reality “they were relinquishing their authority and status

