When we think of Quebec, its French language and culture come immediately to mind. Few are aware that Quebec is also home to the second largest population of native Inuit in Canada (the Nunavut Territory has the largest Inuit population). In the northern third of the province, above the treeline, almost 10,000 Inuit live in a region called Nunavik—the “big land” in Inuktitut, the Inuit language. While currently not independent in the political sense, the people of Nunavik nonetheless have a significant say in their own governance and almost complete control over their education system. And they are in the process of negotiating a unique and autonomous government with both Canada and Quebec, not unlike the one that governs the new territory of Nunavut.

Inuit living in Nunavik, like Inuit across Canada, have been in the North for some 8,000 or more years. Unlike aboriginal people in the rest of North America, the survival of Inuit language, culture and traditions was not threatened by outside forces until the middle of the 20th century. Until that time, contact with explorers, whalers, fur traders and even missionaries lasted for only brief periods, allowing English words and materials to be incorporated into Inuit culture without significant impact. It wasn’t until the 1950s that federal programs were implemented in the North with a considerable, and mostly negative, impact on Inuit society.

Having observed the atrocities of World War II in Europe, and buoyed by a strong economy, the federal government of Canada took the position that no Canadian should live in poverty. This view led to the development of Canada’s many federally-funded social programs such as health care, family allowances, old-age pension and the like. But making these services available to nomadic peoples living thousands of miles from the country’s population centers was seen as an impossible task. Thus, both the Canadian and Quebec governments implemented a major relocation effort...
in Nunavik in the late 1950s, encouraging the Nunavit to move into villages where government housing, education and health care were provided. While these services had positive results in the south, in the north they led to the interruption of traditional life and created a dependency on the government.

The darkest period for Inuit across Canada was in the 1950s and 60s during which time most Inuit were relocated to permanent settlements and children sent to mandatory residential schools. Inuit children were sent away from their homes for up to a year at a time, leading to their loss of the Inuit language and the skills necessary to live traditionally and survive in the North. The result was tragic, causing a breakdown in the families and loss of meaning for the younger generation.

By the mid-70s Inuit began to make efforts to regain control over their culture, language and governance. Fortunately, this effort was significantly helped along by the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. The Agreement, the first modern-day land claims settlement in Canada, was a turning point in Nunavik history as it marked the beginning of limited self-government and Inuit control over aboriginal culture, land and governance.

In a nutshell, the 1975 Agreement was an exchange between the provincial government and aboriginal peoples in Northern Quebec. The Quebec government won the right to develop hydro-electric projects in exchange for the aboriginal people gaining title to territory, monetary compensation for the lands and resources used, and the power of self-governance. The current system of governance in Nunavik has evolved directly from the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. Immediately three important and Inuit-run institutions were created: the Kativik Regional Government, the Kativik School Board and the Kativik Regional Board of Health and Social Services.

The Kativik School Board has jurisdiction over all levels of education and is responsible for providing teaching materials in Inuktitut, French and English as well as for training new teachers. There are some 3,000 students in Nunavik and all attend Inuktitut-only classes for their first two years of school. In Grade 3 parents must decide between French and English as a second language (a slightly larger number of students take French) but Inuit language and culture education continues until graduation.

The Kativik School Board immediately established the Inuit Teacher Training Program at McGill University in Montreal. The courses in the teacher training program are taught by Inuit instructors and are conducted in Inuktitut. Similarly, all teachers in Nunavik schools must be Inuit. The people of Nunavik believe it is crucial to the development of a child's self-esteem to be taught and mentored by a teacher with the same background and language.

The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement also necessitated an Inuit corporation to act as a legal entity, to administer compensation and to oversee the implementation of the Agreement. In 1978 the Makivik Corporation was created for this purpose. The Makivik Corporation is recognized as the Inuit Party to the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. The compensation from the Agreement are treated as "heritage funds," meaning that the money must be utilized in a manner that
supports future generations of Inuit. The Corporation funds non-profit groups in Nunavik, cultural organizations, and recreational facilities such as the Avataq Cultural Institute, founded in 1981, to preserve and promote Inuit culture.

The Avataq Cultural Institute has already been successful in achieving several of its goals. In the early 1980s the Institute organized the “surname project” to correct Inuit names that had been assigned by non-Inuit. The Institute also assisted in selecting Inuit names for all the Nunavik communities that had formerly been given non-Inuit names. For example, Inukjuak was formerly named Port Harrison by the Hudson’s Bay Company. In addition, the Avataq Cultural Institute publishes a beautiful magazine twice yearly entitled, Tumivut or “our footprints.” The publication is mandated by the Nunavik Inuit Elders to protect and promote the language and culture of the region. The magazine always includes several interviews and oral histories with the elders as well as archival photographs of the region.

Most importantly, the Makivik Corporation is leading the effort to establish an autonomous government in Nunavik. This process began over 30 years ago when public hearings were conducted across Nunavik regarding the creation of a new government. The case was pleaded before a special Commission of the Quebec National Assembly and then Premier René Lévesque clearly indicated that the Quebec government would consider such a proposal if a draft constitution could be created. Such a proposal was drafted but the initiative did not gain ground until the late 1990s.

In the fall of 1999 the three major parties involved in the potential creation of a new territory—the Makivik Corporation representing Nunavik, the Quebec government via the Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat and the federal government through the Ministry of Indian and Northern Affairs—mandated that a report be written outlining all of the recommendations for a new Arctic government. The Nunavik Commission began to work on the report by setting up extensive meetings with community members, school administrators, students, elders, and other Inuit governments such as Nunavut and Inuit government in Greenland.

On 5 April 2001, the Nunavik Commission presented the report at a meeting in Kuujjuaq, Nunavik. It is entitled, Amiqqaaluta—Let us Share: Mapping the Road toward a Government for Nunavik. The report has been printed and distributed throughout Nunavik to inform residents of the parameters and nature of the new government. Once negotiations are settled with the provincial and federal governments, a vote for final ratification will be presented to the Nunavimmiut (legislature).

The Nunavimmiut are intent on creating a government that will relate to both the Quebec provincial and federal governments on an almost state-to-state basis, quite unlike the rest of the provinces or territories that have less autonomy. This would allow the Government of Nunavik to be a truly Arctic government able to respond to the needs, desires and aspirations of the Inuit people.

The law-making powers of the Assembly would include the ability to establish laws specifically for the protection of Inuit language and culture, to have effective powers over education, health care and justice and to disallow any natural resource development without the consent of the Nunavik Assembly. The report also recommends the creation of a Nunavik court with its own full-time judge and crown attorney.

While the official languages of Canada are French and English, each province or territory has its own official languages. Most, including Quebec, are unilingual with Quebec’s official language being French. There are now two territories with Inuit as one of the official languages; Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. Nunavik, like Nunavut, is recommending three official languages; French, English and Inuktittut—with Inuktittut being the dominant language and the one used in daily government and institutional operations.

The report of the Nunavik Commission was tabled
in March of 2001. It now has to be agreed to by the governments of both Quebec and Canada. Once this takes place, hopefully by 2003, the agreement would then be presented to the Nunavik population for a referendum vote. If it is accepted by the electorate, the transition process to establish the new government would be set up over a couple of years. The report recommends that the Nunavik Assembly and Government hold its first election in the fall of 2005. While there is no guarantee that this timeline will be met, or that all will agree to the recommendations laid out in the Report, the efforts to create a new Inuit jurisdiction are well underway.

The potential new jurisdiction is the final step in the 30-year process leading to self-determination for the people of Nunavik. Certainly, these efforts have not been without their extreme challenges as Inuit across the North struggle with the highest rates of suicide and substance abuse in the country and lowest levels of education. Yet, there is every indication that the language and culture will survive. Interestingly, Nunavik is part of the province of Quebec, whose people faced similar language/cultural struggles not long ago. The creation of a new government of Nunavik, like the now “distinct society” in Quebec, is an illustration of how minority languages and cultures are surviving and thriving in an era of globalization.

There are just 14 communities in Nunavik located around the Ungava Peninsula. The Makivik Corporation website includes this map and allows users to click on each community bringing up a short history, the population and other interesting facts about the village.” Makivik website: http://www.makivik.org/eng/communities/index.htm

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