

# WHO ARE THE INUIT?

## A CONVERSATION WITH QAUYISAQ “KOWESA” ETITIQ



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*An excerpt from Who Are the Inuit? A conversation with QauyisAQ “Kowesa” Etitiq. View the full resource at [etfofimi.ca](http://etfofimi.ca).*

**R**esilient, strong and innovative are some words to describe the Inuit, but who are the Inuit? The word Inuit means “the people” in Inuktitut, the language spoken by the Inuit. For thousands of years the Inuit have survived in harsh arctic climates, relying on their relationship with the Land and their community for survival. From a modern geographic perspective, the Inuit Territory is comprised of four regions in the Arctic Circle: Nunavut (the territory), Inuvialuit (the Northern Northwest Territories and Yukon), Nunavik (Northern Quebec and Labrador), and Nunatsiavut (North-eastern Labrador). The land, water and ice that are home to many Inuit is called, Inuit Nunangat. Today, the Inuit also live outside of this region, including urban areas such as Ottawa and Toronto. The Inuit are one people and speak one language but with many different dialects; Inuktit (also called Inuktitut). Through a conversation with QauyisAQ “Kowesa” Etitiq, we learn about who the Inuit are, and will aim to answer commonly asked questions. We will learn about Inuit identity, where they come from, where they live and about their distinct set of values and way of life.

### A CONVERSATION WITH QAUYISAQ “KOWESA” ETITIQ

#### WHAT ARE THE PROPER TERMS THAT WE SHOULD BE USING WHEN WE REFER TO INUIT?

Inuit means human beings. Inuk is the singular form of Inuit. Inuuk means two or more Inuit. Innu are a Nation of people from Labrador or Quebec (formerly referred to as Montagnais). The Inuit are a distinct Indigenous group and are recog-

nized as Inuit in the Constitution Act in 1982. Eskimo is a Cree word that means eater of raw meat. Some Inuit (Elders) as well as some Western Arctic Inuit still use this term. In Alaska, the term Eskimo is still used. In Canada however, the term used is Inuit. People should use the term Inuit and if you are ever unsure of how to refer to someone, you can always ask what language they use to refer to their community.

#### WHAT ARE THE INUIT VALUE SYSTEMS?

The value system is called Inuit Qaujima-jatuqangit, which means, “that which the Inuit have always known to be true.” The six values are serving, decision-making by consensus, acquiring skill and knowledge, collaborating, environmental stewardship and being resourceful. The Inuit Qaujima-jatuqangit also has four laws including: working for the good of all, being respectful to all living things, maintaining balance and harmony and always planning and being prepared for the future.<sup>1</sup>

#### WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT INUIT NAMING CUSTOMS?

The Inuit naming customs usually involve being named after someone. A “namesake” is the person who you were named after. When you are given a namesake, you inherit all of the relationships that this person had. You inherit their friends, family and the respect that your namesake had. Inuit can have multiple names. This way of naming keeps people together and memories alive. [When Kowesa was given his name, he had grown men giving him respect, even as a child. Kowesa inherited friendship and respect from his namesake.]

<sup>1</sup> Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: The Role of Indigenous knowledge in Inuit Communities in Nunavut (n.d.)

## HOW IMPORTANT IS STORYTELLING FOR THE INUIT?

Traditional Inuit stories are a part of Inuit culture and oral tradition that have been passed down from ancestors. Inuit stories always have a lesson in them or a deep underlying meaning to help one understand. Some stories were about how to avoid conflict with other nations. These stories often travelled from more southern areas to the North, to warn of harm that could come from interactions with other nations.

There are stories of Inuit superheroes, like the Orphan and the Polar Bear. This story teaches about believing in yourself. Inuit stories are often scary and told to children as a warning to ensure that they go to sleep, or do not wander off alone by the water, or do not walk on thin ice. Another story, Qalupalik is about children who would be taken if they were alone or walking too close to the water's edge. Other stories explain the creation or existence of other beings and things, like the Northern Lights. In this story, the Northern Lights are explained by author Michael Kusugak as the souls of the ancestors playing soccer.

Inuit have been here since time immemorial. There are several creation stories that are shared orally from generation to generation, such as the story that explains the creation of the sun and moon. Another story is about "Sedna," the Goddess of the Sea. There are other stories about Nuliajuk, the Goddess of the Animals. Inuit stories speak to life and death, because that is the reality of living in the Arctic.

## WHAT ARE "ESKIMO IDENTIFICATION TAGS"?

The Eskimo Identification Tag System was a federal program that ran from the 1940s until the 1980s. The tags were the size of a loonie, made of copper and had pressed brown cardboard or leather with a number on the tag. Every Inuit was issued a number, the first letter and number indicating the region where they lived, 'E' for 'Eastern Arctic' or 'W' for 'Western Arctic', and

this was followed by four digits personalizing the identification of each person. Most Inuit sewed this tag on their winter clothing. If you went to the local Northern Store (previously a Hudson's Bay Company Store), you needed your e-tag to shop. This is how Inuit were tracked and how the government tried to exercise power over them. Each Inuk was known as just a number by the government.

Everyone in my family had a tag. My name was Kowesa E7259 until the age of two. Then Project Surname was created and I was given my mother's last name because she was the head of the household. Due to this government mandate, often uncles and aunts would all have different last names because they were the head of their own households. Now more Inuit have adapted to the last name system and it has created confusion when trying to find displaced family members, such as those taken in tuberculosis boats.

**"THE VALUE SYSTEM IS CALLED INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGIT, WHICH MEANS, "THAT WHICH THE INUIT HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN TO BE TRUE." THE SIX VALUES ARE SERVING, DECISION-MAKING BY CONSENSUS, ACQUIRING SKILL AND KNOWLEDGE, COLLABORATING, ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AND BEING RESOURCEFUL."**



**“INUIT ARE A HUNTING SOCIETY AND ANY IMPACT TO THE ENVIRONMENT HARMS THEM. FOR EXAMPLE, YOU CAN’T HUNT ON SEA ICE UNTIL IT IS FROZEN. THEREFORE, IF THE ICE FORMS LATER, YOUR HUNT STARTS LATER. IF THE ICE BREAKS UP SOONER, THIS MEANS THAT THE HUNTING SEASON IS SHORTENED.”**

### **WHAT INNOVATIONS AND TECHNOLOGIES HAVE INUIT CONTRIBUTED NATIONALLY OR GLOBALLY?**

The qajaq (kayak) is an Inuit invention. It was the first boat that had a waterproof cover and you could do flips underwater with it. The qajaq was traditionally made from driftwood and caribou bones, covered in sealskin, and tied together with caribou sinew or rope made from skin. The umiak are big boats that are for whale hunting. Inuit also made detachable harpoon heads and seal buoys, and the bow-drill that was used to drill into bone or driftwood.

Inuit clothing is also very innovative, and was made using the resources available. Inuit clothing is waterproof and could protect against cold temperatures. Caribou is still used to make outdoor clothes, and is still the warmest. Inuit are responsible for the original sunglasses, snow goggles. These were made of bone, antler or driftwood. As wood was very rare in the North, finding driftwood was like finding gold.

Inuit also invented igloos. These self-supporting structures are insulated and made from cut snow blocks. A panaa (knife) made from caribou antler or copper and other available metals, was the tool used to cut the snow or ice. Apparently some metal in the North came from meteorites. Inuit are also known for their use of astronomy.

Inuit use the stars like a map to navigate and find their way through the Arctic. *The Arctic Sky: Inuit Astronomy, Star Lore and Legend* is a book that was written in collaboration with Inuit. In the far North, Inuit can use the stars to identify when the winter is ending, because two stars appear in the horizon.

### **HOW HAS CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTED TRADITIONAL INUIT WAY OF LIFE?**

Inuit are a hunting society and any impact to the environment harms them. For example, you can’t hunt on sea ice until it is frozen. Therefore, if the ice forms later, your hunt starts later. If the ice breaks up sooner, this means that the hunting season is shortened. Unpredictable weather makes it hard to be safe in the harsh conditions. Every year someone dies on the ice.

Climate change also impacts migration patterns. There was a hunting ban in Baffin Island for caribou, due to the low numbers, which is unprecedented. Climate change impacts the caribou’s food which impacts the migration patterns. Caribou can’t access the lichen (to eat) if ice freezes over top of it.

### **DO THE INUIT HAVE ARRANGED MARRIAGES?**

Nowadays Inuit marriages are not arranged. In the past, marriages were arranged at birth and you were socialized for that during your childhood. You often grew up knowing who your wife or husband would be, and you would refer to them as your wife or husband. My mother and her best friend had arranged for their children to marry. I was supposed to marry the woman’s daughter but chose not to marry her. However, to this day I still call her ‘wife.’ Traditionally, it was not uncommon for a man to have more than one wife. However, they needed to ensure that they could take care and provide for their partners and children. This was also true for women, having more than one husband.



## DID THE INUIT HAVE TO GO TO RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL?

Inuit children were forced to attend residential schools or Federal Day Schools and they also experienced the same hardships as First Nations and Métis children who attended these schools. A few schools operated in the North under contracts with the Christian Churches (Chesterfield Inlet Residential School). Later, the schools were run by the government. [Kowesa explained that everyone in high school had to live in the school residence for Grades 11 and 12, unless they lived in one of the larger communities that had a school. Today, there are high schools in the smaller towns.]

## WHAT IS AN INUKSHUK?

Inukshuk (pl. inuksuit) are a part of the Inuit culture that are made of rocks and have different meanings and purposes depending on the shape and size. The Inuit would use the Inukshuk to herd the animals they were hunting. For instance, Inuksuit were placed on top of a ridge to frighten and herd caribou into a desired location. Inukshuk might also mean a place of spiritual power, a marker to signify a murder or a death, or show the way for good hunting or fishing. Mainstream public has appropriated the image of the Inukshuk. Many people use these structures without understanding what they mean. [Kowesa's advice for teachers: Don't just build or draw an Inukshuk, learn the history, the purpose and the meaning behind the different types of Inuksuit.]

## DO THE INUIT HAVE A TREATY?

The British-Inuit Treaty of 1765 is an historic treaty. The rest are all modern agreements and land claims. These include the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement and Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement. When Canada signed with Gwich'in, they offered the same agreement to the Inuit, but the Inuit rejected it, as they did not want to sell their land.

## CONCLUSION

The Inuit are a people with a distinct history, perspective, culture and way of life. Learning about Inuit history and perspectives is a positive way to instill pride in Inuit students and to educate other Canadian or Indigenous learners. This resource was written as a way to introduce the Inuit, and is a great place to start your learning. Through the interview, many commonly asked questions were answered. In getting to know someone or learning about others, conversations are a good start. You may want to consider connecting with Inuit or Inuit organizations, like the Urban Inuit Knowledge Centres or the Inuugatigiit, and participate in learning opportunities in your area. To help get you started, you can connect with the Indigenous education lead or coach at your school board.

As Indigenous educators, the writers of this resource learned many things from Kowesa and have expanded their knowledge of the diversity of Indigenous Peoples, specifically the Inuit. ■

