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FILM REVIEW – *Inuuvunga: I Am Inuk, I Am Alive*

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Inuuvunga: I Am Inuk, I Am Alive is a documentary film that is incredibly important for the representation of Inuit people and in highlighting issues that plague their community. This film addresses concepts such as the transition from traditional to modern practices, the effects of Christianity, the generational gap between youth and elders, isolation in modern terms, misrepresentation in media, teen pregnancy, suicide, mental health issues, poverty, and school dropout rates. These issues are addressed head-on by students featured in the documentary.

In this film, eight high school seniors are given the opportunity to learn about documentary filmmaking. They are given cameras to document their everyday lives. Some of them chose topics to address in their films, such as suicide rates and communication with elders, while others chose to film freely. Each learned to use a camera and traveled with the camera everywhere they went. The entire film is in the Inuktitut language, which was a refreshing change from typical representations of Indigenous peoples speaking English in film and the unfortunate losses associated of Indigenous languages.

One of the most important issues this film addresses is a generational gap due to the transition from traditional Inuit practices to “modern” practices following Canadian contact and ensuing cultural destruction. This generational gap stems largely from the effects of Christianity and colonization.

Students hunt with rifles, ride snowmobiles, live in heated homes, play ice hockey from a young age, and go to school to learn math, social studies, and English. One of the students named Bobby decided to talk to his grandfather about his opinions on this change. Bobby's grandfather complained that students had life so easy and that it was almost shameful that they lacked basic survival skills. Bobby took the opportunity to film his grandfather teaching the students how to construct an igloo; most of the students were unfamiliar an igloo's construction and function, even though it was the primary home for previous generations. Bobby's grandfather also demonstrated traditional hunting with a harpoon and spoke about setting traps to catch animals. (One of the students attempted to set a fox trap later in the film and it is clear he is uncertain of the process. He comments he's not sure about what some of the materials are used for.) Another student talks to her grandmother and she believes that the new generation is lazy and has it too easy. She says they complain of tiredness after menial tasks, whereas her generation was raised tough and ready to live off the land.

The students, however, offer another side of this issue. They all still hunt for food, practice traditional dances and throat singing, and speak their language. There is a beautiful scene when the students take their first trip out of Inukjuak to Montreal and two of the girls sing together on the train. At school, they assist in cutting and cleaning a freshly killed seal, along with all the elementary school-aged students. They assist in bringing caribou meat to the community and still take part in the idea of reciprocity. It is a dialectic, in the sense that they live in an in-between state. They are part of a modernized version of Inuit society and still participate in typical Western teen activities such as partying on New Year's Eve, which was a great scene in the film and an example of Western culture infiltrating Inuit society, and playing video games over winter breaks.

Historical trauma plays an important role in the generational divide highlighted in this film. According to Minority Rights Group International (n.d.), the Inuit were uncontacted by Western societies until the nineteenth century. By then, the Inuit people were incredibly sophisticated in living off the land

despite limited resources provided by the Arctic environment. Initial contact with Europeans started decades of oppression and decimation of their culture. The whaling industry began the destruction of their food sources and brought diseases and alcoholism. Populations declined drastically. Minority Rights Group International (n.d.) describes a decline in the Mackenzie River Delta population from 2,000 people to just 138 in one drastic example. The Canadian government, to make matters worse, then began dividing these territories up into provinces without any consultation with the Inuit and without their consent. This began the forcible relocation of Inuit, along with the cultural erasure that followed in the form of boarding schools and conversion to Christianity.

As a result, negative changes occurred in relation to Inuit life expectancy, suicide rates, drug and alcohol consumption, poverty, hunger, and disease. As of 20 ago, the average life expectancy was 60 years old – while the Canadian national average was 77 years. This number was greatly influenced by rising suicide and cancer rates; Inuit people became 50 percent more likely to die of cancer than Canadians (Minority Rights Group International, n.d.). Hunger became a major issue that forced Inuit to move into towns as the police killed off hundreds of sled dog teams, which were the primary means of transportation for getting food. With the introduction of Western-style housing and technology combined with the destruction of traditional practices, it is no wonder that the generational divide is so great among Inuit. Christianity also brought about the stigma toward traditional practices; when one of the students spoke to her elders, her grandfather immediately called suicide a sin and blamed it all solely on drugs and alcohol. She tried to explain the loneliness felt by the young people who commit suicide, but again her grandfather mentions that suicide is a sinful act.

The isolation of living in the Arctic played a role in Inuit traditional practices, but it also plays a new role in modern Inuit society. (See, for instance, Alethea Arnaquq-Baril's documentary *Angry Inuk*.) After forced assimilation into Canadian society, the Inuit now often have to rely on shipments of food from the south. Hunting practices are growing more and more scarce, due in part to a lack of practice

and teaching in the new generation following enforced inclusion in the educational system of Canada. Before assimilation, the Inuit's isolation taught their people to adapt and to become extremely skilled in living in the Arctic and off what was available to them. It was after these traditional attributes were taken away that their isolation in the Arctic led to extremely damaging results (see Arnaquq-Baril, 2016). In *Inuuvunga: I Am Inuk, I Am Alive*, Willia, Linus, and Bobby talk about their loneliness and lack of activities and opportunities for them. In one scene, they do a ski race. Willia sets a fox trap and ends up sleeping out in the elements waiting for a fox that never comes. Linus shows his activities over a school break and all he really can do (because of weather) is watch TV, hang posters, and play video games. The boredom and loneliness that comes from living in the Arctic seems more pronounced for the young people than for their elders; the elders speak of survival and constant movement, but the students no longer have these needs because of the Western-style housing and amenities that came with colonization.

This isolation becomes and even more pronounced when the students take a trip to Montreal. Population disparity and prejudice are heavily evident in the scenes they shoot. Various people give them strange looks as they explore unfamiliar territories, such as an escalator in a mall or an automatic sink in a public bathroom. None of them had ever been on a plane or train, or seen a shopping mall before. Most of the disdainful looks came when they spoke their language while walking with their cameras. The sense of individualism in Western society, including norms of privacy, is so different from what it is in Inukjuak. People do not like being filmed or watched without a relationship already established or permission granted. It is a fascinating view of cultural differences to see the footage from their trip.

Not only does this film display the effects of assimilation on society, but it also shows a more positive representation of Inuit people. It normalizes modern behavior in Indigenous peoples for audiences who may not fully comprehend how Indigenous culture, like any culture, is not static. Many

representations of Indigenous people leave them frozen in time, as people living in the Plains and wearing headresses and speaking broken English. (This representation of Indigenous people is explained in the documentary *Reel Injun*; see Diamond et al., 2009). Native Americans were portrayed by Hollywood as Plains Indians in old Western films, represented in inaccurate costumes to form persistent stereotypes. Even now, many people make an immediate association with these images when they think of Native Americans.

Most people do not think of Inuit, they think of "Eskimos". They think of people in colorful parkas living in igloos. As shown by a quick Google image search that I conducted in Spring 2020, search results are overwhelming filled with these types of images. In reality, "Eskimo" is a racial slur. In *Inuuvunga: I Am Inuk, I Am Alive*, the students are seen laughing at a depiction of an Eskimo in a children's book. A great example right now of the misrepresentation of Inuit people, as well as cultural appropriation, comes from the Canadian football team, the Edmonton Eskimos. There is a push to change the team name because it is offensive to many Inuit people. Norma Dunning (2017) writes: "The Edmonton football team has said they use their name with pride. In fact, they are disrespecting and suppressing Inuit peoples" by basically saying that the Inuit are incapable of present-day living. This film represents just average teenagers, not the caricature of that shows up on my Google search. They go to high school and wear Western-style clothing. They live in heated homes and watch TV. One of the boys had Metallica and Korn posters on his walls. This depiction is so important because it begins to break apart the traditional Western views of Inuit people as "Eskimos". It shows Inuit people having both their own culture and taking part in Canadian society.

The issue of teen pregnancy is partly addressed in the film, but not directly. Two of the high school students have children that are around a year old; Sarah has a daughter and Dora has a son. That is a quarter of the group of the students in the film. Teen pregnancy is one of the leading causes of health disparities between moms and their babies, and the number of pregnancies in Inuit women

between the ages of 15 to 19 has been steadily increasing since 2000. Teen pregnancies come with much higher risks of infant or maternal mortality, along with risks of physical or mental disabilities in the infant. Teen pregnancy can also affect a girl's choice to drop out of school, thereby impacting the mother's personal and professional life for years. Nearly 20 percent of all births in Nunavut are among women between the ages of 15 to 19, whereas in Canada the average is only four percent (Moisan et al., 2016). This is important to address because this is a major issue in Inuit society, and it comes from lack of access to reproductive healthcare – which feeds back into institutionalized prejudice, poverty, and isolation after assimilation.

During the filming of this documentary, a friend of Sarah's commit suicide. She was only 16 years old. Sarah's little sister also commits suicide. Many of the students experienced similar situations. Although not the main subject of the film, suicide is heavily addressed towards the end when students are seen visiting the grave of the 16-year-old student who died. Dora also speaks about wanting to commit suicide when she was younger, but then explains that she was happy she was encouraged to continue school and be there for her son. According to Minority Rights Group International (n.d.), "[s]uicide remains a deep problem in Inuit communities. In Nunavut, the suicide rate is nearly six times the national average. During Nunavut's first year as a territory, 20 people committed suicide and dozens of others tried."

According to a study by Mohan B. Kumar and Michael Tjepkema (2019), suicide rates are consistently higher among Indigenous peoples in Canada and they relate this to ongoing impacts of colonization that have caused an "intergenerational transmission of trauma." On average, the suicide rate among Inuit in Canada is nearly nine times the average for non-Indigenous peoples. Disparities are highest in young adults from the age of 15 to 24 years old. Living on and off a reservation also has an impact on suicide rates. In the Inuit homeland, the suicide rate among children and youth is 33 times high than the entire rest of Canada as of 2008. It has become one of the leading causes of death in not

just Inuit people, but in Indigenous peoples all over Canada (Mohan & Tjepkema, 2019). These rates are staggering compared to Canadian national averages.

Poverty is addressed briefly in this documentary, as well; it affected the elders during colonization and Rita-Lucy's mother. The elders spoke frequently of hunger after their means of transportation (sled dogs) were taken away and their ways of hunting began to disappear. They lived below the poverty line, unable to assimilate into mainstream society. What was provided for them was either too expensive or simply not enough. Rita-Lucy's mother had to give her up for a period because she could not afford to have both Rita-Lucy and her other son at the same time. This led to such suffering for her and she spoke of crying for her baby every night she was gone.

Poverty remains an issue in Inuit society to this day and children especially are the ones at risk. Emma Tranter (2020) sums up a report by a group called Campaign 2000, which is a pan-Canadian coalition that focuses on child and family poverty. The reports notes that Nunavut's child poverty rate is more than 31 percent, which is well above the national average in Canada of almost 19 percent. For kids under six, this number is even higher at almost 20 percent. The state reports that 25 percent of kids live in poverty. Seven out of ten children live in households that are food insecure, as well (Tranter, 2020). All of this can be traced back again to forced assimilation and isolation. Supplies being shipped to Nunavut become extremely expensive and traditional hunting practices are becoming more difficult to profit from. Sealskin sales are important to the economy in Nunavut. In *Angry Inuk*, for instance, a sealskin sales ban creates stigma in buying the products and therefore sales drop and affect the main economy in Nunavut. Without money to pay for gas, people cannot get out to hunt for "country foods" and must rely on expensive grocery stores (Arnaquq-Baril, 2016).

The final issue that came up in *Inuuvunga: I Am Inuk, I Am Alive* has to do with school performance and school dropouts. Dora tells her story of almost dropping out because of her pregnancy and because she was suicidal at one point. She is so concerned about her grades and graduation that

when she goes in to receive her final report, she immediately thinks she did poorly. Statistics Canada (2016) notes that only about four in ten Inuit between the ages of 18 and 44 has a high school diploma or an equivalent. Children are not being taught their Inuit history and language in school, but rather are part of a school system that came from colonization. Also contributing to this are teen pregnancy, poverty, and suicide rates. Providing for family and others in need is a core value in Inuit society and poverty makes it incredibly difficult to do so. School gets pushed aside to make way for more important needs, such as caring for elderly relatives and babies. Students end up being almost forced to choose to raise a child versus staying in school, and there are also concerns about a lack of affordable and effective healthcare. With the suicide rate being so high, people in this age group may simply not make it to graduation due to mental health issues.

All of the issues represented in this film are human rights issues if we consider foundational human rights frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). In the UDHR, Articles 9, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 25, 26, and 27 are the most important pertaining to issues in the documentary – they cover rights to culture, land, religion, healthcare, and education (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). Colonization and assimilation violate many of these by forcing Indigenous peoples to relocate, have their land stolen, and lose their culture – along with the denial of basic needs such as education and healthcare. The UNDRIP gets more specific about Indigenous rights and directly addresses issues that arose during colonization. A majority of the articles listed in the UNDRIP could be applied to these situations, including issues related to media representation. Article 16 says that Indigenous peoples have the right to produce their own media and in their own languages (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). (This documentary is a great response to this problem because it was produced by Inuit students and is spoken in Inuktitut.) Other UNDRIP Articles relate to healthcare (including mental

health), education, language, cultural and religious practices, and land rights and preservation (United Nations General Assembly, 2007).

Inuuvunga: I Am Inuk, I Am Alive is a landmark film about Inuit youth that combats the misrepresentation and oppression of Indigenous peoples. This film portrays a true-to-life representation of issues affecting Indigenous youth in Inukjuak – issues that are very serious and often go unaddressed. By showing these problems firsthand through the eyes of teens, filmmakers appeal for necessary change that will enable the next generation to heal from the intergenerational trauma that has affected the Inuit since first contact.

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