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Comparing academic and aboriginal definitions of Arctic identities

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ABSTRACT. During the last decades, scholarly studies on Arctic identities have been on the increase, but less is known about how academic viewpoints diverge from aboriginal perspectives. The aim of this article is to compare both points of view, by looking at the way some academic specialists define Arctic identities, in contrast — or convergence — with how one Arctic people, the Inuit, perceive who they are. Twelve scholars conducting social research in the north and recognised for their competence were interviewed on their definition of identity and their assessment of the current situation of Arctic aboriginal populations. Their responses show that they view identity as a relational and constructed process, a process that continues without much disruption despite rapid social and cultural change. As modern Inuit are concerned, ethnography and personal testimonies tend to show that they perceive identity as an open-ended and individual — as opposed to collective — relationship rather than as a way of classifying people. Inuit perceptions agree on some points — the relational aspects for instance — but diverge on others — for example, the primarily individual nature of identity — from those of the interviewed scholars, and they should be taken into account in any assessment of the current human situation in the Arctic.

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Introduction and background

The study of Arctic peoples, especially in North America, has long been dominated by two principal paradigms (Hughes 1984; Wenzel 2001): acculturation and adaptation. From the 1950s through the 1980s, a majority of anthropologists and other social scientists working among the Inuit and, to a lesser extent, the Dene and Cree populations of Canada and Alaska were concerned either with the impact of mainstream Euro-American culture on northern aboriginal societies, or with the way these societies adapted to a physical milieu typically defined as 'harsh' or 'unforgiving.' As early as the 1960s, however, a few scientists had started to examine the impact of acculturation and inter-cultural relations on the ethnic identity of some Arctic peoples, notably the Inuit (for example, Chance 1960; Parker 1964; Kleivan 1970).

That trend gained momentum in the 1970s and early 1980s for two reasons. On the one hand, political developments in the north were redefining relations between mainstream society and aboriginal populations, who were now fighting for their rights. On the other hand, researchers realised that despite major technological, cultural, and social change, northern peoples still continued to practice subsistence activities — albeit in an often modified way — and to share in a partly traditional world view. Such a realisation made them understand that, as Wenzel (2001: 48–49) put it, the 'acculturationist' and 'adaptationist' perspectives may possibly form a whole, rather than be opposite concepts, because 'there is at least as much positive interaction occurring between tradition and change inside the North than has perhaps been perceived or reflected to date by the academic discussions that have occurred about these approaches.'

Early book-length analyses of Arctic identities include Brody's (1975) much-cited description of how Inuit and non-Inuit perceive each other in the Canadian north, as well as his study (Brody 1981) on the relationship between ecological knowledge and identification to the land among the Dene of northeast British Columbia. Another pioneering publication was Paine's (1977) edited book on the neo-colonial process ('tutelage'), which endeavoured to transform Inuit into what administrators considered competent citizens of the Canadian nation-state.

Research on northern aboriginal identities proliferated during the late 1980s and the 1990s, especially among the Inuit. According to Dorais and Searles (2001a: 23), studies on Inuit identity can be divided into seven major categories:

1. Ethnicity as identity (Müller-Wille 1985; Petersen 1995);
2. Psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of personal identity (Bodenhorn 1990; Briggs 1997; Condon and others 1995);
3. Political foundations of collective identity (Dybbroe 1996; Morin and Saladin d'Anglure 1995; for a broader perspective, compare Simard 1990);
4. Relationship between identity and subsistence activities (Searles 2001; Stairs and Wenzel 1992; Wachowich 1998);

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5. Linguistic, semantic, and symbolic manifestations of cultural identity (Fienup-Riordan 1990; Kawagley 1995; Oosten and Remie 1999; Therrien 1999a);
6. Identity and history (Graburn 1998; Trudel 1999; among the Dene, compare Cruikshank 1998); and
7. Modernity and identity (Dahl 2000; Dorais 1997; Hensel 1996; Nuttall 1992).

This vast research effort on various aspects of Inuit — and other Arctic — identities was instrumental in describing and explaining how aboriginal peoples perceive who they are, what their social position is in the modern world, and which strategies they develop in order to assert their identity as native residents of the north. Among other results, this collection of information about self-perceptions and other forms of indigenous knowledge led to the promotion of traditional — that is, indigenous — environmental knowledge (TEK) and its inclusion in a growing number of natural science research projects in aboriginal regions (Krupnik and Jolly 2002; Nadasdy 2003). It also fed reflections on the epistemology of northern science (Bravo and Sörlin 2002).

Even if many — if not most — studies on Arctic identities may be considered faithful accounts of how Inuit and other northern populations are thought to perceive and express their culture, their ethnicity, and their personality, they constitute academic renditions of what identities are. It is only recently, since the turn of the twenty-first century, that series such as Nunavut Arctic College's 'Interviewing Inuit Elders' (for example, Aupilaarjuk and others 2001), 'Inuit Perspectives on the 20th Century' (for example, Tungilik and Uyarasuk 1999), and 'Memory and History in Nunavut' (for example, Gagnon and others 2002) have attempted to show how northern aboriginal populations remember and tell their own cultural history, by reporting directly what elders had to say. But despite all their merits, these publications do not deal directly with the way native residents of the north construct their own identity. It is not their objective to show if, and how, aboriginal identity-construction differs from academic definitions of Arctic identities.

The aim of this article is to attempt such a comparison. It will look at how some academic specialists define Arctic identities, in contrast — or convergence — with the way one Arctic people, the Inuit, perceive who they are. It shall, thus, heed Wenzel's (2001: 49) advice that: 'the real action regarding [Inuit] identity is to be found, as it has always been, among Inuit themselves.'

Methodology

In order to collect academic definitions of identity, 12 specialists of Arctic peoples were interviewed between October 2001 and June 2002. The interviews dealt with the way these social scientists defined identity and, eventually, subdivided it into various types (personal, ethnic, cultural, social, etc); their appraisal of the current political, cultural, and linguistic situation of aboriginal peoples in the Arctic; and their views on ethnic relations in the north. All those interviewed had conducted research on topics linked, in one way or another, with questions of identity. None was from the author's home institution.

The sample included six men and six women, all mature (more than 40 years of age) individuals trained in the western scientific tradition. In terms of their academic specialities, six defined themselves primarily as social/cultural anthropologists, two as linguists/ethnolinguists, two as specialists of religious studies, one as a sociologist, and one as a philosopher of science. All but one (a specialist of sub-Arctic Indians) had conducted most of their research among Inuit. All were still pursuing fieldwork in the north.

Those interviewed were promised confidentiality, as is the rule in social-science research. It is thus impossible to reveal names. However, some of their credentials may be stated without prejudice to confidence. Each holds a doctoral degree (*honoris causa*, in one case). Seven are senior scholars, full professors (emeritus, in one case) in prestigious and/or scientifically dynamic universities (Aarhus, Berkeley, British Columbia, Copenhagen, Leiden, Nijmegen, and Paris). Four more teach at the assistant professor level (in Berlin, Cambridge, Copenhagen, and the University of Greenland) and, like their senior colleagues, have extensive publication records (including books) on various aspects of northern identities. One interviewee was a junior researcher, a postdoctoral fellow in a major university at the time of the interview. At least eight of these scholars may be considered world leaders in Arctic social research, since they are regularly invited as discussants or guest lecturers on northern aboriginal identities and other related topics.

Interview data were supplemented by notes taken during a roundtable on Arctic identities held at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands, in March 2002, as well as during an informal conversation with one more social scientist (an anthropologist, assistant professor in a major European university). Due to the limitations of the sample, these data can in no way be considered valid from a statistical point of view. Qualitatively speaking, however, they fulfil the criterion of saturation of contents, that is, the last interviews did not bring in many ideas that had not already been expressed in preceding ones. Data thus convey a relatively exhaustive range of opinions about identity.

Information on aboriginal views of Arctic identities was drawn from published material reporting and/or discussing field observations among the Inuit or, in a few cases, written by Inuit authors. Because Inuit were not interviewed on their perceptions of their own identity and of academic views about that identity, the data are not strictly balanced. It is clear that Inuit perspectives are diverse, and that the present research would have benefited from more interviewing. But the written sources are diversified, too, and since they appear to concord in most ways, they may be deemed to represent widely held — albeit not exhaustive — Inuit perceptions on identity.

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These perceptions will be compared with interview data.

Defining identity

Arctic social science has generally followed trends — rather than led the way — in debates on identity. For example, the thrust for transforming acculturation research into a study of Inuit ethnic identity was seemingly given by the seminal works of Barth (1969) and Abner Cohen (1969) on interethnic relations (Dorais and Searles 2001a: 19). This is not to say that Arctic anthropologists, sociologists, and human geographers have had no impact on their respective disciplines. Pelto's research on technological change and social differentiation among the Sámi (Pelto 1973), for instance, as well as books by Brody (1975) and Paine (1977) on Inuit–European relations in the Canadian north, or more recent studies of contemporary aboriginal identities have demonstrated that native peoples are not passive subjects of cultural change, but active historical agents who seek to conciliate tradition and modernity the best they can. However, as far as the author knows, no specialist of the Arctic has ever tried to devise a theoretical definition of identity.

Broadly speaking, identity may be considered as the way human beings relate to their surroundings and perceive their own position within this relation, either as individuals or as members of a group. According to the nature of the relation, identity may be deemed social (that is, based on age, gender, income, profession, etc), cultural (linked to world view, values, collective practices), ethnic (concerned with one's ascription to a group considered as sharing the same geographic origin and at least some culture traits), national, linguistic, or other. An individual can thus possess several identities, according to the various relations in which he or she is engaged.

Since this is not primarily a theoretical paper, it shall leave to those interviewed the task of further defining what identity is. Let it simply be noted that according to a majority of social scientists — for example, Barth (1969), Anderson (1983), Jenkins (1996), and, in an Arctic context, most contributors to Oosten and Remie (1999) or Dorais and Searles (2001b) — identity has three fundamental characteristics:

1. It is a *relation* rather than an intrinsic quality that would exist by itself in a kind of vacuum. People start identifying themselves — and being identified by others — when they become aware that they are not alone in this world, that they need other people and other elements in their surroundings in order to function in a productive way.
2. Because identity is basically relational, it is liable to change when circumstances provoke modifications in the relation. This means that it is not given once and for all, but is *constructed*. This process of construction continues all through one's life, even if some elements in a person's identity have more permanence than others.
3. Identity is one's constructed relation to his/her *environment*. This word must be understood here in a very encompassing way. Environment is not limited to the natural milieu. It comprises any significant element in one's surroundings: people, but also the words — spoken in specific languages — and actions of these people, as well as the ideas and representations (meaningful images) conveyed by these words and actions, and the material productions that result from human activity. Environment also includes the surrounding aspects of nature, with its geographical features, plants, and animals, as well as the supra-natural world, the other (that is, not entirely terrestrial, human, or animal) places and entities with which some people are said to communicate.

From a methodological point of view, the relational and constructed nature of identity means that it must be apprehended through interaction. Identity is not a static quality, but a dynamic process that becomes manifest only when enacted (for an Arctic example, see Hensel 1996). Identity enactment is the way individuals behave — consciously or not — in order to show who they are when relating with human and non-human elements in their environment. It is also the way people react to this behaviour. Identity thus lies in dynamic interaction.

How academic informants define identity

The scholars interviewed were asked about their own definitions of identity. Only one of 12 did not answer the question, and another avowed his incapacity to reply readily. Among the 10 who did respond, five stressed the subjective aspects of identity, four its social parameters, and one defined identity as an existential phenomenon.

'Subjective' definitions typically describe identity as the way one looks at oneself. It is based on one's own criteria about who one is, and these criteria may be multiple. This is why identity is multidimensional and liable to change according to circumstances. It is also relational, since beyond self-definition others must also be defined, and they must define as well. As one informant put it: 'Identity is a way of representing the self in a relational context.'

This relational character predominated in the four responses that described identity as a primarily social and cultural phenomenon. According to one respondent, identity is always linked to specific situations. From an anthropological point of view, it is 'what is said about who one is,' while sociologically speaking, identity is 'a way of consciously defining what you are in relation to gender, social, and political conditions.'

Another informant sees identity as a matter of classification. It is a process that consists in organising relationships with other people, 'in order to generate solidarity and a way of belonging, thus giving sense to life.' In sum, identity is a way of understanding the world.

Two more respondents insist on the contextual aspects of identity. One of them defines it as a relation through

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which people identify with others in various ways, according to circumstances. The other informant spoke about 'multiple identities (based on age, gender, ethnicity, or nationality), which are simultaneously external and internal: external because you are told what you are; internal because what you are told is formative of your self.' As a result of this dialogue between externality and internality, identity changes all the time, according to context.

Finally, a last informant, who adopts the point of view of the philosophy of science, considers identity as predominantly existential. It is a presence, a set of practices linked to place, a way of life that answers questions about existence.

Definitions similar to these were voiced during the roundtable on Arctic identities held in 2002 at Nijmegen. Participants insisted on the multiplicity of identities: various ways of defining the self usually coexist within the same individual, and these ways can be manipulated according to circumstances. This means that identity is constructed rather than given once and for all. It may become a social instrument, used for furthering the interests (political or else) of various categories of people.

The synthesis of the informants' views on identity brings in, perhaps not surprisingly, a definition similar to that currently found in the academic literature. Identity is a way of defining who you are in reference to other people, and who these people are in reference to you. It is, thus, essentially relational. Being relational means it is social: identity reflects — and helps manipulate — the various economic, political, ethnic, and other contexts within which one performs as a member of a group. It is also cultural: identity is a way of relating to the world and giving sense to life. Finally, since social and cultural relations involve constant change, identity is variable and multiple. It consists of a set of significant practices rather than a fixed ascription to well-defined categories, even if most people perceive it as a way of classifying individuals according to definite criteria.

Types of identities

Informants were asked if they thought identity could be divided into various types. Again, their answers were not so different from those found in literature (for example, Cohen 2000). Only one respondent believed that identity cannot be subdivided but is a holistic, subjective process. The others deemed that for analytical purposes, one should distinguish between various forms of identity.

Six, out of 11 informants who answered the question, spoke about dimensions, aspects, and levels — rather than types — of identity. These range from personal, to local and social, although the more collective levels of identity may also be part of one's personal definition of self. Various aspects crop up in particular situations and form a specific combination within each individual. In other words, identity operates at different levels simultaneously. Its multiple dimensions — which may seem contradictory but possess their own logic — enable the individual to adapt to various situations.

These dimensions form a complex structure. The identity of every person is embedded within the social organisation of that person's group(s) of reference, thus multiplying the levels at which identity becomes manifest. Some of these levels imply each other (for example, ethnicity, religion, and family), while others are discrete (professional occupation and family role, for instance). The various dimensions of identity are culturally constituted.

Four respondents consider these dimensions as separate types — rather than aspects — of identities. They distinguish between three main forms: ethnic, cultural, and social identity. The first form is only relevant in a political context. It is a collective process of self-representation that enables a group to deal consciously with difference, in order to define its position within a nation-state.

Cultural identity has a weaker meaning and weakened epistemological utility, because it is more encompassing. It comprises any practice, symbolic representation, or artefact — and those who share them — that one considers to be in accordance with one's own values and world view. For some people, however, including several aboriginal groups, cultural identity is synonymous with ethnicity, because they have to emphasise a number of emblematic culture traits (such as hunting, respecting elders, etc) in order to justify their ethnic position and political claims within the nation-state to which they belong.

Finally, social identity concerns identification with a group based on social criteria like gender, age, profession, and hierarchical status. This includes — but is not limited to — social class.

Can identity survive the loss of culture and language?

The informants were asked if identity can survive when a people has lost most of its original culture and language. With two exceptions, who think that identity becomes purely imaginary — or must be rebuilt from scratch — when culture disappears, respondents believe that it can indeed survive cultural and linguistic loss.

One scholar deems that one can show a high level of sophistication with both one's native culture and the outside world, giving as an example northern aboriginal women in their fifties, who can perform in both worlds without feeling that their identity is in jeopardy. Some informants think that when people have a specific background that they value, they will preserve their identity whatever the circumstances. Their sense of place — living in Greenland or in Arctic Canada, for instance — can be as important as their aboriginal culture in defining who they are. For that reason, cultural change will not necessarily weaken their identity.

Three respondents stressed the structural aspects of identity: it lies at a deeper level than surface cultural and linguistic phenomena. Culture and language may change, but people still feel continuity between who they (or their parents) were, and who they are now. Since identity is

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relational, it can easily migrate from one cultural form to another. As one informant put it: 'Language and culture are symbols which, at the limit, may be mere epiphenomena of a deeper identity.'

Such symbols can be manipulated by those in power for instilling into a social group — an aboriginal population for instance — a consciousness, which may be true or false, of who they are. Identity thus has ideological dimensions. That form of consciousness might explain why some people are able to verbalise their difference when feeling a discrepancy between themselves and their social environment. This gives them a sense of their ethnic identity, even without the presence of any culture and/or language they can call their own. In many cases, however, says one respondent, one does not have to define oneself. Concepts such as 'Greenlandicity' or 'Inuitness' are coined by specialists. Instead of being defined according to these concepts, Arctic residents should be asked directly how they identify themselves.

In sum, most of the informants believe that cultural and linguistic change — even when occurring rapidly — does not entail a rupture in the identity of those who experience it. Inuit remain Inuit and Sámi remain Sámi, even if many of them are hardly distinguishable from their non-aboriginal neighbours, and only speak English or a Nordic language. However, it is only they — and not alleged specialists — who can really say who they are.

The present situation of aboriginal peoples in the Arctic

In relation to the process of loss or preservation of ethnic and cultural identity, informants were questioned about their assessment of the current political, cultural, and linguistic status of Arctic populations. Three of them responded broadly, the balance focusing their answers on a specific group or geographical area.

Generally speaking, respondents consider that contemporary political developments such as the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA), the Nunavut Agreement, or Greenland's Home Rule, have enabled Arctic peoples to take control of themselves and accede to their own political identity, like most other populations in the world. Such agreements have also provided aboriginal groups with tools for preserving their language and culture. One informant warned, however, that local people, involved in their daily problems, may not show the same interest in political stakes as the political elite. Another believes that support for language and culture can only work in wealthy countries (that is, in North America and Fenno-Scandinavia, as opposed to northern Russia), while a third pointed out that in regions like Chukotka or some areas of Arctic Canada, it seems too late to preserve aboriginal languages.

One scholar focused on the Inuit, stressing the fact that they know who they are collectively, even if several of them may have problems defining their personal identity. But since the core of Inuit identity is unalienable, one should not worry about negative prognoses concerning their future.

Four respondents restricted their remarks to Nunavut, and three more to Greenland. Regarding Nunavut, respondents believe that the creation of the new territory has not and will not solve all problems. The population expects that its aboriginal values will be put into use by the government of Nunavut, but this is difficult to fulfil. Local authorities aim at including Inuit Traditional Knowledge (*Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*, or IQ) into their mode of governance, but it is not clear how this can be implemented, and if it is at all, warns one scholar, it might mean that elders would take control of society.

By contrast, if only lip service is paid to aboriginal values, language, and culture in general, the political situation might create greater distance between government and the community, a situation that might lead to failure. Nunavut has enabled Inuit to 'become architects of their own destiny,' to quote one respondent, thence its psychological importance, but this does not bring a solution to every problem. For instance, is it possible to train enough local people to replace all non-Inuit civil servants within 10–15 years? The answer is not clear.

In Greenland, the aboriginal language, Kalaallisut, will survive because it is used at every level of society, even if Greenlanders still need expertise from Denmark — this is why the language of bureaucracy is Danish. Aboriginal Greenlanders will eventually come to peace with Danish culture, rather than shunning it on political grounds, when they will realise that the Danish language can protect Kalaallisut against the onslaught of English and globalisation. Kalaallisut can thrive if its speakers accept the idea that their language can only develop through the introduction of new vocabulary, rather than by trying to preserve the lexicon and grammatical forms of traditional hunters. At a more directly political level, some solution will be devised between total independence from Denmark — difficult for economic reasons — and Home Rule.

As far as Alaska is concerned, in an informal conversation on identity one scholar pointed out that whereas non-natives living in aboriginal communities used to consider themselves as 'guests,' they now deem that Alaska belongs to America, and as such, it is theirs as much as it belongs to anybody else. Of course, native Alaskans — Inupiat in particular — do not adopt this view, because they feel they have a special stake in the territory. The situation might, thus, entail problems in the future. One of its immediate effects is that more and more whites are now sitting on local boards and committees, which hampers the use of aboriginal languages in public life.

Despite some problematic situations like the one just mentioned, the informants seem cautiously optimistic about the current status of Arctic populations. They think that political developments during recent decades gave people control over their own affairs, and they can be beneficial to the preservation and development of aboriginal cultures and languages, at least in those

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regions where it is not too late. Several respondents, however, point out that many problems have not been solved yet, and that special efforts should be made to fulfil the expectations of local populations.

Ethnic relations in the Arctic

Informants were asked about their perception of present-day relationships between aboriginal and non-native people in the Arctic. Six share views that could be defined as positive. They believe that ethnic relations are better now than they used to be. In Arctic Canada, non-Inuit are less racist than they formerly were, while, in Greenland, there is no real expression of intolerance based on ethnic or linguistic prejudice. Relations between Greenlanders and Danes have softened since the late 1970s, even if many individuals still cannot relate at the personal level. More generally, international initiatives like the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) and the University of the Arctic have contributed to improve relations.

Three of the 'positive' respondents stressed the importance of education and knowledge for eliminating ethnic prejudice. As one of them put it: 'Ignorance breeds intolerance.' Another pointed out the desire of Inuit elders to collaborate with non-natives. According to these elders, intelligence does not solely lie within their hands. It can be activated and increased by opening their minds unto others, including *Qallunaat* (white people).

Four informants hold more negative opinions. One thinks that, in northwestern Canada, ethnic relations have deteriorated since land claims were settled, and intra-community conflicts have developed. Another is alarmed at the current level of political correctness in the Arctic: you need a permit to undertake research or to take almost any kind of initiative, even if this enters in contradiction with the basic values of Inuit society, which encourages the sharing of knowledge. A third respondent believes that, basically, Inuit continue to consider *Qallunaat* as outsiders, while very few *Qallunaat* get really connected to Inuit culture and society. This opinion is echoed by a fourth scholar, who sees equal prejudice on both sides.

Finally, two scholars share a more balanced view. One mentioned the good ethnic relations observed in Nunavut, although these are counterbalanced by some sort of reserve on the part of the Inuit. The other drew a comparison between Chukotka, where the Russians who remained after the demise of the USSR are those who grew deeper roots and are less racist, and Greenland, where relations seem cordial on the surface, even if Danes and Greenlanders are allegedly prejudiced one against the other.

Inuit views on identity

To heed one informant's complaint that Arctic identities tend to be defined by specialists rather than elicited from the people themselves, attention is given to the way northern aboriginal populations describe who they are, comparing some of their definitions with those of interviewed scholars. To avoid dispersion, and in view of the fact that data on North American Arctic peoples are more readily available, this discussion focuses on Inuit and Yup'ik self-identity, with the caveat already mentioned: the perspectives quoted here may be deemed fairly representative of aboriginal opinions, but they are far from exhaustive.

Inuit identity as described in ethnography

On the basis of their own fieldwork, a number of social scientists have described how contemporary Inuit (and Yupiit) define who they are, either explicitly — when questioned directly — or implicitly. Such descriptions are fairly numerous (Briggs 1997; Brody 1975; Dahl 2000; Dybbroe 1996; Fienup-Riordan 1990; Nuttall 1992; Searles 2001; Stairs and Wenzel 1992), and it is impossible to take all, or even a majority, into account here. There are, however, a few representative works, written by scholars who actually speak the native language and can, thus, communicate directly with aboriginal informants. Their purpose is academic, but the perspective they wish to convey through their ethnography is that of local people.

In his account of ethnicity and discourse among Yupiit living around Bethel, southwestern Alaska, Hensel (1996) described how talk about fishing, trapping, hunting, and life on the land in general acts as a proxy for a type of activities — those linked to subsistence — which are considered by Yupiit as important identity markers. In the Bethel area, according to Hensel, people are more concerned about where someone fits on an imaginary continuum extending from Yup'ik to non-native practices, than about abstract categories of identity. This means that an aboriginal individual who cannot or does not wish to devote himself or herself to subsistence activities may be deemed less Yup'ik than a non-native person who draws at least part of his/her subsistence from local resources. Identity is, thus, more of a quality than an allocated category.

In his community study of Quaqtaq, an Inuit village in Nunavik (Arctic Quebec), Dorais (1997) described three 'fundamentals' of local identity: family and kinship, language, and religion. To be an *inutuinnaq*, a 'genuine Inuk,' one must have at least one Inuk parent, speak Inuktitut, and abide by Christian morality, which is seen as continuing traditional values. Identity is best expressed through *maqainniq*, 'travelling on the land.' When practising land-based activities, one is closer to family, use of native language, and religion, than when remaining in the village. Nowadays, however, *maqainniq* is confronted by *kiinaujaliurutiit*, the 'means for making money,' that is, wage work, the English language, and ideas brought from outside, which are essential to modern life. In order to preserve their identity while enjoying modernity, Inuit must conciliate both elements, which is not always easy.

It is up to each individual to devise how he or she will work this conciliation out. This is confirmed by Therrien's (1999b) observations on identity, based on an analysis of papers presented by Inuit at a conference held in Iqaluit,

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Nunavut. One of Therrien's conclusions (1999b: 34) was that:

> In defining their own identity, Inuit always leave room for personal interpretations. Identity is not a dogma or an axiom. There is no ready-to-think definition given as such, even if almost everybody respects a certain number of values. Therefore each person has her own way of talking about identity according to her own experience and inherited knowledge.

During the conference, the notion of identity was translated as *Inuit inuunirarnirijangat*, 'what is considered as being said by Inuit themselves concerning the fact of being Inuit' (Therrien 1999b: 33), that is, the Inuit way of defining who they are. Therrien pointed out that such a definition is open-ended: it can express cultural identity as well as ethnic or political self-ascriptions.

In an article on the opposition between local and national identity in south Greenland, Nuttall (2001) discussed the role played by memory and by feelings towards the environment, landscape, and resources, in the construction of local identity. He concluded that in small communities, 'a sense of belonging arises from close association with other persons and with the environment and features of the landscape' (Nuttall 2001: 70). Identity is thus based on the memory of events that happened there, on a sense of familiarity with the surroundings, and on shared social relations with people one knows well. This concurs with Therrien's observation about Inuit identity stemming from personal experience and knowledge.

Finally, in their socio-linguistic study of the Baffin region of Nunavut, Dorais and Sammons (2002) showed that for the Inuit they interviewed in Iqaluit, Igloolik, and Kimmirut, one's identity is predominantly defined by his or her genealogy (Inuit parents), way of life, and, perhaps, physical appearance — if you look like an Inuk, you cannot escape being considered Inuit. Language is important for reinforcing aboriginal identity, but it is not essential: one can be an Inuk without speaking Inuktitut. Here again, criteria for defining Inuit identity are rather loose and open-ended.

Ethnographic reports thus seem to show that Inuit and Yupiit share a dynamic perception of who they are. For them, identity can be a quality rather than an ascription. It is not generally bound by pre-selected criteria: it rather stems from personal experience. When such criteria do exist, they are broad enough (genealogy, way of life, subsistence activities) to accommodate many different situations. What may be more important is that identity is experienced at the individual level. It is always open to personal interpretation. Even conciliation between tradition and modernity, to which Arctic societies have been confronted for decades, must be worked out individually by every Inuk and Yup'ik, if their identity is to continue.

Inuit identity as expressed by Inuit

The only Inuit to have specifically published on identity are individuals trained in Western social sciences, like Robert Petersen, anthropologist and founder of Ilisimatusarfik, the University of Greenland (Petersen 1995), or Angajuqaq Oscar Kawagley, a respected Yup'ik specialist of aboriginal education (Kawagley 1990). Although fascinating, their views on identity do not necessarily reflect those of 'ordinary' people. Therefore this paper seeks expressions of Inuit identity in sources that do not always deal directly with this topic.

In Canada, there are two dictionaries of Inuktitut definitions written by unschooled native speakers. None has a word for 'identity,' since, as pointed out by Therrien (1999b: 33), the necessity for conceptualising an explicit self-ascription is rather recent in the Arctic, and it has not left its mark yet on the common language. When looking, however, at how both dictionaries define the word 'Inuit,' some expression of ethnic identity can be deciphered.

In his *Inuit Uqausillaringit* ('The genuine Inuit words'), Taamusi Qumaq (1991: 35) gave the following definition (translations by the author): 'Inuit: the name given to populations living on Earth who differ in their appearance, while differing also in their customs and languages. Being like that [that is, one of these populations], Inuit have black hair and their skin is brown, not white.'

According to Qumaq, the word 'Inuit' applies primarily to any human population. Human beings are characterised by their racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity. As ethnic Inuit are concerned, the first distinctive characteristic that comes to the mind of Qumaq seems to be physical: they have black hair and a brown skin.

In a more recent dictionary, *Uqausiit Tukingit* ('The meanings of words'), written in a dialect different from, but close to Qumaq's, Ootoova and others (2000: 56) defined Inuit in a contrasting way: 'Inuit are those residents of the Arctic who are not *Qallunaat*.'

Qallunaat (White people; literally 'Big eyebrows') are defined by their physical look and geographical localisation in both dictionaries, although each points at different attributes.

> A *Qallunaaq* is a human being who has a white skin and lives in the warm [regions]. (Ootoova and others 2000: 624)
>
> The reason why they are [called] *Qallunaat* is the following: when they arrived from the other side of Ocean [Europe], those [Inuit] who saw the first of them saw their prominent eyebrows, (Qumaq 1991: 595).

These definitions are purely factual. Inuit live in the north and *Qallunaat* in the south (or they came from abroad); Inuit are brown and *Qallunaat* white. Ethnic and cultural identities are not discussed, but only hinted at by Ootoova and others, who define the Inuit as non-*Qallunaat*, that is, as those residents of the Arctic who did not come from elsewhere (the warm regions).

Tungilik and Uyarasuk (1999) presented the testimonies of two elders who told about how they, their families, and their camp-mates converted to Christianity. The narrative comprises two points that implicitly concern identity: 1) although becoming Christians, Inuit continued to celebrate first catches and share game; sharing was now

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being given a biblical foundation; 2) even if Inuit adopted Christian names, the traditional naming system, including the transmission of name-souls (*atiit*), was preserved. This means that the narrators feel there was no breach of continuity between past and present. For this reason, identity does not appear a relevant topic for them: they just continue to be who they always were.

The importance of naming for defining one's identity is reflected in an article by Alexina Kublu and Jarich Oosten (1999), where the first author, then instructor at Nunavut Arctic College, told about the relations she maintained with her extended family through the traditional naming system. Her statement 'illustrates clearly how Inuit society reproduces itself in the naming system' (Kublu and Oosten 1999: 68). The article concluded that 'in traditional Inuit society, identity was primarily marked by ethnonyms, which connected people to land, and personal names that connected people to ancestors' (Kublu and Oosten 1999: 75). This concurs with Nuttall's description of the importance of locality (Nuttall 2001) and names (Nuttall 1992) for defining Greenlandic identity. It is also in accordance with what one of the academic informants said about the Inupiat of Alaska: naming is used as a potent means for creating social relationships within the group and with some outsiders; personal identity is, thus, more significant than ethnic and cultural identities, which are principally put into use in order to fulfil political goals.

In a book of memories about her home-town of Kuujjuaq, Nunavik, Dorothy Mesher (1995), an Inuk who lived in southern Canada for many years, entitled a chapter 'Some things that still survive'; in this she described culture traits that have not disappeared since her childhood. These traits, which may be seen as emblems of Inuit identity, are: 1) the Inuktitut language; 2) religion; 3) a lack of interest for politics; 4) women's sewing skills; 5) the naming system; 6) attachment to the land; 7) affection for children and babies; and 8) importance of the extended family. Here again, naming, family, and locality ('the land') emerge as important for identity.

Religion occurs as an element of identity in a paper delivered by a young Inuk from Nunavik, at a conference held in 2000 (Nowkawalk 2000). The author insisted that the spiritual identity of the Inuit, that is, their relations with the supra-natural world, should be taken into account when discussing the contemporary situation of Arctic aboriginal populations. At the same conference, Robert Watt (2000), then president of Nunavik's Avataq Cultural Institute, stressed that Inuit identity is not linked to one's physical looks — thus contradicting Qumaq's (1991: 35) more traditional definition — or specific cultural habits, but to one's will to be an Inuk.

What can be drawn from these Inuit testimonies is that personal identity seems more meaningful than collective self-definitions. These may be important in political forums, but in daily life what really matters is one's position within the naming system, one's relationship to a specific place, and, perhaps, one's link with the supra-natural world. In fact, people are free to define who they are, provided they seek some sort of continuity — through naming, sharing, or otherwise — between themselves and their ancestors. Everyday social and cultural identities are, thus, constructed upon a person's individual experience as bearer of a traditionally transmitted name and as a member of a specific community. That person is related — through kinship or otherwise — to several other individuals, with whom he or she shares values, memories, and cultural practices.

The identity of 'ordinary' people can, thus, differ from that put forward by contemporary Inuit political discourse (Dorais 1994: 258). Aboriginal politicians who, in contrast with most other individuals, are prone to be influenced by academic and bureaucratic categories of thought, rather stress the collective aspects of identity. For them, Inuit constitute an aboriginal collectivity that fights for its territorial and political autonomy. Native values and cultural practices function as symbols of this autonomy, but they do not have much intrinsic value. For Inuit — and, presumably, other Arctic aboriginal — politicians and activists, it is self-government and economic development that form the core of modern identity, rather than community relations and shared memories.

Comparison and conclusion

This article has indicated how a sample of 12 social-science specialists of the Arctic define the concept of identity, and how they assess the current political, cultural, and ethnic situation of northern aboriginal peoples. As a counterpoint, it has shown the way some Inuit perceive and enact their identity, as described in recent ethnography or stemming from statements made by natives of the Arctic.

A comparison between visions shows similarities. Generally speaking, academics as well as Inuit see identity as a way of relating with one's human, social, and political surroundings. This relation occurs *hic et nunc*, that is, in specific contexts that may vary according to the involved persons and circumstances. This means that identity is constructed: it is a process rather than a category. It is enacted and re-enacted every time one has to relate to someone else.

There are differences, too, between scholarly and aboriginal views on identity. The scholars interviewed, as an effect of their academic training and social position, and also perhaps, because of the structure of the interview schedule, tended to conceptualise identity in relatively precise and definite ways. It consists of a set of significant practices, partly open to description. There exist various dimensions or types of identity, and it may be worthwhile, for analytical purposes, to undertake a classification of these.

Most academic informants deem that despite real problems, the current political and cultural situation is basically satisfying in several regions of the Arctic. This may be partly due to the fact that political developments have given aboriginal peoples a degree of control over

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their own affairs. Scholars are more divided concerning ethnic relations, about half being optimistic (these often stress the importance of educating people against prejudice) and the other half rather pessimistic. Almost all agree, however, that despite rapid social and cultural change, Arctic populations have preserved their identity.

In this, they concur with many Inuit, who insist on a sense of continuity — enacted when going on the land, sharing game, transmitting names, speaking Inuktitut, or in other instances — between tradition and modernity. For them, one should strive to live a modern life while abiding by traditional values. Such an endeavour is individual. Every man or woman has to attempt it in his or her own way. Inuit thus generally consider identity as being primarily personal. This is one of the main differences with the scholarly respondents, who tended to speak about identity as a collective phenomenon.

In keeping with their more individualistic vision, Inuit see identity as open-ended. It cannot be enclosed within specific categories or defined according to precise criteria. Identity may have to do with anything one deems important, including elements — like religion — that do not come readily to the mind of scholarly observers. As stated by Watt (2000), you are an Inuk when you want to be one. Inuktitut dictionary descriptions of what an Inuk is can only come out with factual — even trivial — definitions: Inuit live in the Arctic and their skin is not white.

Comparing academic and aboriginal definitions of Arctic identities leads to one conclusion: the scholars and their public should by all means take into account how Inuit and other northern peoples think about themselves. Both natural scientists and specialists in Arctic social sciences must pay attention to aboriginal knowledge in the fields of human behaviour and cultural analysis. It is of consequence, for instance, that they recognise the tremendous importance of personal identities based on names, kinship relations, and individual habits. As pointed out by one of the academic informants, Inuit — and, probably, other Arctic populations — are confident about their collective self-definition, but several of them may have problems concerning their personal identity, their individual conciliation between tradition and modernity. If scientists are to play a positive role in the modern Arctic, they have to document and take into account what identity really means for its aboriginal residents.

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