

**BCS 100: The Circumpolar World**  
**Module 4: The Peoples and Cultures of the Circumpolar World**

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Cosmology  
Culture  
Harvesting  
Indigenous  
Nomadic  
Pastoralism  
Reciprocity  
Subsistence  
Taboo  
Modes of production

### **Learning Objectives and Outcomes**

Upon the completion of this module, you should be able to:

Recognize the names, broad cultural features, and ways of life of a significant proportion of the Indigenous peoples of the four main regions of the Circumpolar World (Northern Asia, Northern Scandinavia, North Atlantic, and North America);  
Define culture and describe how it relates to traditional lifestyles of various peoples in the Circumpolar World;  
Recognize and describe the three main lifeways of Circumpolar peoples; hunting and gathering; marine hunting; and reindeer herding;  
Explain the influence that non-Indigenous peoples have had on Indigenous peoples in the Circumpolar World.

### **Overview**

The peoples of the circumpolar world have maintained their individual and collective identities in spite of colonialism, industrialization, development, and globalization. Integrated into colonial then industrial states, Indigenous peoples and their cultures have been put under extreme duress. In this module, culture will be defined as a complete way of life that includes key elements such kinship, language, economic organization, lived experiences, religious worldviews, and traditional knowledge systems. In this module, we explore the ways in which traditional culture has been mobilized in the face of imposed culture change and the ways in which Indigenous traditional knowledge can be transmitted to new generations and integrated into the practices of the new millennium. It will be argued that Indigenous traditional knowledge must be integrated into modern practices if Indigenous populations and their cultures are to flourish in a period of rapid change.

### **Lecture**

The Peoples of the Circumpolar World include the Sami of Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Russia; the Inuit of Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Russia; the Aleut, the Gwich'in, the Dene, the Cree, and other Native groups in northern North America; and the Chukchi, the Khanty, the Naganasan, the Nenets and other peoples indigenous to Russia. Though there is a great deal of cultural difference in this vast geographic zone, there are some commonalities that will be discussed in this module, with examples drawn from selected populations.

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AMAP 1998. AMAP Assessment Report: Arctic Pollution Issues. Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), Oslo, Norway. Xii+859 pp. Graphical production: Philippe Rekacewicz and Emmanuelle Bournay

## DEFINING INDIGENEOUS

After the Second World War and the collapse of colonial regimes, the newly created United Nations began examining the plight of Indigenous populations located within the confines of nation-states. In the 1950s, the International Labour Organization (ILO) began referring to the problems of “indigenous populations in independent countries.” The term was used to describe culturally and geographically distinct populations that were not self-governing and in effect were colonized inside the borders of independent states.

By definition, an Indigenous population was one that did not hold political power: in democracies, this occurred when Indigenous populations were minorities within the larger political structure and governed by the larger state-structures, usually with little or no input; or in certain cases the Indigenous population was a demographic majority, but the political and power institutions were ruled by a non-Indigenous minority (Guatemala being a case in point).

These populations are often considered colonized as their lands were forcefully integrated into larger political structures. Unlike classic colonies, these territories were incorporated within expanding nation-states, but like classic colonies, these territories were often appropriated in order to ensure resources that would benefit distant centers of financial and economic power. Quite often, populations from the colonial centers would relocate (or be relocated) to Indigenous lands, reducing Indigenous populations to a minority status within their traditional territories.

Now, the terms “Indigenous peoples,” “Indigenous ethnic minorities,” and “tribal groups” are often used to describe social groups that share similar characteristics, namely a social and cultural identity that is distinct from dominant groups in society.

The United Nations and international law apply four criteria to distinguish Indigenous peoples:

- Indigenous peoples usually live within (or maintain attachments to) geographically distinct ancestral territories;
- they tend to maintain distinct social, economic, and political institutions within their territories;
- they typically aspire to remain distinct culturally, geographically and institutionally rather than assimilate fully into national society; and
- they self-identify as Indigenous or tribal.

Despite common characteristics, there does not exist any single accepted definition of Indigenous peoples that captures their diversity as peoples. Self-identification as Indigenous or tribal is usually regarded as a fundamental criterion for determining whether groups are Indigenous or tribal, sometimes in combination with other variables such as “language spoken,” and “geographic location or concentration.”

In North America, a population is generally regarded as Indigenous if ancestry can be traced to a period prior to contact with European colonizers and settlers. In the Russian Federation, a population is Indigenous if it has been living in a given region prior to the spread the Russian Empire and a population is considered a “small-numbered” people if it has a population of less than 50,000 people and is Indigenous to a given territory.

The term **Aboriginal** is a legal term that is entrenched into the Canadian Constitution (1982) Section 35 (2) and includes Inuit, Indian, and Métis.

Source: Adapted from “Indigenous Peoples,” produced by the United Nations Development Programme. Retrieved from <http://www.undp.org/cso/ip/faq.html> January 18, 2005.

## Indigenous People and Culture in the American North

The Indigenous populations of Circumpolar North American can be grouped together linguistically into a number of populations that speak related languages:

- 1) Eskimo-Aleut
  - a) Eskimo
    - i) Inuit. The Inuit speak a number of dialects that form a language continuum stretching from Alaska to Greenland. The main languages (or dialects) of this continuum include:
      - ii)
        - (1) Inupiatun (or Inupiaq): the language of the Inupiaq of northern Alaska
        - (2) Inuvialuktun: the language of the Inuvialuit of the Mackenzie River delta region.
        - (3) Inuktitut: the language spoken by the Inuit of the Central and Eastern Canadian Arctic;
        - (4) Inuktun: the language of Northern Greenland
        - (5) Kalaallisut: the language of Western Greenland
          1. The Inuit are one of the largest Indigenous populations of the Circumpolar North with a population numbering roughly 125,000 (Creery 1994:105).
      - iii) Yupik-Yuit. The Yupik stretch from Russia to Alaska. They include the Yupik speakers of Central Alaska and the Alaskan Pacific Gulf. The Yupik-Yuit languages also stretch across the Bering Strait and are spoken on St. Lawrence Island and in a number of locations in the north of the Russian Far East.
    - b) Aleut
      - i) The Aleut language is divided into Western and Eastern dialects and is spoken by the Indigenous populations of the Aleutian Islands and the adjacent Alaska Peninsula mainland.
  - 2) Na-Dene or Athapaskan (or Athabaskan) language group
    - a) Dene speakers comprise another language continuum that spreads across the interior of Alaska, into the Yukon and Northwest Territories of Canada and into northern British Columbia and Alberta. The main languages include:
      - i) Koyukon spoken along the Koyukuk and middle Yukon Rivers
      - ii) Dena'ina, formerly known as Tanaina, spoken around Cook Inlet and the territory around Anchorage
      - iii) Tanana spoken around the Tanana River
      - iv) Ahtna spoken in the Copper River region of south central Alaska
      - v) Tutchone dialects are spoken in the southwestern region of the Yukon Territory
      - vi) Gwich'in, formerly known as Kutchin, spoken in Northern Alaska, the Yukon Territory and the Northwest Territories
      - vii) The Dunne-za or Beaver people are a small Dene population living in the Peace River area of eastern British Columbia and northwestern Alberta.
      - viii) Slavey (Slave) or Deh Gah Got'ine spoken along the Mackenzie River (Deh Cho)
      - ix) Yellowknife or T'atsaot'ine that was formerly spoken to the north of Great Slave Lake, but has now been integrated into the Chipewyan language
      - x) Tli Cho or Dogrib spoken between Great Slave and Great Bear Lakes
      - xi) Chipewyan or Denesuline spoken to the east of Great Slave Lake

Though Athapaskan speakers cover a large territory in the Circumpolar North (and this does not include the Athapaskan speakers found much farther to the south, notably the Navajos), many of the Na-Dene languages of the Circumpolar North face extinction in our lifetimes—in certain cases fewer than 20 speakers remain.

1. Algonkian (or Algonquian) language group
  - A. The Algonkian languages stretched from the Eastern Coast of North America to the Circumpolar North. Examples of Circumpolar Algonkian languages include:
    1. Innu (Montagnais and Naskapi), a language and dialects spoken in Labrador and northern Quebec
    2. Cree, a language that is now spoken across northern Quebec, Ontario, and the Prairie provinces
    3. Ojibwe, the most common Indigenous language after Inuktitut and Cree;
    4. Michif, a French Cree Creole spoken that was spoken by some of Metis, a population that is now found far into the Circumpolar North, including the Northwest Territories.

Though there was a great deal of linguistic diversity, there were certain similarities in traditional economic practices and traditional land use. In the Arctic regions, the main economic focus was on the sea and the hunting of sea mammals. Farther inland, subsistence shifted to the hunting of ungulates such as caribou and moose and, in certain regions, the hunting and trapping of beaver was central to economic subsistence. We will examine these traditional economies (they will be revisited in Module 7) and will then compare and contrast them to the practices of the Indigenous peoples of Northern Scandinavia and Russia.

### **Inuit Culture in Alaska and Canada**

The Inuit are a coastal people whose main subsistence activity was the hunting of sea mammals either in open waters using umiaks or on the ice when the Arctic Ocean was frozen over. The Inuit are probably the best known of the northern Indigenous peoples, known for their igloos, yet in reality Inuit culture shows a great deal of variation. Certain groups subsisted mainly on the hunting of whales and others relied on seals. The Inuit, however, did differ markedly from their neighbors both in language and culture, whether it be the Athapaskans of Alaska or Canada or the Chukchi of Russia.

The Inuit are descended from the archaeological Thule (pronounced too-leh) culture that spread out of Alaska one thousand years ago. Building semi-subterranean houses using whalebone, sod, and hides, the Thule quickly established their culture across the Arctic. The Thule culture spread in a period of global warming that left the ocean waters open much of the year, facilitating the hunting of migrating whales. Centuries later, in a period of global cooling, the Thule of the central and eastern Arctic largely abandoned whale hunting in favour of seals that were hunted on the sea ice. The archaeological Thule eventually became the Inuit.

Inuit traditional culture was marked by a number of important cultural markers, notably the hunting of sea mammals. On the open waters, large sea mammals, including whales, were pursued from open boats. These mammals were caught using harpoons with bone points that would detach from their shafts. The points were attached to floats, often made of sealskin. The floats would tire the harpooned animal, and, when it died, the floats would ensure that the animal would not sink. The lines would then be used to drag the dead animal to shore. Whale hunting continues to this day in regions of Alaska and Northeastern Russia.

In the central Canadian Arctic, Inuit groups such as the Netsilik relied to a much greater extent on seal hunting. Unlike whales, which require open water (and therefore migrate to warmer waters when the sea ice closes the Arctic Ocean), many seal species remain under the sea ice throughout the winter. However, seals must breathe, so, to ensure their survival, seals keep breathing holes open in the sea ice. Invisible at the surface, this tiny hole on the surface—with a much larger funnel shaped opening underneath—allows the seal to surface and breathe. A hunter would place a piece of fluff at the hole and wait. The seal's breath would make the fluff flutter, signaling to the hunter that the seal was at the hole. Swiftly, the hunter would drive his harpoon into the hole, spearing the seal. Inuit hunters such as the Netsilik used dogs to find the breathing holes and then patiently waited for seals to surface. Because seals keep a number of breathing holes open during the winter, a larger number of hunters cooperating in the hunt would improve the chances of success. Though the southern stereotype of the Arctic in the winter is that of a frozen desert, the reality is quite different. It is in the winter when families would gather together on the winter ice to hunt the plentiful seals.

Seal hunting was more than a means of providing meat for subsistence and oil to provide light and warmth. The traditional religious and cosmological beliefs are known as animism, a belief system in which the universe is peopled with spirits that inhabit not only humans, but animals and inanimate objects equally (we'll examine these beliefs more closely in Module 8). A seal was not killed because of the skill of the hunter, but rather because the animal was willing to sacrifice itself to humans. Consequently, its spirit had to be respected and a number of taboos regulated hunting. Failure to respect these taboos could lead to starvation because it might mean failure in future hunts. Also, the distribution of meat and blubber was regulated by strict social conventions. It was through balanced or collaborative reciprocity that meat and seal fat would be distributed not only within the nuclear family but with a larger social grouping, ensuring that all would receive a fair share.

Traditionally, Inuit did not have a formal political organization; leadership was usually achieved and maintained by consensus. In many cases, their leader was an *Angakut* (or *angakok*, shaman). The Inuit did not have formal laws. Rather, social norms were enforced through a variety of means including taboos that regulated behaviour. As noted, the taboos that regulated hunting were central to Inuit life and beliefs. These taboos ensured that the Inuit would properly respect both the spirit of the animal that was hunted (the *anua*) through the use of proper ceremony and ritual, but also ensured the respect of spiritual entities such as the Keepers-Masters, who cared for the animals on land, and deities such as Sedna, who was the master of the sea mammals. If a taboo were broken, Sedna (also known as Taleelayo or Nuliajuk) had the power to withdraw the seals, refusing to send them to the hunters, and thus condemning a community to starvation. When hunting failed, the community often turned to the shaman to discover the cause of the failure. The shaman or medicine man could reach the supernatural realm by eliciting both good and bad spirits through prayer, songs, and dance (Creery, 1994:108). The shaman was able to make amends to the spiritual entities that lived in the larger spiritual universe that surrounded the Inuit. In contemporary times, many of the original meanings and reasons for certain taboos have been forgotten. However, as more Inuit achieve self-determination through land claims and self-governance, they are able to modify their traditional practices into political organization.

A loose social grouping of individuals and nuclear families that would gather and disperse over the year marked Inuit social organization. In the Central Arctic, larger groups would gather on the ice to cooperate in hunting. Status was achieved and leadership was enforced through respect, not force. In the spring, when the ice would thaw and the open ocean reappeared, nuclear families would disperse over the coast and territory. Whereas travel by dog sled was the main form of transportation in the winter, the kayak and the umiak were the main forms of transportation in the summer as the terrain was too boggy to allow effective overland transportation. In the summer and winter months, many Inuit groups would hunt caribou and spend much time fishing. Even though these were not central to Inuit diet, they were an important part of the economy: though caribou meat was not the main sources of meat, the caribou

provided hides that were used to make Inuit clothing, without which life would not have been possible. Also, fish could be stored by freezing in the permafrost and later used to feed the sled dogs.

### **The Gwich'in of the Northwest Territories, Canada**

Gwich'in means "people who live in a flat area" (Heine 2001:38). This hunting and gathering group is bound together by cultural values that are perpetuated through Indigenous traditional knowledge, oral history, language, shared beliefs, and ecology. Their beliefs are based on the reciprocity of ecology and animals. For instance, there "was a time when people and animals were equals, when animals had the power of speech and were able to change into human form" (Heine 2001:xvii). Raven plays an important role in creation, as do medicine men. Medicine men could transform from human to a piece of caribou sinew. Through their dreams, they were able to help other people. A medicine man was generally a leader of his people because he helped guide his people away from harm. They maintain their culture and traditions through traditional knowledge that has been transmitted through the generations (we will be looking at Indigenous traditional knowledge in Module 10).

Whereas the Inuit, as we have seen, were a coastal people who relied on hunting sea mammals for their subsistence and survival, the Gwich'in relied on the caribou for much of theirs. Traditionally, caribou meat was dried and the hides were used for making clothing and to cover tents: the summer tents used tanned hides that remained soft and light even in times of rain; the winter tents used hides with hair for better insulation (see *Gwich'in Words about the Land* 1997:31). Not only were the caribou hides used to make a variety of clothing, the hides were used to make babiche, a strong rope used for building boat frames, toboggans, and snowshoes. Caribou sinew was used as thread for sewing, necklaces were made from caribou bones and hooves, and rings were carved from caribou bones. In sum, caribou were used to make virtually all clothing and decorations.

Caribou meat was considered better quality than moose and was prepared in a number of ways, including cooking the meat in pots made of wood or birch bark, or in baskets woven out of tree roots. (Woven when the roots were still wet, the basket could be woven so tightly that once dried, it would not leak.) Meat from the back was prized for making soup, leg bones were boiled to make a nutritious broth, and ribs were chopped and boiled, as was the tail. Dropping red-hot rocks into the water, ensuring that the water would boil without burning the container, would boil the water in the pots and baskets, thus cooking the meat. Caribou hindquarters were the best choice of meat for drying.

The caribou also provided for the health and well-being of the Gwich'in: bones and sinews were used in surgical procedures and caribou fat could be chewed or pounded and mixed with spruce gum to apply to an infected wound to encourage healing. Also, the stomach contents of caribou calves were dried and used as medicine: the dried material, mixed with cranberries, could be eaten to heal an upset stomach. Medicine men drank the fermented content of the caribou stomach. Finally, caribou grease and marrow could be used as creams and applied to the skin (*Gwich'in Words about the Land*, 1997:36).

As was the case with the Inuit, redistribution of food was central to Gwich'in practices. As noted in *Gwich'in Words about the Land*:

If a hunter had a family, he told the people at his camp that he killed a vadzaih [caribou], and then presented the carcass to a respected hunter. If he was unmarried, he told of his success to his father, who praised him before the people and gave the meat away.

The person receiving the meat sent his friends to bring it back to the camp and prepared a feast for everybody. These customs saved many people from starvation, in particular,

those who could not hunt because of old age or injury, or when vadzaih were scarce. Often, when one hunter gave out meat at the camp someone else tried to outdo him by handing out even more. (1997: 30)

Cooperation was also essential to ensure success in hunting. Traditionally, the Gwich'in constructed a fence, surround, or corral into which migrating caribou would be herded and shot by waiting hunters. This fence would make it easy to hunt the caribou with spears and arrows and were essential in ensuring a reliable supply of meat for the winter.

As was also the case with the Inuit, caribou—and other animals—were respected by humans in order to ensure a successful hunt. Except for the bear, the caribou was the most respected animal. However, a wide variety of animals were hunted. Of particular importance were moose, which provided not only meat but also hides, which were used to make large boats used for travelling. Dall sheep were hunted in the mountains and a variety of smaller mammals were trapped for their meat and hides. Fish were also an important source of food in the summer.

Finally, bears were occasionally hunted when meat was scarce or when a bear would linger near camp. Bears (black and grizzly) could be hunted with deadfall traps or were killed in their dens in winter or early spring. Bears, however, were a spiritually powerful animal, one that can hear and understand what people say. The name of the bear was not to be mentioned, and this was especially true while hunting.

There were, of course, a variety of taboos that had to be followed to ensure a successful hunt. Of particular importance were the taboos associated with women. At puberty, a young girl would be separated from her family for a period of up to one year, living in a hut by herself. At this time she would learn all the responsibilities associated with her new status as a woman. Men and boys were not allowed to approach the young woman while she was segregated. At this time, the young woman learned how she could influence a hunt: a woman had to be careful to respect men's hunting equipment and their clothing used for the hunt. If a woman failed to show respect, a hunt could fail. A woman had to be careful not to walk over guns and other hunting weapons and tools. Likewise, when a moose was killed "the woman was not supposed to walk over the blood, or the hair, or the feet of the moose" (*The History and Stories of the Gwichya Gwich'in* 2001:98–99). The respect of these taboos helped to ensure men's success in the hunt. Likewise, while hunting, the men used medicine power to ensure success.

The survival of the Gwich'in depended on detailed cultural knowledge that provided essential skills and insight into the natural environment. Traditional Indigenous knowledge is defined in several ways, depending on the academic discipline, but it is important to realize that the academic definitions of traditional knowledge differ from the Aboriginal perspective. (Traditional, Indigenous, and Western systems of knowledge will be further discussed in Module 10.) This could be for several reasons, such as the concept of science vs. Indigenous traditional knowledge, nature vs. nurture, or oral vs. written history (Module 8), to name a few. Based on my own experience, Indigenous traditional knowledge is the system of knowledge that consists of traditional laws and oral traditions, land and land use, ecology and environment, plants and animals, hunting and fishing, and culture and spirituality, and can only come from the people who elicit it. For example, according to Gwich'in Elder Mary Kendi, "[m]any of the stories are about animals, how the animals lived their life, how they lived with each other, and their relationship with us" (*The History and Stories of the Gwichya Gwich'in* 2001:17) Others believe that animals and Gwich'in could talk to each other. It is the belief that all things are interconnected and equal. Consequently, one system is not complete unless all aspects are considered.

## Indigenous Peoples of Northern Russia and Scandinavia

In Russia, Indigenous peoples are referred to as “peoples of the north” (Slezkine 1994:1) or the “small-numbered peoples” a term that is parallel to the Canadian term *Aboriginal*, which includes Indian, Inuit, and Métis. The Russian Indigenous “small-numbered” peoples are characterized by subsistence patterns that focus on foraging (hunting and gathering) and reindeer herding. As is the case in North America and other countries, these populations are Indigenous in that they are small minorities within nation-states, yet inhabit traditional lands that they occupied for centuries, if not millennia.

The Indigenous, small-numbered peoples of Russia can be grouped according to languages. The main language families of the Indigenous groups of Russia and Scandinavia include:

- 1) **The Uralic Languages:** A language family comprising twenty or so related languages. Certain of these languages are spoken by populations that are neither Indigenous nor small-numbered, these are indicated in italics.
  - a) Samoyedic subfamily
    - i) North Samoyedic
      - (1) Nenets (Yurak)
      - (2) Enets (Yenisey)
      - (3) Nganasan (Tavgi)
    - ii) South Samoyedic
      - (1) Selkup
      - (2) Kamas – Practically extinct
  - b) Finno-Ugric subfamily
    - i) Finnic
      - (1) Finno-Lappic
        - (a) Lappic
          - (i) Sami languages (or Lappish)
            1. Western Sami languages
              - a. Lule Sami
              - b. Northern Sami
              - c. Pite Sami
              - d. Southern Sami
              - e. Ume Sami
            2. Eastern Sami languages
              - a. Akkala Sami
              - b. Inari Sami
              - c. Kainuu Sami – Extinct
              - d. Kemi Sami – Extinct
              - e. Kildin Sami
              - f. Skolt Sami
              - g. Ter Sami
        - (2) Permian-Finnic
          - (a) *Komi-Zyrian* (including the dialect spoken by the Izhma Komi, a group that is trying to gain independent status as an Indigenous small-numbered people)
          - (b) *Komi-Permyak*
          - (c) *Urdmurt (Votyak)*
        - (3) *Baltic-Finnic*
          - (a) *Estonian*
          - (b) *Finnish*
          - (c) *Ingrian – Practically extinct*
          - (d) *Karelian*
          - (e) *Livonian – Practically extinct*

- (f) *Veps – Practically extinct*
- (g) *Votic – Practically extinct*
- (4) *Volgo-Finnic*
  - (a) *Mari*
  - (b) *Mordvin*
- ii) Ugric
  - (1) *Hungarian*
  - (2) Ob Ugric
    - (a) Khant or Ostyak
    - (b) Mansi or Vogul

## 2) The Altaic language family

- a) Manchu-Tungus languages
  - i) Tungus languages
    - (1) North Tungus
      - (a) Evenk or Evenki (Evenky) language: this language, with more than twenty dialects, is spoken in China, Mongolia, and Russia.
      - (b) Even (also known as Lamut)
    - (2) Southern Tungus
      - (a) Manchu
      - (b) Goldi
      - (c) Olcha
      - (d) Udihe
      - (e) Orochon
  - b) Turkic languages
    - i) The Turkic languages spread across from Turkey, through central Asia and well into the Russian Far East.
      - (1) One of the Turkic languages that is spoken by a Circumpolar population is the Sakha (or Yakut) language spoken in the Russian Far East
      - (2) The Dolgan migrated to the Circumpolar North presumably from the southwest. It is thought that the Dolgan might have been Evenk that adopted a dialect of the Yakut language. Currently, the Dolgan live in the Taymyr (or Taimyr) Peninsula of northern Russia.
  - c) Mongolian languages: found in Mongolia and surrounding territory. Indigenous Mongolian languages are not found in the Circumpolar North.

## 3) The Yukaghir-Ural language family

- a) Tundra (Northern) Yukaghir and Kolyma (Southern) Yukaghir are both endangered with fewer than a hundred speakers each. The relationship of these languages to other language families is mostly unknown. It has been suggested that it is a Uralic language.

## 4) Luorawetlan or Luoravetlan language family

- a) Chukchi language
- b) Koryak
- c) Itelmen
- d) Aliutor
- e) Kerek

Indigenous peoples in Northern Russia and Scandinavia historically relied on reindeer herding, foraging and marine hunting for subsistence: many still do. They traveled in groups or “camps” that consisted of “several nuclear families” that was comprised of a mother, father, and children (Slezkine 1994:4). These

nuclear families belonged to larger kinship entities, clans, and these clans typically collectively owned many reindeer herds.

Reindeer herding was, in many ways, an extension of much older foraging practices. The exact origins of reindeer herding is still debated, however there are a few suppositions that can be logically inferred:

- The first reindeer likely served as decoys to attract their wild brethren so they could be hunted with greater success.
- Even when herding, much of the subsistence of reindeer herders came from hunting, fishing, and gathering as opposed to killing reindeer from the herd.
- Though reindeer show signs of domestication, they tend to be smaller than their wild cousins and they will have a much greater range in coloration. Reindeer remain a semi-domesticated animal that remains skittish of humans without constant contact.
- One of the essential uses of reindeer is transportation—either for riding, as in the case in the Russian Far East, or pulling sleds, as is common in northern Russia and Scandinavia.
- Intensive herding seemed to appear only a few centuries ago. One hypothesis is that this herding was a reaction to Russian and Scandinavian colonization: by having larger herds and a reliable source of food, reindeer herders could move away from the encroaching colonizers.
- Reindeer herding seems to have favoured the expansion of some groups to the detriment of others who were nomadic hunters and fishermen. A case in point is the Yukaghir, a population hard hit by Russian colonization who came close to extinction in the twentieth century.

In certain cases, intensive reindeer herding was used to sustain important trading relations with industrial societies: the Izhma Komi adopted reindeer herding from the Nenets, but revolutionized it with a system of constant surveillance in the summer months and the use of reindeer products (notably leather) to trade with southern societies.

Most of the Indigenous populations of the Russian and Scandinavian North adopted reindeer herding, and these populations share much else in common:

- Animism: the belief that all living beings have spirits and that spirits inhabit the world surrounding humans, including inanimate objects and entities such as trees, lakes, mountains, and so on;
- Shamanism: though the exact meaning is not clear, the term shaman has Tungusic origins. The term was used to describe the practices of Even and Evenk individuals who communicated with the larger spirit world, often with the help of a drum and other accoutrements that would promote a shamanic trance. Shamans elicited the spirits through ceremony and songs in times of sickness, for rituals, or sacrifice for burials.
- An egalitarian political ethos and very decentralized political power: status was achieved and there was no strong central governing structure. Quite often the primary social organization was the clan, a kinship unit where a group of individuals claimed descent from a common ancestor, quite often a totem ancestor. The clan was useful in ensuring mutual support and played a role in redistributing and transmitting property rights.
- A focus on hunting, gathering, and fishing, and later herding. Agriculture was practiced only by some of the groups and usually on the margins of the Russian and Scandinavian circumpolar region. Even in those regions where agriculture gained in importance (in the south of the Komi territory, for example), survival would very often not have been possible without continued hunting and fishing.

Today, the common point shared by all the Indigenous peoples whether they are in Russia, Scandinavia or North America is that they were colonized within the frontiers of nation-states. The Circumpolar populations were subjected to the edicts of policy-makers located in distant capitals and they rarely had much input in decision-making. This would include the decision to collectivize the reindeer herds and to implement new methods of managing the herds in the Soviet Union. Pressures were brought to bear to assimilate the Indigenous populations across the North: Canada had residential schools, Russia had boarding schools (or internats). Finally, the Indigenous populations quite often became minorities within their own territories and lost their ancestral rights to their territories: even in Russia, which was, in many ways, established as an ethnic federal state, the Small-numbered Peoples were and are usually minorities in the territories they occupy. In all cases, the challenges facing the Indigenous populations across the North are not solely social and economic, but also political.

### Student Activity 1

Read “Introduction to Native Groups,” “Family Life,” and “Religion” in *The Arctic as a Homeland* by Piers Vitebsky. Available at: <http://www.thearctic.is/articles/overviews/homeland/enska/index.htm>. Vitebsky talks about the “outsiders.” Who are the “outsiders” and what is their view towards Indigenous people and the lands they occupy in the Circumpolar World?

## Hunter-Gatherers of the Circumpolar World

### Hunting and Gathering as a Mode of Subsistence

Before colonization, hunting and gathering practices were “the dominant mode of production for 99 per cent of evolutionary history” (Ziker 2002:8). Modes of subsistence means “the chief complexes of activities through which human societies provide for their food and overall survival. The number of subsistence modes range from five or six (gathering, hunting, fishing, animal husbandry, and agriculture” (Krupnik 1993:7). Other modes of subsistence that can be added to Krupnik’s list include horticulture, pastoralism, industrialization, and now, post-industrialization.

Traditional hunting and gathering societies that are still exist today include many, if not all, of the Inuit and Indians in Alaska and Canada as well as the Yupik in Siberia and Kalaallit in Greenland. They mainly hunt caribou (reindeer) and moose that serve the purposes of food and clothing. They also hunt small game animals such as rabbits, fowl, gophers, or muskrat. Fishing is also an integral part of their subsistence. Many pre-contact hunting and gathering societies, such as the Dolgan and Nganasan of Siberia, were assimilated into other modes of production including horticulture, pastoralism, agriculture, and industrialization.

### Hunting and Gathering Practices

The Gwich’in and Inuit remain hunting and gathering societies who were once **nomadic** or semi-nomadic peoples who migrated with the animals they hunted. Nomadic means they moved their camps frequently while semi-nomadic peoples were both mobile and sedentary or settled peoples.

Generally, men did the hunting and women looked after the camps. Women prepared the meals, looked after the children, as well as other chores such as snaring small animals, tending to fishnets, preparing animal hides, making clothing, and gathering berries. This is known as a division of labour and each person knew their specific tasks. This division is still evident in contemporary times as men generally conduct the hunts while women prepare food and skins.

## Relationship to Hunting and Gathering

Hunting and gathering societies place less emphasis on the self and more on the collective or group. As a result, hunting expeditions were well-organized by group consensus. The exception is fishing, which is an individual activity. For instance, if fish are caught by hook and line, the fisher could keep the catch, but, if fish are caught by net, “they are shared by those who helped set, check, and clear the net” (Bodenhorn 2000:32). This taking of animals, fish, or plants for subsistence is referred to as **harvesting**.

In contemporary times, it is not uncommon to see hunting and gathering societies using rifles, snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, or other conveniences of modern technology. A question to ask is, does this makes them less traditional in their hunting practices?

## Marine Hunting

### Marine Hunting as a Mode of Subsistence

Marine hunting includes harvesting whales (baleen, beluga), seals and bearded seals, and walrus, among many other marine animals. Inuit relied on a successful hunt to provide food, clothing, oil for lighting, and for subsistence and trade.

#### **Marine Hunting Practices**

Marine hunting is the centre of social organization of societies that practice this mode of subsistence. Whale hunts are highly structured and organized and often involve members of the whole family. Inuit traditionally used bone and ivory harpoons to hunt their prey, but with the introduction of industrial technology they added rifles and dart guns. There were differences in the way the hunt was conducted: “Yupik and Inupiat Eskimos of western and northern Alaska used large umiaks, harpoons with floats, and lances, while eastern Aleuts and Pacific or Allutiq Eskimos of the Gulf of Alaska used a quite different kayak and darting procedure” (McCartney 1995:87). The owner of an umiak (large skin boat) is called an “umialik” (Bodenhorn 2001:33).

#### **Relationship to Marine Hunting**

“Many Inupiat perceive the animal’s intent to be a deciding factor in a hunter’s success: the animals, following their purpose for living from time past, allow themselves to be killed” (Bodenhorn 2000:29). The hunt is guided by traditional laws, which include the protocol and respect towards the animal that is being hunted. Women are responsible for rituals surrounding cleanliness, which ensure a successful hunt. They are integral members of the hunt for ceremonial purposes. When traditional laws are not followed accurately, it is believed, bad luck will follow that or future hunts. It is thought that the first person to break the taboo regarding the role of women in the hunt was in fact a woman herself by not following protocol before a hunt. In contemporary times, many of the rituals associated to the hunt have been abandoned or forgotten, but are making their way back into marine hunting protocol through a process of modification.

## Reindeer Herding

### Reindeer Herding as a Mode of Subsistence

Some Indigenous peoples in Siberia were nomadic pastoralists who relied on reindeer herding as well as hunting and gathering as their mode of subsistence as did the Sami of Fennoscandia. Reindeer are generally not bred and domesticated only for their meat but to serve also as sources of income (in trade) and of material (leather), milk, or blood protein. Not all pastoralists are nomadic. Those who are more sedentary practice animal husbandry, which is the raising of the animals and is more related to agriculture as a mode of production and subsistence. The main challenge for pastoralists is ensuring an adequate supply of feed and pasture for their animals. This often requires a form of transhumance: annual cyclical movements from a winter pasture to a summer pasture.

### **Reindeer Herding Practice**

The practice of intensive **pastoralism** is thought to date back three or four hundred years, but the relationship between Sami and reindeer is thousands of years old. In this process, Sami went from being reindeer hunters to reindeer herders. Although the majority of the tasks associated to herding reindeer are the responsibility of the male family head, the whole family is often involved. Pastoralist communities are small and consist mainly of family members.

### **Relationship to Herding**

Sami peoples “regard the reindeer as a basic guardian of their culture, their language, and identity” (Beach, 1994:152). In fact, their language and terminology is based on how they categorize and describe their reindeer. Indeed, Nenets often sacrificed their reindeer at burials and ceremonies.

In the nineteenth century, several Sami were relocated to Alaska to teach the Inuit there how to herd reindeer. It was not a successful endeavour. Many got “gold fever” during the Klondike Gold Rush in Dawson City, Yukon, in the late 1890s. Other attempts to introduce reindeer herding to North America have had mixed success.

### **Student Activity 2**

Read the article (all sections), *Modes of Production and Minke Whaling: The Case of Iceland* by Gísli Pálsson (2000). This article is available online at

[http://www.thearctic.is/articles/cases/minkewhaling/enska/kafli\\_0200.htm#](http://www.thearctic.is/articles/cases/minkewhaling/enska/kafli_0200.htm#)

In the section “Modes Of Production,” Pálsson indicates that hunting and gathering societies are overtaken by capitalism. What is capitalism and how does it affect “small-scale” hunting and gathering societies? What will traditional values mean in the future for hunting and gathering societies in your area?

## **Non-Indigenous People in the Circumpolar World**

### **Non-Indigenous Peoples in the American North**

After the initial fishers, explorers, and whalers, the first non-Indigenous people to have contact with the Aboriginal peoples of Greenland, Canada, and Alaska (after the early fishers, explorers, and whalers) were missionaries, fur traders, and, later, government agents who set up communities in the hope of assimilating and Christianizing Indigenous peoples. Inuit and other groups of Indigenous peoples moved closer to the communities while continuing their subsistence lifestyles. However, being closer to the communities meant they were also further from their hunting grounds. Indigenous peoples were not only introduced to modern technology such as guns and intrusive hunting practices, but they were also subjugated to colonial conservation laws while many of their traditional hunting practices were banned or severely limited.

### **Non-Indigenous Peoples in Northern Asia**

The first newcomers to have contact with Indigenous peoples in North Asia during the sixteenth and seventeenth century “Conquest of Siberia” were Russian soldiers and merchants who imposed the tsar-mandated *yasak* on the Indigenous peoples: tribute to be paid in the form of pelts, notably the highly-prized and valuable sable furs. The sable became over-trapped and the supply of furs exhausted. This spurred further movement, or conquest, eastwards and northwards. Following the soldiers and merchants, peasants from European Russia would often settle in the territories to the east and south as they sought new agricultural lands or tried to escape their feudal obligations by fleeing their lands. Some were relocated to Siberia deliberately to support the continued expansion of Russia into the region. These colonists “built new roads, built new villages, cleared the forests for agriculture and cultivated crops” (Goryushkin 1991:140). Orthodox clergy and missionaries would soon follow, striving to convert the Indigenous peoples to Christianity.

In the Soviet period, great demographic changes occurred throughout the Soviet Union: with its system of gulags, or prison camps, millions were displaced from central Russia, Ukraine, and other southern and central territories and relocated to the North and the Far East. In the process, many Indigenous populations became minorities within their own territories. Then, after World War II, the development of the massive oil and gas fields of Siberia and northern Russia pushed more colonists into Indigenous territories. Additionally, Indigenous groups became dependent on modern conveniences during Soviet rule, but when the Soviet Union collapsed they had to once again rely on the land for subsistence. Also, in the Soviet period, reindeer herds were collectivized, undermining the traditional ownership of herds, which was often clan-based. One of the challenges faced by Indigenous populations now is how to maintain reindeer-herding as a viable industry given that collective farms often face bankruptcy and are not equally subsidized by local governments and the Russian state.

### **Non-Indigenous Peoples in Northern Scandinavia**

The first encounters Sami had with non-Indigenous peoples was with peoples from “Russia, Finland, Sweden, and Norway [who] made raiding and trading forays into Saamiland to extract what they could of her riches . . . foodstuff and furs” (Beach 1994:171). Sami (also written Saami or Sámi) peoples were nomadic peoples who knew no lines of demarcation between Sweden, Norway, Finland, or Russia. When the newcomers encroached on their lands, Sami were subjugated to their laws. In Northern Scandinavia today, it is difficult to tell the difference between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as many Sami have assimilated and do not identify as being of Sami descent.

#### **Student Activity 3**

**WE should have a different Activity 3 if possible, this one covers similar ground to Unit 11.**

Read “Self-government in the Circumpolar World,” by Stephanie Irlbacher Fox (2001), available at <http://www.spri.cam.ac.uk/~smi21/research/csg.pdf>. In reading the history of Indigenous peoples in the American North, Northern Asia, and Scandinavia, the article concludes that “positive changes are a direct result of Indigenous peoples’ political organization and activism, and national and international legal and political recognition of Indigenous peoples’ human rights. Among these is the right of ‘self-determination’; the ability of a people to determine its own governance and destiny” (2001:1). What can you say about their self-determination in contemporary times?

Needs a conclusion/summary.

### **Study Questions**

1. What is culture and why would it be important for Indigenous peoples in the Circumpolar World to maintain a subsistence lifestyle? Refer to Pálsson and Vitebsky.

2 Gísli Pálsson, in *Modes of Production and Minke Whaling: The Case of Iceland*, states “Humans, whatever their mode of production or subsistence, are simultaneously part of nature and society” ( 2000, Ch. 2, ¶ 8). After reading “The Hunter and Primitivist Fallacy” do you agree or disagree that Indigenous peoples should be deemed “primitive” for maintaining their connection to the land and animals? Explain why or why not.

3. According to the evolutionary scale, all societies should advance to higher levels of subsistence/production, yet, many Indigenous societies remain hunters/gatherers/herders. Should we be calling those who maintain their traditional culture and subsistence lifestyle, hunter/gathers in contemporary times? What would you call societies that remain traditional, yet take part in modern technology? Refer to the terms given by Pálsson and Vitebsky.

4. Piers Vitebsky in *The Arctic as a Homeland* talks about religion as “a close relationship between humans and nature.” Explain what the author means and tell why spiritual beliefs remain an integral aspect of hunting and herding?

## Glossary of Terms

**Aboriginal:** In Canada, the term Aboriginal is entrenched in the Canadian Constitution (1982) Section 35 (2) and includes Indians, Inuit, and Métis.

**Animism:** The belief that all living and non-living things have souls.

**Cosmology:** Religion; accounts or theories on the origin of the universe (see Module 8).

**Culture:** Culture can be defined as “the collection of rules, values, and attitudes held by a society which allows people to communicate, to interpret behavior, and to attach shared meaning to behavior or events” (Laliberte 2000:567). According to anthropologist Robert Murphy (1989:26), culture is “an integrated system of meanings, values, and standards of conduct by which people of a society live and which is transmitted between generations through socialization.”

**Harvesting:** Hunting, fishing and gathering or whatever other “methods humans use to procure food” (Ember and Ember: 1998:381).

**Indigenous:** “those [peoples] which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and precolonial societies that developed in their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continual existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural pattern, social institutions and legal systems” (Simpson 1997).

**Nomadic:** “1) A member of a group of people who have no fixed home and move according to the seasons from place to place in search of food, water, and grazing land. 2) A person with no fixed residence who roams about; a wanderer” (Dictionary.com).

**Pastoralism:** “A form of subsistence technology in which food-getting is based directly or indirectly on the maintenance of domesticated animals”(Ember and Ember 1998:380).

**Reciprocity:** “Giving and taking (not politically arranged) without the use of money” (Ember and Ember 1998:381).

**Subsistence:** “any human activity directed toward satisfying survival needs” (Krupnik 1993:1).

**Taboo:** “A prohibition that if violated, is believed to bring supernatural punishment.” (Ember and Ember 1998:381).

**Modes of production:** Mode refers to the way a thing is done. Production means how “. . . resources have to be transformed or converted through labor into food, tools, and other goods” (Ember and Ember 1998:209). The mode of production for societies throughout history includes foraging, hunting and gathering, horticulture, pastoralism, agriculture, and industrialization.

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