



NUNATSIAVUT

kavamanga

Government

ᑕᐱᐅᐃᐃᐅᐅᐅᐅ

ᑕᐅᐅᐅᐅᐅᐅᐅᐅ

NUNATSIAVUT

SUMMARY REPORT ON NUNATUKAVUT COMMUNITY COUNCIL'S LAND CLAIM REPORT

Prepared by Darryl Leroux
For the Nunatsiavut Government
2021



INTRODUCTION

This report provides a summary of the major findings from two prior reports produced for the Nunatsiavut Government Secretariat in 2020 and 2021. The first report was an analysis of the NunatuKavut Community Council’s (NCC) proposed land claim, through an examination of its 2010 report titled, “Unveiling NunatuKavut: Document in Pursuit of Reclaiming a Homeland, Describing the Lands and People of South/Central Labrador” and the academic material cited therein. The second report analyzed a 1,000-page Access-to-Information package produced by Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs in July 2020. The package consists of documents mostly commissioned by the NCC for their land claim report that were previously unavailable to the research community.

My findings are organized into four themes. The first examines the NCC’s origins in the mid-1980s to counter Indigenous opposition to the expansion of the Goose Bay military base. The second presents the inconsistencies in the NCC’s creation of a distinct “Southern Inuit” people. The third uncovers the limitations of the NCC’s work on what it calls the Labrador Inuit Treaty of 1765. And the last theme explores how the NCC presents the “Southern Inuit” as superior to the Nunatsiavut Inuit (“Northern Inuit”) due to the latter’s relative lack of self-sufficiency.

I argue throughout that the evidence used by the NCC doesn’t support its own conclusions about the existence of a “Southern Inuit” people and that, ultimately, its land claim report faces several fatal flaws.

PLEASE NOTE: I have removed all footnote-citations from the Summary Report, to increase its readability and condense its contents. The citations are all available in the original report.



HISTORY OF THE NUNATUKAVUT COMMUNITY COUNCIL, INC.

John C. Kennedy, who conducted fieldwork in Labrador for forty years between 1972 and 2013, provides the most in-depth overview of the NCC's origins. Kennedy's work traces the history of the south-central Labrador coast Settlers, that is, the descendants of unions between European men and Inuit women mostly between the 1790s and 1830s. He asserts that his conversations with Settlers on the south-central coast between 1979–83 confirmed that they “resented Labrador [Indigenous] peoples” because of the perception that they received too much public funding. The NCC acknowledges in its 2010 report to the Government of Canada that its membership long denied having Indigenous ancestry.

Kennedy claims that the Labrador Metis Association (LMA) was created as part of a political strategy to oppose Indigenous resistance to military expansion: “The actual formation of the LMA appears to have occurred in 1985 when an influential white civil servant in Goose Bay, who actively promotes military expansion in Labrador, helped form a new native organization, so as to dilute native opposition to militarization.”

Kennedy points out that the so-called Labrador Metis “shared an identical lifestyle with their Settler neighbours who had no Inuit ancestors. [...] For Metis, the task of creating a tradition distinguishing themselves from their Settler neighbours is considerable.” One must therefore interpret the NCC's report as an integral part of the process to imagine and create a new people.

THE CREATION OF THE “SOUTHERN INUIT”

Throughout the report, the NCC maintains that a strong division existed between Inuit in the so-called south and north. They even argue against the existence of a single Labrador Inuit homeland. At various points, the NCC argues that the “Southern Inuit” and “Northern Inuit” had distinct languages and cultures and were openly hostile.

However, the NCC itself concludes that there was regular, north-south movement between all Inuit settlements on the Labrador coast: “the concept that Inuit were ‘from’ somewhere up until recent times is an error. From these documents, it appears that Inuit were ‘from’ all of Labrador with their incredible mobility and long-distance relations.” We are left with one Inuit people living throughout their territory.

Relatedly, the NCC's northern boundary between north and south is constantly shifting in the report: it stretches from Nain (57 degrees north) to Hamilton Inlet (53 degrees north), encompassing virtually all of today's Nunatsiavut and all five of its permanent settlements. The inconsistencies in the NCC's definition of what counts geographically as “south” further exposes the flaws at the basis of their creation of the “Southern Inuit.”

The NCC's argument that there existed and continues to exist a distinct, “Southern Inuit” people isn't supported by evidence. It's worth considering historian Kurt Korneski's research about the Hudson's Bay Company's (HBC) first two decades in Labrador (1830–1850), in which he illustrates how “HBC traders helped to fix, and to infuse with particularly harsh and derogatory meanings, a longstanding tendency to see northern and southern Inuit bands as racially distinct.” Korneski unveils how the HBC favoured the mixed-race descendants of the earliest Inuit-European unions and by doing so, established a lasting racial hierarchy that saw Inuit and Innu treated as inferior. The NCC, which largely represents the descendants of those who gained economic and social privilege through the HBC, appears to continue the tradition of creating false (historical) boundaries among the Inuit to its ultimate advantage.



LABRADOR TREATY OF 1765 (“INUIT TREATY OF 1765”)

A cornerstone of the NCC’s land claim submission is the existence of what they call the “Labrador Treaty of 1765,” an agreement between the British Crown (represented by Governor Hugh Palliser) and the “Southern Inuit.” As I’ve discussed previously, there’s no evidence that a distinct “Southern Inuit” people ever existed, despite the NCC’s efforts to create such a group. Nevertheless, the NCC’s argument relies heavily on their creation of distinct Inuit peoples, since they now argue that today’s “Southern Inuit” are the sole beneficiaries of the so-called treaty.

The NCC’s own discussion of the “treaty” negotiations, narrated by Moravian missionaries, suggests that the Inuit who met with Palliser’s party had travelled south from where they lived in the Hamilton Inlet region. As such, any “treaty” would include all Labrador Inuit, not some “Southern Inuit” people created by the NCC. For instance, the NCC acknowledges that Inuit at Chateau Bay “treaty” negotiations were from Rigolet and later, from Hamilton Inlet. Further, the Inuit are reported to have answered that their stuff is “in the north with our houses” to Moravian queries at the 1765 meeting.

Also, there’s no existing scholarly research on the “Labrador Treaty,” though the NCC commissioned two historians to review the evidence in 2005. William Wicken ultimately suggested that the NCC had to explain aspects of the events of 1765 further before he could accept them as a treaty like those between the British and Mi’kmaq.

It’s my assessment that without reliable peer-reviewed research, the NCC’s claims about the existence of a “Labrador Treaty of 1765” are inconclusive. However, even if a treaty had been negotiated with the Inuit in 1765, it would have been with the Inuit of Labrador, not with some segment now being called the “Southern Inuit” by the NCC.

“SOUTHERN INUIT” SUPERIORITY

Before long, the north/south split created by the NCC becomes the basis for them to express the superiority of the “Southern Inuit.” For starters, the NCC repeatedly uses the Moravian influence on the central and north coast of Labrador as a foil through which to advance its superiority as Inuit. The NCC does so by arguing that the so-called Southern Inuit are more authentically Inuit than the “Moravianized” Inuit of northern Labrador, an argument first introduced by Roger McDonnell, who the NCC commissioned to conduct research on its behalf in 1995 and 2002.

By the second half of its report, the NCC refers to its ancestors as the “non missionized Inuit of the South” or the “non-Moravian Inuit of Labrador” to contrast with the “Moravianized” Inuit. The implication is clear: Nunatsiavut Inuit are the inheritors of a diminished, less authentic form of Inuit culture scarred by Moravian intervention. The “Southern Inuit,” on the other hand, are the proud inheritors of a robust Inuit heritage unsullied by Christian missionary efforts. the NCC builds a narrative of a “Southern Inuit” culture of self-sufficiency and freedom juxtaposed to a Nunatsiavut Inuit culture of dependency and hierarchy.

Specifically, the NCC’s argument about the cultural superiority of the “Southern Inuit” relies on them denying the fact that for the better part of two centuries, their membership benefitted from identifying themselves and being identified as Settlers. For instance, Stopp confirms that mixed-descent settlers were quite successful in the nineteenth century due to their employability. Mixed-descent family success was underwritten by a system of racial discrimination practiced by the HBC, which ensured that Inuit and Innu people were unemployable.



Again, Korneski is clearest about the ways in which the forebears of today’s “Southern Inuit” benefitted from the HBC’s creation of a racial hierarchy specific to the region: “[Mixed-race Settlers] could get access to significant amounts of credit [which] signaled that a person was in many ways the opposite of an ‘Indian.’ Rather than indolent, unclean, and unreliable, [mixed race Settlers] were honest, industrious, loyal, and disciplined.”

While their Inuit and Innu neighbours were unafforded the privileges of credit, mixed-race Settlers gained “a more stable material existence than [Innu] and [Inuit] and also [...] had greater access to medicine. Those privileges further distanced one group from another, creating divisions that widened and hardened over time.” Thus, many of the forebears of today’s NCC membership were provided with significant economic and social privilege that most often relegated their Inuit and Innu neighbours to abject poverty and attendant high rates of morbidity.

Without a more forthcoming discussion about how its membership appears to benefit from intergenerational forms of privilege, one is left wondering what type of relationship that Nunatsiavut can build with the NCC. In “Unveiling NunatuKavut,” the NCC gives little indication that it’s committed to building bridges with Nunatsiavut’s Inuit citizens.

CONCLUSION

Whatever position that the Nunatsiavut Government takes on the NCC’s land claims moving forward, one thing appears clear: despite the weakness of their claims in “Unveiling NunatuKavut,” the NCC is riding a wave of support. Without a clear public position on its relationship to the NCC by the Nunatsiavut Government and/or by other Inuit organizations, it seems likely that the NCC will succeed in most of their political claims.

