Mala Goes to Kuujjuaq

This summer, I went on a trip to Kuujjuaq. I flew there with my school soccer team for an indoor soccer tournament with teams from around Nunavik. We had to play lots of games because we got all the way to the semi-finals. Unfortunately, we lost to a really good team from Ivujivik. I had lots of fun though and made some great new friends.

During my time in Kuujjuaq, I was staying with one of my uncle’s family. Most nights I would play video games and eat potato chips with my cousins and their friends. One evening, we had to stop playing, because some other people were staying at the house. They were Inuit from a different country and they said they had come to Kuujjuaq and were also going to stay with my uncle’s family.

One of them asked me where I was from. “I’m from Salluit,” I said. “Where are you from?” She said that she was from Nuuk, Greenland. I was really curious so I asked: “What is it like living in Greenland?”

“Well, to start with I speak Inuktitut too,” she added. “However, Greenland is a little different, because it’s part of Denmark, so I also speak Danish.”

This group of Inuit from Greenland were in Kuujjuaq for a big international assembly of Inuit. This gathering was no ordinary get-together. This big meeting was for Inuit from Siberia (Russia), Alaska (United States), Canada and Greenland. I never knew there were Inuit that lived in Russia! They said their meeting was for something called the Inuit Circumpolar Conference which meets every four years.

I sat there for a little while longer and heard more about Inuit from other countries and why they have these meetings. They explained about the meetings by saying: “They show that Inuit are working together to make a safe future for the whole Arctic.” After awhile we went back to playing video games.

As I was falling asleep that night, I remember thinking that maybe one day I’ll take part in a big assembly and get to meet lots of Inuit from other countries.
The Yupik and Chukchi of Siberia

The Yupik live along the eastern shore of the Chukchi Peninsula in Siberia and on Saint Lawrence Island in Alaska. They were mainly a maritime people who hunted sea mammals from large seagoing canoes in the spring and fall. They also caught land animals and sea birds and ate eggs and edible plants.

During the Soviet period, the communist government weakened the Yupik way of life, closed down their villages, and forced them to assimilate with newcomers from the south. Today, the Yupik are regaining elements of their own culture, and there is a strong movement supporting the return to their own communities.

The Chukchi are Inuit who have inhabited the extreme northeast of Siberia for about 7,000 years. Traditionally, they were reindeer herders who traded their reindeer products with the coastal people for fish, oil and walrus skins. Their way of life is often hard, but they are a proud, self-sufficient people, quick to defend their freedom. An interesting fact about the Chukchi is that the men and women pronounce their words differently.

The Chukchi lived close to the Siberian Yupik and have adopted their techniques for fishing and hunting large sea mammals. The Chukchi, in turn, have influenced Yupik social organizations and material culture. This has happened gradually even though there were conflicts between the two groups. Yupik oral history speaks of the hot-tempered Chukchi and the peaceful Yupik.

In the 1920s, the Chukchi were reported to be a strong and healthy nation. Since then radioactive residue and heavy metals have entered the food chain causing a variety of illnesses. Only 40 percent of Chukchi childbirths are normal. These peoples have very high rates of alcoholism and suicide.

The Chukchi and Yupik were separated for many years by the Cold War, but since 1988 have renewed contact.
The Yupik of Alaska

The Alaskan Yupik are closely related to the Siberian Yupik. Although they too have had to go through many extreme lifestyle changes, Yupik are now the most dominant Aboriginal group in Alaska. Fortunately, many have retained their language — Central Yupik. In school, about a third of their children learn Central Yupik as their first language.

Alaskan Yupik live in small coastal villages along the Bering Sea and the lower Yukon and Kuskokwin rivers. Although there are few roads, people are connected to the outside world via computers, telephones and daily airline flights. Many Yupik, whose ancestors were marine hunters, now work in schools and stores, for the government and in commercial fishing. However, some Yupik live much as their ancestors did, by hunting walrus, moose and caribou, although usually with the help of modern technology. Yupiks do some whaling, but not as much as they once did. They also fish for salmon and trout, and gather wild vegetables, berries and eggs. Community events bring the people together, helping children understand and take pride in their culture.

The Inupiaq of Alaska

There is archaeological evidence of the Inupiaq in Alaska over a 10,000-year period. Inupiaq communities made up the northernmost villages in Alaska, along Norton Sound, and stretched south to the Canadian border. The larger populations were found along sea mammal routes. The Inupiaq hunted the bowhead whale in skin-covered boats and harpooned and dragged 50-tonne whales to the shore. Some people stayed in the coastal settlements, while others chose a more nomadic life.

Today, about a third of the Inupiaq live in towns and cities, but two thirds live in ancestral villages and in larger centres built on top of ancient trading sites. Many are still salmon fishers, reindeer herders, and caribou or maritime hunters. As in the past, many women work with fur, sew clothing for their families and make birchbark baskets.
The Inuvialuit or Mackenzie Inuit

Inuvialuit lands cover some 800 kilometres from the Alaskan border to the Arctic islands of Amundsen Gulf, and include the Mackenzie Delta where the modern towns of Aklavik, Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk are found. This is the richest area of the Arctic in vegetation, sea animals and probably also in land animals. Because of these plentiful food resources, people live here in larger communities.

Although the Inuvialuit constructed snow houses, their permanent homes were made with driftwood logs covered with sod. Larger villages would have had a dance house some 20 metres in length.

When Europeans first met them in the 18th century, there were about 2,500 Inuvialuit. For about 500 years, they had lived in relative peace and plenty, avoiding and being avoided by their enemies to the south, the Dene. European contact brought diseases that decimated the Inuvialuit population for a time. Today, there are about 3,000 Inuvialuit, and their lands now stretch to Holman Island in the Central Arctic.

Central Arctic Inuit

The Inuinnat (Copper Inuit) and the Netsilik (People of the Seal) were the last of their culture to be influenced by Europeans. They occupy the North-Central Arctic and are closely related to the Inuvialuit.

The Copper Inuit have occupied Banks and Victoria islands and the near mainland for 1,000 years. In the late 19th century, their population of about 800 people would divide up into groups of 50 or so during the spring and summer. They did this to travel inland to fish and hunt musk-oxen and caribou. In winter, several of these hunting groups would join together, building snow-house villages on the sea ice where they hunted seals.

Their name comes from the copper they used to fashion knives and other artifacts they traded even in faraway Alaska. Contact with Europeans in the early 20th century changed the lifestyle of the Copper Inuit from one of independent subsistence hunting to one based on trapping tied to the fur trade. Today, they live in the villages of Sachs Harbour, Cambridge Bay, Holman, Coppermine and Bathurst Inlet.

The Netsilik are the People of the Seal, but like their neighbours, the Copper Inuit (Inuinnat), they also hunted caribou, musk-oxen and polar bear. They journeyed
over, and had an intimate knowledge of, their 259,000-square-kilometre territory, between Victoria Strait, Committee Bay and Somerset Island. The Netsilik tended to form small hunting groups that scattered over this vast area. Although they often travelled great distances to acquire southern goods from the early explorers, their traditional ways were not endangered until 1923, when the first Hudson’s Bay Company post was established on King William Island. Today, the Netsilik live mainly in the villages of Spence Bay, Pelly Bay and Gjoa Haven.

**Nunavut Inuit**

On April 1, 1999, Nunavut came into being! Nunavut — Canada’s third territory — consists of almost two million square kilometres (almost one fifth of Canada’s land mass) in the Eastern Canadian Arctic. It includes three regions: Qikiqtarlik (Baffin Island), Kivalliq (Keewatin District) and Kitikmeot (the Central Arctic).

The history of Baffin Island Inuit in this region goes back at least 4,000 years. The first of these nomadic people lived in skin tents, and not in an igluvigaq. Nor did they travel by dog sled, as later Baffin Inuit groups did.

The first known contact between Baffin Island Inuit and Europeans took place in the 16th century when British explorers, searching for the Northwest Passage, landed near what is today called Iqaluit. Then came the whalers, fur traders and missionaries who brought with them their southern goods. But it was not until the 20th century that Inuit felt the full impact of these newcomers. During this period, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) set up their stations, the federal government introduced a southern school system and trading posts reinvented themselves as stores.

During World War II, the U.S. Air Force built a base at Frobisher Bay, which had an impact on Inuit of this area. Today, Frobisher Bay has been renamed Iqaluit and is the capital of Nunavut. Inuktitut is the language used in most of the kindergarten to Grade 3 classrooms of Nunavut. Problems experienced in the south are widespread here as well. Homelessness, for example, is on the increase in Iqaluit. But now, with the creation of Nunavut, Inuit can oversee their own lands and are actively working to restore their culture and values.
Labrador Inuit

In contrast to most Inuit, Labrador Inuit have been in contact with Europeans for centuries. Labrador Inuit had contact with Basque whalers and fishermen in southern Labrador as early as 1540. Although the two groups sometimes traded peacefully in the north, their relations were generally hostile throughout the 17th century. Inuit would raid fishing stations, which were abandoned during the winter, taking everything they considered useful. When the fleet returned, the fishermen killed some Inuit. However, Inuit had been introduced to European goods and were ready to trade for more of them. The main trade item was whalebone from the Greenland whale. In Europe, whalebone was used to make corset staves, brushes and other high-priced goods.

Although groups of Inuit travelled as far south as the Strait of Belle Isle in the summer, they returned to the Arctic every winter and carried on their traditional winter hunts. There were no non-Inuit in this area until the Moravian missionaries established their first Labrador station in 1771, founding the village of Nain. Between 1771 and 1902, seven other missions were opened on the Labrador coast. Although the missionaries’ main goal was to spread Christianity, they also operated trading posts to help pay for the missions, provided medical care and maintained schools where they taught reading.

Moravian trading posts were sold to the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1926, and after Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, the federal government took over Inuit schooling and medical services. For 150 years, schools had taught in Inuktitut. As of 1949, however, all instruction was given in English and the people consequently began to lose their first language. Only in the last two decades has Inuktitut again become part of the curriculum. The Labrador Inuit Association is supporting a concerted effort to preserve the Inuit language and culture.
Inuit of Kalaallit Nunaannit (Greenland)

The first Inuit migrated to Greenland (Kalaallit Nunaannit) about 4,500 years ago. Over the centuries, they were followed by two other waves of migration. All these groups settled on this island’s rich hunting grounds. About 1,100 years ago, the Thule people, the forefathers of modern Greenlanders, settled the western and eastern portions of Greenland. The Thule had a more advanced culture than those already there. Using the qajaq and umiaq, the Thule peoples hunted sea mammals like their chief prey, the 40-tonne Greenlandic whale.

Unlike the earlier nomadic groups, the Thule created larger, and for the first time, permanent settlements. This resulted in a more centralized social structure, headed by a chosen leader. The last Inuit migration from Alaska and Canada to Greenland took place some 200 to 300 years ago when the present polar peoples, the Inughuit, arrived to live in and around the settlements of the Thule on the northwest coast.

Norse farmers arrived from Iceland around 1000. They established their Eastern Settlement in the south and, later, their Western Settlement in the Nuuk region. Eventually, Greenland’s climate grew steadily colder, and it became impossible to grow crops and raise cattle there. Then, due to European political problems, the Norwegian ships supplying these Norse settlers stopped coming. By the 1300s, the Western Settlement began to dwindle. The Eastern Settlement lasted into the early 1400s. The Norse that remained in Greenland were absorbed into the Inuit populations. Many of today’s Greenlanders are of mixed Inuit and Scandinavian ancestry.

In the centuries that followed, explorers and whalers sailed along Greenland’s coasts, but Aboriginal life continued undisturbed, as it had for centuries. Around 1948, concerted efforts began to modernize Greenland or Kalaallit Nunaannit, as it is called in the Inuit language. There is therefore a good health care system today, and a healthier population overall. Fishing has become a major Greenlandic industry.

Greenlanders have one of the oldest newspapers in the world, the Atuagagdlialit, which first began publishing in 1861. They have a highly developed Greenlandic literature and, in 1960, had a literacy rate of 98 percent. Greenland is an autonomous nation and a member of the Kingdom of Denmark. The Greenland Home Rule Government, formed in 1979, has complete legislative power over Greenland’s internal affairs.