

Identity and environment in contemporary Inuit music

John Lehr, Jeff Tabvahtah, Julie Bartlett, University of Winnipeg

Abstract: The music of the indigenous peoples of North America was profoundly affected by European contact. In Canada's Arctic, external influences upon the Inuit reflected the history of contact with Europeans. Whalers from northwest Europe introduced the fiddle, jigs and reels; the missionaries who followed promoted hymns and gospel music. The penetration of radio in the 1960s gave access to the mass media of southern Canada and the United States and exposure to a wider variety of musical genres. The introduction of tape recorders, computers and jet travel all contributed to the evolution of modern Inuit music. Embracing a variety of genres ranging from heavy metal to country and gospel it is distinguished by its lyrical content, use of Inuktitut and frequently by a unique fusion of Inuit traditional elements with introduced styles. As elsewhere, music has become a vehicle for cultural and political expression. Issues of Inuit identity, cultural and political survival, and the relationship of the people to the land are commonly addressed by contemporary Inuit musicians.

Music and dance are an integral part of Inuit knowledge and heritage. Before contact with Europeans the Inuit of Canada's North (Fig. 1), as elsewhere in the circumpolar region, had a unique repertoire of songs and dances that in their lyrical content and instrumentation reflected an intimate relationship with the arctic environment.

The two principal traditional forms of Inuit music were the drum dance and throat singing. Neither technique is unique to Inuit culture as variants are found in other cultures around the world, but the way in which both are performed is unique to the Inuit.

The drum dance was played on a small hand-held round drum built on a wooden frame that is covered with part of a caribou skin. The side of



Figure 1: Canada's North.

the drum, not the skin, is struck with a small wooden stick. Drum dancing played a role in almost every Inuit gathering whether for the celebration of a birth, marriage, a successful hunt or to honour a person who had died (Serkoak, Hanson and Ernerk). It was enjoyed by people of all ages. The drum dance singers, who were usually women, sat in a circle, waiting until a male volunteered to be the first dancer. If nobody volunteered the women would begin singing a *pisiq* (or plural *pisiit*) – a personal song of a man in attendance, who would then feel challenged to dance. Almost every adult had his or her own *pisiq*. There were many types of *pisiit*: songs of contest, of satire, humorous songs with obscene lyrics, songs that dealt with the range of human emotions: love, hate, happiness, loneliness and despair (Serkoak, Hanson and Ernerk). In Greenland and the Baffin Island area *pisiit* were used to settle arguments with the wittiest *pisiq* being chosen as the winner. The traditional *pisiq* declined in popularity as a result of the introduction of European instruments. *Pisiit* eventually died

out in parts of the eastern Arctic where Inuit had been exposed to European culture for a longer period.

Throat singing was common to most but not all areas of Inuit culture and was widely practiced by the Inuit in Canada's Arctic. Usually performed by two women, the singers stand face to face each repeating a low-pitched sound in a fast rhythm. These sounds represent the sounds made by various birds and animals.

Contact with Europeans in the seventeenth century introduced new musical genres and instruments to the Inuit, some of which were adopted by them and integrated into their evolving culture. Whalers from northwest Europe penetrated into Inuit territory bringing the mouth organ, violin, push-button accordion and the mouth harp with them. They introduced the population to new dance rhythms: the jigs and reels of the Scottish Isles and Highlands and the polkas of continental Europe. These new musical forms were so widely adopted that many Inuit came to regard them as traditional forms of Inuit music (Powell 3). Throat singer Madeleine Allakariallak explained that when she was a child in the north:

Traditional music to me was the accordion, fiddle and mouth harp, only because I saw my grandma playing both the fiddle and mouth harp, and my uncle was an amazing accordion player. My grandma throat sang *Inaquuyit*, or lullabies, to all her kids, to calm them down from crying or even to put them to sleep. I never questioned whether throat singing was a part of my tradition because it was a normal part of everyday life. (Allakariallak, pers. comm.)

In the mid nineteenth century, hard on the heels of the whalers, came missionaries, who introduced European values, along with hymns, gospel music and written forms of Inuktitut. Churches, like all bureaucracies, function best when operating among geographically static populations, and so encouraged the development of permanent Inuit settlements and the abandonment of their nomadic way of life. There was no desire by Europeans to take land for agriculture so the Inuit were never confined to specific areas on Reserves, as were the First Nations to the south, but they were still affected by European colonial demands for control of resources and territory. Education, the promotion of English, and the inculcation of Canadian values depended on fixed populations or the establishment of residential schools at central points to serve a scattered and mobile population. As the population became less mobile, the replacement of the tent and snow house with houses based on southern-Canadian designs contributed to the high incidence of introduced European diseases such as tuberculosis among the Inuit population. The consequences were profound,

leading to an erosion of traditions and an acceleration of the degree of exposure to southern Canadian ways.

Charlie Panigoniak from Arviat and Rankin Inlet (Fig. 1), the first Inuk to record a song, was first exposed to the guitar and country music by First Nations patients at the sanatorium at Ninette, Manitoba, in the 1960s when, like many other Inuit tuberculosis patients, he was sent there for treatment:

When I was growing up I would listen to my father play what I thought was a guitar but was in fact an old hot chocolate tin and I would copy him and learned to play too. In the sixties when Inuit were sick with TB I was sent down to Ninette, Manitoba, this is where I learned to play guitar and sing. I couldn't speak English and I couldn't play guitar, but those Indians could play and sing so well, I had to learn too. I was so amazed at their guitar, I grew up with the hot chocolate tin thinking it was a real guitar and to see a real guitar was something else. Because I could hardly speak English, let alone understand it, I never knew what the Indians were singing, English or not. Eventually, I too learned to play [the guitar]. Boy, those Indians could sing. (Panigoniak, pers. comm)

For most Inuit, exposure to southern music came via church and schools until radio became widely accessible to northern communities. Country and gospel music were the most popular genres. Gospel music was obviously favoured by the churches but the reasons for the popularity of country music are less clear. The late 1950s and early 1960s were a time when country music was enjoying great popularity in the south and some of the more southerly northern communities were able to receive American country music stations broadcasting on clear bands. It has also been suggested that the northern missionary churches were more tolerant of country music because it was seen as a morally more acceptable alternative to rock and roll and because of country music's association with square dancing, a form that was not only compatible with the jigs and reels of the new "traditional" music but which did not involve bodily contact between the dancers. Perhaps, as Nick Hornby (2003, 142) noted, "country music is too embarrassingly sincere, too respectful of the past," to be appropriated by the ruling commercial establishment. It was, and largely remains, the music of alienation and anomie. Whatever the reason, country music became ubiquitous in the north, and as Mark (1988) has shown, musical taste is largely determined by the frequency of exposure to a particular genre.

During the 1960s radio diffused rapidly through northern communities. Inuit singer Madeleine Allakariallak commented that:

As a kid, growing up with my grandmother [in Resolute Bay on Cornwallis Island] we had the radio turned on all the time because of how isolated we were from everything. Our way of connection to the rest of the world was mostly through radio. And the radio played country music. (Allakariallak, pers. comm.)

However, it was not until the early 1970s that Cree and Inuktitut language programming was introduced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Northern shortwave radio service. Shortly thereafter cassette tape recorders became available, a technological innovation that allowed Inuit musicians to record their music and submit it to the CBC Northern service Inuktitut program for airplay. Elijah Menarik, host of CBC's "Isumavut" program received submissions from throughout the north. Most were poorly recorded with just a single voice and guitar. It was difficult to broadcast cassette tape recordings, as most northern program facilities were equipped only with reel-to-reel tape and turntable playback equipment. The solution was to produce a series of seven inch extended play 45 rpm discs in the CBC Arviat facility. Charlie Panigoniak was the artist featured on the first two Inuktitut recordings issued in 1973. About 500 discs were produced of each recording all of which were distributed to North American radio stations. During the 1980s this initiative continued, broadening to include production of 35 12 inch LP records, many of which were made commercially available. These albums embraced a variety of Inuit musical genres ranging from pre-contact traditional style music, from the fiddle music common to festivals and community dances to contemporary North American music blended with Inuit lyrics (Lintel).

During the 1990s, the advent of computers, improved home recording equipment and access to the Internet again revolutionized Inuit music. Improved communications and the introduction of jet service to some regional centers contributed to the ability of Inuit musicians to share their music throughout the north and to bring their talent to southern markets. The spread of television and the official encouragement of multiculturalism and increasing acceptance of artistic contributions from minority cultures by the mainstream Canadian community certainly played a role. Most important, though, was the spread of English through Inuit communities, which enabled Inuit artists such as Susan Aglukark and Lucy Idlout to reach beyond the northern market and to achieve recognition and acceptance on the world stage (Idlout, pers. comm.).

Contemporary Inuit music embraces virtually all genres that the Inuit have encountered. Country and gospel continue to predominate but jigs and reels compete with pop, hard rock and heavy metal in popularity. This is evident, for example, on the Compact Disc *Aqqik Jam '97* that features Inuit amateur musicians from the Arviat area of Nunavut performing in a variety of genres. Inuit music thus cannot be identified by genre alone but it is possible to identify it through its lyrical content, because Inuit musicians, like their counterparts in other cultures, sing about what they know and what they have experienced. The first song written by Charlie Panigoniak, "Sanatorium," for example, was about the TB sanatorium in Ninette, in southern Manitoba (Panigoniak, pers. comm.) This medical facility treated thousands of tuberculosis patients, many of whom were aboriginal or Inuit, until its closure in the 1970s.

Inuit society has experienced massive social, economic, and political change over the last century but its intimate relationship with a changing arctic environment remains strong. The Arctic environment is still the soul of Inuit culture despite the widespread adoption of technological innovations that have transformed traditional life in the north. The snowmobile has replaced the dogsled and the rifle has long replaced the spear and bow but even in modern northern communities the people still live close to the land, acutely aware of that the rhythm of life in the Arctic is set by nature, not people. As Madeleine Allakariallak commented: "In every sense and form, being Inuk and coming from the Arctic is who I am and what I write about in my songs . . . I want to sing about the beauty of the north, the people, the culture. But you see, I have to translate these images from an Inuit perspective, and find the words in English to describe them . . ." (Allakariallak, pers comm.) This is exemplified in the song "Hear Me," where the English lyrics are followed by the Inuktitut equivalent:

Rhythm of life, Innusivit
 Beat of my heart, Ummativut
 Whisper of wind, Anurialuk
 A cry in the dark, Qiajuruluk

All the sounds that surround me are magic
 Casting spells on the way that I see
 All around there's a half hidden world
 And it's crying out, "Hear me."

Ilainatuanga takunnaqakkakku
 Ilainnanga tusaatsugu
 Qiajuq, Tusaaviit."

Howl of a wolf, Amarualuk
Cracking of ice, Sikugasit
Song of a bird Qupanuallu
Hiss of a knife, Natujunnaq.
(Park-Wheeler and Allakariallak, 1995)

Even to the Inuit, whose culture is so closely adapted to the harsh northern environment, the Arctic can often be an inhospitable place. Nostalgia for the old days, a stock theme of the country genre, is tempered by a realization that technology made modern life in the Arctic a good deal easier than it had been for earlier generations. In 1980 Etulu Itidlui from Cape Dorset (Fig. 1), recorded “Ajuqsanaqtuk” [hardships] with a theme that hardships, sickness, and starvation, often accompanied traditional life:

You’ve never known a hard life, you’re not like us [elders].
Right now you’re a child, so I’ll tell you.
Back when we had the proper things, we still had a hard life;
We used to travel by walking and by dog team.

Right now the young people don’t know what it’s like to
live in hardship, because now they have warm houses to
travel from.

(Translated from Inuktitut by Jeff Tabvahtah)

Everything comes at a price. Modernity and technological innovation did much to destroy the traditional Inuit way of life. Economically, the north was treated like a colony. It was exploited by southern corporations and ruled from Ottawa with the Inuit treated in a high-handed paternalistic fashion by federal bureaucrats. Perhaps the most glaring example of this was the naming issue.

At the time of European contact Inuit did not have last names. Unwilling or unable to pronounce Inuit first names Ottawa solved the problem by issuing all Inuit with a dog tag that bore the number of the district in which they lived and a personal identification number that replaced their name. Inuit found this humiliating, a reaction made very clear by Susan Aglukark in her song E1-186 and Lucy Idlout in her composition, “E5-770 My Mother’s Name.” E5-770 was the “disk number” assigned to an Inuk from the Number 5 district around Baffin Island in Nunavut. E stood for Eskimo, 5 for the district and 770 was Idlout’s mother’s number.

The disk number was one of many humiliations borne by the Inuit. Their language and traditions were denigrated; their culture eroded by the incursions of modernity, and their way of life derided by outsiders with a colonialist mentality.

You farmed my mother, E5-770
 You imposed your name number
 E5-770, my mother's name.
 Your tongue unfit, too frail to speak
 Identities of thousands cattled 'E'
 E5-770, my mother's name
 (Idlout, E5-770)

Both Susan Aglukark and Lucy Idlout have written and sung extensively about the social problems that have plagued Inuit society. Through their English language lyrics they brought some of these issues to national and even world attention. Earlier, in Inuktitut, singers had broached similar issues, such as suicide and the loss of loved ones. "Qatangutik" [Cousin,] for example, tackles the issue of high suicide rates among Inuit youth, with the lament "What did I do to make you leave? I wish you hadn't left me. If you were still alive today it would be all right with me." (Qimutjuit 1997). —The lyrics express the bewilderment of bereaved relatives and a strong sense of loss. At the same time there is an implicit understanding of the conditions that create despair in the hearts of a generation that finds itself caught between the traditional and the modern.

The political struggle for self-government and the creation of the territory of Nunavut as an Inuit homeland has been a popular theme among Inuit singers and songwriters. With lyrics in Inuktitut and with songs clearly aimed at a local audience, Inuit musicians express the political hopes and aspirations of their communities:

Nunavut, that Inuit strove for self determination and their own land.
 Nunavut, it was hard to accomplish, to get our own government.
 For a long time Inuit didn't have a voice,
 For a long time Inuit didn't have a choice,
 To choose their own government.
 (Uvagu 1995, Translated from Inuktitut by Jeff Tabvahtah)

Many songs in Inuktitut celebrate the Inuit identity and the emotional ties that exist between the Inuit and their land. Perhaps typical is Kuujjuaq

artist, William Tagoona's 1979 recording of "Inuit Nunaanit" [In the land of Inuit.] issued on a 1991 CBC compilation:

Here in the land of Inuit I was born
Here in the land of Inuit I grew up, I grew up
Here in the land of Inuit I learned
Here in the land of Inuit I hunted, I hunted

I'm an Inuk, do you recognize?
My grandfather passed the [Inuit] way of life to my father and I live the
way of life my father passed onto me.

Here in the land of Inuit when I have become tired;
In the year that I am too old and can no longer do anything;
My choice is to die, in the place where I was born,
My choice is to die, in the place where I was born.

(Tagoona 1979. Translated from Inuktitut by Jeff Tabvahtah)

Conclusion

Although traditional Inuit music remains an integral part of modern Inuit culture it no longer is the only form of Inuit musical expression. Contact with European whalers and missionaries introduced new instruments and, later, increasing interaction with southern Canada exposed the Inuit to a variety of musical genres.

Contemporary Inuit music, while often adopting these genres heard from the south, remains unique through the content that it presents. Although some popular Inuit music addresses the stock themes of southern popular music – love, lost love and sadness – the common use of Inuktitut imparts sets it apart from mainstream music coming from the south. The genre, melody and instrumentation are almost an afterthought as the lyrics commonly tell of resistance to European morals, values and customs. They demonstrate an active attachment and deep understanding of the environment and are more than words sung to a catchy tune or rhythm. They are testament to the people who live in one of the world's harshest regions. They are about cultural and physical survival but also, more importantly, about identity and the emotional cost of colonialism.

Bibliography

- ALLAKARIALLAK, M. 2003 Personal communication. 7 February
- AQPIK JAM 97 Qimuk Music Inc., Kuujjuaq, Quebec
- BERGMAN, B. 1995 'Pride of the Arctic' *Maclean's* 108 (7) 65
- FELD, S. 2000. 'Sweet lullaby for world music' *Public Culture* 12 (1) 145-171
- HORNBY, N. 2003 *Songbook* New York: Riverhead Books
- IDLOUT, L. 2002 "E5-770, My Mother's Name" CD Album *E5-770* Heartwreck Records
- IDLOUT, L. 2003 Personal communication, 12 February
- ITIDLUI 1980 "Ajuqsanaqtuk" [hardships] *Nitjautit*, CBC CD. 1991 Compilation.
- LEBLANC, L. 1994 'Aglukark brings Inuit Culture to Mainstream' *Billboard* 106 (21) 44
- LEBLANC, L. 1994a 'Canada's Aboriginal musicians seek mainstream recognition' *Billboard* 106 (36) 1-2
- MARK, N. 1998 'Birds of a feather sing together' *Social Forces* 77 (2) 453-485
- PANIGONIAK, C. 2003. Personal communication, 2 April
- POWELL, A. 1998 'An ear for anthropology' *Harvard University Gazette* June 11
- QIMUTJUIT. 1997 "Cousin" CD Album *Cousin* Inukshuk Productions, Inukjuak, Nunavik, Quebec
- SERKOAK, D., HANSON, M and ERNERK, P. 2003 'Inuit music' *Nunavut Handbook* (online) <<http://www.arctictravel.com/chapters/inmusicpage.html>>
- TAGOONA, 1979 "Inuit Nunaanit" [In the land of Inuit.] issued on a 1991 CBC Northern Productions CD
- PARK-WHEELER J., ALLAKARIALLAK, M, 1995 "Hear Me" *Tudjaat* Columbia Records Rescue Music
- UVAGUT, 1997. "Nunavut" *Aqpiq Jam '97* Qimuk Music Inc., Kuujjuaq, Quebec