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Dissertation abstract

"We just help each other." Dynamics of power relationships and construction of the figure of leader among the Nunavik Inuit (20th century - 2011)

This dissertation describes power relationships among the Nunavik Inuit by addressing two interrelated themes. On the one hand, the nature of power and the role of authority figures are analyzed. On the other, the concept of leader is deconstructed by showing its exogenous nature and the way it is appropriated by Inuit. Through reflexive fieldwork, this research points to a high prevalence of cooperation practices among the Nunavik Inuit. These practices, which are structured by power relationships and various inequalities, cover a wide range of social and material goods and go far beyond food sharing and equipment lending. Such pooling of resources is driven by authority figures who possess what others lack and, as such, are obliged to give back and share their wealth. In line with previous research on egalitarian groups and stateless societies, this research shows that Inuit individuals gain power through exogenous factors, i.e., what others within the group think of them, and not through endogenous ones, i.e., their personal ambitions. In other words, a group creates its leader by deciding to follow him or her. This finding sheds new light on the history of Inuit and Qallunaat relations during the 20th century. Each Inuit group continually exerted pressure to control authority figures, and this pressure extended to missionaries and traders as well. Despite efforts to impose their own power structures by creating new positions of authority in the Arctic, missionaries and traders were nevertheless considered to be wealthy people who had an obligation to share. Governments likewise felt the same pressures, which in time subverted their paternalistic policies. The same applies today to the Nunavik regional government project, whose negotiators recognize this reality and are seeking to develop a very advanced form of participatory democracy.