

Consumption and Standards of Living of the Quebec Inuit: Cultural Permanence and Discontinuities*

MARCELLE CHABOT

Cette étude examine les tendances récentes relatives aux pratiques économiques des Inuits du Nunavik (Québec, Canada). L'étude se fonde sur une caractérisation des transactions monétaires et non monétaires effectuées par un échantillon de 38 ménages inuit en 1995. Les résultats des analyses montrent que les Inuit sont fortement dépendants des produits manufacturés. L'élévation du revenu a permis la création d'un revenu discrétionnaire. Cependant, les analyses suggèrent que les conditions économiques actuelles réduisent l'expression des besoins et des aspirations purement individuelles et encouragent le maintien des normes de conduites traditionnelles. L'étude conclut que les conditions de vie matérielle et les valeurs se renforcent mutuellement pour freiner la diffusion de la culture de consommation.

This study explores some recent trends in the economic practices of the Inuit of Nunavik (Quebec, Canada). It is based on a characterization of the monetary and non-monetary transactions made by a sample of 38 Inuit households in 1995. The analyses show that the Inuit are highly dependent on manufactured goods. The rise in income has allowed for more discretionary income; however, analyses suggest that current economic conditions place limitations on the development of individual wants and aspirations, as well as play a significant role in encouraging traditional norms of conduct. It is suggested that material conditions and values mutually reinforce one another to reduce the penetration of a consumer culture.

CONSUMER GOODS HAVE ENTERED THE HOMES and are transforming the daily lives of people around the world. A new social order, influenced by the consumer culture, appears to accompany these purchased

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objects (Scardigli, 1983). How are the behaviours and values that characterize this social order introduced, and how do they take root in societies?

The modernization process has given rise to a new culture that began in the Western Hemisphere with the industrial revolution (Slater, 1997) and became generalized after World War II (Ewen, 1976). Consumer culture represents a particular development of modernization that is characterized by the importance of market relations. With individuals no longer producing what they need, the market has supplanted the traditional economic institutions that used to resolve most material problems (Scardigli, 1983). A consumer culture developed in Western societies under conditions created by the generalization of material affluence, which was maintained by an effective system of production. The increase in supply would have exerted only a limited effect without a concomitant organization of consumption. This was achieved with the aid of a few essential conditions. First, the monetarization of family economic resources through wages, credit and welfare policies, and the consequent rise in monetary income, generated discretionary income (Katona, 1964). Secondly, the generalization of the urban way of life destroyed the possibility of economic self-sufficiency for the domestic unit. Finally, the organization of the advertising industry, which triggers and directs individual desires, contributed to a high level of consumption (Galbraith, 1978; Ewen, 1976).

The consumer culture also presupposes the belief that well-being is achieved through material affluence (Scardigli, 1983). In addition, it implies the conviction that the desired goods are readily available and accessible, determined only by access to monetary resources. Furthermore, once the identity of the individual is associated with what is consumed, rather than with what is produced, the consumption of commodities becomes the preferred medium to negotiate self-identity (Slater, 1997). Consequently, the objects that characterize the consumer culture are progressively less associated with basic needs and increasingly chosen for non-utilitarian symbolic motives, such as status seeking. Katona (1964) argued that higher living standards appear to set the stage for higher aspirations. In other words, the consumer culture is about what we want, rather than what we need.

Variants of this classic model have been observed, especially in non-Western societies. In many developing countries, the evidence shows that the consumer ethos spread before basic needs were met (Belk, 1997; Sklair, 1991). To be desirable, a commodity must be perceived by the individual as making sense. Advertising and modern institutions such as schools and factories play a crucial role in this respect, not only by diffusing information on the use of consumer goods, but also by promoting new lifestyles and creating new needs. New wants, according to Duesenberry's (1949) classical formulation of the demonstration effect, may thus be triggered when consumers learn about a superior mode of consumption, which shifts upward the propensity to consume. This theory has been used to explain the emer-

gence in developing countries of a "standard package" of goods associated with the Westernized lifestyle (James, 1993). New wants may indeed be driven by a desire to emulate or outdo the peer group, thereby contributing to the negotiation of one's social position. Thus, the demand for manufactured goods often results in the rejection of local products and an increased dependence on the market and monetary resources. In a context of material constraints, this may jeopardize the quality of the diet and threaten the well-being of individuals (Belk, 1997; James, 1993). However, the power of advertising and non-traditional institutions operates more effectively under certain conditions. The anonymity created by urban life, for instance, predisposes individuals to accumulate and spend money for their own benefit, whereas in smaller rural communities, individualistic behaviours are comparatively discouraged (Belk, 1997).

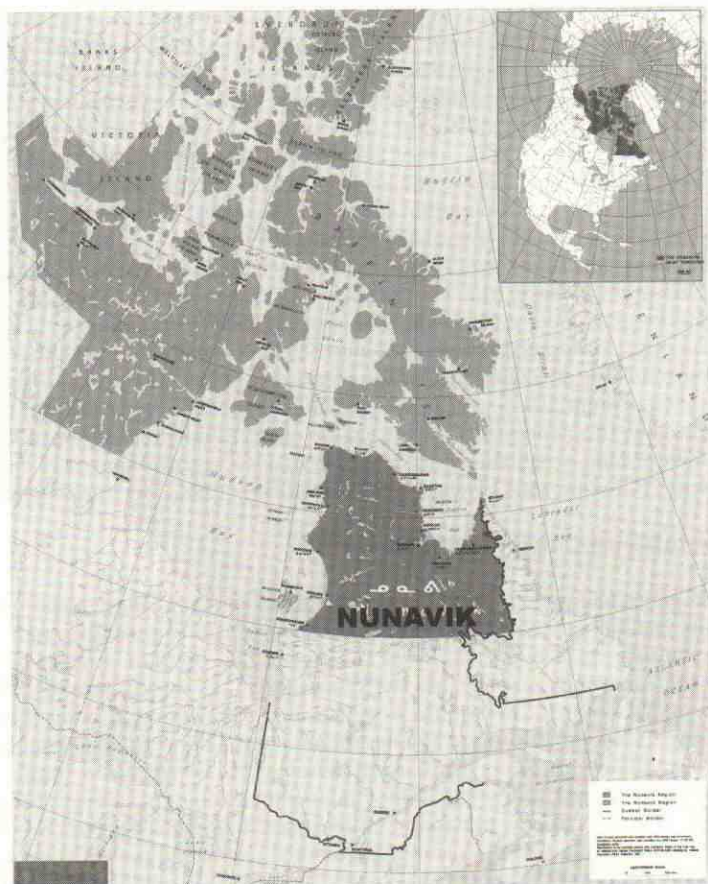
In sum, affluence is only one condition that fuels the development of the consumer culture and the adoption of a consumer ethos. As many authors have argued, citing examples from non-Western societies, changes in consumption and economic behaviours tend to create circumstances that influence further developments in the economic sphere. The power of cultural specificities, population size, level of influence wielded by traditional institutions, and the proximity and intensity of external pressures are important factors that affect the ways in which new values and norms of conduct penetrate (Classen and Howes, 1996; Hamilton, 1994; McCracken, 1988).

The Inuit and Consumer Culture

To juxtapose the terms "Inuit" and "consumer culture" may appear incongruous. Indeed, stereotypical representations of the Inuit eating raw meat or navigating the frozen waters of the Arctic Sea in their kayaks to hunt large sea mammals are at odds with the images of the consumer culture, which evoke a vibrant urban life with its advertisements and manufactured products. However, the Inuit are no longer nomads and they no longer live in igloos. Although many Inuit hunt whales and seals and a majority of them eat raw meat, they also hold wage-earning jobs, use credit cards and are fond of fried chicken, like many other Canadians. Do these characteristics indicate that Inuit society has shifted toward the consumer culture?

The Inuit make up the vast majority of the 10,000 inhabitants of Nunavik, the northernmost part of the Canadian province of Quebec (see Figure 1). Until recently, this population had remained relatively isolated from the rest of the continent. Although manufactured goods made their entry into the daily life of the Inuit prior to the 20th century, it was only after 1920, through the fur trade, that the Inuit were intensely exposed to imported goods. Their participation in this economic enterprise entailed a progressive transformation from their traditional ways of life towards a semi-sedentary lifestyle, one which has resulted in a greater dependence on commodities, especially in relation to food, clothing and production equip-

Figure 1
Nunavik (Canada)



Source: Makivik Corporation

ment (Graburn, 1969; Turner, 1979). When the fur industry began to collapse in the 1930s, earnings from the fur trade were slowly replaced by government assistance, and later, in the 1960s, by wage-earning jobs. In 1973, wages were the main source of income in most of the villages (Simard, 1982). Two decades later, wages were by far the principal monetary source of income (Duhaime, Chabot and Fréchette, 1998). The 1960s also saw an increase in expenditure, stimulated by an overall progressive rise in monetary

income, greater access to imported goods and the complete sedentarization of the population during the same period. For instance, in the 1960s retail sales were the main source of income for the Hudson's Bay Company, which had formerly been involved mainly in the fur trade (Simard, 1982). In 1983, personal expenditure for goods and services was estimated at more than \$9,000 (Duhaime, Fréchette and Robichaud, 1999).

In spite of the monetarization of the family's economic resources, today household production remains a vigorous activity. For instance, in 1995 Inuit households, on average, harvested over a ton of edible country food, including sea mammals, caribou, fish and berries. This food was obtained locally and used mainly for local and household consumption (Duhaime, Chabot and Fréchette, 1998).

In 1975, the Inuit of Nunavik signed the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) with the provincial and federal governments. The implementation of the JBNQA has greatly contributed to the transformation of the Nunavik economy over the last 25 years, through substantial injections of public money into the local economies. Unlike the situation in developing countries, the Inuit of Nunavik are directly and much more intensively exposed to the values and goods of a dominant, wealthy society. What impact has this economic and social environment had on the diffusion of a new ethos among the Inuit? This paper seeks to explore this question by analysing the current consumption behaviours of Inuit households in Nunavik.

Method

This study is based on an analysis of Inuit household budgets for 1995. The budget included monetary and certain non-monetary transactions made by the adult members of the household. An Inuit household comprised all the people, generally related, living in the same house at the time of the survey, according to the list of tenants and the list of beneficiaries of the JBNQA, as provided by the local administrations. These lists, supplemented by secondary information obtained from key informants, were used to select potential participants.

Using a nonprobabilistic sampling, data was collected from a sample of Inuit households selected from two villages in Nunavik. The households were characterized according to the presence of a male head, along with his occupation. Considering the traditional division of labour among the Inuit, the presence and occupation of a male head of household were considered valid indicators of the ability to engage in harvesting activities (Duhaime, Chabot and Gaudreault, 2002; Condon, Collings and Wenzel, 1995; Smith and Wright, 1989; Mackey and Orr, 1987). These variables were used to construct a typology of three household types for all the households from the two villages: 1) households with a male head as wage earner; 2) households with a male head without regular employment; and 3) households headed by a woman.

The data used in this study were collected during the summer of 1995 from 47 households in one small (population circa 500) and one medium-sized (population circa 1,000) village in Nunavik. Semi-directed interviews were carried out with one or more informants from each household. The interviews were conducted in the settlements, as well as in a few summer camps. In addition to the interviews with the adult residents and various officers from local and regional organizations, complementary data was gathered from participant observation and official records.

The household budgets of 38 of the 47 households interviewed were estimated in the following way. First, the total income of the household included monetary and non-monetary resources. Monetary income before taxes was calculated using the data from the interviews, secondary material from several official sources, and a 1995 survey on the labour market. This gross income included wages, transfer payments (pension, unemployment insurance, child allowance and welfare) and income from production sales. The last amount was based on records provided by the local Hunter Support Program.¹ This program was designed to reimburse part of the hunters' production costs, while providing country food to the community free of charge.

Second, non-monetary income represented the value of the country food. This value was based on the average consumption of country food by a household, estimated for 1995 in Nunavik at 202.4 grams per day for one adult unit,² then adjusted proportionally for the number of consumption units.³ This amount was then multiplied by the average market equivalent at the time of the survey (\$10 per kilogram), and production expenses were subtracted from the total. The non-monetary income also included the subsidized portion of the rent for certain low-income households that were receiving welfare allocations, according to the local housing list.

Third, expenses for production (gasoline, vehicles, camping, hunting and fishing equipment) and groceries were estimated from the interview records. Data on clothing was calculated using the regional average expenditure for that budget item, adjusted for the number of consumption units in each household. Expenses for shelter were drawn from the local housing list. The remaining expenses constituted the difference between total income and the above-mentioned expenditures. The volume of country food harvested was estimated using the interview records. The resulting estimates for production and expenditure were compared to the official data whenever possible and adjusted accordingly.

1. Sales of production under this program represented 83% of all production sold in 1995 (Chabot, 2001).
2. Based on estimations calculated by Duhaime, Chabot and Fr chet (1998). Twenty-five percent of the waste related to food preparation, according to Wein, Sabry and Evers (1991), has been added, for a total of 253 grams per day per adult unit.
3. As follows: a 0-7-year-old child corresponds to 0.3 units; an 8-14-year-old represents 0.67 units and a 15-year-old and over represents one unit.

Some comments about the sample are relevant. The households in the sample are larger than the regional estimates (by 1.3 members) and the husband/wife households are over-represented (74% vs. 58% for the two selected villages), resulting in a significant under-representation of single people living alone (8% vs. 18%). The sampled household income is also higher (\$6,000 on average). Households headed by a male without a regular job are over-represented (47% vs. 38%), whereas households headed by a male wage earner are under-represented (29% vs. 36%). The special effort made to gather data from active hunters may explain these sample characteristics. Thus, the data may tend to over-represent the number of families that were more intensively engaged in traditional activities.

The following analyses are based on an equal distribution of the sampled households in three income groups—low, middle and high—according to total income (including the non-monetary value of household production). The data is presented in Table 1.

Income

The analysis shows that size of household increases with income, a phenomenon that is not unique to Nunavik. However, the number of people per household in this sample is very high—households in the high-income group are comprised of more than seven persons on average. The per capita income shows that the effect of income increase is weakened by the very large size of the households.

Nevertheless, the exceptional size of the households provides some advantages with regard to income. Indeed, higher household income is associated with a higher number of full-time workers. The analysis of income composition confirms the link between wages and high income. Household income in the low-income group included transfer payments, whereas wages were by far the principal source of income in the middle- and high-income groups. It should be noted that, in general, the male head of household was seldom the main breadwinner, and this is consistent even at higher household income levels. Wages were generally earned by the wife or other housemate. This allocation of work within the household reflects the importance attached to food production activities, particularly hunting for large game, as well as the traditional gender division of labour. One man, a good hunter, described his situation: "Our daughters share the expenses, without which we would be constantly starved. The girls support our family so they cannot purchase luxuries or very expensive things" (Household 17). This kind of organization of resources allows a man to devote himself to hunting and fishing and thus to ensure a supply of country food. The wages of the other household members, on the other hand, provide for daily family needs, as well as the capital that is indispensable for maintaining the father's production activities. In fact, this pooling of resources is one of the main characteristics that distinguish the households in the low-income group from the other groups.

Table 1

**Some demographic and economic characteristics
of the households according to income**

Variables	Household income groups			Average
	Low (\$9,296 to \$27,501)	Middle (\$27,508 to \$57,385)	High (\$58,987 to \$81,210)	
Sociodemographic				
Number of households (n=38)	13	12	13	
Number of persons	4.2	6.1	7.2	5.8
% Households with husband and wife	46.2%	75.0%	100.0%	73.7%
Number of wage earners (regular full-time and part-time)	0.2	0.9	1.6	0.9
% Households with no full-time earner	84.6%	41.7%	0.0%	42.1%
% Households with one full-time earner	7.7%	58.3%	76.9%	47.4%
% Households with two or more full-time earners	0.0%	0.0%	23.1%	7.9%
% Households with husband as full-time earner	0.0%	16.7%	23.1%	13.2%
% Households with mother or other housemate as full-time earner	15.4%	41.7%	92.3%	50.0%

Food Expenditure

Expenditure for groceries increases with income. This can be partly explained by the size of the households, which increases with income. However, the proportion of expenditure for food decreases with household income. Indeed, the low-income households spent over 50% of their budgetary resources on groceries, whereas the households whose income was higher spent about a quarter of their income on groceries. This preliminary analysis confirms Engel's second law, which stipulates that food expenditure decreases with rise in income, and not being indefinitely extensible, the groceries expenditure reaches a ceiling (Zimmerman, 1936).⁴

Table 1 (cont.)

**Some demographic and economic characteristics
of the households according to income**

Variables	Household income groups			Average
	Low (\$9,296 to \$27,501)	Middle (\$27,508 to \$57,385)	High (\$58,987 to \$81,210)	
Income (before tax)				
Total income/person	\$5,041	\$6,954	\$9,408	\$7,530
Total income	\$20,938 (100.0%)	\$42,305 (100.0%)	\$68,029 (100.0%)	\$43,796 (100.0%)
Wages	\$5,428 (25.9%)	\$25,765 (60.9%)	\$54,077 (79.5%)	\$28,493 (65.1%)
Transfer payments ¹	\$12,821 (61.2%)	\$13,698 (32.4%)	\$11,465 (16.9%)	\$12,634 (28.8%)
Production ²	\$901 (4.3%)	\$212 (0.5%)	\$1,261 (1.9%)	\$806 (1.8%)
Other income ³	\$1,788 (8.5%)	\$2,631 (6.2%)	\$1,226 (1.8%)	\$1,862 (4.3%)
Expenditure				
Total expenditure	\$20,938 (100.0%)	\$42,305 (100.0%)	\$68,029 (100.0%)	\$43,796 (100.0%)
Groceries	\$11,108 (53.1%)	\$14,826 (35.0%)	\$18,438 (27.1%)	\$14,790 (33.8%)
Food production	\$3,518 (16.8%)	\$3,827 (9.0%)	\$12,084 (17.8%)	\$6,546 (14.9%)
Other ⁴	\$6,311 (30.1%)	\$23,653 (55.9%)	\$37,507 (55.1%)	\$22,460 (51.3%)
Food production				
Harvest (kg)	1,409	842	2,561	1,624

1 Includes: Unemployment, Welfare, Canadian Old Age Pension Program, Federal and Provincial Child Allowance.

2 Includes sales of food and handicrafts.

3 Includes replacement value (\$10/kg) of the production consumed by the household and subsidized portion of the rent for tenants receiving welfare.

4 Difference between total income and expenditure on food production and groceries.

4. The original study by E. Engel, wherein he states his well-known laws, was published in Germany in 1857. In 1895, he published another study that qualified those proposals, and submitted that only his second law reflected the reality (see Engel, E. 1895. "Die Lebenskosten belgischer Arbeiterfamilien früher und jetzt. Ermittelt aus Familien-Haushaltsrechnungen und vergleichend zusammengestellt." *Bulletin de l'Institut internationale de statistique*, t. ix, 1st ed., Rome, 124 p.). The contents of the study were reviewed by Zimmerman (1936).

However, the Inuit do not rely on industrial foodstuffs alone. Production costs for country food must therefore be considered in the calculation of food expenditure. When total food expenses are taken into account, a decrease of food expenditure as income rises is observed, as expected. However, as shown in Figure 2, the rate of decrease stabilizes in the higher income strata. The sums allocated to food production were much greater in the higher income households, thereby contributing to the rise of food expenditure. Consequently, this major result moderates the conclusions of the preceding analyses, which suggested a link between increase in income and a drop in the proportion used for food expenditures.

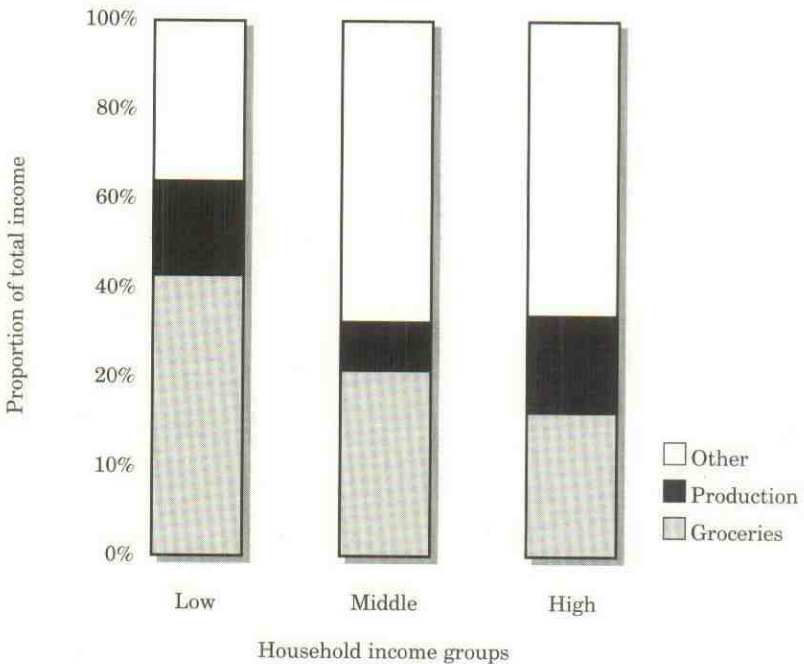
Household Food Production

In order to better understand the preceding result, we must examine household production. On average, the sampled households harvested 1.6 tons of edible country food products in 1995. They also spend considerable sums on food production—15% of total expenditure. It should be pointed out that these investments support a substantial portion of the diet, i.e., two thirds of the meat consumed on average by the Inuit in Nunavik (Duhaime, Chabot and Gaudreault, 2002). Although food preferences have changed over the past decades—in fact, nowadays country food is consumed more by the older generation—it is still the preferred food for most people and is considered more nutritious (*niquitunnaq*, literally “really food” in Inuttitut) (Bégin and Parent, 1995; Kuhnlein, Soueida and Receveur, 1995).

However, the data suggests a variety of behaviours with respect to household food production. For instance, production-related expenditure was much higher in households in the high-income group, as was the volume of food harvested. The results show that the greater the investment, the more substantial the volume of production.

Nonetheless, a closer look at household characteristics would be required to corroborate this significant result. Several households in the low- and middle-income groups were headed by women, whereas all the households in the high-income group were two-parent households. The volume of the women's harvest is generally much lower than the men's because the men harvest much larger-sized resources. Women tend to concentrate on fishing, berry collecting, and sometimes hunting small game, while men hunt caribou, seal and whale. Furthermore, in this type of household, the male offspring take little part in production activities. In fact, the low- and middle-income groups include few very active producers who harvest over two tons and incur high expenses. However, this behaviour is diluted by the number of households that did not produce. On the other hand, more households in the high-income group reported having a son involved in production activities, although he generally shared his production expenditure with his father, and his production was much lower than his father's.

Figure 2

Household food expenditure, Nunavik 2005

Nevertheless, all things considered, the low-income households spent less on country food production than households in the higher income strata. This becomes more apparent when the behaviours of only the most productive hunters are compared: the productive households with a lower income spent 50% less per kilogram than the productive households with a higher income. One reason for this is that the low-income productive households seemed to rely more often on various strategies to reduce their production costs—borrowing equipment, receiving monetary gifts and material gifts whose value could not be estimated, sharing production costs with other producers, etc. For example, one good hunter mentioned: “I also have a 303 rifle. However, I do not have enough money to buy cartridges. So people give some to me, like Noah, who is my friend” (Household 17). The limitations imposed on monetary resources seem to influence the way

in which money is managed in these households. Lack of money was reported by a few respondents as a reason to justify the fact that they could not harvest. One hunter explained, "Since our snowmobile was broken last autumn, I could only hunt with my canoe, therefore, until the water froze" (Household 25). This instability of access to money may consequently explain the lesser production recorded by the poorer households. Therefore, access to monetary resources appears to be a determining factor, even though the producers could access other kinds of resources.

Household production is not intended solely for the immediate family's food needs. In fact, a portion of the production is sold. However, this share is rather small—on average, only 12% of the volume of the harvest reported in our sample was sold. Furthermore, less than half of the households, which included many productive hunters, sold their production. It should be remembered that the country food that is sold is mostly redistributed among the local residents, free of charge, through the Hunter Support Program. The income earned by the sampled households was also relatively small—on average, around 2% of total income. This percentage never reaches more than 10% for individual households. A comparison between production income and production costs shows a financial deficit—sales covered only a fraction of the investment. In fact, country food production is not intended for profit making. Most of the food is shared with other people. A well-off hunter, whose wife earned a high income, explained, "Those who do not have a hunter in their family receive a lot of meat. Because I have all the necessary equipment, I give much more than I receive" (Household 11). The social obligation to help others provides a strong motivation to produce and share food. This good hunter told us about his situation:

We receive food when we do not have anything to eat anymore. Some give us country food, but we also receive White's food. We send our request through the radio station and we always receive something (Household 25).

This comment suggests that for the productive households with a lower income, gifts of food also contribute to maintaining the reciprocity system.

Investments made in hunting and fishing equipment do not always appear to be correlated with household production. Indeed, several households spent large sums of money on hunting and camping equipment even though they recorded a small volume of harvested food. In some cases, especially in those of vehicles used for transportation and leisure, the equipment was employed for purposes other than hunting. However, other situations were more ambiguous. For example, one young man who stated that he obtained most of his country food from his in-laws, but who had spent over \$13,000 on equipment, described his situation as follows:

This year I bought two rifles. I bought a 22 magnum at Northern Stores for \$200. I paid cash for it. I also bought a used seven-millimetre rifle from one of my friends. It cost me \$1,200. I am slowly paying my friend back (Household 15).

This investment, which, moreover, was made for an unusual type of firearm, appears disproportionate to its intended use. This suggests that, for some, the purchase of the means of production is not always intended to improve their production efficiency. This case could represent an example of ostentatious consumption. In sum, although people with higher incomes participate in the support system, greater access to monetary resources can also influence behaviour in a less altruistic way.

Consumption and Standards of Living: A Comparison

The previous results show that Inuit households generally use a large portion of their income for food. What conclusions can we draw from these tendencies with regard to their standard of living?

We will now attempt to compare the standard of living in our sample of Inuit households with that of Canadian households in general. The figures for Canadian households are based on data from the Family Expenditure Survey (FAMEX) produced by Statistics Canada for 1996 (Statistics Canada, 1996). To make this data comparable for the Inuit, the gross income of the sampled households has been adjusted to include indirect transfers. This amount of money is based on the difference between the rent paid by Inuit households and the average shelter costs (rent/mortgage, fuel, water, electricity) for Canadian households, according to the corresponding 1996 income group. The rationale behind this adjustment is that housing in Nunavik is largely subsidized. The Canadian data prepared by Statistics Canada was used unchanged. With the data arranged in five, rather than three, groups, the comparison is based on quintiles 2, 3 and 4, whose average incomes correspond most closely to those of the three income groups established for Nunavik in 1995.

Two indicators, expenditure structure and low-income threshold, have been tested. The first indicator will be discussed in this section, and the second indicator in the following section. The results are presented in Table 2.

The expenditure structure shows that the percentage of expenses for food (including the cost of food production in Nunavik) is very high in Nunavik, in comparison to that of Canada as a whole. This expenditure monopolizes 43% of the adjusted overall Inuit income and, on average, almost 60% of the budget of the low-income households. This percentage remains substantial even for the high-income households. First, such a large proportion reflects the larger size of the Inuit households. Second, it results from a higher cost of living. Food and gasoline for hunting vehicles, for example, are almost twice as expensive as in southern Quebec (Duhaime, Fréchette, Langlais and Strong, 2000). In reality, when the cost of living is neutralized, food expenditure per capita for the Inuit (\$2,029) is comparable to that for Canadians as a whole (\$2,284). Third, the portion of the budget used for food expenditure also reveals the importance of food

production in Nunavik (according to Table 1, on average one third of total food expenses). In comparison, a study on household food production in France shows that the average amount spent on subsistence farming and gardening in 1994 totalled approximately \$140, and provided between one quarter and one half of the consumption of some vegetables and small animals (Gojard and Weber, 1995).⁵ If we apply this figure to Canadian households, the economic value of household food production among the Inuit is significant.

When the totality of essential needs is considered, food, clothing and shelter monopolize a very large part of the budget—over half the adjusted income of the Inuit on average. This proportion reaches 72% in low-income households. This leaves Inuit households with little left over for other needs. The following example illustrates how many households experience stressful situations. One of the most active hunters, whose income consists mainly of transfer payments, described his situation: “We usually spend a little more than our monthly welfare allocation. With this money, we buy gasoline and groceries. Of course, we are always in debt at Northern Stores” (Household 8). The percentage of income that this household devotes to imported food and country food production was estimated at 85%. This suggests that the economic situation of the average Inuit household is closer to that of the Canadian households in quintile 2, which must also use a greater portion of their income for essential needs, and for which shelter is the major expenditure.

Credit has been used extensively over the past century in Nunavik, initially as a system for enabling transactions between the fur trade companies and the Inuit trappers. Thus, a trapper could obtain commodities by committing his future fur production (Graburn, 1969). In the past as well as today, credit allowed a household to expand its access to commodities. One informant described how he made use of credit: “I cannot get credit to buy groceries either at the Co-op or at Northern Stores. I have reached my \$3,000 limit at both places” (Household 15). The needs of this household clearly exceed its resources. Needs can increase with access to more resources, but they can also be limited by resources.

The progressive rise in income has allowed for discretionary income. However, this discretionary portion remains small for most households, not only in the case of low-income households, but also for most others. With a household income equivalent to that of the average Canadian, the Inuit of Nunavik struggle to meet their essential needs. They have many more people to feed, as confirmed by their per capita income. They also face a much

5. A comparison with non-Native rural Canadian household production would have been more enlightening, but comparable data on food production (e.g., production and distribution from small farming or gardening) was not available. However, recent studies using national data measuring the amount of unpaid labour in the informal economy in rural Canada show that informal activities are more important in rural than in urban areas. These activities act as a social safety net, support the formal economy, and are a source of social cohesion, support and security (Reimer, 2001).

Table 2

**Income and expenditure according to income: comparison
between Nunavik (1995) and Canada (1996)**

	Nunavik			
	Household income groups			
	Low	Middle	High	Average
Income (before tax)				
Adjusted income ¹	\$25,136	\$47,586	\$74,807	\$49,218
Income per capita	\$6,051	\$7,822	\$10,346	\$8,463
Expenditure				
Food ²	58%	39%	41%	43%
Other essential ³	14%	9%	7%	9%
Other ⁴	28%	51%	52%	48%
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Canada				
	Household income quintile ⁵			
	2 (Low)	3	4 (high)	Average
Income (before tax)				
Income	\$27,278	\$43,111	\$62,363	\$51,453
Income per capita	\$12,399	\$16,146	\$20,182	\$19,714
Expenditure				
Food	17%	14%	11%	12%
Other essential ³	29%	23%	20%	21%
Other	55%	63%	69%	68%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source for Canada: Reference 23, from Table: Detailed average household expenditure by household income quintile, Canada (10 Provinces), all households.

1 Adjusted income includes total income (Table 1) plus an amount of money based on the difference between the rent paid by the Inuit households and the average shelter costs (rent/mortgage, fuel, water, electricity) for Canadian households, according to the corresponding 1996 income group.

2 Includes food production and grocery expenditures.

3 Includes housing and clothing.

4 Difference between total income and expenditure for food and other essential.

5 Quintiles 1 and 5 have been eliminated and only quintiles 2, 3 and 4 have been retained.

higher cost of living. This brings the analysis to the next section, where the standards of living of the Inuit will be discussed in light of a second indicator—the low-income threshold.

Poverty and Low Income

In Canada, there is no official definition of poverty. The most frequently used indicator is the low income cut-off (LICO) developed by Statistics Canada. This indicator measures relative poverty by comparing income and household expenditure according to the number of people in the household and the residential location. The threshold for a given year is set where households spend 20 percent more than the average Canadian household on food, shelter and clothing—traditionally regarded as the essential needs. Families that typically spend over 54.7% of their income on these needs are considered to be living under strained circumstances (Statistics Canada, 1999). This indicator has undergone criticism over the past decade, and alternative poverty and low-income measurements have been proposed (Ross, Scott and Smith, 2000). The following analysis does not seek to challenge the validity of these indicators. Rather, the objective is to compare the standards of living of the Inuit using the available documentation. However, the use of these low-income thresholds requires that the adjusted income of the Inuit households, calculated for the previous analysis, be modified to include the consumer price index. The gross monetary income was adjusted according to the regional 1990 price index, estimated at 182 (Montreal and the Quebec City area were at 100) (Chabot, 2001).

Pursuant to the LICO scales established for 1995, 42% of the sampled Inuit households and 46% of the households constituted of at least one family fell below the line. In the low-income group, all but one household were under the threshold, and a third of those in the middle-income group were also under the LICO. These proportions are considerable compared to the rest of Canada. To illustrate, in 1995, 16 percent of all Canadian families were situated under this threshold (CCSD, 2002a).

Canadian households headed by a female parent are an at-risk category for poverty. In fact, 57% of them fell below the low-income threshold in 1995 (CCSD, 2002b). The same proportion is found in the selected Inuit households, although the sample size does not allow us to conclude with certainty that poverty more specifically affects single-mother households in Nunavik. However, I suggest that this might be the case, since 44% of the households headed by a single mother in the two sampled villages (316 households) were in the low-income group. Further analyses would be required to confirm this finding.

Notwithstanding the relevance of the Statistics Canada low-income threshold, many Inuit households reported harsh situations. One woman described her situation:

My family eats when I get my social assistance cheque. . . . My daughters Linda and Tina only want to eat store-bought food. It makes me unhappy when I do not have enough money to buy any (Household 14).

Another woman explained:

Often, I give bannock [traditional bread] to poor people and to the people who received welfare, especially at the end of the month. You know, at the end of the month, there are people out there who eat absolutely nothing because food costs too much (Household 13).

This comment also reveals the level of dependence on imported food. On the other hand, the practice of mutual aid seems to mitigate the effects of food shortages. Solidarity was demonstrated not only between relatives but also between members of the community, and it involved imported foodstuffs, as well as country food, as discussed above. Estimates show, for instance, that country food alone may have represented a net income of 10% to 20% in several households, which means thousands of dollars in replacement value. Numerous comments from the interviews demonstrate that the traditional mechanisms of mutual aid still function very well. The extent of this help undoubtedly represents a great advantage, and one to which many poorer Canadians do not have access, especially in urban areas.

The final analysis demonstrates that a large majority of the Inuit have a very low standard of living in comparison to that of Canadians as a whole. Moreover, when material wealth is present in the household, it is diverted toward the collective interest.

Discussion

Over the past few decades, the monetary income of the Inuit family has continuously risen. This rise has been followed by a constant increase in expenditure, which has led to a gradual commoditization of the Inuit's material needs. This phenomenon is especially obvious with regard to food, since nowadays a large part is obtained on the market, instead of being produced. The increase in income is thus accompanied by a transformation of the Inuit diet, which is the result of many intertwined factors such as the passage from a semi-nomadic life to a sedentary existence, an increase in the local supply of foodstuffs and a shift in food preferences (Kuhnlein, Soueida and Receveur, 1995; Wein and Freeman, 1992; Wein, 1986). The data show that the increase in income has particularly benefited this budgetary item, and it has also benefited household production. The growth and monetarization of economic resources have been accompanied by a generalization in the use of modern, market-dependent hunting and fishing technology, which renders traditional tools more or less obsolete. The data clearly show that new wants have emerged in Nunavik, as evidenced by the

amount of money devoted to manufactured foodstuffs and modes of household production. Although this is not a recent phenomenon, needs have nevertheless expanded with the increase in spending capacity.

The replacement of traditional goods by commodities brings with it a greater dependence on the market and implies an organization of economic life that is centred on monetary resources. This creates new constraints that the Inuit must face daily. However, as discussed elsewhere, it has not led them to adopt utilitarian behaviours (Chabot, 2003). As it happens, the need for money fosters mutual help, not only at the household level but also at the community level, where economic resources circulate, a well-documented fact in other areas inhabited by the Inuit (Wenzel, 1995; Nuttall, 1991; Dahl, 2000). For instance, households invest large sums of money in food production that is not intended for the accumulation of capital. As shown in the case of Nunavik and in other regions of the Arctic, it is stimulated by a simple desire to share, or else the necessity of respecting customs and social obligations (Wenzel, 1995; Caulfield, 1993; Langdon, 1991; Nuttall, 1991; Wenzel, 1991; Dahl, 2000). Furthermore, country food production activities maintain a large and effective circulation system for country food and other foodstuffs, goods of all kinds, as well as money (Wenzel, 1995; Langdon, 1991; Dahl, 2000). As demonstrated here in Nunavik, wealthier individuals play a key role in this system. Indeed, if they are more likely to spend more, they are also equally pressed to give more. Therefore, traditional models of conduct are operational and enduring in Nunavik, and they exert a strong influence on individual behaviour.

The status of household production in the budget is particularly interesting. It reflects not only a considerable change in the ways in which the Inuit perform these activities today, but also reveals the economic and social significance of such production. Indeed, although the economic value of locally produced meat is not the main reason for maintaining household production activities, it is cheaper to produce country food, which is not available on the market in Nunavik, than to buy a poor-quality equivalent on the market. Moreover, the cultural and symbolic value of traditional food contributes to maintaining household production activities. In fact, household production activities confer prestige in the community. The Inuit identity is also deeply associated with the image of the hunter and the eating and sharing of country food (Searles, 2002; Dorais, 1997; Freeman, 1996; Wenzel, 1991). The individual social status of the men and women alike⁶ appears to be strongly linked to the role of producer (or provider), rather than that of consumer. In fact, the substitution of modern equipment for traditional technology has allowed the Inuit to act even more effectively within the traditional sphere.

6. According to our interviews, women produce food (especially fish and berries) and are often responsible for the distribution of country food, which also garners them prestige and serves to maintain their networks. See, for instance, Searles (2002).

Social pressures to harvest country food may put a strain on the budget when households have fewer resources. The constraints on the budget are even greater when the volume of food produced is insufficient to meet household needs or maintain an effective solidarity network, which requires balanced exchanges (Bodenhorn, 2000). In addition, this social requirement to take part in production activities can also give rise to forms of ostentatious consumption. If this type of behaviour represents a convenient way to negotiate one's social position, it may also, in some cases, have negative consequences on family resources when it results in the substitution of high-prestige items for basic needs.

Status factors appear to play a prominent role in the production and distribution of food. However, the extent to which status determines the desire to pursue this activity has not been explored in this study. Food production and distribution are sources of empowerment and those who contribute more to the food supply generally enjoy greater authority and power, even today. Nevertheless, on the one hand there are other factors involved in traditional, as well as modern, Inuit leadership, while on the other hand, country food is only one set of goods that, when distributed, contribute to maintaining status. Store-bought food and hunting gear that are acquired through employment earnings are also contributing factors (Searles, 2002).

Individual aspirations in Nunavik are not totally released from the traditional obligation to help others—a major barrier to the penetration of the consumer culture. Individual interest and the desire to accumulate economic resources for individual ends are channelled toward the fulfillment of social duties and traditional roles or their representations. In addition, the size and geographical remoteness of the Inuit communities in Nunavik, combined with strong kinship ties and the fact that the influence of the outside world is relatively recent, are factors that discourage individualistic behaviour and the freeing up of independent desires.

The current economic conditions play a definitive role in fostering altruistic conduct. Indeed, the analyses have shown that affluence, another necessary condition for the development of a consumer culture, is not yet a *fait accompli* in Nunavik, since a majority have difficulty meeting their basic needs. Besides, the economic discrepancies in the living standards of Inuit households are partly offset by the redistribution of resources within the community, so that the potential effects of individual opulence on social stratification are thereby neutralized. On the other hand, the more or less generalized state of impoverishment is largely the result of a widespread desire to concentrate labour and energy around the production of country food, rather than engage further in labour market activities. In sum, the economic conditions and demographic environment support and encourage a traditional ethos. Values and material conditions mutually reinforce one another and reduce the penetration of a consumer culture.

Conclusions

Inuit subsistence is no longer based solely on hunting and fishing. However, this study has tried to demonstrate that access to monetary resources and market consumption has not driven the Inuit society to embrace a consumer culture. Two sets of factors can be offered to explain this conclusion. First, new wants and needs have emerged in Nunavik as a result of a growth in income. However, the increase in monetary income has not brought about a generalized state of material affluence. As stated previously, affluence is not always an essential condition for the establishment of a consumer culture. In several areas of the developing world where basic needs were not being met, the consumer culture did penetrate and take hold (Belk, 1997; Sklair, 1991). In the case of Nunavik, the lower standards of living reduce the capacity to consume and, consequently, to fulfil one's desires. Second, the evidence shows that wants and needs are influenced by traditional social values and norms. In addition, these values also influence the level of living standard, which in turn strengthens the permanence of traditional values.

For the time being, the current economic conditions will most probably persist. Indeed, with the general improvement of living conditions, the population of Nunavik has increased considerably—according to Canadian Census data, by 60% between 1986 and 2001. However, in comparison to the previous decades, a major decrease in income-growth rate has been observed since the 1980s, and income growth has not matched the increase in population. This suggests a possible stagnation or even a relative deterioration in the economic situation of the average Inuit. Furthermore, 41% of the population is less than 15 years old. This population category is more financially dependent than the previous generations, which puts increased pressure on families' resources.

This study has shown that the traditional values and norms of behaviour are enduring. However, there is no doubt that the traditional social order is being challenged. Many Inuit who did not have access to a television set in the 1980s are now intensively exposed, through all forms of information technologies, to an infinite number of images that propose new commodities and lifestyles. Although the prevailing values and material conditions do not allow individual desires to be satisfied, the exposure to mass consumption images and articles contributes nonetheless to modifying definitions of situations and aspirations. This can put pressure on the family budget, which may in turn create and even exacerbate social tensions. In addition, young people appear to be less willing to subordinate their jobs to country food production activities than the older generation. They occupy well-paid jobs with more responsibilities, which diminishes the freedom of action they need for hunting and fishing activities and, consequently, productivity (Condon, Collings and Wenzel, 1995; Lamothe and Lemire, 1994). In spite of the omnipresent images of the "Inuit hunter" and their unquestionable influence on individual choices, the status associated with country

food production activities now competes with the prestige gained from occupying other functions and roles.

We should point out that, despite the widespread network of solidarity, the effectiveness of social networks to compensate for the lack of economic resources in the household remains in question, since the material security of several low-income households appears to be precarious. A recent study revealed a correlation between having a job and variations in nutritional intake (Dewailly et al., 2001). Although other factors may be linked to a low-quality diet, adequate access to money by the household is essential to satisfy a family's needs.

It is unlikely that the younger generation of Inuit, most of whom were not born "on the land," will content themselves with a living based on temporary jobs, transfer payments and production activities. Rather, the expectations of the current young generation have created a need for additional employment in the region. As a matter of fact, their demands have recently been heard. In April 2002, over 25 years after the JBNQA, the government of Quebec and representatives of the Inuit of Nunavik signed an agreement to accelerate the economic development of Nunavik.⁷ The proposed measures will lead to an injection of \$360 million into the regional economy over a 25-year period. This funding, which addresses, among others, concerns about improving infrastructures, should offer employment opportunities to the Inuit. These new measures should help propel individuals a little further into the world of market consumption and thereby challenge the foundations of Inuit society.

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