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Nobuhiro Kishigami

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Homeless Inuit in Montreal

Nobuhiro Kishigami*

Résumé: Inuit sans-abri à Montréal

La migration des Inuit depuis l'Arctique vers les villes du sud du Canada a augmenté sensiblement pendant les années 1980. Environ 10 000 Inuit sur un total approximatif de 50 000 vivaient à l'extérieur des régions arctiques du Canada en 2006. À mesure que le nombre d'Inuit vivant dans les villes augmente, celui d'Inuit sans-abri s'accroît dans des grandes villes du sud. On estime à plus de 90 personnes les Inuit sans-abri à Montréal, dont la population Inuit s'élève environ à 800 individus. La présente étude a pour objet de décrire la vie et les caractéristiques des Inuit sans abri à Montréal, ainsi que les activités de deux organisations essentielles à leur survie: le Centre d'amitié autochtone de Montréal et l'Association des Inuit de Montréal. Les Inuit de Montréal doivent dorénavant former des réseaux sociaux utiles pour faciliter leur adaptation en ville. Un centre communautaire inuit, où des informations et de la nourriture pourraient être partagées, devrait être mis en place à Montréal afin de changer la situation actuelle des Inuit sans-abri.

Abstract: Homeless Inuit in Montreal

Migration of the Inuit into southern Canadian cities from the Arctic increased substantially during the 1980s. Approximately 10,000 out of a total of 50,000 Inuit lived outside the Canadian Arctic regions in 2006. As the number of urban Inuit is increasing, so too is that of homeless Inuit in large southern cities. It is estimated that there are more than 90 homeless Inuit in Montreal, which has an Inuit population of about 800. This paper describes the life and characteristics of homeless urban Inuit in Montreal, and the activities of the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal and of the Association of Montreal Inuit, which are essential for their survival. The Inuit of Montreal have yet to form useful social networks to ease their urban adaptation. An Inuit community centre, where information and food can be shared, should be established in Montreal to change the present situation of homeless Inuit.

* National Museum of Ethnology and the Graduate University for Advanced Studies, 10-1 Senri Expo Park, Suita City, Osaka, Japan 565-8511. inuit@idc.minpaku.ac.jp

Introduction

Progress in economic globalisation has accelerated population movements throughout the world. While the presence of Indigenous peoples in several major cities dates back to the 1950s in western Canada, it has greatly intensified since the early 1980s in Montreal and other cities in the Province of Quebec (Lévesque 2003: 23). During the 1980s, Inuit migration into southern cities became more pronounced than previously. Since 2000, the drastic increase in the number of homeless Inuit has become a serious problem in several cities of Canada and has been identified as such by municipal workers (NFCM 2002; Trattles 2005). According to the 2006 census, the total population of Inuit in Canada is approximately 50,000, and while the majority live in the Arctic, approximately 10,000 have left their homeland (Statistics Canada 2006a). As to the major cities in the south where Inuit now live, Ottawa-Gatineau has 725 Inuit inhabitants, the largest Inuit population outside the Arctic. This is followed by Yellowknife with 640, Edmonton with 590, Montreal with 570 and Winnipeg with 355 (*ibid.*, 2008b).

There are many recent studies of urban Native people in North America (*e.g.*, Andersen and Denis 2003; Deane et al. 2004; Fixico 2000; Frideres 1998; Gill 1995; Hanselmann 2001; Lambert 1986; Lobo 2002; Lobo and Peters 2001; Newhouse and Peters 2003; Proulx 2006; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1993; Todd 2001, Williams 1997, etc.)¹. However, few anthropological studies have focused on urban Inuit (*e.g.*, Campbell 2001; Carpenter 1993; Chaumel 1993; Fogel-Chance 1993; Kishigami 1999; Lee 2002; Olofsson 2004). Thus, their life, especially when they are homeless, is essentially undocumented. This paper considers the life, characteristics and problems of homeless urban Inuit in Montreal as well as the activities of the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal (NFCM) and of the Association of Montreal Inuit, which are essential to their survival.

Research aim, place and method

My research on urban Inuit began in 1996 as a part of a National Museum of Ethnology (Osaka, Japan) research project called “Indigenous Peoples and Cities in the World.” My role was to explore the contemporary socio-economic situations of urban Indigenous people in Canada and their ways of adapting to urban environments. I selected Inuit living in Montreal as my case study. There were several reasons for selecting Montreal as my research site for exploring the urban Inuit experience in and their adaptation to the urban environment. First, I had previous experience in both Montreal and Nunavik. Second, Montreal is a multiethnic, cosmopolitan city with a large immigrant population even though French Canadians dominate the city numerically, politically, and culturally, and French is the dominant language. Finally, Montreal is an important service centre for Inuit from Nunavik (as it was for the Inuit

¹ See Fixico (1981) and Thornton et al. (1982) for further bibliography on the study of urban Native Americans before 1982.

from the Baffin region of Nunavut until the late 1990s), and a number of Nunavik Inuit organisations are based in the greater Montreal region.

The 2006 census shows that there are 10,130 First Nation people, 6,010 Métis, and 570 Inuit in the greater Montreal region, which includes several neighbouring cities and towns, and has a population of about 3.5 million (Statistics Canada 2008c). Thus the Inuit are the minority of minorities numerically in Montreal. In the Montreal metropolitan area, there are Inuit working for a number of Inuit and governmental organisations as well as private businesses. Nevertheless, a considerable number of Inuit in this city depend on welfare and unemployment insurance; others are there temporarily for higher education or medical reasons, and finally, a number are homeless. The life styles of urban Inuit are much more diversified than those of Arctic Inuit (Kishigami 1999a; 2004a; 2006). Although the 2006 census indicates that there are 570 Inuit (235 males and 335 females) in the Montreal area (Statistics Canada 2008b), if the number of patients, students, and homeless Inuit is taken into account, a more realistic figure is over 800 Inuit. About 90 homeless Inuit were counted in downtown Montreal between April 2004 and March 2005 (NFCM 2005), but as suggested by a previous report on Aboriginal homelessness (*ibid.*, 2002), this is probably underestimated (Annie Pisuktie, pers. comm. 2004).

In 1996, I undertook preliminary research on Inuit in the greater Montreal region. Based on this survey and in cooperation with Ms. Caroline Stone (who worked at the Makivik Corporation at the time), I developed about 60 questions for a one-hour open-ended interview. The questions concerned one's name; age; birth place; parents; education; length of stay in Montreal; income; jobs; reasons for coming to Montreal; family and kinsmen; friends; communication; Inuit food and meals; sharing practices; health conditions; residence area; housing condition; language use; social problems; etc. Using a snowball sampling technique, I contacted as many Montreal Inuit as possible at offices of Inuit organisations, the NFCM, several shelters, parks and streets with the cooperation of workers from the Makivik Corporation, the Association of Montreal Inuit, and the NFCM. Because I did not select informants at random, my sample does not statistically represent the whole Inuit population in Montreal. For example, although I interviewed 3 students, 20 employed and 29 unemployed Inuit during my research in August, 2004, I did not interview anyone under the age of 16. Thus, the youth population of Montreal Inuit is underrepresented in my sample. However, the sample includes adult individuals from a full range of economic and social contexts.

In 1997, I interviewed 54 Inuit and since then, I have continued this research, even during short visits to Montreal (Kishigami 1999a, 1999b, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). In August, 2004, I carried out follow-up research with 52 Inuit in Montreal (Kishigami 2004c, 2008). More than 80% of those interviewed were not the same individuals as those interviewed in 1997. Since I published the general characteristics of Montreal Inuit as elicited from my 2004 research in another paper (Kishigami 2008), I will now focus on the homeless Inuit population only.

Homeless Inuit in Montreal

Homelessness can be generally classified into three categories: situational (or temporary), episodic, and chronic (long term) (Beavis et al. 1997). While one in five clients of the NFCM are homeless, one in two of the Inuit clients are homeless (NFCM 2002: 28). Also, the majority of the homeless Inuit fall into the chronic category (*ibid.*: 19). According to the NFCM report on homelessness among Montreal's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit:

The Inuit are clearly over-represented in all categories of homeless. Although they account for less than 10 % of the Aboriginal population in Montreal, they account for nearly 43% of those who are homeless. They are also more likely to access mainstream services but are the most likely to become chronically homeless (NFCM 2002: 17).

During my 2004 research, I was able to interview 12 homeless Inuit: seven men and five women. Most were in their 30s or 40s, with the youngest about 27 years old and the oldest about 50 years old. The average age was 38.8 years old. There was almost no difference in the average ages between male and female. Although the female population is generally larger than the male population among urban Inuit, the tendency is reversed among urban homeless Inuit.

Of the homeless Inuit interviewed, six came from the Nunavik region (two from Kuujjuarapik, one from Inukjuak, one from Kuujjuaq, one from Kangirsujuak, and one from Quaqtac); five from the Nunavut Territory (one from Iqaluit, one from Cape Dorset, one from Pond Inlet, one from Resolute Bay, and one from Gjoa Haven) and one from the Labrador region (Northwest River). Thus, the majority of them came from the Nunavik and Baffin Island regions.

The majority of homeless Inuit did not move to Montreal directly from their native villages, but instead arrived there after having moved among several villages within the Arctic and/or within southern Canada. This tendency suggests that they will probably move to other cities or Arctic villages in the future. One reason why some Inuit end up in southern Canada is that the Government of the Northwest Territories closed Baffin House (a patient transit centre) in 1998, and Inuit patients from the Baffin region were then sent to hospitals in Ottawa. There are various reasons for Inuit migration to Montreal, including accompanying parents or a spouse (Table 1).

From my sample, the average length of time Inuit have lived homeless in Montreal is approximately 7.3 years. However, the majority of the homeless Inuit have lived that way for no more than 5 years. The average length of male Inuit homelessness in Montreal is about 2.9 years and no male stays in Montreal more than 10 years. On the other hand, the average length of female homelessness Inuit in Montreal is about 13.3 years and half of them spend more than 10 years. Hence, although fewer Inuit women are homeless in Montreal, they tend to stay in the city much longer than the Inuit men. This is because most of urban Inuit women, including homeless ones, tend to live

together with and/or marry non-Inuit men who may support their life financially in Montreal even for a short period.

Table 1. Reasons for Inuit migration to Montreal by gender

Reason	Men	Women
Accompanying parents or spouse	1	3
For a job	1	0
Being sent to prison	1	0
Escaping from gossip	0	1
Escaping from police	1	0
Being divorced	1	0
For experience	1	0
On the way back to Arctic home	1	0
No identified reason	0	1
TOTAL	7	5

Life of homeless Inuit in Montreal

In general, the homeless Inuit spend their time along a main street, in three parks or at the NFCM, which is located in the downtown area. At night, they tend to stay in the parks or shelters. Homeless Inuit manage to live in Montreal by combining resources provided by the NFCM, charitable organisations, and shelters. Their resources include free food or meals, clothing, services, cash from panhandling and/or welfare. Many homeless Native people, including Inuit, in urban centres tend not to use existing programs and services due to lack of knowledge about federal and provincial government available programs and services (Carter and Polevychok 2004). Although many Inuit are not aware of it, since 2002, Inuit with two pieces of identification can get welfare money in Quebec, even without a fixed address. The social workers of the NFCM help homeless Native people to prepare the documents necessary to get access to the Quebec welfare system. Most of the unemployed Inuit depend on welfare money from Quebec and get about \$550 per month on average. This applies to the majority of homeless Inuit.

Homeless Inuit congregate in the same places for sleeping and panhandling. They tend to share cigarettes, beer, food, and drugs with other homeless persons in the same location, regardless of original native village or ethnic origin. The majority of homeless Inuit tend to avoid using several of the shelters and charitable organisations because they are discriminated against by non-Inuit workers and homeless persons. According to the Inuit I talked to, the non-Inuit workers and homeless persons often say: “the Inuit

smell,” “the Inuit are noisy,” “the Inuit have fleas and lice,” “the Inuit are always begging,” or “the Inuit are always drinking.” Although homeless Inuit are able to obtain cash income from panhandling and/or welfare, they spend the cash not to rent an apartment, but instead to buy food, alcohol, cigarettes or drugs. Many homeless Inuit obtain an apartment with the assistance of the NFCM. However, because almost all of them fail to pay their rent and are noisy in their apartment, they are often evicted by the owners of the apartment after only three months.

None of the homeless Inuit in my sample completed junior high school or have any special job skills. Furthermore, they do not participate in education and job training programs, and do not speak French. Thus, finding employment is extremely difficult in Montreal. They generally cannot escape from their poverty except by returning to their home village. Also, many of them suffer from serious drug and alcohol problems, though it should be emphasised that the majority of the homeless Inuit have chosen a homeless life because they enjoy the freedom such a lifestyle offers.

To give an idea of the life conditions for homeless Inuit, I will describe in detail two individual cases (a woman and a man) from my interviews of 2004.

Case of a homeless Inuk woman

The first case is that of an Inuk woman, called Lucy (a pseudonym) and approximately 35 years old, who married a French Canadian in the North. Lucy and her husband had two children (both were around 10 years old in 2003) in Montreal. Lucy lived in Montreal, Ville La Salle, and Alma for about 13 years before becoming homeless. She and her husband were divorced 10 months before our interview (in the fall of 2003) due to her heavy drinking. Her former husband was granted custody of the children. Since that time, she has been homeless and panhandling on the streets in the downtown area. In Lucy’s case, she does not receive any welfare because she did not know how to apply for it. Through panhandling, she can get a little more than \$5 a day but cannot live on such a small amount. Thus, she frequently takes free lunches at the NFCM and free suppers at various women’s shelters such as Chez Doris, the Native Women’s Shelter, etc. At night, Lucy tends to sleep in one of the parks. Only occasionally does she spend nights at one of the shelters or a friend’s place. She is able to shower four times a week and wash her clothes two times a week at one of the missions run by local churches and shelters which provide such amenities to the homeless. She can also obtain free clothing from the NFCM and women’s shelters. Although she has no place to live and has to endure rain, wind, and a very cold winter, she manages to obtain food and clothing in order to survive in the city.

Lucy has various medical problems connected to her alcohol and drug use. Despite this, she drinks beer every day and sometimes smokes marijuana. She shares and drinks several bottles of beer with her friends at a park and occasionally drinks heavily until the early morning at a friend’s apartment. Lucy and her friends share the costs of the beer and continue drinking until all of their money is gone. As she also frequents bars,

Lucy can acquire additional beer from male bar patrons. Once she and her friends get drunk, they often have fights with others or yell at each other on the bus or metro, or in the street. Although she herself recognises that her life is not good, she finds it very difficult to escape from this reality. Once a month, her ex-husband takes his two children to the NFCM to let them see their mother. Because she cannot live with her children, she hopes to leave the city for her home village in the Arctic. But as she has an ongoing court case relating to a violence charge against her, she is not allowed to do so.

Case of a homeless Inuk man

This case concerns David (a pseudonym), an Inuk man in his early 40s who has spent several years in Montreal. He had committed a crime in his native village and had been sent to prison in the south for two years. After David was released, he came to Montreal before flying back to his home in the Arctic. But as he lost his airplane ticket, he was unable to go back to his home and had no option except to stay in Montreal. Currently, David does not have any job or fixed address. He receives welfare of about \$550 per month. If he wants to rent an apartment, he can do so. But instead, he spends almost all of his income on alcohol, cigarettes or drugs. Nevertheless, he is able to survive in Montreal.

A typical summer day for David starts when he awakes in a park in the morning, then goes to his accustomed grocery store to buy a one-litre bottle of beer, which he brings back with him to the park and shares with his homeless friends. Usually, his friends include not only Inuit but also French Canadians and persons from other Aboriginal groups. At lunch time, David goes to the NFCM, which provides free lunch to poor or homeless Aboriginal people from Monday to Friday. The centre also gives out donated clothing and food baskets. After lunch, David reads newspapers, watches video or television programs at the Centre or uses the internet, or talks with other Inuit friends in the lobby. At the centre, he hears of news from his native village from other visitors or talks to his family or relatives in his home village via a telephone. Occasionally, he eats caribou meat and Arctic char donated to the centre. After 16:00, David visits one of the restaurants run by various shelters, the Salvation Army or local missions. There, he can have a free supper. Also, if he desires, he can take a shower and/or spend a night in bed. If he uses these charitable organisations and missions, he can manage to live without cash. If he is not going to stay at a shelter, David goes back to a park where his homeless friends come together and sleeps there, where he shares beer and cigarettes with his companions. He generally communicates with them in English.

From these cases, three points can be made. First, although homeless Inuit are able to obtain cash income from panhandling and/or welfare, some of them spend the cash not to rent an apartment, but to buy food, alcohol, cigarettes or drugs. Second, they obtain clothing and food necessary to survive from missions, shelters or the NFCM.

Third, some homeless are having socio-economic problems that prevent them from escaping their situations.

Problems of homeless Inuit in Montreal

The report of the NFCM (2002: 14-16) indicates several socio-economic factors that contribute to Indigenous homelessness in Montreal, which are similar to those affecting other homeless Native people there and in other regions of Canada (Beavis et al. 1997; Wentz 2000). These factors are: 1) high unemployment; 2) low education levels; 3) single-parent families; 4) language and cultural barriers; 5) mobility (lack of preparation for the move); 6) racism and discrimination; and 7) substance, domestic and sexual abuses. Several factors such as 1, 2, 3 and 7 apply to the homeless cases of non-Aboriginal people as well. It should be noted, however, that homeless Indigenous people have special needs such as cultural appropriateness, self-determination, etc. (Beavis et al. 1997; Davis 2004; Duffield 2001).

Jacobs and Gill (2002) interviewed 202 Indigenous persons in Montreal in cooperation with the NFCM and found that one third of them had a current drug and alcohol problem. My 1997 research on Montreal Inuit shows that about 60% of them had or had had drinking problems (Kishigami 1999b: 105) and my 2004 research indicates that almost all of the homeless Inuit had a current drug and alcohol problem. One study of homeless people in the USA shows that about 30% of homeless are substance abusers (Davis 2004) and research indicates strong associations between substance dependency and homelessness among American Native people (Lobo and Vaughan 2003). The rate of substance abuse among homeless Inuit is thus much higher than that of the general homeless people.

Because the homeless Inuit had had alcohol and drug problems before becoming homeless, they were forced to give up their jobs as well as normal life. Also, because they have the same problems even after becoming homeless, they are not able to escape their homeless life. Because they spend almost all their income for drugs, alcohol or/and cigarettes, they hardly have adequate meals. This leads to poor physical health (e.g., Kishigami 1999b: 95-96). Concerning the physical health of urban Aboriginal people, malnutrition, HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C are prevailing among them. Inuit women are the highest risk group for the HIV/AIDS infection. Furthermore, psychological distress such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and attempted suicide are augmented by substance abuse (Jacobs and Gill 2002). This would lead one to conclude that substance abuse is one of the most serious problems for the homeless Inuit.

Beside physical and mental health problems related to alcohol and drug abuse, the homeless Inuit in Montreal have difficulties getting access to means of communication and country food. While the unemployed Inuit, especially the homeless, exchange information primarily on a face-to-face basis, or directly through friends by word of mouth, those with jobs communicate by telephone, fax, and/or email. Furthermore,

while the employed urban Inuit communicate with their families or friends in Arctic home villages to obtain among other things country food such as caribou or Arctic char, the unemployed seldom have this option. Differential accessibility to cash thus leads to unequal accessibility to information and food resources among urban Inuit. These circumstances are not prevalent among most Inuit in the North whose accessibility to information and food resources is based on kinship and/or proximity (*e.g.*, Kishigami 2000).

Lack of access to country food is one of the most deeply felt problems among the Montreal Inuit. While unemployed Inuit, especially the homeless, tend to stay in downtown Montreal, employed Inuit tend to live in the suburbs. There is no close interaction between the two groups. The suburban Inuit tend to socialise with other employed Inuit or with non-Inuit persons. As they also keep in touch with their families, kinsmen, and friends by phone and internet in the North, they often receive country food from the Arctic Inuit and reciprocate by sending them gifts. On the other hand, the homeless as well as other unemployed Inuit without any means of communication hardly get country food from the Arctic, which they miss greatly. Although the suburban Inuit with jobs take pity on the unemployed and homeless Inuit in the city, they seem to avoid keeping contact with them in Montreal. This division is a factor which restrains the establishment of a group including all the Inuit living in Montreal.

The Native Friendship Centre of Montreal (NFCM)

Native Friendship Centres were established in the 1950s, but got really going in the 1970s only, with financial assistance from the federal government as a service to big Canadian cities with large Aboriginal populations. Currently there are more than 70 such centres across Canada. Each centre has its own budget and programs and is run by executive directors elected by its members. The NFCM was established in 1974 in downtown Montreal and aims to improve the quality of life of the homeless and/or poor urban Aboriginal people. The centre provides several services such as 1) referral/walk-in clinic; 2) community meals program; 3) day centre; and 4) outreach/on-the-street work. Many homeless Inuit use the centre for lunch, laundry and/or meeting with other Inuit.

The two outreach projects concerned with homeless Aboriginal people are a daytime downtown patrol and a meal distribution. These projects are carried out by NFCM workers under the “NFCM Hepatitis C, HIV/AIDS Prevention and Outreach Pilot Project Interventions” which started in April 2004. The patrol team consists of two Inuit and one Mohawk who check a few main streets and parks over a downtown area from the Atwater metro in the west to the Université du Québec à Montréal in the east. These patrols take place from morning to afternoon every Monday, Tuesday and Thursday. If they find a sick Aboriginal person, they take him/her to a hospital. If they find that a person needs food or clothing, they provide it.

The meal distribution project is carried out in the downtown area with a NFCM's van every week, Monday through Friday, from 14:30 to 22:00. Sandwiches and coffee or juice are given by the workers on the van. They also provide blankets and new needles as preventive measures against HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C, if needed.

The Association of Montreal Inuit

Until the late 1990s, there were few places for Inuit to meet and exchange information in Montreal. As the Inuit of Montreal did not have any voluntary association and did not form a spatially separate community, they had to constitute individual social networks among themselves. This resulted in a lack of extensive food sharing and only occasional use of Inuktitut (Kishigami 2004b). In 1998, a number of Montreal Inuit who had read my 1997 research report (Kishigami 1998) on the Montreal Inuit became concerned about the situation and held several meetings to discuss the establishment of an urban Inuit organisation in Montreal. In November 1999, Mr. Victor Mesher (who was working for the Makivik Corporation at the time) and other people held an Inuit supper at an Anglican Church in Lachine, a suburb of Montreal². The Inuit volunteers who organised the supper asked for assistance from the Makivik Corporation, Air Inuit and First Air (owned by the Makivik Corporation as subsidiaries), and 14 Inuit communities in Nunavik in order to assist in the cost of the monthly supper. The Makivik Corporation provided \$500 a month for food and \$150 a month for a place (the church) to hold the meal.

When the day of the supper approached, Mr. Mesher made phone calls and sent faxes to the 14 mayors in the Nunavik region to request donations of caribou meat, Arctic char, etc. A few villages sent some meat and fish to Mr. Mesher each month. The two air companies carried the meat and fish from Arctic villages to Montreal airport without charge. The meat and fish were allowed to be kept in a freezer in the basement of the Makivik Corporation building until the monthly supper. The Anglican Church in Lachine provided the Inuit with a hall for the supper. Inuit volunteers prepared the dishes and put things in order after the supper at the church. After supper, children's games were carried out. Some 120 Inuit who heard about the supper joined in. This event was the start of a monthly supper for the Montreal Inuit on the last Saturday of each month. At Easter, Halloween, and Christmas days, the feasts were especially large and the games well-attended. The monthly supper provided the Montreal Inuit with country food which was otherwise very difficult to obtain, and an opportunity for them to develop friendships and exchange information. An urban community of Inuit was forming in Montreal.

However, because the monthly supper was held in the Lachine area far from downtown Montreal, several homeless Inuit were not able to participate due to lack or costs of transportation. Thus, the homeless Inuit were the last persons to benefit from

² Many Inuit in Montreal area had attended church services at this Anglican Church in Lachine, where many Inuit workers of the Makivik Corporation and Kativik School Board and their families live.

the activities of the Association of Montreal Inuit. However, Mr. Mesher and his fellow workers sometimes delivered meat and fish to homeless Inuit in downtown Montreal by car.

In March 2000, the Association of Montreal Inuit was officially founded by several persons. Mr. Mesher became its president and appointed 6 representatives among the Inuit volunteers. One of Mr. Mesher's strategies for running the association was to obtain cooperation from a wide variety of people and groups in Montreal through cultural exchanges. He obtained unsold clothing, furniture and books at flea markets organized by the nearby Rotary Club and old hockey equipment from local hockey teams free of charge. A few times a year, he donated them to the Nunavik villages which sent fish and meat to the Montreal Inuit for the monthly supper.

In November 2002, the Association of Montreal Inuit received permission to use the buildings owned by the Makivik Corporation and opened an activity centre for the urban Inuit. The association also opened a small shop to sell Inuit clothing, prints, sculptures and food next to the centre's building. It was expected that the profits from the shop would assist in the costs of running the association. Although the shop opened everyday from Monday to Saturday, it did not attract many customers nor made any profit because of its location in a suburban area and on a non-commercial street. Hence, the centre always suffered from a shortage of funds. Being unable to hire permanent staff, it often remained closed during the week. In summer, the backyard of the centre was used as a place for a monthly supper. In addition to the activities, the centre was used by Inuit women every Saturday for a sewing class to make winter fur clothing and gloves.

In the spring of 2005, the Makivik executive directors decided to sell the buildings that housed the centre and the shop. This decision resulted in the association giving up the space in April of that year. The association experienced a further setback when the minister of the Anglican Church in Lachine, who had kindly provided the urban Inuit with a hall for the monthly supper, was transferred to a church in downtown Montreal and the membership of the Lachine church committee was also changed at the end of March, 2005. The new church committee hesitated to let the Inuit use the hall for the monthly supper because, they said, several cooking items disappeared after the supper. Thus, the monthly supper which took place 65 times without a break after November 1999 was interrupted in March 2005.

In December 2005, a group of Inuit in Montreal held an election for a new board of directors of the Association of Montreal Inuit. Seven persons were elected as directors. Ms. Lisa Koperqualuk was appointed as the new president and other officers of the board were chosen by the directors. Currently, the association makes an effort to maintain the monthly suppers and wants to establish a resource centre.

Discussion and conclusion

In the Arctic, it is essential for the Inuit to organise subsistence activities as well as share food and information within each extended family and in a community composed of several extended families. Thus, many anthropologists have argued that the household, the extended family and the community are the basic social units of the Inuit for socio-ecological adaptation in the Arctic (*e.g.*, Burch 1975; Damas 1964; Fienup-Riordan 1983; Nuttall 1992; Wenzel 1981, 1991). Social situations in urban centres are very different from those in the Arctic as Inuit come from disparate regions and backgrounds (*e.g.*, wage workers, non-workers including homeless ones, students, etc.). In Montreal, the urban Inuit tend not to aggregate in a particular residential area but instead are scattered throughout the city. As a majority of them do not have their extended families or any Inuit community, they seldom practice food sharing, and their social relations are based on friendship and the shared experience of living as an Inuk rather than kinship (Kishigami 2006: 215). Under these social circumstances, the Inuit encounter severe difficulty in adapting to the urban socio-ecological environment of Montreal.

Molly Lee (2002) points out that in Alaska the social networks formed among the urban Yupiit, and between urban and rural Yupiit, contribute to and promote the well-being of those in Anchorage. Also, Donald Fixico (2000) illustrates that while urban Native Americans have suffered from low wage and unstable employment, alcohol abuse, high crime rate, assimilation pressures, etc., they have formed pan-Indian communities to deal with the socio-economic situations surrounding them. As these examples suggest, Inuit in Montreal should form a pan-Inuit community to share information and other resources. Although the contemporary NFCM and Association of Montreal Inuit have contributed to the well-being of urban Inuit, they do not improve the capacity of the homeless urban Inuit to adapt to urban environments. An Inuit community centre which could foster social networks should be established in Montreal; this is actually one of the goals of the Association of Montreal Inuit.

The conclusions of a national workshop on urban Inuit corroborate the need for Inuit community centres. The workshop was held in October 2005 in Ottawa and was a historical event in the history of Inuit of Canada³. For the first time, some 30 Inuit from seven Canadian cities (St. John's, Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Edmonton and Yellowknife) reported on and discussed their experiences and problems as urban Inuit. The participants identified three concerns: the need for a national body representing Inuit in the south, the need for Inuit community centres in urban areas, and the need for support from the federal government and other sources (Tungasuvvingat Inuit 2005).

³ A national conference on urban First Nation people was held in 1966. The major problems identified during that conference were housing; employment; education and vocational training; acceptance and adjustment in the new environment; lack of preparation for move; etc. (Indian-Eskimo Association of Canada 1966: 3). The problems are basically the same as those of the contemporary urban Inuit.

Socio-economic problems of the homeless Inuit in southern Canada are closely connected with those in northern Canada. As the shortage of jobs, housing, substance abuse, domestic violence, and sexual violence remain unresolved in the North, many Inuit, especially women, will continue moving out into the southern cities from their native villages. Since migrant Inuit might not adapt well to the cities and encounter poverty problems, including homelessness, a new socio-economic policy addressing both the southern and Arctic situations of the Inuit should be developed (Walker 2005). The creation of Inuit community centres is likely to be one of the necessary solutions to improve the quality of life of urban Inuit across Canada.

Finally, I want to make two points about the establishment plan of the Inuit community centre in Montreal. First of all, I would argue that both urban Inuit's own efforts and the federal government's support to establish and run the centre are essential for a sustainable accomplishment. Secondly, the homeless Inuit population should be seriously taken into account when the plan is discussed and implemented by both the urban Inuit and the government officials concerned.

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