

Inuit Women and the Politics of Naming in Nunavut

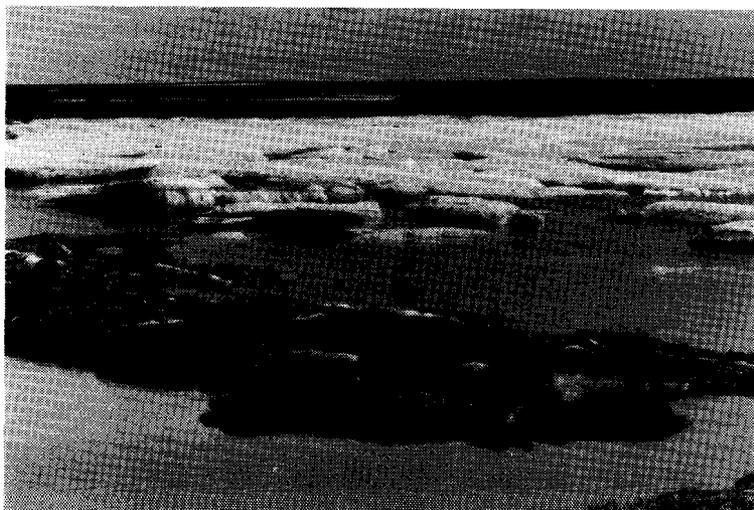
by Valerie Alia

L'auteure examine l'importante signification des noms dans la vie du peuple Inuit ainsi que leurs traditions qui existent toujours malgré des générations d'interférence et de changements. L'auteure condamne plus précisément le gouvernement et les religions organisées qui essaient de changer les noms des Inuit.

In the past ten years, countless Inuit—women and men aged 19 to 90—have told me that despite centuries of interference by visitors to the North, traditional ways of naming are very much alive.

This is a time of great change in the eastern Arctic, which, although it will not be official until 1999, is already known as *Nunavut* (Inuktitut for "Our Land"). Inuit women have played a major role in the process of creating this Inuit-majority public government. Among the key players are Rosemarie Kuptana, president of the national organization Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC); Nellie Cournoyea, Northwest Territories government leader (who is Inuvialuit);¹ Mary Simon, former head of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference and a member of the Nunavut Implementation Commission; and Martha Flaherty, president of Pauktuutit, the Inuit women's association. In February, Pauktuutit held its tenth annual general meeting in Iqaluit.

Between changing diapers and calming rambunctious children, they talked about rape and the failings of the northern justice system. They wept for the loss of Inuit culture and traditional skills. And they demanded that [the issues] be addressed... (Gregoire 7)



"Break-up," Igloolik, NWT (Nunavut), June 1994

Photo: Valerie Alia

When I spoke with Martha Flaherty in Iqaluit in June, she spoke of the deep meaning of names in her life, and the traditions that have survived generations of interference and change. Her extended family was celebrating the birth and naming of its newest member.

The name never dies... The name which I have is the same one that was carried by my ancestors for a very long time... (Robbe 46)

Before I was born, my mother had to decide who would be involved at my birth... The first person who has to be there is a mid-wife, man or woman.² In my case it was my grandmother... Also present at my birth was the person I was named after, my other grandmother... we called each other *sauniq*, *name-sake*, *bone-to-bone* relation. (Freeman 72)

In Inuit culture, names insure the continuity of the lives of individuals, families, and communities. Names are passed from one generation to the next without regard for gender. The same namesake can live through several new people, male or female. The ties are so strong that until puberty, kinship terms, dress, and behaviour often follow the namesake relationship, rather than biological sex or conventional gender identification.

No child is only a child. If I give my grandfather's *atiq* [soul-name] to my baby daughter, she *is* my grandfather. I will call her *ataatassiaq*, grandfather. She is entitled to call me grandson. (Brody 33)

"Discovered" by seventeenth century explorers, the Canadian Arctic has known traders, governments, and European religions since the early 1900s. Since then, visitors have continued to interfere with the ways Inuit define and experience genders and families, and name themselves and their land.

Although the missionaries were sure that they were doing the right thing, their actions sometimes brought confusion and sorrow. Those who stopped the drum dancing, forbade the Coppermine Inuit to wear lip ornaments, and christened children with foreign names were little by little helping to destroy independence and pride... (Crowe 148-9)

Like the missionary activities, the history of government intervention also reveals frequent discrepancies between intention and effect. Efforts by government to save Inuit lives and administer important services were grounded

in paternalism and framed in inappropriate terms.

The various missionaries and public officials gave religious or bureaucratic explanations for changing Inuit names. They sought to baptize and bring Inuit into the faith (whichever faith it happened to be). Or they found the absence of surnames "confusing" and the Inuktitut names difficult to pronounce and impossible to accurately record (Alia).

After Anglican and Catholic clergy had carried baptismal naming throughout the North, government got into the act. Numerous complaints (many of them from government representatives) short-circuited a fingerprinting

*"My mother was the head of the household —
my father was always out hunting;
she ran things at home. So why wouldn't they
list her as the 'head' of the family?"*



program which was begun in the 1930s. Next, Inuit were issued identification, or "disk" numbers. In 1944, census fieldworkers were told that each Inuk (Inuit person) was to receive a disk whose number would appear on all birth, marriage, and death certificates. The Arctic was divided into 12 districts, separated into West and East. Each number started with "E" for East or "W" for West; Inuit in the eastern Arctic still refer to their "E-numbers."

Many *Qallunaat* (non-Inuit) and Inuit expressed resentment of the disk number system. However, negative reactions were far from universal, as some *Qallunaat* suggest. For example, Derek G. Smith's fascinating discussion, although grounded in genuine social concern, is out of touch with reality. He follows the current trend of embracing ethnohistory and avoiding live interviews (in part, a response to challenges levelled at past anthropological practice).

Smith assumes that all Inuit are affronted by the disk system, framed as "structural violence" (citing Johan Galtung) or "cultural genocide." If he left the archives for Nunavut, he would hear another story. In ten years, many people (from different age groups, communities, and experiences) have told me they much preferred the disk system, which was minimally disruptive to identity traditions, to other bureaucratic interventions. The interviews reveal a range of Inuit perspectives, from acceptance (even attachment) to the disk system to resentment. At a 1986 meeting of Pauktuutit, several women expressed different attitudes about the disk numbers, including one remark that "I wish they'd give us back our disk numbers."

Smith's assumption raises a significant methodological problem: it is easier to apply theory to dead publications than to live people. Of course, the fitting of data to theory occurs in interview-based research as well. The challenge is to listen to, or read accounts of, a variety of people and

then try to discover whether any theory covers the range of their experiences and views. Thousands of people vividly remember the introduction of disk numbers and were entirely ignored in the research and theory-making process.

Census and certification: reshaping the Inuit family

Census-taking was filled with inconsistencies and absurdities. Lists followed official standards for "the Canadian family," with no attempt to understand Inuit family structures or traditions. Such understanding would have made it clear that much of the census structure was irrelevant for Inuit. Some of the "standard" categories have no parallels in Inuit culture. There are no titles such as "Dr.," "Mr.," or "Ms." There are no gender-specific pronouns—an "Inuk" is a male or female person.

Children who were full family members according to Inuit practice were designated "boarder," "step," or "adopted" by census-takers. *Qallunaat* policymakers have yet to acknowledge that today's "new" *Qallunaat* policies allowing adopted children access to their biological families have been followed by Inuit for centuries. In 1969, The Northwest Territories Council tried (unsuccessfully) to move the other way and make adoptions "confidential" (i.e., secret). Today, Inuit "custom adoption" remains common and is gaining legitimacy in the *Qallunaat* legal system.

The concept of "head of family" or "head of household," essential to government documentation, is alien. In an Inuit extended family, the "father/husband" is not necessarily the central or most powerful person. In 1994 in Iqaluit, a woman told me the idea seemed silly to her. "My mother was the head of the household—my father was always out hunting; she ran things at home. So why wouldn't they list *her* as the 'head' of the family?"

Bob Hodge says birth certificates express state control, and portray the official image of a "normal" family. They carve identities into the record, and convey privilege or subjugation that can last more than a lifetime (Hodge). Birth certificates issued to Inuit contained wrong names, nonexistent family relationships, irrelevant dates. They listed precise times and locations of births that had never been recorded, for people who travelled widely and identified time and place in non-southern ways.

I have heard many stories of the sometimes comical, sometimes harmful inaccuracies. Some people have failed to receive retirement and other benefits. In the 1980s in a Baffin Island community, twins were listed as having been born several years apart.

Elise Attagataluk told me she was stunned when, as a young adult, she suddenly received a birth certificate with her *husband's* surname on it. "I sent it back and asked for correction and they just sent it back to me unchanged." Frustrated by the still unresolved situation, she told me the story one afternoon when we were in Ottawa for a meeting. Not long after, Elise died with that name.³

Inuit families feature close ties, grounded in the intricate, intimate naming system. The distinction between a "real" and a "common-law" spouse is meaningful only in non-Inuit terms, for southern law. Despite encouragement or pressure from missionaries, many families follow neither religious nor legal marriage rites. "There are hardly any marriages here," one woman told me. People mostly live together in what southerners would call "common law marriages." Women tell me the missionaries in the early days insisted on marriage.

Project Surname

Surnaming has always been tied to class and power. A surname can be a sign of power or powerlessness. It can mark inheritance of family, status or property, or subjugation of one class or gender by another, signifying person-as-property.

In western tradition, a woman's renaming at marriage represents the transfer of "property" (the woman) from father to husband. Inuit tradition does not include this kind of marriage tie or reidentification of the woman through her husband's identity.

Following criticisms of the disk number system (many of them by *Qallunaat*), Inuit in the Northwest Territories were given surnames out of a misguided idea this would give them more power by making them like other Canadians. Commissioner Stuart Hodgson made it an official project of the 1970 Territorial Centennial and hired Abraham Okpik to carry out the military-sounding "Project Surname." In 13 months, Okpik travelled over 45,000 miles and interviewed more than 12,000 people.

In a culture without gender-specific naming, titles, or other status designations, surnaming was absurd. Despite assurances that all was "voluntary," many people had no say in their renaming. In fact, many of them were not even present for the program in which they presumably participated. "Kids came home and were told 'You're somebody else'," Elise recalled.

Women were renamed in their absence, by men. One Elder remembered her confusion when her husband came home and announced their new name. It made no sense. Women didn't take their husbands' names, yet suddenly, both she and her husband had his father's last name. The new name was not just a confusion or an inconvenience, it undercut the relationship between name, name avoidance, and respect in the family. In many communities, a woman may not speak the name of her husband's father. In order to follow traditional practice, a woman surnamed for her husband's family would now have to avoid speaking her own last name.

Canada was not the first country to develop a surnaming program for indigenous people. The Soviet government gave surnames to the Yuit in the 1930s. Today, amidst an emerging movement of Siberian peoples, Yuit are finding ways to counter the assimilationist results of such programs. In the 1960s, Polar Inuit were given surnames by the Danish Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs. After 15 years of home rule, Greenland is taking over responsibility for the names of its people.

Despite culture and language loss and change, agony, and anomie (especially in younger generations), Inuit culture remains remarkably strong. Cultural continuity is particularly evident with regard to naming. "Underground" practices (such as using the Inuktitut name in private and putting a *Qallunaat* name on the birth certificate) are moving back aboveground.

I think that Nunavut, the Inuit homeland and public government scheduled to become official in 1999, will usher in an era of cultural renewal. With this will come increasing acknowledgment that contact among cultures goes two ways. Despite the outward appearance of acculturation, traditions are in constant flux, and are never pure except in the minds of scholars. We must respect the rights



"Waiting for Sealift," Pangnirtung, NWT, (Nunavut), 1985 Photo: Valerie Allia

of different Canadians to experience and express their cultures, families, and identities in different ways.

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¹Inuit from the western Arctic call themselves Inuvialuit. Their organization, the Committee on Original People's Entitlement (COPE) preceded the founding of ITC.

²Thanks to recent developments, midwives are again able to practice. Martha Greig, formerly head of Pauktuutit, is a midwife who was instrumental in developing programs to bring traditional and western medical practice together. It was she who first told me Inuit had male midwives; her grandfather was one.

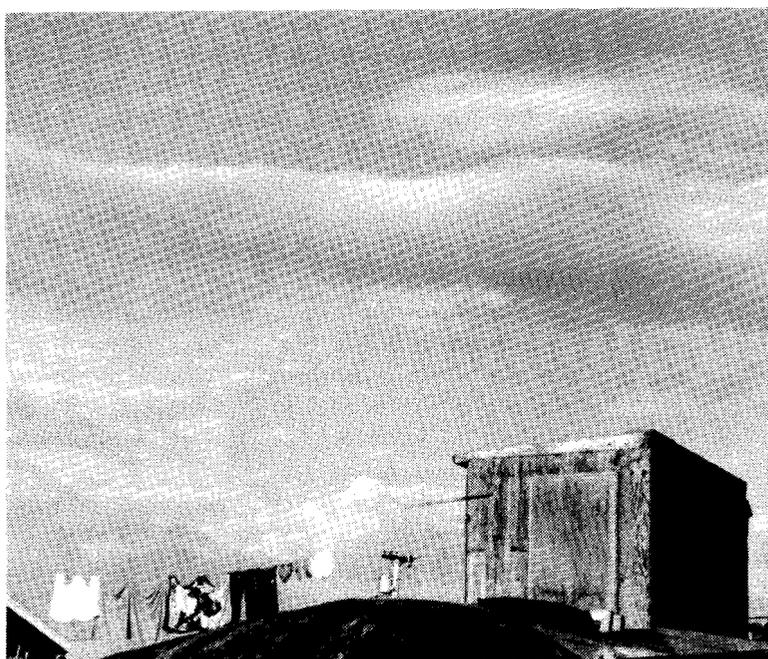
³Elise died in 1986, shortly after we had made plans to work together studying naming policies and traditions. Her life continues through names, and through the many policies and projects she initiated or inspired, in her community of Igloodik and through her national work in Pauktuutit.

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Skylines
 Earth's pulse
 Timeless heartbeat of the land
 I feel it
 Belly to the tundra
 Nose in wet moss
 Smelling the clean earth smell
 Hearing the flit of the pipit
 Sensing the water's trickle
 My spirit – linked to ancient ancestors
 Of wanderers
 My body – linked to ancient cycles
 Of blood red sunsets
 My limbs – linked to ancient forests
 Of long clean extensions
 The north and I – linked by memory
 Of solitude.



"Laundry," Iqaluit, NWT (Nunavut) , June 1994

Photo: Valerie Alia

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