

Place Names, Territoriality and Sovereignty: Inuit Perception of Space in Nunavik (Canadian Eastern Arctic)

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Place Names, Territoriality and Sovereignty

Place names are integral elements of humankind's relationship with the physical and cultural environment. The naming of places represents geographical and environmental knowledge of the spaces used and occupied by humankind. Geographical names are proof to the integration and appropriation of space into the environmental perception of distinct cultures. This perception is expressed through oral and written traditions. Both attest to the validity of place names and thus represent aspects of territoriality and sovereignty (cf. Lester 1980). In this context it is important to make the distinction between indigenous and exogenous place name systems in this context.

Indigenous [or aboriginal] place name systems, such as Inuit toponymy in the Canadian arctic, have been developed through intense human-environmental relations by which the first people, occupying an area, have differentiated the environment using proper names identifying specific qualities of places. In oral traditions, the place name systems serve as mental maps which consist of indispensable and crucial signposts and markers organizing and qualifying the resources in the physical and cultural landscape. Toponymies, as is also the case with Inuit place names, contain a large scope of information: geographic orientation and distance; environmental conditions; location, accessibility and availability of resources; historical information, cultural knowledge and heritage.

Exogenous place name systems, i.e. the introduced Western European-based names in North American arctic regions, relate mainly to the habit and convention of dedicating a place by naming it in honor of specific people or events. Such place names are usually not a reflection of the human-environmental link but rather express political and socio-economic processes and relations which, in many cases, coopt already named spaces based on "discovery and exploration" supporting the expansion of territoriality and sovereignty (cf. Dugas 1987).

Place names are symbols and elements of territoriality, sovereignty and cultural identity. They are indicators of the type and intensity of land use and occupancy in specific physical environments and cultural areas expressing the spatial links between the "occupants" and the network of named spaces covering a territory contiguously. In fact, place names create and maintain, through their conti-

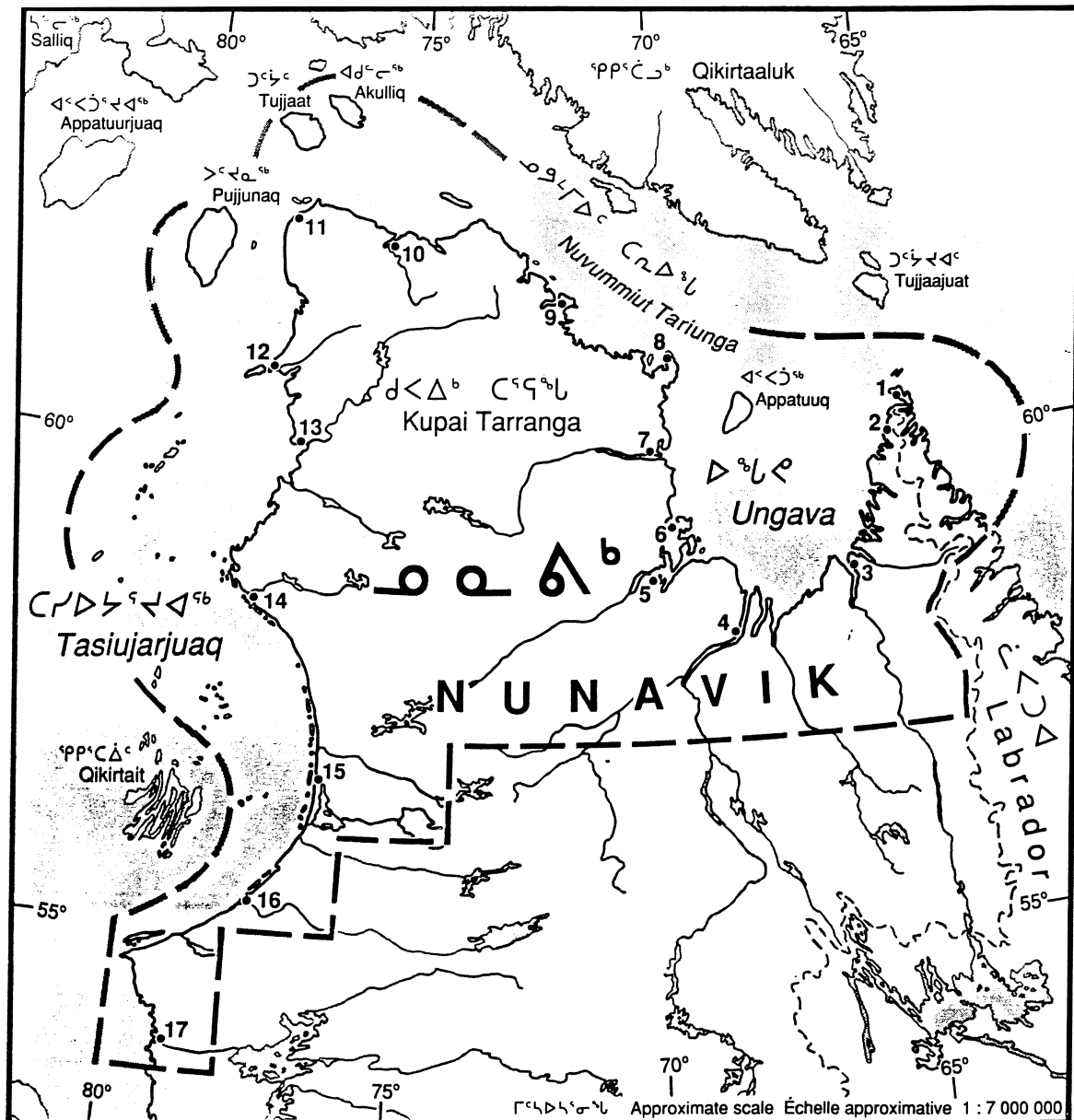
nuous use and application, a system of spatial organization which is the essence of territoriality and sovereignty. Place name systems, embedded in culture and language, are not static. They evolve in time and space and thus are shaped and altered, in general terms, by the dynamic process of culture change and contact.

In an aboriginal place name system, such as the Inuit toponymy in Nunavik discussed below, places and names do not exist in isolation. Rather they are connected in space and mind by their linguistic and cultural expressions and contents. The existence of place names in an area – land, sea or ice – proves use, occupancy and ownership and thus maintains claims to such areas by the aboriginal inhabitants. This claim might not easily be apparent but becomes more lucid with the analysis of the application of place names which provide historical, linguistic and cultural proof (for further discussion of these aspects among others refer to Brice-Bennett (ed.) 1978; Castonguay 1979; Freeman (ed.) 1976; Lester 1979, 1980; Müller-Wille 1983, 1984).

The Inuit Place Name System in Nunavik

In the fall of 1983 Avataq Cultural Institute [ACI] in Inukjuak (Nunavik) and Indigenous Names Surveys [INS] (Department of Geography, McGill University, Montreal) implemented the *Inuit Place Name Project* to collect systematically all Inuit geographical names throughout the Inuit homeland in the arctic region of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula, later to become **Nunavik** (see Map). This project was the implementation of the resolution on the preservation of Inuit geographical names passed by the Northern Quebec Inuit Elders Conference in 1981 (Avataq 1983). The Elders, who met at the first time in 1981, were concerned with the survival of their language and culture and stated clearly that priorities had to be established in order to secure "traditional [oral] knowledge" throughout the Inuit communities. One of the priorities was to document Inuit geographical knowledge including place names. A detailed description of the surveys and the methodology which was specifically developed for these purposes are explained and discussed in the **Gazetteer of Inuit Place Names in Nunavik** (Müller-Wille 1987: 6-18).

The toponymic field surveys were conducted in Inuit communities of Nunavik in early 1984 covering the interior of Nunavik and its offshore areas of



Inuit Villages and Regions in Nunavik
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 Les villages et régions inuits du Nunavik

- 1 Killiniq / ᑭᐢᐱᐢᑦ
- 2 Tarpangajuaq / ᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ
- 3 Kangirsualujuaq / ᑭᐱᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ
- 4 Kuujuaq / ᑭᑦᑦᑦ
- 5 Tasiujaq / ᑦᑦᑦᑦ
- 6 Aupaluk / ᐱᑦᑦᑦ
- 7 Kangirsuk / ᑭᐱᑦᑦ

- 8 Quartaq / ᑦᑦᑦᑦ
- 9 Kangirsujuaq / ᑭᐱᑦᑦᑦᑦ
- 10 Salluit / ᑦᑦᑦᑦ
- 11 Ivujivik / ᐱᑦᑦᑦᑦ
- 12 Akulivik / ᐱᑦᑦᑦᑦ
- 13 Purvimituq [Povungmituk] / ᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ

- 14 Inujjuaq [Inukjuak] / ᐱᑦᑦᑦᑦ
[ᐱᑦᑦᑦᑦ]
- 15 Umiujaq / ᐱᑦᑦᑦᑦ
- 16 Kuujuaaraapik / ᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ
- 17 Mailasikkut (Chisasibi) / ᐱᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ
(ᑦᑦᑦᑦ)

Tasiujarjuaq [Hudson Bay], Nuvummiut Tariunga [Hudson Strait] and Ungava [Ungava Bay]. The surveys incorporated also all previous collections of Inuit place names carried out in Nunavik by Bernard Saladin d'Anglure (1968) and by ACI and Ludger Müller-Wille between 1980-82. In 1987, the

Gazetteer of Inuit Place Names in Nunavik (Quebec, Canada) (Müller-Wille 1987) including close to 8,000 original Inuit place names was published and presented to the Inuit Elders of Nunavik at their conference in Kuujuaq. This Gazetteer is the first one of its kind in Canada to contain **all** geo-

graphical names of a contiguous Inuit cultural region. These place names identify locations and regions on land, sea and ice on the mainland and offshore in Nunavik.

The Inuit Elders approved the **Gazetteer** unanimously and encouraged ACI and INS to continue the projects through publication programs (Müller-Wille 1991) enhancing and developing the knowledge of Inuit place names among the Inuit, government departments and other sectors of Canadian society. In 1988, ACI took an additional step and requested of the **Commission de toponymie du Québec** [CTQ] the acceptance of **NUNAVIK** as a regional name for the Inuit homeland in northern Québec (see Map). This name had been selected by referendum in Inuit communities from a list of eight proposals in late 1987. The request was granted in April 1988. By today, **NUNAVIK** has received broad and full recognition as a regional name and has given the Inuit a strong regional identity within the context of modern Canada. Further, INS, on behalf of ACI, submitted all Inuit place names located within Québec to the CTQ for official governmental approval according to provincial law. By 1992, more than 2,200 Inuit place names on the mainland of Nunavik have been "legally" accepted by Canadian authorities. Thus, within a few years, the aboriginal Inuit place name system has been transferred into a written tradition at equal level with the encroaching exogenous place names of mainly French and English origin (cf. Müller-Wille 1983).

In late 1989, the NUNA-TOP Projects entered a new phase which began with the initiation of the **Inuit Place Name Map Series of Nunavik** (1:50,000) (Müller-Wille, ed. 1991). This map series is the first of its kind clearly outlining the named spaces in their dimensions and presenting their names solely in Inuttitut with basic information given also in English and French.

The documentation of Inuit place names in Nunavik including detailed background information provides the Inuit with a major linguistic and cultural reference tool. This body of data has become an invaluable resource for preservation and development of their cultural heritage and knowledge related to history, language, land use and occupancy. Further, this encyclopedic source has enhanced the Inuit inhabitants' relations to their land and territory as well as their aspirations for self-government envisioned for Nunavik in the near future.

Content and Extent of Inuit Toponymy

Nunavik is the contiguous land and sea area occupied and used by the Inuit who, today, live in permanent and temporary settlements along the coastline of mainland Nunavik. The limits of Nunavik represent the outer geographical reach of those areas and places which the Inuit have named and used. Thus, as a region, Nunavik represents the Inuit homeland based on continual land use and occupancy and on the congruous and contiguous naming of places and spaces throughout the area.

The distribution and density of the places and spaces named vary depending on the type of land use and occupancy as well as the physical topogra-

phy. Both aspects are difficult to assess since a number of other factors, such as social organization, economic and political systems, come in to play influencing both distribution and density. In the Inuit toponymy of Nunavik with close to 8000 place names, there exists a preponderance of a high density of names along the coastline reaching on to the sea and to the offshore islands and archipelagos. This evidence clearly indicates that the Inuit orient their activities toward the sea. On land, covering the northern parts of the interior of the Québec-Labrador peninsula, the Inuit toponymy is guided by corridors influenced by the hydrographic drainage and lake systems and the general physiography of mountain ridges and other geomorphological features. The southern fringes of the Inuit naming territory, inland and on the coast, overlap with the northern extension of the Algonquian (Cree and Naskapi) place name systems.

The Inuit toponymy of Nunavik represents a detailed identification and analytical description of the geographic environment. These place names distinguish close to 180 different categories of physio- and anthro-geographic entities (or features) in the arctic environment. They include a large number of specific categories which are characteristic to the arctic environment. The terminology used for these entities is specific to the Inuit language. These terms which, in most cases, are integrated into the proper place name clearly represent Inuit geographical concepts and knowledge (i.e. **qamaniq** = longish, open, straight lake or river section/channel; **qan-garsinaaq** = stranded sea ice). It is often difficult to render these concepts in other languages.

In addition to the variety of geographical entities, the body of place names ("proper names"), as in other languages, embodies very specific and highly specialized components of the Inuit language with respect to vocabulary, syntax and grammar. General literature in onomastics, the study of names, indicates that place names undergo linguistic changes. It has also been stated that toponymies, in particular aboriginal ones, are conservative in nature and retain elements of previous periods through language shifts. Thus toponymies contain important data for linguistic analysis which can be evidence for proof of occupancy in space and time. A cursory assessment of the 8000 place names in Nunavik yielded a specific vocabulary of close to 6000 different words and combinations thus indicating a high degree of differentiation and a low degree of repetition of terms and words.

Defining Territory: The Case of Off-Shore Areas

Today, the modern political boundaries, delineating Canada internally and externally, represent a historical process in which aboriginal peoples, the First Nations, had to define their territoriality and sovereignty versus the encroaching interests of Euro-canadian settlers and colonizers who formed their own sovereign claims. What is Nunavik today is divided into federal (Canada), provincial (Québec and Newfoundland-Labrador), territorial (Northwest Territories [NWT]), municipal (i.e., Kativik Region)

and last not least aboriginal jurisdictions. Latter ones relate to the modern native land claim process which so far has resulted in the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement and the recently, late 1991, negotiated agreement on Nunavut.

The boundaries of these jurisdictions meet mainly in the offshore at the tidal low water line between Québec and the Northwest Territories, a rather impractical line which, according to the Inuit spatial perception, does not exist. The Inuit consider this area – coast and off-shore – as one within the bounds of Nunavik as represented by their contiguous Inuit place name system.

Maritime and Hydrographic Names beyond the High Water Line: Inuit toponymy of marine features in the offshore areas identifies a variety of places and phenomena which, among other aspects, relate to resources, navigation and orientation, environmental conditions associated with danger and safety as well as the location of settlements. The following list of entities is only a selection:

- river mouths, deltas and estuaries; bays, coves and other types of inlets and parts thereof along the coast;
- harbors, shelters, anchorages;
- open water: currents, foreshore flat, leads, pools, whirlpools, channels, waterfront, crossings between mainland and islands;
- ice conditions: polynya, ice edge stranded ice shoals (for freshwater), occurrence of ice cracks;
- reefs, sand bars, shallows, shoals;
- tidal zone: bars, barriers, currents, dam, flats, lagoons, line (low and high tide), pools;
- channels, leads, narrows, passages, sound, straits.

Some examples of place names give an indication of the types of feature and the manner in which these are named (codes refer to the lists and glossary in Müller-Wille and Weber 1983, Müller-Wille 1987):

- ▲ **Qikirtait** (34F/14-023), "the islands", very small reefs in open water.
- ▲ **Siukkaaluup Ikirasanga** (34F/02-007), "the strait/crossing to the big shelving coast", the shortest and safest crossing from the mainland to a prominent point "Siukkaaluk" (34F/02-006) on the island "Innalialuk" (34F/02-005), "the one with big cliffs".
- ▲ **Ikkaaruit** (34L/14-001), "the reefs", an area with reefs far off the mainland coast which is not marked on maps.
- ▲ **Qujjautaq** (34L/14-002), "looks like water sprinkling", an island far offshore which can hardly be detected because of its minute size.
- ▲ **Aukkaturliq** (35K/05-022), "where the ice melts early", a small offshore area which, at times, even maintains a polynya, an ice free pool.

Offshore Island Toponymy: Almost all islands, skerries or reefs – small or big – off the coast of Nunavik are named. A considerable number of names refer to features on the islands. These places are, for example, campsites, creeks, valleys, hills, lakes, or cairns. They provide information on orientation, resources, and danger zones. Examples of the major islands and island groups in **Tasiujarjuaq** [Hudson Bay], **Nuvummiut Tariunga** [Hudson Strait] and **Ungava** [Ungava Bay] are:

- ▲ **Innalikkuit** (34E/08-008), "the cliffs", [King George Islands],
- ▲ **Arviliit** (44P/09-006), "the ones with blue whales", [Ottawa Islands],
- ▲ **Pujjunaq** (35L/04-002), "the large one in size", [Mansel Island],
- ▲ **Tujjaat** (35N/04-007), "the steps; the place to get ashore", [Nottingham Island],
- ▲ **Akulliq** (35N/10-001), "the one in between", [Salisbury Island].

The Inuit toponymy in the off-shore areas of Nunavik testifies that the region is one contiguous territory consisting of land (mainland, coastline and islands), water and ice. This territory is integrated into a territorial unit through its use and occupancy as expressed by place names which form an inter-related spatial network.

Conclusion

The Inuit place name project described above and initiated by the Inuit Elders began a process that first of all established the basic reference for a particular element of inherent traditional Inuit knowledge. This knowledge was transferred into written form and thus became available to the large Inuit community throughout the region in the form of a gazetteer and on maps widely available. The resource and its application led to the formulation of a new name for a specific region – the Inuit homeland of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula and its off-shore area. The name, **Nunavik**, has served as a symbol for not only Inuit cultural heritage and its development, but it has also created a strong image for enhanced territoriality, sovereignty and identity, and thus has had a unifying influence on the Inuit communities throughout Nunavik which has now become part of the checkered political landscape in Canada.

Note

This article is an abridged and revised version of "Nunavik: Land and People, Places and Names" by the author published in Montreal by McCord Museum, 1992.

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