

Naming in Inuit Communities: The Attack on Tradition with the Goal of Assimilation

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First came a desire to tame the North. The Canadian government had relatively little to do with its northern territories for a prolonged period of time and minimal contact with the Inuit people who had lived there for countless generations. Inuit communities spanned all the Canadian territories, Northern Quebec and some parts of Newfoundland and Labrador. The Inuit had built lives in the snow and ice embracing the cold temperatures. Their cultures and traditions that were unique to communities; and unique to the Inuit people as a whole. Like the majority of cultures, the tradition of naming held great importance in identifying who a person was within their community. Although, like many cultures differed from the European style of naming. The Inuit names proved difficult for Canadian government official to record or pronounce. As such, two large projects, one a reaction to the first, were implemented by the government to try and solve this, so called, problem. The first one being a disc identification system that started in the early 1940s. Which gave each Inuk a small disc that would be their form of identification. After issues arose eventually there was a new program put in place called “Project Surname”, one of Project Surname’s goals was the elimination of the disc identification system. These programs were implemented without thought or consideration to the Inuit culture and traditions. Along with the Inuit not being considered Aboriginal people, at the time, the Canadian federal and provincial/territorial governments did not treat them as full citizens. Inuit cultures and traditions were attacked, leaving many lost in the system. While Canada tried to assimilate the North, the Inuit struggled to maintain their traditional identity and did what they could to protect traditions, lifestyles, and cultures.

Before one can understand the effects of these projects, there must be an understanding of the naming process in Inuit communities. While there are differences among Inuit communities, there are also many similarities. The tradition of naming is key. The Inuit’s way of naming a

person is complex compared that of the European style. The European style provides a person with a surname, a first name and usually a middle name. This style is meant to identify a person's family relations and a way to address them. The Inuit people's naming traditions are more than that.

Inuit have developed one of the deepest and most intricate naming systems in the world. Names are the heart and soul of Inuit culture. The multilayered naming system is based on *sauniq*- a powerful form of namesake commemoration that some people describe as a kind of reincarnation. The names are passed from one generation to the next regardless of gender, with the single expectation of Polar Inuit, who developed separate male and female names.¹

When a child is named, they become the *sauniq* of that name. Meaning they are now the base of the name for all those who have shared it, as *sauniq* means "bone". This name usually comes from someone who has passed away or near death (though this does differ from community to community as in some the person is still alive), and upon receiving a name the person who has passed is, in some senses, reborn. As the child is themselves but also the other person, in a new cycle of life. The name is basically the holder of a soul, and continuity of that soul is important. The child who receives that name will have a special relationship with those who were related to the deceased, with others who may share the name, and with the name giver. The intricate naming system, with differing sections community to community, is important as the name relates and is connected to the soul.

¹ Valerie Alia, *Names and Nunavut: Culture and Identity in the Inuit Homeland* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 17.

When the government officials arrived in the North they were confronted with multiple issues. One being that government official and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police “found it difficult to make positive identifications and keep accurate records of individual Inuit.”² This was due to multiple reasons. Including that the official could not read nor write traditional Inuit names, there were no surnames in traditional Inuit names and some were biblical names but were often duplicated in the same area. The government officials and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police believed that an identification system was needed in the North. Several ideas were discussed in government meetings with the end result being a disc identification system. In 1941, when a census was due the government handed out to each Inuk a small disc with four number on it, meant to represent that person. Four years later in 1945, those discs were recalled and replaced with identical ones. The change being the in the number, they “bore a district and regional designation as well as an individual four-digit identifier (e.g., E9-4220).”³ This change in discs, changed nothing else about the system itself. These discs were no larger than quarter in size. They were made of copper and stamped into the metal was the words “ESKIMO IDENTIFICATION CANADA”, round the edges of the circle. A crown in the middle and below the crown (or on the back)⁴ was the E number.⁵ These discs became how an Inuk was identified by the federal government. Few people worried if the name recorded with the disc was spelled

² Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. *Identification and Registration of Indian and Inuit People* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1993), 23.

³ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. *Identification and Registration of Indian and Inuit People* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1993), 23.

⁴ John McDonald. Disc Number Identity Tag. Photograph reproduced in Valerie Alia, *Names and Nunavut: Culture and Identity in the Inuit Homeland* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 50.

⁵ Barry Pottle. *Barry Pottle's Awareness Series examines Eskimo Identification Tags, developed by the Government of Canada to distinguish Inuit for census purposes*. 2016. Photograph. Available from James Adams. “Barry Pottle’s photography explores Inuit objectification by ID tags.” *Globe and Mail*, May 17, 2016. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/barry-pottles-photography-explores-inuit-objectification-by-id-tags/article30060124/>.

correctly when the Royal Mounted Police attempted to update the disc list for the settlements, which occurred annually.

Adults and children had discs. Some wore them on hats, bracelets, necklaces and others attached them to their houses. The majority of people memorized their numbers, especially children who were forced to use them as their names in schools. Since the only languages allowed to be spoken in schools were English or French all others being strictly forbidden, children went by there numbers or by an Anglicized name. “The "E" numbers, as they were known in the Eastern Arctic, were the only acceptable means of identifying yourself in school, says Teemotee, 30, who was then known as Eskimo E71796.”⁶ These numbers became how the government and by relation teachers, police, hospitals and more viewed the Inuit. Though there were people who did not overly care about the discs since their real names were still used in the communities. Although, a general consensus could be found in the belief that these discs were degrading.

The discs were used for all Inuit up until 1969. In 1969, Project Surname was approved in the Territorial Council. It was approved even though “it was never legislated into existence.”⁷ Project Surname was spearheaded by Abe Okpik. The goal was to gather a name from every Inuk. These names would be of their choosing, including a surname. “For all its good intentions, the policy retained a double standard, replacing apartheid with assimilation.”⁸ For many people, who were not Inuit, incorrectly believed that “Inuit were simple-minded, and that tampering with

⁶ Laurie Sarkadi.” His name E71796, his language forbidden; only 25 years ago, Inuit were known by gov't serial numbers.” *Edmonton Journal*. August 28, 1990.
<http://ezproxy.msvu.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/251769607?accountid=12617>.

⁷ Valerie Alia, *Names and Nunavut: Culture and Identity in the Inuit Homeland* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

⁸ Valeria Alia, *Names and Nunavut*, 71.

identity had little consequence.”⁹ Abe Okpik was received differently in each community, some welcoming him while others did not. “Project Surname” only took place in the territories, Quebec continued with the disc identification for multiple years after. The reasoning for this was that “Project Surname” (often having been incorrectly referred to as Operation Surname), had only be brought up and approved by the Territorial Council.

This is when the choice to assimilate or remain a number was put forth. This is the core problem with “Project Surname”. It gave the Inuit an alternative to being identified by a number system but the price was assimilation. “Project Surname” occurred in a blitz fashion. Over the span of a couple years Okpik travelled around the territories collecting names. Usually the oldest male of a family would be asked first. A name, surname and birth date, if known, (if not they were “assigned the arbitrary birth date of [January] 1”¹⁰) would be the key information gathered. A social insurance number would be provided in return and the disc taken. The surname collected would then apply to the entire family in the traditional European way. The women being forced to take the surname of their husband; the children the one of their father. With this blitz method many people were missed and in later years could trade in their discs for a social insurance number and a legal name. Many issues with names quickly raised with misspellings and incorrect names. This came from many places, such as the schools and Royal Canadian Mounted Police as they did not take care to spell names correctly when the disc identification system was put into place.

⁹ Valerie Alia, *Names and Nunavut*, 68.

¹⁰ Richard Foot. "Nunavut Hopes to Set Birth Records Straight: Hundreds Given Arbitrary New Year's Birthdays." *National Post*, Oct 27, 2000.
<http://ezproxy.msvu.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/329629307?accountid=12617>.

The Inuit were forced, through processes they did not fully understand, into assimilating. First, they were tags, with the letter “E” and a number to represent them as a person and their name in legal terms. Then the introduction of “Project Surname”, a seemingly better system that gave the Inuit actual names in the legal system and a social insurance number. With names being as important as they are in traditional Inuit naming culture, being referred to as a number whenever dealing with any government officials or offices could be viewed a kick to the gut. Inuit were not considered Aboriginal until 1949, in a Supreme Court ruling; though it was not until 1982 that in the Constitution section 35, under Rights of the Aboriginal People of Canada, they were written into legislation as “Aboriginal”. Therefore, at the time they had no rights to land claims, no rights that other Aboriginal people were provided with but were also not considered “full” citizens of Canada. The government put them between a rock and hard place. Assimilate or just be a number.

The effects of “Project Surname” have many. There are been numerous amounts of people having to legally change their names again, due to misspelling or in some cases misnaming. Those who did not know their exact birth date being given January 1st, has caused issues when it comes to retirement, pension, and more. There have also been studies done noting an increase in suicide in Inuit communities; “Inuit accounted for 87% of all suicides within the area comprising the former N.W.T.”¹¹ (Northwest Territories). One reason these researchers believe the suicide rate is so high among the Inuit people is “the systematic abuse of Inuit—physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually—by individuals, often working for the State, and themselves socialized within a totalizing Qallunaat culture.”¹² With this information it can be

¹¹ Frank Tester and Paule McNicoll. "Isumagijaksaq: Mindful of the State: Social Constructions of Inuit Suicide." *Social Science & Medicine* 58, no. 12 (2004): 2626.

¹² Frank Tester and Paule McNicoll. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2630.

seen that in history the Inuit have been cheated of the tradition of naming and since naming is linked to their spiritual beliefs of the soul, their spirituality was under attack too. The Canadian government, provincial and territorial governments, attacked the base of the Inuit culture. The overarching goal of these processes was the assimilation of a people whose culture did not mirror that of the dominant society, Canada made took assimilation, dressed it up as “Project Surname” and made it the better-looking option of the Inuit people.

The Inuit traditional ways of naming relate to the soul. It is intricate and a crucial part of Inuit life. The Canadian government from federal to territorial ignored that fact and decided instead to assimilate the people of the North. The Inuit were not considered Aboriginal but instead of simply providing them with a social insurance number and accepting new names, as they would to other Canadian citizens; the government decided to force them into assimilating. And while in terms of legal names they succeeded, some communities still hold on to their naming traditions and simply give a name for the government, and have another for themselves. Though, the effects reverberate through time and can still be felt. There are people who never did trade the disc identification in for a name. Two large projects. The first being disc identification where small metal discs were given to all Inuit. The next as a response to the failure of the first. “Project Surname”, with the goal of letting the Inuit choose their names while forcing them to assimilate at the same time.

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