

SNOW AND ICE IN INUIT PLACE NAMES  
IN THE EASTERN CANADIAN ARCTIC

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ABSTRACT

Since 1973 the author has been involved in systematic place name surveys in the Inuit areas of the Central Arctic, northern Quebec-Labrador and Baffin Island in Canada. More than 10,000 geographical names have been collected with pertinent background data on geography, history, culture and language. Inuit place names carry a wealth of data on environmental conditions. Snow and ice are some aspects which appear in names. The paper discusses the range and type of information yielded by a preliminary analysis of place names which contain references to snow and ice conditions so pertinent to the indigenous peoples using the arctic environment.

More than 100 years ago, during the First International Polar Year of 1882/83, a team of 11 Germans - seven scientists and engineers and four workers - sailed in the schooner Germania to Cumberland Sound (Tinujjuavik = place of large tidal areas) of Baffin Island (Qikirtaaluk = huge island) where they were supposed to erect a scientific station as far north in the sound as possible. After some consultations with Scottish and American whalers - not local Inuit - operating in the sound they headed for Qingua Fiord (= head of the bay, referring both to water and land) and settled on the fluvial terrace of a valley called Sirmialuk (= big perennial ice field, cf. Table 1, No. 30). This was a well-chosen site for a safe supply of fresh water. Here the team stayed for 12 months helped by a hired Inuit family to cope with the arctic environment. They conducted scientific experiments and recordings, the beginnings of stationary polar research on a long term basis. In this forum I do not have to comment on the importance of that period for the development of polar research in general. Rather I would like to stress that this German party, as was often the case with other scientific and exploratory expeditions in northern polar regions, did not leave any place names of their own behind which later would have entered published material and finally stayed on maps we still use today without giving an inkling of already existing indigenous geographical names systems. (Still, the station's diary indicates that the team members had very well a range of German place names in their station's colloquial). Rather care was taken to obtain and use indigenous Inuit place names throughout the publication. This situation was also partly due to the influence of Franz Boas who followed the German team a year later in 1883/84 to conduct research into the Inuit's relationship with their environment.

As one of the results of his year-long research we have today one of the most detailed and colorful lists of Inuit place names for one culture area. Let me also stress that after several years of intensive research into Inuit place names it is my opinion that we have to be grateful to the natural scientists in arctic regions for the collection and preservation of geographical names. It was seldom the anthropologist or linguist who became interested in names as a source of important information. Rather the natural scientist detected keenly that indigenous peoples are perceptive observers of natural formations, conditions and events, a necessary prerequisite and base for living on and with the land.

Since 1982 I have directed Inuit place name surveys in the Kativik Region of northern Quebec as well as on Baffin Island. The survey in Quebec was aimed at a complete coverage of a particular cultural area. That meant to record and document all geographical names known in the oral tradition of the Inuit and to integrate other names existing in the literature or on maps. This survey resulted in the Inuit Gazetteer of Northern Quebec-Labrador which includes more than 8,000 locations with between 10 to 11,000 names (counting variants, i.e. several names for one location). Recently, I have gone through this gazetteer to verify the information and - thanks to the convincing powers of John E. Lewis - selected names which relate to snow and ice and general winter conditions to present them to this conference. Table 1 includes a list of 31 different Inuit words which are used in geographical names to identify places according to their particular attributes such as snow and ice. This list is not exhaustive. It merely gives an indication of the variety and complexity of naming places and indicates the possibilities to use names as a source to interpret the perception, experience and knowledge of the land among the Inuit.

These selected names can be divided into four categories: (1) natural formations of snow and ice, (2) types of conditions as a description of a location or as a warning to be aware of particularly dangerous circumstances, (3) natural events and people's involvement, and (4) human application or interference. Looking at the actual content of the words used as names the following formations and conditions are mentioned: for ice - glacier, ice-field, drift ice, rough ice, clear or transparent ice, stranded or grounded ice, ice crack, floe and fast ice; for snow - snow drift, perennial snow patch, melting snow, soft snow cover; for water - fresh water, run-off water on ice, unfrozen areas in rivers or rapids; and finally for vegetation - peat and moss to be used in frozen condition on sled runners.

A closer look at the different categories makes us realize that the Inuit have detailed knowledge of snow and ice conditions in their home region. This knowledge enables them to size the possibilities afforded by the environment, but also to become aware of the dangers to be avoided. The 31 words or names can be divided as follows (Table 1):

- (1) Natural formations: Nos. 2, 3, 9, 10, 14, 18, 19, 25, 27, 30 and 31.
- (2) Particular conditions: Nos. 1 including a warning to dogteam or snowmobile travelers, 4, 7, 11 to 13, 21, and 26.
- (3) Natural events and people's involvement: Nos. 8 and 22 refer to locations at the tree-line where one has a chance to make fire or find shelter among the trees; 15, 17 and 24 describe recurring ice movements in those places, 20 is a lake where once white whales got caught by forming ice, and 28.
- (4) Human application or interference: Nos. 5 and 30 are places where peat or moss can be collected and used to smoothen sled runners when frozen to them; 6 and 29 refer to sites with good snow cover depth to build snow houses, and finally 23 as a modern term describes either an earth cellar or a community freezer.

Table 1

#### INUIT PLACE NAMES RELATED TO SNOW AND ICE CONDITIONS IN NORTHERN QUEBEC

(Information in sequence: place name, geographical entity named, Inuit word with English translation in the official Kativik Schoolboard orthography, and explanation)

- 1) Aajuralik (lake): aajuraq = (ice) crack.
- 2) Aniuvagittuq (site): aniuvaq = snow drift; snow for drinking water.
- 3) Aujuittuq (ice field): aujuittuq = glacier, icefield.
- 4) Aukkaniruluk (creek): aukkaniq = stretch of unfrozen water (in fall), melted ice (in spring).
- 5) Itjurittuq (inlet): itjuq = moss used on runners to create frozen layer to be smoothened.
- 6) Illutalik (site): illuq = snow house.
- 7) Imaapik (creek): imaq = fresh water (hardly freezes)
- 8) Itigaijartuisirvik (lake): itigaijartuisirpuq = making something cold warm (i.e. feet).
- 9) Killiniq (cove): killiniq = drift ice (also waterfront).
- 10) Kivinilik (lake): kiviniq = water on the ice after cracking; or melting snow sliding from steep shore onto lake ice in spring.
- 11) Maniittuajukallak (island): maniittuit = rough, uneven ice.

- 12) Maujarjuaq (lake): maujaq = soft snow cover (on lake ice).
- 13) Nangianartuq Sikunut (estuary) = dangerous ice conditions.
- 14) Nilattavik (pond): nilak = clear ice from fresh water (also glass) or ice for water supply (ice cutting).
- 15) Pakkiviit (islands): pakkutuk = crushing.
- 16) Pangaliriat (lake) = running, galloping of animals over hard snow.
- 17) Qaaqsiviaq (island): qaaqsaq = exploding (of ice moved by tide).
- 18) Qainnguqittuq (island): qainnguq = border of solid ice stuck on shore/ground, only passed by highest tide; does not move; smooth surface for traveling.
- 19) Qangarsinaaq (rapids) = stranded ice, no water underneath.
- 20) Qanurlik (lake): qanuq = disaster (caused by thin ice).
- 21) Qaumajulik (lake): qaumaq = (day breaks); transparent ice/glass; lantern.
- 22) Qaugijartuisirvik (lake): qaugijartuisirpuq = making cold forehead warm.
- 23) Quanatulik (site): quanatuq = freezer (frost).
- 24) Siirtitaalik (creek): siirtitaaq = ripping (ice).
- 25) Sikukallait (slope): siku = ice (patches, cover).
- 26) Sikusiilalik (narrow): sikusiilaq = does not freeze at all.
- 27) Sinaaliariaq (route): sinaaq = floe ice edge.
- 28) Sinanniavik (point): sina = edge (of ice to go hunting).
- 29) Sirluaraaluk (lake): sirluaq = larger or smaller snow house connected to another one without separate entrance.
- 30) Sirmialuk (icefield): Sirmisarniavik (site): sirmiq = icefield (Greenland, Baffin Island); thin smooth ice layer on peat frozen to sled runner.
- 31) Tuvaaluk (bay): tuvaq = sea or lake ice.

It is apparent from the preliminary analysis of snow and ice in Inuit place names that the Inuit are keen observers and users of their seasonally frozen and cold environment. But one has to be aware that looking at snow and ice is only one aspect of the information contained in Inuit toponymy. The now established Inuit Gazetteer of Northern Quebec-Labrador is in fact an encyclopedia of Inuit ethnoscience which will serve the Inuit but also others who want to learn about the Inuit way of life. It is also particularly meaningful to scientists who spend only a fraction of their life experiencing northern conditions in a rather selective way on which they found their deliberations and conclusions. For the Inuit the preservation of this knowledge in written form, such as on official maps, is of great importance if their cultural heritage is to be transmitted to future generations.

#### NOTE

The surveys for the Inuit Gazetteer of Northern Quebec-Labrador were conducted under my direction and the auspices of Avataq Cultural Institute. The material and data are housed currently with Indigenous Names Surveys, Department of Geography, McGill University. Their publication is anticipated in the near future.

