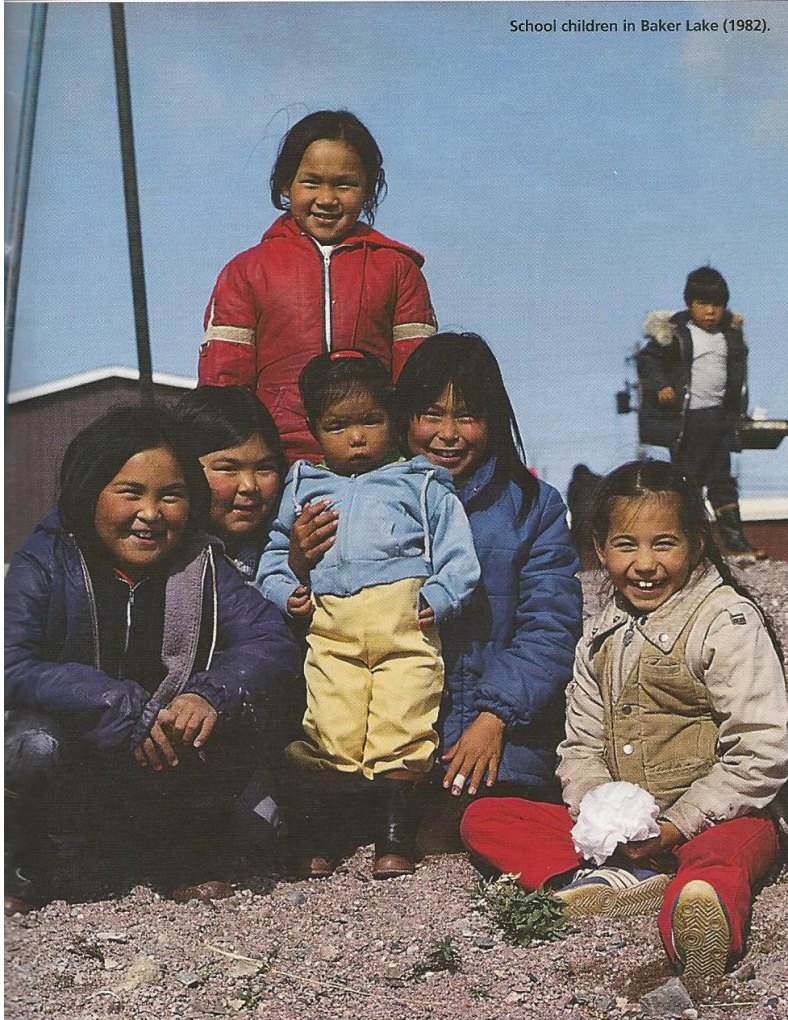


School children in Baker Lake (1982).



When I first went to school, in 1958, at the residential school in Chesterfield Inlet, we were not allowed to speak Inuktitut in the classroom,” recalls Peter Irniq, now in his 60th year. “We were slapped with a yardstick for speaking Inuktitut.”

Things have changed in the last 50 years. The education system across Nunavut now encourages skill development in the Inuit language* — no more yardsticks. And yet the ability of the average 12-year-old to converse comfortably in Inuktitut is significantly less than that of Irniq and his contemporaries at that age.

Inuit culture is rooted in the land and the relationship of the people to the land. The language reflects this relationship. At the simplest level, just as Inuktitut previously had no word for the modern technological wonders — rifles, airplanes, radios, televisions, computers, the list is endless — which have arrived in the North over the past hundred years, English has no single word to express the subtlety of “over there, just at the limit of where we can see, at the horizon,” or “over there, just beyond the horizon.” Inuktitut is a spatial language, which reflects the need of all hunters to know the land stretching out from their camp so well that they can describe their prey’s location to each other with precision — a cultural imperative. Knowledge of the land, animals and the total environment is embedded in the language itself.

A hundred years ago, this valuable aspect of indigenous languages was not understood by the newly arrived (colonial) missionaries and teachers. One such missionary in the late 1800s wrote: “We should let the old tongues with their superstition and sin die, and replace these languages with that of Christian civilization, and compel the natives in all our schools to talk English and English only.” Evidently this philosophy survived into at least the

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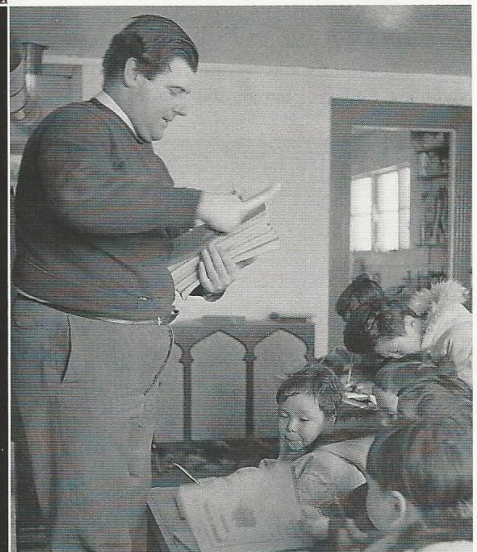
Inuktitut

A Remarkable Heritage, an Uncertain Future

by David F. Pelly

** Although “Inuktitut” is used here, as the most widespread indigenous language in Nunavut, much of this discussion would also apply to Inuinnaqtun, and other dialects. It is recognized that several dialects of what is essentially the same language are spoken across Nunavut, Nunavik and the western Arctic.*

Anglican missionary-teacher, Rev. Don Whitbread, handing out school books. Pond Inlet settlement (1954).



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A class of students at the residential school in Chesterfield Inlet (1958-59), including Peter Irniq (farthest right, leaning on his elbow) and Jose Kusugak (two boys to Irniq's right, looking straight at the camera).

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1950s, when Peter Irniq's generation arrived at one of the missionaries' schools.

Today, we understand that language is part of the foundation of a culture, and, in Canada at least, we value and celebrate cultural diversity enough to want our indigenous cultures to survive and flourish to whatever extent that is possible. Language preservation has become a central objective for the education system. But here's the rub. Traditional Inuit society was a strictly oral culture, upon which has now been imposed the western (or southern) requirement for literacy. Literacy was not a traditional Inuit skill, but the ability to read and write is a

modern necessity. Consequently, the crisis, which the language now faces, stems, in part at least, from its evolution into a fully functional written language.

That transition began about 1885 when the Reverend E.J. Peck, an Anglican missionary in the eastern Arctic, adapted a syllabic system, created 40 years earlier for the Cree language, for use in Inuktitut. He wanted his parishioners to learn to read the Bible. Syllabics, wherein each symbol represents a specific sound, allowed Inuit to read and write their hitherto strictly oral means of communication.

As the Roman alphabet became better known across the North, the temptation to write Inuktitut using the same a,b,c's became irresistible. One could argue that this in itself was a matter of colonial pressure, but there are also those (and lots of them) who believe the survival of the language now depends on making this adaptation. "The best hope for keeping the language alive," says Peter Irniq, who

Over There

Notwithstanding some slight dialectal differences,* here are some words, which most speakers of the Inuit language across the North would recognize. This list is not complete, but it begins to illustrate the degree to which one can be specific in a reference to something "over there" — which, for example, a hunter might do in describing where he saw caribou — as an example of how the language (and the culture) is strongly connected to the land and the space in which Inuit lived.

taavani	"over there, in that general area we both know"
taikani	"over there, right there in that place we both know"
takpingna	"up over there"
takpikani	"up over there, on top"
takpaani	"up over there somewhere"
takpaga	"up over there, moving"
takanani	"down over there"
taunani	"down over there, somewhere"
tauka	"down over there, moving"
taingna	"[that thing] over there, but not visible"

* For example, *takpingna* becomes *tappinna* in South Baffin dialect, as *tauka* is *tauga* in South Baffin, and so on.



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acknowledges he is one of very few who have fully embraced this process, “is to use the standardized Roman orthography. That writing system is our only hope to save the [proper] Inuktitut way of speaking.”

Jose Kusugak, who arrived at the Chesterfield Inlet school in 1958 with Irniq, and is now the President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, thinks along the same lines. Last year, in an address at University of Ottawa, he repeated a catchy phrase he has used before, advocating the development of a “Queen’s Inuktitut” so that all Canadian Inuit would be using a common dialect.

Recently, Inuit have collectively created modern terminology, in an effort to keep the language current in the 21st century. The word for computer is *qarisaujaq* or *qaritauijaq*, meaning “like a brain.” In the early 1980s, when the fax machine became commonplace in offices across the North, Inuit coined the term *sukkajukkuurut* or *sukattukkuurut*, which is still in use today, literally meaning “sends off very quickly.” Last fall, a group of 30 elders and interpreters met to develop new words describing the phenomenon of global warming and its implications for the Arctic, all in an attempt to keep up with changing times.

Naullaq Arnaquq, Assistant Deputy Minister responsible for language issues within the Nunavut government, says, “Inuktitut is a very productive language. The structure of the language is such that you can coin new words very easily — in

Children playing in the schoolyard,
Baker Lake (1982).

“Inuktitut is a very productive language. The structure of the language is such that you can coin new words very easily — in that sense it is very powerful.”



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“I believe the language will survive. But — there’s a big ‘but’ — people have to really believe it is worth speaking....”

that sense it is very powerful.” That said, she acknowledges that the impact of English is extreme. It is easy, she says, even for bilingual speakers, to slip in an English word for a concept that has not as yet been developed in Inuktitut. “If a language evolves on its own, it develops new words naturally, and stays strong.” But Inuktitut today is not left to evolve on its own, it faces an onslaught of English from all sides. “English is dominant through the media, so it is very challenging,” sums up Arnaquq.

As one long-standing teacher put it, “Schools can’t compete with television — the *Simpsons* are not speaking Inuktitut to the kids.”

What does the future hold for Inuktitut? We hear often that the world’s indigenous languages are dying out at an alarming rate — most indigenous languages around the world are severely endangered. Will Inuktitut go the way of the dodo bird (or the Eskimo Curlew), or will it be an exception to this alarming global phenomenon?

Peter Irniq does not sound optimistic, though it must be said that few have the heartfelt passion for the language that he does. “The language is dying very quickly,” he says.

“Much of the language has already died. It’s unfortunate, but that’s a fact of life.”

Others are more optimistic. Naullaq Arnaquq is one of those, partly because, in her job, she has to be. She’s the one, after all, carrying the official banner for Inuktitut onto the battlefield. “I believe the language will survive. But — there’s a big ‘but’ — people have to really believe it is worth speaking, and they need to speak Inuktitut to children.”

No one — including Peter Irniq, or Nunavut’s teachers, or language experts from the South — would disagree with that. If Inuktitut is to survive, parents will have to use the language at home. The government and the schools cannot do it alone. There is also a strong argument in favour of generating a body of Inuktitut literature — advocated by Jose Kusugak, among others — including everything from original material to translation of popular English novels, so that reading both historical and contemporary writing in Inuktitut becomes an option for those, as Arnaquq put it, who “really believe it is worth” using. Greenland has done this to good effect.

Uliut Iksiktaaryuk, a language consultant in the Kivalliq school system, is another hopeful voice. In the smaller communities in the Kivalliq, she says, parents are speaking to their children in Inuktitut, and the kids are speaking Inuktitut to each other when they’re outside playing. All that is surely reason for optimism.

Above: Mary Panagoosak and Leah Idlout attending school in the newly built Anglican Mission during Easter week at Pond Inlet settlement (1954).

The Nunavut government's vision document, the Bathurst Mandate, or "*Pinasuaqtavut 2004-2009*," set the target that in 2020 "we are a fully functional bilingual society in Inuktitut and English." A government study in 2000 entitled "*Aajiqatigingniq*" boldly states: "There are parts of Nunavut where the Inuit language is seriously endangered," and then sets out to propose "a major twenty-year effort to develop a strong bilingual education system for the territory." One-third of that period has now passed, with little progress and quite possibly some decline in the use of Inuktitut. The Department of Education has, however, been engaged in an effort to examine the problem and adopt solutions. Only time will tell if they will be successful. Nevertheless, the question is in the air: where should they be going with the school programs?

A recently released report by Justice Thomas Berger is harshly realistic — the schools are failing, it says, by not producing enough graduates "truly functional in either Inuktitut or English" — and then goes on to propose that the only way to address this situation is with a redesign of the school system to offer a truly bilingual education, with Inuktitut (and English) instruction right through from kindergarten to grade 12.

Most schools across Nunavut in recent years have been teaching the lower grades, usually kindergarten to grade three, entirely in Inuktitut, and then switching entirely to English as the language of instruction. It has not worked well. The abrupt change from Inuktitut to English means that the students become strong in neither. In addition, the implicit rejection of Inuktitut could be culturally harmful, challenging the students' very identity. In Pangnirtung, the elementary school has tried a different approach, which may well become a model for others to follow. For the past five years, the bilingual education program in this Baffin community introduced English-as-a-second-language in grade one, and gradually increased its presence in the classroom in higher grades, but retained Inuktitut as well throughout the program, eventually achieving roughly a 50/50 split in the higher grades. It has worked. Literacy in both languages has improved among students in Pangnirtung.

As language and culture are so closely interrelated — some people even suggest that, if the language is lost, the culture itself will eventually perish or, at the very least, evolve into something quite different — almost everyone who speaks to the educational challenge proposes a stronger cultural curriculum, taught in Inuktitut. "We have to be more aggressive in teaching our young people about their own culture, and their own past," says Peter Irniq. "I want to teach young people now, in Inuktitut, about where we Inuit have been in the past. So that young people don't think we grew up with MP3s, Nintendo and cell phones. We grew up with sealskin boots, harpoon and *kakivak*." The logic is quite simple: for the cultural lessons to be truly meaningful they need to be delivered in Inuktitut — no other language can effectively capture the essence of the culture — and the



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"When I'm 80 years old," says Arnaquq, "I want to be able to speak to my grandchildren in Inuktitut.

very process, not to mention the content, sends the implicit message that the language remains vital and relevant today. Genuinely bilingual education is the way of the future in Nunavut.

Naullaq Arnaquq is happy with that. There are aspects of Inuit culture, she says, for which a grasp of Inuktitut is essential. Without the language, future generations could not be as wholly Inuit as she feels. She cites the complicated but fascinating realm of kinship, by way of example. "If you don't speak Inuktitut, you can't fully understand the relationships between people," she says, referring to the Inuit custom of addressing people not by their name, but by their relationship to you, or to your namesake (the person after whom you are named). If a man names his daughter after his mother (her grandmother), he may well address her as *anaana*, 'mother,' and she may call her father *irniq*, 'son.' "These names contain a lot of historical information," points out Arnaquq, referring to the kinship terms. She knows how many of her numerous aunts and uncles, some now deceased, were related, by the way they addressed each other as she was growing up. Furthermore, she adds, it enhances one's sense of belonging. "I can remember my great aunt who always referred to me as her older sister, and looking back, it made me feel loved, that I belonged." Without Inuktitut, a child could not experience this deeply cultural sense of kinship.

"When I'm 80 years old," says Arnaquq, "I want to be able to speak to my grandchildren in Inuktitut. And I think it will still be around, if people believe in it." ❧

Regular contributor David Pelly has been writing about cultural and historical subjects in the North for nearly 30 years. www.davidpelly.com

Children from the Repulse Bay/Naujaat area, away from home at Christmas for the first time, attending school in Chesterfield Inlet (1958).



© ADINA TARRALIK LEGER

An Inuktitut Dream

By Adina Tarralik Leger

Above: Adina with her grandparents, Tuinnaq and Mikitok Bruce.

Growing up in Nunavut, I experienced the emptiness of a world where you feel invisible, where you never see Inuit heroines or characters in the media.


I wish that I could express myself with more conviction and depth of emotion in Inuktitut. It is a reality that I face, most acutely, sitting with my grandfather, when he asks me "Qanu isumavi?" I long to tell him all that I am feeling, but I am stunted by my insecurities and lack of ability. The reason I am able to communicate with confidence in English is because I had better English classes than I did Inuktitut, and I had more books to read in English than in Inuktitut. I used to think that I would never be able to speak Inuktitut well. I did not have the feeling that Inuktitut was something that you could get better at, something you could learn.

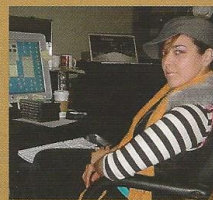
Since leaving home, I decided that I had to do something to keep my language strong. I had this realization that advancement in my language was in my hands, and in my hands alone. My mother had sent me the *New Testament* in Inuktitut (the only substantial book available), and it had been collecting dust on my shelf. One day, I committed to reading the entire book in Inuktitut. Within a month, I noticed a remarkable difference. I read Inuktitut faster and consequently with more enjoyment. I found myself thinking more and more in Inuktitut.

I have a personal dream. As a young Inuk with a love of books, the world would have been less empty for me if there had been the option of reading the classics in

Inuktitut. I would like to see a Nunavut-based publishing company, to produce translations of contemporary and classic novels and original Inuit-authored stories in Inuktitut.

Young Inuit reading classic novels, in Inuktitut, will become culturally aware, have a world opened up to them that is otherwise inaccessible, at the same time that they are exercising their mother tongue. It will teach them not only to read in Inuktitut at a higher level, but also to think in Inuktitut at an advanced level. Imagine, reciting the lines of Shakespeare in Inuktitut. Not to mention, a Nunavut-based publishing company will create jobs, and encourage Inuit authors, something the world has yet to see on a large scale.

One time I heard an aboriginal man say that you are not truly bilingual unless you dream in both languages. At the time I heard that, it scared me, because I honestly could not recall having ever dreamed in Inuktitut. I felt, maybe I am not as bilingual as I think I am, maybe I am losing my language. In turn, I felt I was losing a part of my heritage, a part of my Inuitness. That was something that I had never considered before. I always felt like it was something inherent, just something that you had or you didn't. But I realize now this is not the case. After just one month of committed reading, I found myself smiling, glowing, one morning. I stood up that morning ready to face the world with more vigour than I had just the day before. I had just awakened from a dream. I was dreaming in Inuktitut. 



Adina Tarralik Leger grew up in Coral Harbour, Nunavut. She now lives in San Diego, California, where she is a writer and filmmaker.