

## Inuit personal names. A unique system?

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### Abstract

Major traits of Inuit naming shall be outlined from an examination of some of the existing literature on the subject, and its unique features shall be analyzed according to a conceptual grid devised by the author for broad cross-cultural comparison of naming practices. The Inuit system is tentatively characterized by few productive name types. Although typical of small-scale societies with long-term and intensive internal communication within self-contained linguistic communities –as far as the number of name tags for the same individual are concerned—the Inuit system appears to be of an extreme kind from another point of view. Its uniqueness may lie in the proliferation of name tags for the autonym alone, whereas most other systems tend to minimize the productivity of the autonym and maximize that of secondary name types (such as nicknames, teknonyms, friendship names, birth-order names, etc.). Sociological properties of Inuit naming being taken into consideration, one concludes by saying that the Inuit naming practices are characterized by a tendency to emphasize one of the two basic functions of naming, i.e. incorporation and qualification, to the expense of the other, i.e. individual identification.

**Keywords:** personal names, naming, cross-cultural, anthropology, identity, culture

*“The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter,  
It isn't just one of your holiday games;”*

T.S. Eliot

(The Naming of Cats)

## Introduction

My aim is to outline some features of the Inuit naming practices as described in the literature available to me and look at it from a comparative, cross-cultural point of view. My approach is restricted to broad functional and formal aspects of the naming system. I do not presume to add anything new to the knowledge of the Inuit practices of naming, as I have no direct experience of it. My approach aims at a characterization that, while being hopefully true to the actual features of the system, helps locate it within a much broader framework. In other words, my question could be “what is so unique about Inuit personal names?”

In order to proceed with this goal in mind, let me briefly explain a few things regarding the anthropology of naming<sup>1</sup>.

## Functions of personal names

First of all, I submit that personal names fulfil two general and opposite functions. The first one is quite simple and straightforward, it consists in identifying single individuals so that addressing them or referring to them do not raise major communicative difficulties. It has thus an instrumental and discriminatory value in terms of information flow. The second function is not one that can be so easily defined. I call it qualification or incorporation. It consists in providing some kind of information about the person so named, making that person part of a set. This can be done several ways, either by the semantic content of the name tag –especially when “motivated” in linguistic parlance–or by the structure of the lexical set of which the name tag is an element. In many instances the name tag provides an information regarding qualities, virtues, traits of character, etc. or just membership in a group (be it a clan, or a family, or a nation, or a gender even). The dynamics of naming rests on the contradictory requirements of these functions. The problem of naming individuals in all human societies centres on accommodating these opposite needs: making someone a single entity and part of a wider set at the same time, making it at once different from all, and similar to many<sup>2</sup>.

## Other preliminary considerations

1. Probably the single most important concept is that of “name type” (henceforth NT) which has to be distinguished from the notion of “name tag”. In English “given name”, “surname”, and “nickname” are name types (NT), i.e. onomastic categories or classes. John, Peter, Elizabeth, Mary, Smith, Mayer, Reid, Macdonald, Pete, Tony,

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<sup>1</sup> See MACDONALD 1999, 2004, and in press.

<sup>2</sup> The so-called « classificatory » function of personal names has been overestimated or mistakenly attributed to naming systems.

Lizzy, Chuck, etc. are name tags, i.e. linguistic units or lexemes. This obvious distinction usually gets lost in the course of the analysis. I submit that an anthropological study of personal names is one that focuses on NT, rather than name tags. I would thus contrast onomastics as primarily a study of name tags, as against an anthropological or ethno-pragmatic study focusing on name types.

2. An important observation has to be made at this point. It seems that all existing naming practices (the way different cultures name individuals) contain not one but several NT –to my knowledge so far.
3. Another crucial observation is that apparently all naming systems seem to put an emphasis on one of the NT, which I call the “autonym” (variously dubbed the “real”, “true”, “primary”, “big”, “beautiful”, “good”, “main”, and so on, name). Morphological, sociological and pragmatic characteristics of the autonym are of paramount significance. Its relationship to other NT also.
4. It is the relationship, organisation and combination of NT that make up the study of naming systems (henceforth NS) since this is how I see naming, not as a collection of name tags but as an organized set of NT with rules of combination and use.
5. As stated previously NT combine in various ways and their use in speech acts and utterances characterize a naming system (NS). Among the different ways this happens two seem more salient: whether NT are used together (causing name tags to be strung together) or one instead of the other (causing different name tags to be used exclusive of others according to circumstance, identity of speakers, etc.). Most naming systems do both, but I submit that systems show a tendency to predominantly or characteristically use one rather the other. This would result in extreme situations which we may see as “ideal types”, for instance:
  - A. Systems that use few name tags for each individual, usually strung together in a certain order (syntagmatic);
  - B. Systems that use a great number of names tags for the same individual, but one at a time (paradigmatic).
6. The morphology of NT and particularly the autonym can be studied from a grammatical, lexematic and morpho-syntactic points of view, in order to decide whether it is simple or complex, and if complex, how, to what degree.
7. Moreover to each NT is attached a specific set, stock, or repertoire, of name tags. Such sets or repertoire can easily be characterized as: a-either closed or open, (narrowly restricted or restricted but large) , b- motivated or not motivated (that is, the name tags belong or do not belong to an already existing lexical set), c- as being productive or unproductive of name tags for the same individual.

## Inuit name types

Amassalimiut personal naming has been described by Gessain and Robbe (GESSAIN 1980, ROBBE 1981). What Gessain calls *adek* is what I call the autonym, the main reference to self. Gessain makes a distinction between sub-categories within this name type, one being the true or main one, other *adek* bestowed later on being what he calls “auxiliary names” or “noms de réserve” (408). The *adek*, at least the main *adek*, is the “reincarnation Name” (409) and provides the individual with its true and enduring identity. Each individual thus has a number of names (understand ‘name tags’) for the autonym and chooses to make one public while keeping the others “secret” (413). According to Robbe, the autonym, *aleq*, or *aleruseq*, including Christian names (47), is indeed productive of a number of name tags for the same individual (a property that is referred to as “polynomy” by several authors), but Robbe questions Gessain’s contention that there is a “main name” as opposed to “auxiliary names” on the ground that all name tags for the *aleq* are equally the result of transmission from ancestors (78-79). All name tags, says Robbe, as long as they are *aleq* are on the same footing and are equally capable of defining the true identity and the place of the individual in the community in relation to his/her homonyms and eponyms. This discussion, confined in a footnote, is actually an important issue from the point of view I am adopting in this presentation. Since no specific terms are given for either “main” or “auxiliary” name, except the one general term *adek/aleq*, I will side with Robbe in considering that Ammassalimiut view is that the autonym is not subdivided into clearly defined sub-categories and that we deal here with one name type only, the autonym. This does not prevent people to create a more subtle hierarchy between their name tags, thus providing Gessain’s claim with some substance.

Among the other name types mentioned are the Christian name (ROBBE 47) and the nickname (ROBBE 53). The latter was formerly very common and still frequent at the time of Robbe’s investigation (id.). More importantly there are two different kinds of nickname, labeled in the vernacular *araala* and *taagulaq*. The first is a term of endearment that sticks and even becomes like a real name. The second is a descriptive term used in more restricted circles (id.). Both however are “names” and as such become prohibited when their bearer has passed away.

Putting aside the Christian names –which in any case can be considered here as part of the set of tags matching the category of *aleq* (ROBBE 47)—and following Gessain and Robbe, the total –emically defined– Ammassalimiut name types amount to three: 1. *aleq* or *aleruseq* or *adek* (the autonym), 2. *araala* (nickname 1), 3. *taagula* (nickname 2).

In a paper published in 1970 and other subsequent papers, Saladin d’Anglure has given a detailed account of Tarramiut personal naming practices (SALADIN D’ANGLURE 1970,

1977, 2001). In his 1970 paper he describes the autonym *atiq*, also *avakku*, *atissiaq*, and *sauniq*<sup>3</sup> (1014, 1026, 1030 and *passim*), while mentioning teknonyms (1017) and descriptive nicknames (1024). If the *atiq* seems to match the Ammassalimiut *adek/aleq*, the Tarramiut nickname does not seem to exactly match the Ammassalimiut nickname. While the former (Tarramiut) are not really names (“n’ont pas rang de nom... mais par la suite acquièrent tous les attributs d’un véritable nom”, id.1024), the latter (Ammassalimiut) as we have seen are true names. The former are rarely used, the latter frequently. Moreover Saladin d’Anglure gives no specific term or label for either nickname or tekronym. Teknonymy does not appear either as a true naming practice but as an expedient way to describe someone as in the expression “he, the father of so-and-so” (1017). Going back to the autonym one of its most conspicuous feature is to provide a number of name tags for each individual (1016), what the author calls “polynomie”. I will consider other properties of the autonym later, including of course its spiritual dimension (SALADIN D’ANGLURE 1977b), but I shall dwell now briefly on the shamanistic name discussed by the same author (SALADIN D’ANGLURE 2001: 193-199).

Shamans seemed to have special names inasmuch as they bore the names of companion-spirits and/or other supernatural entities, like animal-spirits. Those names are also dubbed “second” or “secondary names” (196) to the effect that shamans had two series or even “systems” of names (id.). This observation is certainly relevant in many respects but I cannot use it here to substantiate the existence of another name type. What we are dealing with here is a specific set of name tags which ordinary people had no access to, but that was still contained within the name type *atiq*, as the author himself makes clear (193). In other words shamanistic names were just *atiq*, not some other name type. The fact that shamans had among the various tags making up their identity, some specific name tags reserved to them only, does not change the nature of the system, it only changes the composition and quality of their stock of autonoms.

In sum then, this particular regional naming system (Tarramiut- Nunavut/Nunavik) contains really one “true” name type, plus another, the nickname, which does not quite make it to the status of “true name”, or does it occasionally, under certain conditions. The same seems to be true for the Alaska Inupiaq (BODENHORN 2006: 153). This, in a

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<sup>3</sup> These terms are more or less synonyms or describe variously the autonym. They are not referring to distinct name types. Interestingly, the word *sauniq* means “bone” (SA 1979: 1019, 1026) and it is explained that the name is like the bone or skeleton, the hard part of the anatomy inherited from the eponymic forebear, as opposed to the flesh. Elsewhere the name is supposed to be the “dress” or “cloth” that wraps the person so named (SA 1997: 57). Elsewhere yet it appears as the “image” or (French) “reflet” (ROBBE 1981: 77). This apparent paradox (the name being either the inner part= bone, or the outer part=dress) makes sense if compared to the popular representation of dead people in Western folklore. As ghosts they appear as “dresses” or “shrouds”; conversely they appear also as skeleton. Either empty dresses, or denuded bones. In a sense names are dead people in Inuit ideology.

comparative perspective, is rather extraordinary and worth noting as exceptional (see below).

A different picture is given by Guemple of the Belcher Islands (Qiqiktamiut) naming system (GUEMPLE 1965). Saladin d'Anglure has pointed out some of the contrasts (SALADIN D'ANGLURE 1970: 1038, n. 72) between the two (Tarramiut and Qiqiktamiut) naming practices, one being the crucial fact of not using the name of deceased people to name the living ("in complete contrast to the pan-Arctic pattern", GUEMPLE 1965: 324). He (S. d'A) asks the question: "Might these differences be accounted for by the presence of missionaries in the Belcher Islands since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or do we deal here with a different traditional system?" (id., my translation). Let us see whether we can answer this question.

Belcher Islanders (Inuit) numbered 200 individuals at the time of Guemple's investigation. Each one had "two names" (GUEMPLE 1965: 323), understand "two name tags", the first one of Biblical origin and the second traditional Inuit. Let me quote: "The two elements of the name have since become closely associated and are now conferred as a single unit." (id., my emphasis). The first name tag was of course gender specific and the second was not. The first name tag (biblical) was postfixed with *-ii*. But "...both names were acquired as a unit" (id., my emphasis). So, if we follow Guemple, we face an astonishing fact. The autonym is made of a syntagm composed of two segments, or two name tags. Together, these two lexical items make up the autonym. This appears indeed as an exceptional formal property for Inuit naming. Affixional (post-base) syntagmatic expansion is of course a usual feature of Inuit naming (see Kublu and Oosten 1999 for numerous examples), but not lexematic expansion. The second major feature of the Belcher Islands system is that nicknames are recognized name types (id. 325) in the form of descriptive appellatives used for homonyms, similar in this respect to the Ammassalimiut variety. In all then, we have a system that contrasts formally with the Ammassalimiut and Tarramiut with respect to the binomial nature of the autonym, and one that uses nicknames on a regular basis like the Ammassalimiut and unlike the Tarramiut.

I will consider mainly the binomial nature of the autonym, nicknaming being a latent dimension of the system anywhere. The fact that the first segment is a foreign biblical name tag can be explained as an influence of missionaries, for sure, but this is only part of the story. The foreign name tag is embedded in a syntagm that in itself is an Inuit name type, not a Christian name type. At the time of Guemple's investigation surnames were not in current use (id. 334, n. 4). So the second name tag is definitely not a surname. Why then would this particular sub-culture come up with this strange (for Inuit practice) device of linking two name tags to create an autonym? The answer is probably as follows. The entire

community was composed of 200 individuals and a count of name tags came up with 240 items (id. 324). So there should be at first sight enough name tags to name living people. Actually it is not so. The 240 name tags came from a sample of 900 individuals spread over five generations that is at least two generations of dead people. Since the rule is that the living cannot be named after the dead those name tags that are not passed on before death are lost<sup>4</sup>. This will drastically diminish the supply of available name tags. Moreover, names of the living bestowed on children who die, will after three trials be dismissed (id. 329). Again the supply of name tags will suffer a loss. In the end there is a shortage of name tags and foreign names will be a welcome addition as a syntagmatic complement of traditional Inuit name tags --so as to replenish the depleted stock of name tags. In other words Inuit have used Christian names to enrich their own traditional system at the cost of syntagmatic expansion<sup>5</sup>. This certainly is a beautiful example of Levi-Straussian 'bricolage'. The European lexemes have been extracted from their Biblical cradle and incorporated into a purely Inuit syntagm.

The picture offered by Kublu and Oosten for the Inuit of Northeast Canada (1999) is quite similar to the Tarramiut and Ammassalimiut. The word *atiq* refers to the name of a person and his/her namesake. A person may have and usually has a number of *atiq*. Aside from the *atiq*, pet names and terms of endearment are mentioned, and they rank prominently in the repertoire of commonly used appellatives. It is not clear however whether these terms or phrases have the status of personal names. Compounds made of kin terms, adjectival and nominal categories (like in "father-*kuluk*" or "'naughty-big-*kullu*") could be seen as kinds of nicknames. Descriptive nicknames are present (73) as well as derivatives of the autonym (67). Interestingly the authors mention a way of addressing another person by means of a reciprocal term (65, 73) reminiscent of the reciprocal or friendship name known in the literature (see NEEDHAM 1971, ROSALDO 1984, MACDONALD 2004). Let us note also that among the Ammassalimiut namesakes address each other with the reciprocal term *aliik*. (ROBBE 1981: 62) There are then a number of "creative ways of addressing each other" (73). No specific labels are attached to these various ways of calling other people, aside from general terms like *aqausiq* (way of addressing,) *tuq&uraisiq*

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<sup>4</sup> This is another unusual trait, not naming living people after dead ones, but one that cannot be explained on the basis of formal properties of the system only. Here I focus on the result it has in terms of number of available name tags.

<sup>5</sup> In colloquial daily practice the first (Christian) segment is used among the young, and the second (Inuit) among the old, but the first is 'Inuitized' by affixation. (GUEMPLE 1965: 325). This shows that the foreign element has been thoroughly assimilated in a traditional Inuit system. The new name tags produced an enormous supply of binomial syntagms if we consider all possible combinations of let us say 300 biblical name tags with 200 Inuit name tags. Therefore the simultaneous use of several name tags as autonyms might not have been considered useful anymore, at least in order to individualize people. That maybe would explain another unusual (for Inuit practice) aspect of the Belcher Islands system --having only one binomial name tag instead of three or more. The binomiality could further be explained by reference to the polysynthetic nature of Inuktitut.

(way of referring to a person), *aqaq* (speak with endearment) (65-66, 71).

It seems then that the concept of name has been restricted to one and only one name type, the autonym *atiq*, while many other terms and phrases –not exactly deserving the status of names– are used in the act of naming another person. Teknonyms, nicknames, pet-names (RASMUSSEN 1931: 192), and even the rare friendship reciprocal names (see above), have among the Inuit a kind of sub-institutional existence, being used in address rather than in reference, except in the case of the Belcher Islands and the Amassalimiut where nicknames possess the status of names. Compared to other societies where teknonyms or other appellatives become the real name of the person or are consistently used to refer to the person, together and in addition to the autonym, Inuit culture does not seem to have developed alternative name types on par with, for instance, the Balinese teknonym (GEERTZ 1964), the Palawan nickname (MACDONALD 2004) or the Plain Indians war-name (BARNES 1980).

### **Formal and attributive properties of Inuit autonoms**

All authors quoted so far seem to agree on the following characteristics of the autonym:

1. Its name tags belong to a closed list
2. The tags are highly motivated
3. It is productive

Let me explain these traits briefly. The list of name tags fit to become the *atiq* or *ale* is theoretically limited since it is the list of names borne by older or dead people, names that are passed on to their descendants (GESSAIN 1980: 408-409, 412; SALADIN D'ANGLURE 1970: 1019; 1977 b: 36; ROBBE 1981: 49-56; KUBLU & OOSTEN 1999: 68; ALIA 1994: 16). Within a local community the pool of names consists in the list of all name tags of all living and dead ascendants (with the Belcher Islands exception of course, see above). This stock of name tags is large since a majority of people have several name tags attached to their identity. In practice however new names can be occasionally coined and names from neighboring communities can be adopted. As a rule however name tags are in limited albeit large number<sup>6</sup> (there are more name tags than living people at any given time, but the stock of name tags is limited, it is a closed list).

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<sup>6</sup> In the Belcher Islands case the supply was limited and then became large as a result of the introduction of a new batch of name tags.

All Inuit name tags “have meaning” or rather, in a more technical sense, are “motivated”. It means that personal names are made with lexical items already used in the language for another purpose, and not specifically and exclusively used for naming (see list of names in RASMUSSEN 1930: 81-88, and RASMUSSEN 1931: 85-90). This particular criterion has a high typological value comparatively speaking (think of our French or English name tags that are not motivated). This aspect of naming, the presence or absence of semantic content, provides also the ground for the popular view of names (what’s in a name?) and one which attracts the most attention. The semantic content of Inuit name tags could certainly be the topic of a fruitful investigation. I shall skip this discussion for the time being, except to emphasize the fact that Inuit name tags derive their “meaning” from several sources, mainly as the reflection of the eponym/namesake’s character and personality (for Inupiak see BODENHORN 2006: 148), and cannot be reduced to the literal translation of the words they are made of. The basic meaning of a name like “The one who has turned white”, (RASMUSSEN 1931: 86) is probably not the color white of the person so named (who actually might have had a dark complexion) but the fact that this morphologically complex phrase refers to an eponym whose social or spiritual attributes are known otherwise (he/she was a successful hunter, or a mother with many children as the case might be). Inuit names have a multi-layered semantic structure, and are loaded in more than one way, even more so with shamanistic names<sup>7</sup> (SALADIN D’ANGLURE 2001: 193-195 –see his discussion of the name Nanuq: 196-7).

The third important aspect of Inuit names is that the same individual bears frequently several name tags which are all considered as his/her *atiq* or *aleq*<sup>8</sup>. I call this property “productivity”. In the literature it is referred to sometimes as (French) “polynomie” (SALADIN D’ANGLURE 1970: 1021; ROBBE 1981: 60; GESSAIN 1980: 412, RASMUSSEN 1931: 220). The general fact of having several names attached to one’s identity is probably the most common feature of all human naming systems. The fact however that all name tags should belong to the same name type, and even more, to the autonym itself, is an exceptional fact. I see the Inuit naming system unique in this respect. Most if not all other naming systems that I know of, create names from a number of categories (types) other than the main name (autonym). Nicknames, war names, honor names, married names, teknonyms, pen names, occupational names, birth order names, “market names”, and many other name types are the source of innumerable varieties of appellatives which have, in the vernacular, status of “names”, are labeled in the vernacular or are clearly identified as distinct lexical categories. No so with the Inuit, again with the notable

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<sup>7</sup> The morpho-syntactic properties of Inuit name tags could form an object of investigation *per se*. See for instance names like *jakäk* (RASMUSSEN 1931: 87) which is translated as “I say, just look at her!”.

<sup>8</sup> An important exception already noted seems to be the Belcher Islands where according to Guemple (1965, also quoted in SA 1970: 1038, n. 72) individuals had one name only. See above note 4.

exception of the Ammassalimiut (see above ROBBE 1981: 53) I do not mean to say that Inuit people are less creative in calling and addressing other people (see KUBLU & OOSTEN 1999: 73) but they do not as it were “institutionalize” these practices into rigid naming patterns. The actual situation might actually have been that the system posed a problem not easily solved and that naming practices fluctuated with respect to the status of appellatives like nicknames, or the relative status of name tags belonging to the autonym (Robbe’ discussion of Gessain in ROBBE 1981: 79, n. 20; or “secondary” shamanistic names discussed by SALADIN D’ANGLURE 2001: 196).

### **Sociological and other aspects of Inuit autonoms**

I shall consider now the sociological correlates of the autonym’s nature as spiritual component of the person. These are well-known and spectacular aspects of the Inuit naming practices.

The concept of name-soul has been explained in similar terms for Greenland (Eastern) and Canadian (Central) Inuit (WACHTMEISTER 1956, SALADIN D’ANGLURE 1970, *passim*, 1977b: 37; RASMUSSEN 1929: 58, 1931: 219-20; GESSAIN 1980: 409-11; ROBBE 1981: *passim*) and I probably do not need to belabor this point, a “cornerstone of Central Inuit ideology” according Stevenson, 1993 (quoted in KUBLU & OOSTEN, 1999: 64). The *atiq/aleq* is a kind of “soul”, is a spiritual component of the person, has a permanent existence, and provides the rationale for an ideology of reincarnation. Inuit are not alone in this. Eastern Indonesian people have a very similar conception (FORTH 1983, GEIRNAERT-MARTIN 1992) and, by the way, deal with exactly the same intellectual conundrum as to how much exactly the ancestor should be considered as “reincarnated” into his living namesake, from the person itself (GESSAIN 1980) to a more abstract principle defined as a social or relational identity (SALADIN D’ANGLURE 1977b: 36; ROBBE 1981: 79; KUBLU & OOSTEN 1999: 64). This also provides the ground for making namesakes special relations (ROBBE 1981: 62 and SALADIN D’ANGLURE 1970: 1025-1027).

Probably the most stunning and far-reaching correlate of this belief in the name-soul is the incorporation of the person into kinship relations inherited from his namesake-eponym. This has been the object of several analyses (SALADIN D’ANGLURE 1970, KUBLU & OOSTEN 1999, ROBBE 1981, GUEMPLE 1965). It explains why Inuit are not to be considered as seriously cracked when, for instance, a lady calls her grand-daughter “brother”, or a boy says of her mother that she is his “uncle” even if they don’t know why<sup>9</sup>. The sociological significance of this is crucial since it places the named individual into a series of kinship configurations that radically depart from his/her biological configuration of origin. It creates various social and kinship spaces into which Ego moves back and forth according to

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<sup>9</sup> One informant says that she calls her sister “maternal uncle” but she does not know why. (KUBLU & OOSTEN 1999: 66).

the relationships existing between himself, the other speaker and their mutual namesake, including the namesake's relative, and the relative's namesake (SALADIN D'ANGLURE, 1979, ROBBE 1981). The transitivity of this relationship creates an extraordinary complex entanglement of personal kin and social networks, or in Kublu and Oosten's words a "closely interwoven network of relationships defined in terms of kinship and the naming system" (id. 76) This connection however between kin relations and name relations is not a direct outcome of the formal properties of the naming system, but of a particular philosophy thrust by culture upon it.

Homonymy is frequent since names are transmitted to several individuals, sometimes dozens of them (Robbe gives an example of one name tag being given to 36 people! Id. 61. See also SALADIN D'ANGLURE 1970: 1025-1031, and GUEMPLE 1965: 324). Since many individuals bear the same name the result in terms of the first function of naming is negative. One could argue that actually, since individuals bear a number of names (name tags), not two bear the exact same list of names. This should be discriminatory enough. In the example given by Saladin d'Anglure (1970: 1033) a person has five names (Nuvukkat, Kiatainaq, Qalliuuq, Aasivaq, and Ulaaju). She is maybe the only one to possess these five names, no matter whether if each is linking her to various other namesakes. However, in the actual functioning of the system all names are not known to all other members of the community (this point is made in the following paragraph as well). In this example no or few people possess the information that the five names quoted above belong also to the same person. Some names are kept secret, some names are disclosed to certain individuals, not to others, some name tags are know by relatives other by strangers, etc. It goes so far as to having the nominee himself not knowing all of his/her names (ROBBE 1981: 60).

The rule just mentioned is closely associated with the plural transmission and frequency of namesake relationships or homonym , and with the plurality of name tags for each individual. This rule, again, consists in the habit of using one name tag with one set of relations and another name tag with another (BODENHORN 2006: 149, makes the point for Alaska Inupiak). The nominee will choose who will use which of his/her names and in which context. This I would call "foreclosure of naming circuits" (in French "étanchéité des sphères de nomination"). This creates a major problem as far as the first function of naming is concerned. Let's say individual A has 3 name tags to his autonym, 1, 2 and 3. A will be known to individuals C, D and E as 1, to individuals F,G, H, I, J as 2, and yet as 3 to individuals X, Y, Z. Logical consequences of this situation explain why Inuit naming constituted such a huge problem to the state intervention –why it was absolutely not legible (Scott et al. 2002) and why it was never entirely solved by successive attempts at introducing legible onomastic identifications (ALIA 1994, SOBY 1997) Indeed, consider the

difficulty met by a foreign person to locate individual A by using one name tag. If one uses name tag 1 one must be sure to ask C,D, or E. If F or X are asked the question “where is 1?” they will not be able to answer. Knowledge of a name is not enough to identify a person, you need to know all name tags of an individual and all persons using these various name tags, and how they use it. This cannot be achieved unless one is very familiar with the context of naming, individuals involved, personal networks of the target, etc.

Inuit names (autonyms) tend also, according to all observers (among them Gessain and Robbe, *ibid.*) but with varying degrees (ROBBE *id.* 50, GUEMPLE 1965: 328) to be avoided. It is deemed improper to mention aloud the name of persons, especially spouses, elder persons, or other significant members of the community (RASMUSSEN 1931: 192). Almost everywhere there was a strict prohibition on names of the recently dead. Here again Inuit are joining the vast majority of human societies. For different and sometimes opposite reasons names, particularly main ones (autonyms), tend to remain unsaid and this of course explains why naming cultures resort to a great variety of alternative ways, secondary names or optional appellatives, when identifying another person. As we have seen this is the case with Inuit naming, but instead of creating other names Inuit culture resorts to kin terms, or to endearment terms, petnames, and other descriptive phrases (akin to teknonyms and nicknames) that do not possess the stability and identity status of real names (again with due respect to the Amassalimiut and Belcher Islands naming practices which make room for nicknames).

### **Behavior of names in speech acts and the social value of names**

Lacking the data to investigate this most essential aspect of naming, I will make a very brief note of it. As far as I can judge, names are --or were-- rather not used syntagmatically together with other names or with kin terms. There were no titles. Formulas of the type “autonym + autonym” or “autonym + appellative/nickname” or “kin term + autonym” are not recorded. Names were used, but used with caution and never, apparently, ostensibly displayed in speech acts. Instead of naming someone by one of his *atiq/aleq*, one would use a kin term or a descriptive deixis (“father of this one” for example, SALADIN D’ANGLURE, 1970: 1017). When names were spoken, one of the name tags composing the list of the person’s autonyms was used, without being strung to the other name tags. Peoples had often many names but were using them one at a time. I guess that the Inuit naming system was paradigmatic in the extreme. This trait is underscored by the absence of titles and bears upon the social value of names. It seems even that name tags tend not to be used in association or strung together with kin terms as in English “uncle Tom”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> J. Oosten, personal communication.

The paradigmatic nature of naming practices is frequently connected, as I have shown elsewhere (Macdonald, in press), to a society's egalitarian ethos. When names denote social status and ranking in a hierarchical structure there are more often displayed with other name tags and titles (syntagmatic dimension). Inuit names seemed to connote strength, spiritual and other qualities handed down by forebears (RASMUSSEN 1929: 58) some of them of renown, but did not seem to imply that the bearer of the name was in a competitive position to acquire or claim superior status. The case of shamans could have been at odds with this general state of affairs.

If names were not used to locate individuals into a ranking system, they were used to incorporate them into tight networks of kinsmen or assimilated kinsmen by way of namesakes among the living, and into rebirth series by way of eponyms among the dead. Names thus intricately linked Ego with other members of his society and with spirits and souls, with the living and with the dead (SALADIN D'ANGLURE 1997a: 68), in some cases with natural entities as well. In this manner Ego profoundly identified with his name or names and was organically integrated into the social, natural and supernatural cosmos. This provided a felicitous experience from a Batesonian point of view, "an experience of unity and integration", the expression of "a general truth simultaneously asserted for the fields of sex, social organization, and death"<sup>11</sup>. However, it had to be done at the expense of the other main function of naming which is to permit a quick and easy identification of single individuals.

### **Concluding remarks**

Having many names, having namesakes, being known to different persons under different names, changing one's name(s) in the course of life, bearing forebears' names, are features commonly encountered in many societies and cultures of the world. These traits are compatible with demographically small communities interacting with a certain degree of intensity and continuity. It is so because in order to know who is who one needs to keep track of a complex and rich history of naming for each individual. It requires the storage of a considerable amount of information. This remains possible with a restricted number of consociates. Beyond a certain point this is not feasible any more. Complex naming histories tell important stories about people and help locate them into various networks, recall circumstances of their life, highlight traits of character, habits or achievements, ancestral connections, spiritual powers, and so forth (MACDONALD 2005). In other words they qualify and incorporate very well. This large amount of knowledge, not to mention a high degree of homonymy, foreclosure of onomastic circuits, and the prohibition to utter personal

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<sup>11</sup> This will immediately remind the reader of what Saladin d'Anglure says about sexual dualism (2005: 134).

names in a number of circumstances, are elements that precisely stand in the way of an easy identification of single individuals at all times by using personal names alone.

To bypass this communicational obstruction, naming systems generally use several name types. One name type is used to permanently refer to the same person. Very frequently this autonym has no daily currency and people tend to avoid using it. Other name types (nicknames, teknonyms, etc.) are used to store the individual's traits, qualities, memberships in various circles, circumstances and so on, and are freely handed back and forth in a constant negotiation of proximity and distance, familiarity and respect (MACDONALD 2008).

The unique feature of the Inuit system is to possess a productive autonym almost to the exclusion of other name types. Inuit people seem to have spurned indeed the more usual method of having several name types. Instead they have kept to names that, while embodying the permanent identity of the person, are rarely used or never used by everyone to refer to the same individual. In other words, the Inuit system uniquely incorporates and/or qualifies individuals but does make the task of finding someone, by way of his/her personal name only, particularly onerous. It has developed the second function of naming to an unprecedented degree of social and mental integration, but at the expense of the first function of naming. The gain is probably the great mental unity and integration noted above, a process by which the individual feels part and parcel of a larger whole. It also highlights the egalitarian aspect and tight communitarian ethos of their collective life.

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