

Peter IRNIQ
Commissaire du Nunavit

(2005)

“Mending the Past.
The Case of the Inuits.”

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Cette édition électronique a été réalisée avec le concours de Pierre Patenaude, bénévole, professeur de français à la retraite et écrivain, Lac-Saint-Jean, Québec.
http://classiques.uqac.ca/inter/benevoles_equipe/liste_patenaude_pierre.html
Courriel : pierre.patenaude@gmail.com

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Peter IRNIQ

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Courriels : labelle.m@uqam.ca

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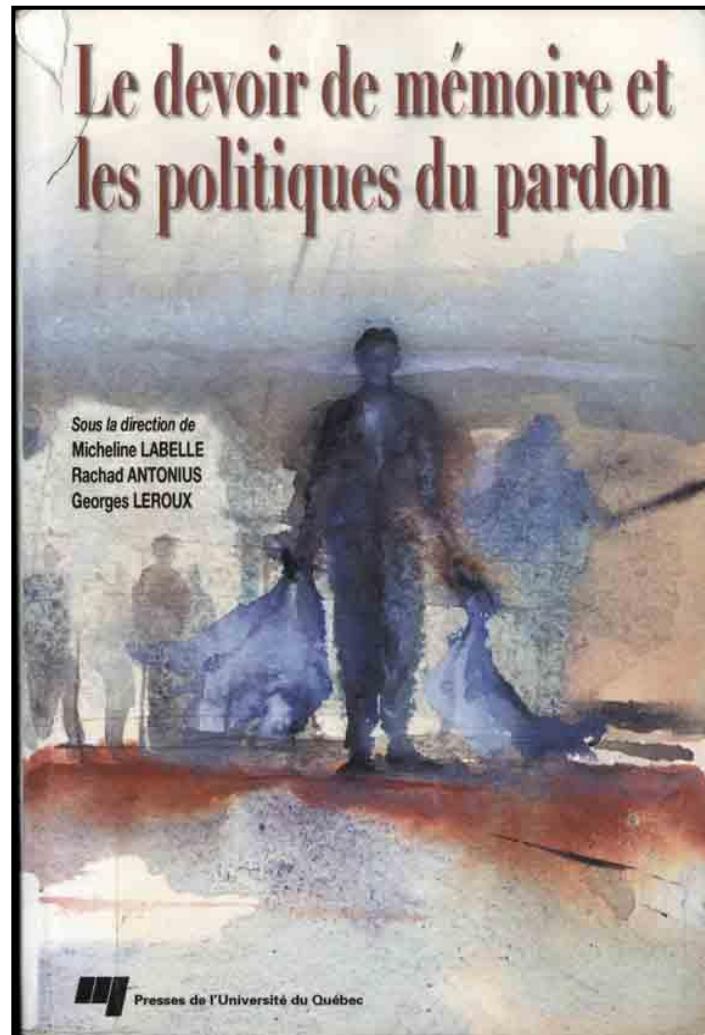
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Note pour la version numérique : La numérotation entre crochets [] correspond à la pagination, en début de page, de l'édition d'origine numérisée. JMT.

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**Le devoir de mémoire
et les politiques du pardon.**

MÉMOIRES

Peuples autochtones des Amériques

**“Mending the Past.
The Case of the Inuits.”**

Peter IRNIQ

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I was taken, by a Roman Catholic priest, in broad daylight, right in front of my parents ! We were at our summer camp near Naujaat, a tiny settlement on the west coast of Hudson's Bay, getting ready to walk to inland, for our annual caribou hunt.

It was 1958. I was 11 years old, and I was to attend Sir Joseph Bernier Federal Day School in Igluligaarjuk – Chesterfield Inlet – for the first time.

Little did my parents or I know that this was the beginning of leaving behind my culture, language, Inuit spirituality and the practice of shamanism which we used for healing, this special relationship among us Inuit, with animals, land, our past and the future. We were to be assimilated into the *Qablunaaq* world, to think like a European.

The losses we experienced were to be permanent. The impact on all of us – my family, my friends and many of us who are now considered leaders of our people – was traumatic. Many of us have spent our lives trying, in many different ways, to bring "meaning" back into lives that were emptied of the ideas, beliefs, and relationships which, for thousands of years, had brought meaning and purpose to the Inuit. Some have turned to this modern religion, called Christianity. Others, like me, are convinced that recovering the culture we have lost is essential to giving direction not only to ourselves, but also to future generations.

Naujaat – Repulse Bay – is about 1000 miles to the north of Winnipeg, right on the Arctic Circle. In 1958 the settlement had about 100 people ; 95 Inuit and five non-Inuit. In 1958, my parents were in their fifties. I had one little brother. I understood little English and was used to hearing French, as spoken by the clergy. We rarely stayed in the settlement, as my father preferred to be at one of our several camps. We still dressed in skins and lived in tents or snow houses in the wintertime. We harvested wildlife and fish for all our needs. My mother and sister carved and sold to The Bay to supplement our income.

As a young boy, living in the vicinity of Naujaat/Repulse Bay, I was loved by my parents, taught what I needed to know by both my mother and father, and encouraged to be inquisitive, attentive, independent, and courageous. We lived nomadically and I was accustomed to entertaining myself and to learning by observation. Life was hard and often unpredictable [80] because of the weather and the migrations of the animals, despite my parents' ability to predict these. I remember these times with my family with a great fondness and respect for their wisdom.

I also remember other things that I would like to forget, but that must be addressed if the past is to be mended.

These include :

- Being told that we should never say "no" to the demands of the Qablunaaq (the white man), and that if we dared to "talk back" there would be trouble.
- Hearing the Hudson's Bay Company traders say to me things such as : "We have a whole bunch of 'sons-of-bitches of Eskimos' around here. They don't know how to hunt and trap."
- Picking up hints, like the Hudson's Bay Company clerk telling others : "The RCMP is wondering when are you moving back to the land ?" (In other words, you better get out of town soon !)
Or : "If you don't let your son go to school in Chesterfield Inlet, they can put you in jail, or take away your family allowance."

We were moved around, told when to come into town, often for a religious holiday, or never to hunt animals on Sundays, and then told to leave for fear that if we didn't get out trapping, we might become dependent on government social assistance. We understood little of these new ideas that were brought before us.

Then there were books to teach us to become good little "Eskimos." *The Eskimo Book of Knowledge*, produced by the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1930s, instructed the Eskimo how to be clean and to live in a safe, clean tent or igloo, and reassured us that "our father" the King was looking after us. In return, we were to be grateful and do as

we were told. Even the Canadian government got in on the act, producing its own booklet, *The Book of Wisdom for Eskimos*, first published in 1947. It also told us how to live and addressed us like unknowledgeable children, telling Inuit women how to look after a baby, Inuit hunters how to hunt, and encouraging us to use plenty of soap and hot water. I challenge any of you to use plenty of soap and hot water, living in a snowhouse with outside temperatures down to —40 or —50°C, with only precious seal oil for fuel !

For *Qablunaaq*, all Inuit were happy, smiling children playing in a land of ice and snow ; an image reinforced by *Qablunaaq* photographers and writers in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. I remember that many of the *Qablunaaq* who came north acted as bullies towards the "Eskimo" ! Most of the Inuit were obedient and felt they always had to listen to the *Qablunaaqs* instructions.

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In Igluligaarjuk (Chesterfield Inlet), where we were assembled for school, we were told to forget our language. We got slapped with a meter stick for speaking "Eskimo" : "Don't ever let me hear you speak that language again in this classroom !" In 1958, during my first year, my teacher scolded me in front of the other kids. "Forget about your language, your culture. You are here to learn to speak and write English and to do arithmetic."

When we were taken away to school we, as children, were helpless and voiceless. Our parents – who up until then had full responsibility for their children – suddenly saw them taken away, felt powerless against the "government" and "clergy," and accepted the actions of these people.

Even if we had someone to run to, no one would have believed us at that time ! We were so far away from our homes and families. Some of our teachers and caregivers at the schools abused us in every way they could. This abuse was physical, mental, and sexual. Those who did not participate in the abuse appeared not to know anything was wrong. Instead of protecting us, they protected each other.

I can also tell you that those of us who went to the residential schools became the best educated Inuit. If I did not have this education, I would not be here speaking to you today. That is the terrible tragedy of all of

this. Those of us who became the best educated and the most capable of leading the drive toward the creation of Nunavut – of talking back to the *Qablunaaq* – were also the most negatively affected by the same education that made all of this possible. That is why, to put it bluntly, my friends and colleagues deserve your respect and understanding even as we struggle with this difficult history.

In our particular case, in the early 1990s, two friends, Marius Tungilik and Jack Anawak – and myself – spoke of the reality as we remembered it ; of the pain and the shame. We knew we had to do something about this reality. We had suffered abuse at the hands of those who had been entrusted with our care at residential schools.

After much work and fundraising, in the summer of 1993, we held a reunion of former students at Turquetil Hall/Joseph Bernier Federal Day School. Because we cannot easily erase the memory of the sexual, physical, and mental abuses that we have suffered at the hands of the various religious groups, we had to do something to restore our health and history and pride.

Healing, or mending the past, involves two actions. Among those of us who had experienced Joseph Bernier School, our reunion involved students remembering, sharing, and crying. This helps to heal the psychological wounds - but it is only half the struggle. There is nothing worse than having [82] those who abused you deny or rationalize away their abuse. Our second objective was one of getting clergy and the church, as well as the government, to assume their responsibilities and to work with us in finding ways of healing these terrible wounds.

This is not an easy task. While the sexual abuse of children is something that no culture tolerates, other forms of abuse are more easily swept away. For example, some teachers will argue that in the 1960s, strapping a child was acceptable and normal punishment. Not so in my culture. While your ideas about this may have changed, some of these former teachers will argue it was acceptable at the time. Therefore, they see nothing to apologize for. And others will argue that removing children for school was necessary and the only alternative to giving us an education. Without this, they argue, young Inuit would not have been able to relate to the rest of Canadian society. Again, some see nothing to apologize for.

But my point is this. It is not just what we have done, historically, it is how it was done, and that needs mending. Even more importantly, the problem lies with the ideas that lay behind what the *Qablunaaq* did : that we were primitive, ignorant, child-like pagans in need of civilization. What we need is a clear acknowledgement that these ways of thinking were wrong ; that there are other ways of "making sense" that have merit, deserve recognition and are – for all of us, you as well as me – important to what I would like to call the re-enchantment of the world – the return to "ways of being" that respect mystery, tradition, and cultures other than your own. My culture is a precious resource that can teach all of us a great deal about how to live in a society that respects both the environment and people.

As guests at our Joseph Bernier reunion, representatives of the school administrators issued a verbal apology to the former students. We applauded the Catholic Dioceses of the Arctic for taking such an important step in acknowledging and addressing the horrific acts committed against Inuit children. Unfortunately, beyond an apology, they have done nothing. We also applauded the apology delivered by the Government of Canada in 1998. It takes courage and wisdom to make an apology to us in the name of forgiveness. It is more difficult to figure out how to make amends. Financial compensation is not the only - and sometimes not even the best – route to go.

Canadians also have a right to know about what we went through. Much of what has been written about northern history is a fairy tale. Canadians have a right to know the history of residential schools for aboriginal youth. Canadians have a right and duty to correct past mistakes, correcting has only been attempted recently and depends on rewriting much of the historical record.

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We have carried the scars and trauma of our past for too long. In order for us to be healthy and to raise healthy children we need to resolve our personal issues. We Inuit must deal with our own healing however we can. We are reclaiming our culture, heritage and language through Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* — Inuit Traditional Knowledge. As *communities* we must build bridges and open doors to healthy lifestyles. We must encourage, in the strongest way possible, our leaders :

politicians, professionals, and clergy, to model strong, healthy, respectful lifestyles.

But we cannot do this unless we first of all acknowledge and make sense of our past. We need to recognize our history as a colonial one and to use that understanding as the basis for healing. I can assure you that this history, when it is told, will be a very different one than what most Canadians currently understand, which is a history of great (white) men doing heroic things to bring civilization and progress to a backward people. Addressing these myths will be an important step forward.

Nunavut is a government for all, but it is a promised homeland for Inuit. Since Inuit are in the majority we are in a position to forge new solutions to our old problems. We have opened a new chapter and have new challenges ahead of us. As a new Territory we are trying to create a government that is closer to the people it serves. We are creating a government that understands its past, uses the past as strength for the future, and through Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit*, creates a friendly approach to governing.

Inuit are compassionate. We want to promote harmony in our homes, communities, and territory. We have taken steps towards healing and reconciliation. Various groups are taking steps towards reconciliation. Inuit and the RCMP in Nunavut have been working towards reconciliation and mending the past. The churches and the governments are making their efforts at addressing outstanding issues.

Other organizations, such as the Hudson's Bay Company, should step forward to make a gesture of reconciliation. In the eastern Arctic, we have a history of corporate responsibility that parallels what many of you are likely familiar with in the behaviour of oil companies in places like Nigeria and the Sudan, countries that also have a colonial history. Reconciliation means changing practices. It is time that business, economics, and ethics are seen as elements that must work together, not concerns that exist independently of each other.

Mending and forgiveness obviously involves all of us: businesspeople, clergy, educators, social workers, public officials, politicians - no one is exempt because history is made by all of us. Carrying a grudge against those [84] who have done us wrong is,

ultimately, soul-destroying. Inuit have worked long and hard to not carry grudges into the future against those who have done us wrong.

We need to work together and by working together, I believe that we can bring about results which will ensure a better tomorrow for many people in Nunavut, particularly our children.

We feel for others because we actively hold to our values of connectedness and empathy. We would never want to see others in the future be overwhelmed, intimidated, devalued, isolated or abused in any way. Never again !

Let all of us journey together and encourage others to do the same.

Out of great pain there are lessons for all of us :

- Out of our suffering there comes insight, compassion for others, and a deep resolve to move forward, treating other people with greater awareness and kindness.
- Out of our frustration and isolation comes a desire to acknowledge and confront, rather than avoid what is obvious and continuing to suffer in silence.
- Out of a deeply held Inuit belief in survival and always moving forward comes a genuine wish to reach out and help each other progress.
- Out of our marginalizing experience comes a profound need to connect with others, to reaffirm our own identity, while respecting diversity.
- Out of our pain comes sensitivity to others who have suffered.

That provides a lot of fertile ground to engage with you and seek common reference points, common terms, and common understanding.

Let us then, from this day onward, journey together to build a better life, with trust, honesty and determination. We all have a duty and responsibility, to leave a better world for our children and grandchildren.

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RÉSUMÉS / ABSTRACTS

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MÉMOIRE ET PARDON : LE CAS DES INUITS

Mending of the past : the case of the inuits

Peter Irniq

Peter Irniq explique comment la vie des Inuits a été affectée par l'arrivée de l'homme « blanc ». Bien que la présence des gens venus du Sud eut quelques conséquences bénéfiques, ceci s'est fait au prix d'une perte de la culture inuit, de la langue et des croyances, telle que la spiritualité inuit et le chamanisme. Les conséquences négatives ont été déjà ressenties par plusieurs générations, et continueront d'avoir un impact pour de nombreuses années à venir. Certains groupes ont réévalué l'impact de cette situation sur les Inuits du Nunavut, et se sont engagés dans une réinterprétation du passé en prenant en considération les points de vue des populations locales. D'autres groupes résistent à accepter la responsabilité des actions de leurs prédécesseurs. La formation du territoire de Nunavut a été rendue possible par la détermination et la foi de ces Inuits. Un objectif pour les Inuits consiste à assurer la pérennité de leur tradition et de leur langue et à s'assurer que le Qaujimajatuqangit [425] inuit soit non seulement enregistré correctement, mais aussi qu'il survive pour que les générations à venir. Les Inuits visent à avoir une société équilibrée dans tous les aspects de

leur vie. Il y a un sentiment d'urgence chez les chefs Inuits, qui souhaitent atteindre ces objectifs de leur vivant, car leur vie a été remplie de tristesse et de douleur par rapport à leur passé.

Mr. Irniq speaks of Inuit life altered by the arrival of the 'white' man. Although benefits came of the presence of the southerners it was at the expense of Inuit culture, language and beliefs, such Inuit spirituality and shamanism. The negative results have been felt by a few generations already and will continue to have an effect for years to come. Some of the groups have re-evaluated their impact on the Inuit of Nunavut and are taking action to interpret the past taking into account the point of view of the local residents. Some groups are resisting taking responsibility for the actions of their predecessors. The formation of the Nunavut Territory was made possible by the dedication and beliefs of those same Inuit. It is Inuit objective, using the tools of today, to ensure their tradition, language and Inuit Qaujimaqatugangit not only get recorded correctly, but also continue for the generations to come. Inuit aim to have a balanced society in all aspects of their life. There is an urgency for Inuit leaders to achieve their objectives in their lifetime, a lifetime that is also filled with sadness and hurt from their past.

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NOTICES BIOGRAPHIQUES

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Peter Irniq est le commissaire du Nunavut. Il enseigne la culture inuit, et a été le premier Inuit à occuper le poste de directeur des Ressources renouvelables. En 1982-1983, il a été premier président du Conseil de Keewatin puis président de la Keewatin Inuit Association pendant cinq ans. En 1987, Peter Irniq a été élu dans la circonscription d'Aivilik (Territoires du Nord-Ouest), insistant sur l'importance de la participation des Inuits aux postes les plus élevés dans les secteurs de l'emploi, de l'éducation et des affaires. En tant que membre de la Commission d'établissement du Nunavut, Peter Irniq a travaillé au Comité des opérations gouvernementales et des communications. En 1997-1998, Peter Irniq était sous-directeur de la Division du [447] patrimoine et de la Culture du ministère de l'Éducation, de la culture et de la formation du gouvernement des Territoires du Nord-Ouest. L'année suivante, il devenait sous-ministre adjoint au ministère de la Culture, de la Langue, des Aînés et de la Jeunesse.

Fin du texte