

# *Qamani'tuac*

By Raymond Auclair

## ***Résumé - Abstract***

*L'auteur est à la retraite. Il a été, au cours des années 1970, officier de navigation sur les navires de la Garde côtière canadienne. Il est retourné aux études par intérêt personnel et compte sept grades postsecondaires. Il est présentement inscrit au programme de maîtrise en littératures et cultures du monde.*

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Dans la culture et l'histoire Inuit, la ville de Baker Lake ne devrait pas exister. C'était un camp saisonnier où des Inuits de groupes différents se rencontraient, l'été, pour aller chasser et pêcher, afin de ravitailler leurs villages respectifs. L'interférence du colonisateur européen et du gouvernement canadien a fait de Baker Lake une création artificielle. S'agissait-il d'une tentative de construire une utopie? L'auteur mêle ses souvenirs de voyage (1973) avec la recherche littéraire, pour décrire ce mystère.

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In Inuit culture and history, the town of Baker Lake should not exist. It was a seasonal camp where Inuit from different groups would gather, in summer, for hunting and fishing, with the goal of replenishing the supplies of their individual communities. The interference from European colonizers and the Canadian government has contributed to the artificial creation of Baker Lake. Was it an attempt to build Utopia? The author mixes his own travel memories (1973) with his literature research, in order to describe this mystery.

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## **1. Baker Lake is... a place**

Baker Lake is a place. Sure, there is a lake called Baker, but there is also a hamlet at its head, where the Thelon river empties its water into the lake, on its way to the Chesterfield river and Hudson Bay.

The Inuit use the rivers the way we use highways. The lake is just a widening of the highway from Hudson Bay to their summer hunting and fishing grounds.

It is Qamani'tuac "the place where the river widened".

Hunters from different Inuit groups would gather yearly, at the head of the lake, before pushing on to gather food: the caribou migration path covered a wide corridor.

The lake got its English name in 1762, when the Hudson Bay Company's (HBC) explorers were mapping their territory. William Baker was, at the time, a Governor of the company.

Only in 1924 did the HBC build a trading post at the head of the lake, thus forming the nucleus for the hamlet. (Baker Lake Web site)

## **2. A place in the middle of nowhere**

Baker Lake is the only inland Inuit community. The only one. All other traditional Inuit communities are within easy reach of salt water. From Baker Lake, across the lake and down the Chesterfield river, the closest sea water, Hudson Bay, is 300 km away.

Baker Lake is an "island" in a sea of bedrock scoured free of any soil by the advance of the glacier. The glacier was so heavy, pressing down so hard, that the land has been rebounding very slowly, millimetres per year, since the melt, 15,000 years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Nooks and crannies, carved by water and ice, are filled with a compost of earlier biological material. Hundreds of kilometres of naked bedrock surround us. Moss and

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<sup>1</sup> *GEO 1115, Intro to Earth Materials (Geology), uOttawa (audited Fall 2015)*

flower patches are like coloured whitecaps on the waves and swells of that unmoving sea (fig. 1).

At the right time of the year, the place is teeming with caribou and animals that tag along during the migration. Searches in older Inuit hunting camps show the hunters ate well and caught plenty of food for their own communities. (Blangy and Deffner 247)

The place is in the middle of Canada, literally. Take Canada's extreme latitudes and longitudes, find the mid-points and you get a position<sup>2</sup> near Yathkyed Lake, 240 km south of Baker Lake. This makes Baker Lake the closest community to this geographical centre of Canada.

Yathkyed Lake is still north of the tree line, but the summer vegetation there is more plentiful, with plants that could pass for bushes. The map found in Blangy and Deffner (242) shows the caribou calving grounds are in that general area.

We can imagine Inuit hunters avoided hunting around Yathkyed Lake for reasons linked to transportation: there is no direct water link and the calving takes place during the early summer, when the temperature is too warm for safe storage of the meat until winter.

If you visit, please don't go there without a GPS nor an EPIRB<sup>3</sup>. There are no easily recognizable features along the way between the middle of Canada and the place "in the middle of nowhere".

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<sup>2</sup> I calculated 62°23'47"N 098°18'41"W (for Google Earth, use the decimal values 62.39639N 98.31139W)

<sup>3</sup> **Global Positioning System; Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon.** There is no cell-phone coverage.



*Map of Nunavut, showing the approximate “centre of Canada” as the star below Baker Lake*

### 3. Why does Baker Lake even exist as a town?

During the Cold War, the USA installed the DEW Line<sup>4</sup> stations from Greenland (near Thule Air Force Base) to Alaska. Work began late in 1954. Often, American contractors worked as if the territory was theirs, not Canada's.

This prompted the Canadian government to establish permanent communities in the Arctic, in order to strengthen its case for sovereignty. Tester and Kulchyski describe how, starting in 1953, almost a hundred Inuit were moved from the southern Arctic (including the Hudson Strait coast of Quebec) to the high, sometimes very high Arctic. This is when, for example, the community of Grise Fjord (south part of Axel Heiberg Island) was created, by mixing Inuit families of Inukjuak (then Port Harrison) and Pond Inlet.

The government presented this as a humanitarian program, moving the Inuit from where access to food had become scarce (poor hunting, no employment) to new locations where their needs would be satisfied by local abundance and government support. (Blangy and Deffner 242)

In 1927, a report stated “When the Eskimo becomes a trapper he becomes, to a large extent, dependent on the white man for food and clothing. [...] In exchange for his furs he is given white flour or sea biscuits, tea and tobacco, which do not provide sufficient fuel to keep his body warm and nourished.” (qtd. in Tester and Kulcyski 108)

In reality, the relocated Inuit were used as “human flagpoles” (Pope) to assert Canada's sovereignty. The promised support from the government to the new

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<sup>4</sup> *Detection and Early Warning; radar stations to detect any Soviet air invasion of North America.*

communities almost never materialised. A promise to bring back some of them closer to their original land, after two or three years, was never fulfilled. Many of them died.

Canada finally admitted the mistake in 1990 with a formal apology and compensation to the relocated Inuit (through their descendants). In light of the above 1927 quote, future efforts to relocate or to make these nomadic people more sedentary, put them near sea shores where the Inuit's natural source of food and means of transportation are found.

#### **4. White Utopia for Inuit?**

Baker Lake seems to be an exception, but in the context of its location (the “flagpole” at the centre of Canada) and its role as a cultural crossroad (the intersection of hunting routes for at least eight groups of Inuit), sedentarization<sup>5</sup> was encouraged.

In the mid-1950s, Baker Lake got a small hospital; the bigger regional hospital was built in Chesterfield Inlet, at the mouth of the river. A school followed, then a landing strip, two churches, a grocery store and a clothing factory (fig. 6).

To complete this white man's utopia, we gave them wooden houses, just like down south. Being hundreds of kilometres north of the tree line, the idea of wooden houses was foreign to the Inuit. How to stay warm in a house made of flammable material?

We gave them oil furnaces. And skidoos for hunting, and guns, and... What more can they wish for? Of course, someone had to bring all this stuff up north.

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<sup>5</sup> *Sedentarization occurs when a dominant group restricts the movements of a nomadic group.* (*Sedentism on Wikipedia*)

## 5. The Coast Guard and I

The North was largely unexplored at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Captain J.E. Bernier, on the *Arctic* claimed Baffin Island for Canada, on 9 November 1906. (Appleton 74) His trip was mostly one of discovery, but also one of assertion of sovereignty, as foreign countries<sup>6</sup> were also exploring the Arctic to establish their own land claims. Appleton (Chapter IV) describes how this need to assert sovereignty pushed Canada to build a fleet of icebreakers and conduct yearly patrols all over the Canadian Arctic, starting in the 1920s. All these ships were consolidated into a Canadian Coast Guard fleet in 1962.

With time, these ship voyages included the provision of medical services, scientific research, transportation of supplies including heating oil and motor fuel, and so on.

In July 1973<sup>7</sup>, I set out from Québec on the *CCGS Skua*, a converted D-Day landing craft originally designed for a one-shot trip to Normandy, to land armoured tanks and soldiers. Canada had received five of these and converted them into small tankers to supply lighthouses in the South (e.g., St. Lawrence river) and Inuit communities in the North.

I was a navigation officer trained in nautical astronomy, navigation, cartography and mapmaking (what Amerigo Vespucci called a cosmographer). A sign of the time: we were also trained in recognizing incoming Soviet missiles and airplanes... just in case.

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<sup>6</sup> That year, near Hudson Strait, Arctic accosted the Neptune from Newfoundland (not part of Canada until 1949).

<sup>7</sup> This was my 4<sup>th</sup> summer in the Arctic, my second one as an officer. Trips were four months long back then.

We met our sister ship *CCGS Eider* at Chesterfield Inlet (fig. 2) and together, we sailed up to Baker Lake (fig. 3). Our “preliminary chart” had only one line of soundings, and even that showed spots where our ships should not be able to pass. Not only was it (for me) a voyage of discovery, it was also an adventure, flirting with danger. On our first trip up the river (we made seven trips), as the navigator, I was up all the time, recording positions and soundings for future charts, and planning the crossing of the lake.

After this 24-hour trip, we arrived at the settlement just as the Sun rose behind us (fig. 4). What a view of paradise! In this desert of rock and moss stood a village of a thousand<sup>8</sup> complete with glistening metal oil tanks and a newly-received satellite dish! (fig. 5)

Here we were, delivering southern utopia: groceries from the south, heating oil from the south, gasoline for their skidoos (from the south, of course).

I went ashore to visit this place, saw the hospital, the school, a church, the grocery store (where canned vegetables were selling for five times their southern prices) and the clothing factory (fig. 6). I even purchased an “Eskimo coat” for H  l  ne; a perfect fit<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> *Very big for an Arctic community; even today, Baker Lake is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest community*

<sup>9</sup> “How did you guess my size” I walked up to one of the sales girls and said: show me something that fits you.



1. *The rocky waves on the shores of the Chesterfield river.*      2. *CCGS Eider delivering oil in Chesterfield Inlet, 1973*      3. *Eider and Skua anchored in front of Baker Lake, 1973*



4. *Baker Lake at sunrise, late August 1973.*      5. *Baker Lake's newly installed satellite communication dish*      6. *A local enterprise, the Sewing Center selling Inuit clothing, 1973*

**6. Dystopia predicted**

Late 1970s data show that finding caribou, birds and marine mammals is more difficult; commercial fishing data show constant decline everywhere, including in Hudson Bay. (Usher and Wenzel 147) Would the hamlet of Baker Lake disappear?

Changes in caribou migration routes left the residents with more idle time. Once major construction was done, little employment was left. A gold mine (Meadowbank)

opened 100 km to the North, with its own direct link to Val d'Or; workers bypassed Baker Lake<sup>10</sup>. A road allows Inuit to find work at the mine. However, Tester and Blangy explain how mining efforts in the Arctic, despite the “discours sur « l'emploi » au détriment de la communauté inuit”(6) have enhanced economic disparities among residents and failed to give the Inuit the chance “de participer plus pleinement et de façon plus égalitaire à la société canadienne”. (7)

“Meadowbank has already seriously impacted the community of Qamani'tuaq by creating family problems, by increasing wage disparities and by exacerbating social problems.” (Blangy and Deffner, abstract) In addition, dust from the mine contributed to changes in caribou migration routes. (*Ibid.*)

Yet, the hamlet continues to grow. Its economy is still booming: new hotels are being built (yes, hotels!) and they are NOT for the southern mine workers who have their own residence at Meadowbank, with monthly crew changes. Dystopia is failing.

## **7. Balancing the view**

While the south was still practicing forced integration (for ex., residential school system), the residents of the still-young community at Baker Lake had decided to publicly celebrate their differences.

Most traditional Inuit communities each consisted of a single group. From the start, Baker Lake was a gathering of many groups of Inuit people (les Inuits du Caribou), and none of them claimed the location as a traditional home. They openly shared their

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<sup>10</sup> “NOLINOR 737.” *Mighty Planes*, season 3, episode 5, Discovery Channel. An intro video is available at: [www.smithsonianchannel.com/shows/mighty-planes/nolinor-737/1003002/3439342](http://www.smithsonianchannel.com/shows/mighty-planes/nolinor-737/1003002/3439342)

individual stories, legends and myths among themselves, and passed them on to their children. (Blangy and Deffner 241)

Although commercial fishing and hunting was declining, subsistence harvesting -- not captured by official data -- is still sufficient. (Usher and Wenzel 146) The traditional hunters still know where to find food.

When the mine opened, the company provided cell phone service to the hamlet and along the 115-km road. Generosity? Well, the mine needed satellite access and Baker Lake already had a satellite dish, installed in 1973. Win-win, I would say.

The population of Baker Lake is still young, with a median age of 22. (Blangy and Deffner 242) These young people are well versed in tradition AND modernity.

## **8. Conclusion**

Artificiality saved Baker Lake. A place that was not a place, a coincidental intersection of hunting routes, became a place in the middle of nowhere, and this nowhere became the centre of Canada: a flagpole was needed. The south gave them plenty, then left their culture alone, without forced assimilation. Today, Baker Lake continues to enjoy a good mix of southern-like economy and generous subsistence from nature.

Maybe not utopia, but definitely not dystopia.

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All photographs are by the author, while on board the CCGS Skua, 1973.