

## In memoriam

### Leah Aksaajuq Umik Ivalu Otak (1950-2014)

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Volume 38, numéro 1-2, 2014

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1028869ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1028869ar>

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#### Éditeur(s)

Association Inuksiitiit Katimajit Inc.  
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

#### ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)

1708-5268 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer ce document

MacDonald, J. (2014). In memoriam: Leah Aksaajuq Umik Ivalu Otak (1950-2014). *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 38(1-2), 297-300.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1028869ar>

## *IN MEMORIAM*

### **Leah Aksaajuq Umik Ivalu Otak**

**(1950-2014)**

Leah Aksaajuq Umik Ivalu Otak was born at Iglurjuat (Cape Thalbitzer) on Baffin Island (Nunavut, Canada) in March 1950. Her early years were spent in traditional camps throughout this area, some 150 km northeast of Igloolik. By her own account she enjoyed a halcyon childhood, secure in the affections of her parents, Aipilik and Piungittuq Inuksuk, and her grandfather, Aaraaq, of whom she was a particular favourite. In the Inuit way, due to the relational connections bestowed by her many namesakes, she was especially loved in other camps around Iglurjuat.

In the early 1960s Leah started her formal education at the recently built day school in Igloolik, run by the then federal Department of Northern Affairs. For the first few years she was a boarder living in the school's hostel until her family moved to Igloolik in 1967, a move resisted by her grandfather who was presciently mistrustful of the government's "in-gathering" policy. Leah showed a ready aptitude for Qallunaat-style learning and in 1968 enrolled at Ottawa's Algonquin College. Further educational pursuits took her to Inuvik and Fort Smith, where she studied nursing and social work.

Leah's working career was characterized by variety and productiveness. Her early employment centred on medical interpretation, social work, and community administration, positions which made good use of her training and language skills. For a period in the early 1980s, she worked for the CBC Northern Service in Montreal, hosting a morning show in Inuktitut, and becoming a well-known radio voice throughout the Eastern Arctic noted for her nuanced and accurate Inuktitut. Between her more permanent assignments, she had stints as a First Air ticket agent, as a freelance translator, and as a heavy-equipment operator working on the expansion of Igloolik's freshwater reservoir.

But it was her work with the Igloolik Research Centre during the last decades of her life that best suited her interests and gave full scope to her passion for preserving Inuit heritage, language, and life skills. At the time Leah joined the Centre, the Igloolik

Oral History Project had already begun. It had its formal start in 1986 at a meeting of elders concerned about the disruption of cultural transmission from one generation to the next as a consequence of the move from the land to the settlement in the 1960s. In response, they decided to document for posterity as much as possible of their traditional knowledge and history. A major aim of the project was to record their interviews in accurate Inuktitut with all its richness and specialized terminology. Specific goals included recording personal and family histories and compiling a record of local traditional knowledge and life skills. The elders asked that their interviews be translated into English as a means of giving researchers, particularly biologists, access to their knowledge. From the elders' stance, professional biologists tended to be dismissive of Inuit understandings of the environment and its ecology, relying solely on Western science to inform their research conclusions, which often shaped—adversely from the Inuit point of view—the government's policies and regulations on wildlife management. Leah and her then colleagues at the Centre, Louis Tapardjuk and George Qulaut, conducted most of the interviews and, together, painstakingly undertook the bulk of the translation work.

The Igloolik Oral History Project's active archive, now widely used, includes approximately 600 interviews documenting, to a greater or lesser degree, virtually all aspects of Iglulingmiut traditional life as it was prior to the move from the land. Topics include family histories, social organization, life skills, environmental knowledge, place names, cosmology, and spirituality. Educators value the collection as an almost boundless resource for curriculum development in the Eastern Arctic. Schoolbooks, CDs, and readers, deriving from the interviews are published and circulated throughout the region. Leah, shortly before her death, was working on such a project later published as *Inuit Kinship and Naming Customs* (Otak et al. 2014). Over the years several monographs and numerous academic papers on Inuit culture and society have appeared in Canada and abroad based on the elders' interviews, all of them acknowledging Leah's assistance. Museums, including the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington and the British Museum in London, have, as a direct result of their collaboration with the Igloolik Oral History Project, fundamentally revised the ways in which they represent Inuit culture. Leah played a guiding role in the latter institution's acclaimed 2001 exhibition on Inuit clothing called *Annuraaq*. At the conference in London paralleling the exhibition, she presented a paper titled *Iniqsimajuq*, detailing caribou-skin preparation, later published by the British Museum in the conference's proceedings (King et al. 2005).

For all this, however, Leah never lost sight of the point that the Igloolik Oral History Project was, first and foremost, a community resource for the people of Igloolik. She was keenly aware that the Project served both as a foil and as an essential complement to the filtered narratives of outsiders, and that without it much of Igloolik's social history would reside—biased and fragmented—in police patrol reports, in the journals of traders and missionaries, in academic papers, and in the travelogues of itinerant visitors from the south. That the Project's interviews, in aggregate, have given the people of Igloolik a proud and authentic voice in their own history is due to the foresight of the elders who initiated the work, but equally to the

persistence and commitment of Leah who, throughout much of the Project's existence, provided the essential thread of continuity.

Apart from her major involvement with oral history work, Leah's long association with the Igloolik Research Centre placed her in the pivotal role of establishing and maintaining productive links between visiting southern researchers and the people of Igloolik. Respected by all parties, she handled these sometimes sensitive culture-bridging negotiations—often behind the scenes—with tact and adroitness. As a result, virtually all researchers working at the Centre, regardless of their disciplines, were indebted to Leah whether they knew it or not.

Her service in the community was driven by the same interests and enthusiasms so evident in her work. Her expertise in Inuktitut made her the “go to” person on language matters for Igloolik's young Inuit teachers. Always the energetic volunteer, she often took the lead in organizing numerous community events aimed at preserving aspects of Iglulingmiut heritage. Among these were courses on traditional sewing and skin preparation, local radio shows on language preservation, and Igloolik's annual re-enactment of festivities traditionally observed each January on *Siqinnaarut* (‘the return of the Sun’). She also volunteered on community committees dealing with health, education, and culture.

Leah's personal life was marked by an extraordinary degree of tragedy and loss, which she bore, characteristically, with quiet, dignified fortitude, countering the heartbreak with the joy and satisfaction of nurturing her large, extended family of whom she was immensely proud and supportive. Leah will be remembered for many things: her lifelong advocacy for Inuit heritage; her volunteer work; her accomplishments as a translator; her skills as a seamstress; her capacity for friendship. But those who knew her well, all agree that she will best be remembered, as she would have wished, as a caring and compassionate mother, grandmother, aunt, sister, and friend.

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Figure 1. Leah Otak, Igloolik, 2001. Photo: John MacDonald.