

## Chapter 2 Iñupiat Nations

**NOTE: this is an unfinished draft which I am making available in the interest of open discussion. Some of the citations may be incomplete. I have not done a final fact-check. There may be mistakes. If you have comments, or find a mistake, please use the comments page on the website. Please do not quote from this version without express permission from the author. [jhaigh@alaska.edu](mailto:jhaigh@alaska.edu)**

*“Although (Burch’s) informants had not directly experienced the social history they described, they were masters of uqaluktuat, historical chronicles about “authentic incidents” going back two or three generations.” Robin Riddington<sup>1</sup>*

The people of, *Kijigin*, now Wales, live at an auspicious point, the very western tip of the Seward Peninsula, where it projects out into the Bering Sea, intercepting the spring and fall migrations of the bowhead whales. As Vernae Angnaboogk, a young woman from Wales, explained in a presentation at the 2015 Alaska Native Studies Conference, they lived within a complete environment in the shadow of *Kijigin*, Whaleback Mountain. For thousands of years, they not only lived there, they were the owners of the land and the stewards of their environment. It was a thriving city with perhaps seven hundred people in two allied villages, in at least sixty houses.<sup>2</sup> *Kijigin* was organized around whaling. The leaders of the community were the *umialik* or whaling captains, each headquartered in a *qargi*, or men’s house.<sup>3</sup> *Umialik* owned equipment and organized the hunts. Their wives recruited relatives for the crew, and led the all-important

---

<sup>1</sup> Robin Riddington, (UBC) Review Essay, Narrative Technology and Eskimo History  
Ethnohistory 47.3-4 (2000) 791-796

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Jean Ray noted at least 60 probable houses that housed up to 1,000 people in twin villages. Ray, ‘Bering Sea Eskimos,’ in *Handbook of North American Indians*, Arctic, vol. 5 p.286

<sup>3</sup> called Kashim by the Russians and in the early literature

sewing of the boat cover. The *Kiniginmiut* hunted 75-ton sea mammal in leads in the Arctic ice with harpoons, from the skin covered *umiaq*, 15-25 foot boats carrying up to 15 men. Men met each day, in the *qargi*, when they weren't hunting, to work on and maintain their tools. The *qargi* were also the political and social center of the community. A village might have one or more *qargi*, and each *qargi* might be the center of operations for one or more *umialik* or whaling captain. Early *Kinigin* had four *qargi* according to research by anthropologist Dorothy Jean Ray.<sup>4</sup>

When they died, prominent whale hunters were laid to rest with their tools on the mountain and on ridges behind the village, the graves marked with whale bones emphasizing the continuity between life and death, and the links between the living and the spirit world. The Iñupiat indigenous knowledge system and spiritual beliefs expressed in art, ceremony, music and dance combined all the things they had come to know to live and survive in this particular place, even as they were also stewards of the land. Angnaboogk showed many photos of the area around *Kinjin*: Whale Mountain, and Granite Mountain, where whale bones mark successful hunters' graves.

Iñupiaq speaking peoples have lived in the Arctic for thousands of years, mastering survival in a sublime and dynamic environment of snow-covered tundra, sea, and ice. Along Arctic coasts, they developed a synthesis of beliefs, cultural practices, and highly efficient whaling technologies allowing them to build large and stable villages. But some of the Iñupiat also lived in more inland areas, where they sustained rich lives and cultures by exploiting a variety of resources, including caribou, fresh-water fish, and small game. Recent research has established that the Iñupiat and other Alaska Natives were, in fact, organized Nations with

---

<sup>4</sup> Ray, Bering Sea Eskimos, p.286

recognized citizens, controlling and defending their resources and territory. But by the time anthropologists and others arrived in the North, after the 1880s, these Iñupiaq nations had ceased to exist, destroyed by the after-effects of a Euro-American appropriation of their resources that decimated the population of whales and walrus, turned their cultures and traditional way of life upside down, and brought epidemic disease and famine which decimated populations. By the late 1880s and 1890s the geography of Iñupiat nations had broken down. While most visitors after this time saw a displaced multi-national population of refugees, Inupiaq speaking census takers in 1900, Ivan Petroff and Charles Brower, were well aware of the original national identities and added these identities to the enumeration, and to accompanying maps.<sup>5</sup> Yet knowledge of these important national identities faded in the twentieth century as survivors relocated, and established new villages. Thus, until quite recently, outsiders wrongly imagined Iñupiat cultures as primitive, nomadic, hunter-gatherers, living in small family units with unchanging culture and lifeways stretching back into the mists of pre-history. They were not always aware that there had in fact been independent nations.

Tribal elders and culture bearers, Native scholars, anthropologists, historians, and oral historians have worked to push back the frontiers of what we can know about Native nations prior to incursions by the Russians, Europeans, and Americans and the devastations of resource appropriation and disease. What territories did these nations occupy? How were they governed and organized, and how did they support themselves and conduct trade and other affairs with other nations?

---

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Burch, *The Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska*, Fairbanks: U of Alaska Press, 1998. Also, Charles Brower, *Fifty Years Below Zero*.

## Iñupiaq Native Nations

Iñupiaq Native nations, while small, were, as anthropologist Ernest Burch states, “the Iñupiat counterparts of modern nation states.”<sup>6</sup> The Iñupiat called their traditional social groups *nunaqatigiich*, in Iñupiaq, and nations in English.<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s anthropologist Dorothy Jean Ray was the first outsider to describe these nations. While not using the term nation, she noted that each sub-group constituted a “well-ordered society in which a chief and often a council played an important role. The influence of their government extended over a definitely bounded territory within which the inhabitants were directed by a system of rules and laws.”<sup>8</sup> Burch and others emphasize that all of the Iñupiaq Nations had internal political leadership structures, and conducted relations ‘between and among’ themselves and other nations in their own regions. Until the early 19th century, each nation spoke its own subdialect of Iñupiaq. While anthropologists have described these sub-groups as societies, nations, or tribes, I refer to them as nations, but I will use societies, nations and tribes somewhat interchangeably.

Native people have always had their own ways of remembering and preserving their history. In particular, the histories are marked on the land with place names that commemorate people and events, reminding people of important hunting and fishing spots, and old villages and camps. In addition, societies have designated historians, charged with remembering these important histories. A number of Iñupiat historians including Simon *Paniaq* Paneak, Charlie *Sagaluuzaq* Jensen, Martha Swan, Robert Cleveland, and others helped anthropologist Ernest Burch to finally understand the structure of Native Nations so that he could write it down,

---

<sup>6</sup> Burch, *Societies*. p.1

<sup>7</sup> Burch, *Societies*.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Jean Ray, 1967, quoted in Burch.

bridging the knowledge gap between traditional and academic knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Anthropologist Robin Riddington noted that “Although (Burch’s) informants had not directly experienced the social history they described, they were masters of *uqaluktuat*, historical chronicles about “authentic incidents” going back two or three generations. The ability to remember, tell, and organize this information is a key to what I have called the “narrative technology” of hunting and gathering peoples.”<sup>10</sup>

Many of the historic place names have been erased and overwritten by Western geographers and explorers, who have designated their own names. Burch conducted extensive research with the Iñupiat in the Arctic and on the Northwest coast for more than forty years, including oral history, and place names. He travelled widely, visiting many different villages, and interviewing the most knowledgeable elders. Burch made an intensive effort to study the early nineteenth century, the “traditional period” prior to arrival of outsiders, and was able to interview recognized Iñupiat historians from fourteen villages between 1960 and 1990.<sup>11</sup> Through extensive research, Burch was able to correlate the stories told in various places, and corroborate them with evidence from written sources. Much of his fieldwork was conducted in the 1960s a period when these still living elders could tell stories of their grandparents and great grandparents that extended back into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> The corroboration and correlation is important in the context of academic anthropology and history, an important bridge between traditional knowledge and academic knowledge.

---

<sup>9</sup> detailed in Burch, *The Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska*, Fairbanks: UA. Press, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Robin Riddington, “Review Essay, Narrative Technology and Eskimo History, *Ethnohistory* 47.3-4 (2000) 791-796. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/11691>

<sup>11</sup> Burch, 2005:10, 48-50).

<sup>12</sup> Erica Hill, Introduction, in Burch, Ernest S., and Erica Hill. *Iñupiaq Ethnohistory: Selected Essays*. 2013

The Iñupiat were and are divided generally into three regions, those on the Northern Coast, from Point Hope to Barrow, those on the Northwest Coast from Kotzebue to Point Hope, and those on the Seward Peninsula, the coastal lands of eastern Norton Sound and the Bering Sea Islands. These divisions are reflected today in the division between the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, ASRC, NANA, the corporation for the Northwest, and Bering Straits Regional Corporation, BSRC. The Bering Straits region also includes Siberian Yup'ik people on St. Lawrence Island, and Central Yup'ik on the eastern shores of Norton Sound, and King Island Iñupiaq who were relocated to Nome in 1959 when their school was closed by the BIA. Inupiaq people also live on Little Diomedede Island, and formerly on Sledge Island.

Each region includes a number of distinct nations. Each individual nation was named after their location using the suffix “-miut” meaning “people of” and had a specific name, usually referring to a geographic location or feature.<sup>13</sup> Each nation occupied a particular ecological niche, and owned and controlled specific resources. These resources dictated the distinct subsistence pattern, responding to, and designed to best exploit the resources. Thus the suffix -miut designates not only inhabitants of a specific place, but a Nation of people who own and control resources within specific boundaries, and sometimes with specific treaty rights to resources in the territories of others. We will see the example of the *Noatagmiut* below.

Yet whole communities were sometimes force to migrate. According to the history accepted by the Bering Straits Native Corporation, The people living around Norton sound migrated and settled there sometime after 1800:

*Around 160 years ago, small groups of people from the Selawik and Kobuk Rivers areas, north of the BSNC region, migrated south to Norton Sound. This migration may have been the result of a famine, devastation brought on by smallpox and the*

---

<sup>13</sup> See Burch

*disappearance of the local caribou herds. These Malemiut speakers (a dialect of Inupiaq) married into the remaining families of Yup'ik speakers, and eventually settled in the communities of Koyuk, Shaktoolik and Unalakleet. The communities of St. Michael and Stebbins are the home of central Yup'ik people.*<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the line between Yup'ik and Inupiat has been a shifting one

Anthropologists formerly saw a division between inland people generally referred to as *Nunamiut*, “*nuna*” meaning land, and coastal people referred to as *Taremiut*, people of the coast.<sup>15</sup> However, these are generic terms, like “Midwesterners,” or “people from the East Coast” or “New Englanders.” In practice, the Arctic Slope Region includes both *Nunamiut*, and *Taremiut*, as does the NANA region. Furthermore, many if not most Iñupiaq Nations depended on a range of resources including both marine mammals and caribou. Burch and others have adopted the terms Estate and Range to describe the territories of these nations. Estate refers to the area over which a nation and its citizens have total control over land and resources. Range is the actual range of territory that the nation’s citizens range over in the course of their seasonal subsistence rounds. The nation may use resources in the territory of another nation, as we will see with the example of the *Napaaqtuḡmiut*, but this is only at a specific time, with express permission of the owners.

### Whaling Villages

Where geographic points of land extended out into the sea, the Iñupiat were able to establish a number of stable villages to intercept the seasonal migrations of the great bowhead whales. The ties to whaling are deep, both material and spiritual, and timeless.<sup>16</sup> Point Hope has

---

<sup>14</sup> / <http://beringstraits.com/about-us/history/>

<sup>15</sup> Iñupiat plural form, while Iñupiaq singular and Iñupiak (from iñuk 'person' - and -piaq 'real', i.e., 'real people')

<sup>16</sup> Kinjikmiut traditional ceremonies and beliefs “Ties Between People and Land” [voanjnaboogok@alaska.edu](mailto:voanjnaboogok@alaska.edu), AKNS conf. Fbks, 2015. The name of the village of Wales is based on the British name for the geographic feature Cape Prince of Wales.

been the seat of the *Tikiġaqmiut* Nation for 2,500 years, making it the oldest continuously inhabited community in North America. At *Ipiutak*, the prehistoric site near the present village, archeologists have found six hundred prehistoric house depressions built over a period of 300–400 years, on ancient beach ridges occupied by perhaps 125–200 people in 20 to 30 houses in any one generation. The *Ipiutakmiut* hunted ringed seal and walrus, and also hunted caribou in mountains to the south.<sup>17</sup>

Utqiagvik, on the shores of the Arctic Ocean, was and is the most important Iñupiaq village in the northern Arctic, and marks the division between the Chukchi Sea to the west, and the Beaufort Sea on to the east, both part of the Arctic Ocean. Iñupiat there have recently reclaimed this ancient name, after using the colonial designation Point Barrow for over a century.<sup>18</sup> Over the last few thousand years, Iñupiaq people have occupied a number of village sites near Utqiagvik, the northernmost point on the US Arctic coast, including sites called Ukpeagvik. The Utqiagvik archaeological site consists of over sixty mounds representing prehistoric winter dwellings and associated archaeological features, dated as far back as AD 500. Many house mounds are still visible in the village of Utqiagvik today.<sup>19</sup>

Whales and whaling provided the Iñupiat with numerous resources, in addition to a cultural identity. The most important resource was food: a large whale could feed the entire village. The whale blubber burned in oil lamps also provided both heat and light. The baleen

---

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.tikiġaq.com/category/shareholder/point-hope/#202>

<sup>18</sup> The people of Barrow voted in 2016 to adopt the name Utqiagvik, ‘place to gather wild roots,’ Just after a local vote local *Ukpeagvik Iñupiat* Corporation took the city to court, claiming theirs was the original name, “the place for hunting snowy owls.” As of March, 2017, Utqiagvik stands. <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/rural-alaska/2016/12/01/the-town-formerly-known-as-barrow-already-in-court-over-new-name-of-utqiagvik/>

Barrow was named by William Beechey in 1826 for a famous British geographer who had never been in the Arctic

<sup>19</sup> Some of the artifacts collected at the site can be viewed at the Iñupiaq Heritage Center [http://www.uark.edu/misc/jcdixon/Historic\\_Whaling/Villages/Barrow.htm](http://www.uark.edu/misc/jcdixon/Historic_Whaling/Villages/Barrow.htm)



was an important material for tools, and the whale jaw bones were used for building. Iñupiat in all the whaling villages have reclaimed this tradition through the modern Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission in coordination with the International Whaling Commission, an international body that designates quotas for whaling.<sup>20</sup>

### Caribou

While some nations were centered on coastal estates and others were centered in inland regions, like the Colville, Kobuk, and Noatak river basins, all of the Iñupiat relied on migrating caribou. The caribou provided not only food, but the basic material for clothing across the Arctic. Caribou skins were a major trade item that inland peoples could trade for seal oil, an important resource for food, lighting and heat, as well as ivory for tools. The Western Arctic Caribou Herd migrated generally north to south and back again, crossing the Kobuk and Noatak rivers. Nearly all used both maritime and inland resources. Each nation followed a seasonal cycle to harvest a variety of resources. Many of the nations followed a seasonal cycle that took them from the river environment, into the mountains to hunt caribou and to the coast to harvest sea mammals. Each nation's traditional subsistence patterns depended upon location and season when resources were available at particular places in particular hunting territories.

Many Iñupiat nations, even away from the coast, centered on large home winter villages, where people gathered during fall and winter seasons. Working with local people, Dr. Doug Anderson, an archaeologist with Brown University has recently documented the existence of a large Iñupiat winter village they call *Igliqtiqsiugvigruak*: Swiftwater Place near the Kobuk River village of Kiana. Anderson describes the village as a regional center with an estimated

---

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.aewc-alaska.com/about-us.html>

population of around 200 people. Radio carbon dating established likely dates from the late 1700s or early 1800s, just before first the first European explorers reached the area.<sup>21</sup>

### **Example: The Napaaqtuḡmiut**

The *Napaaqtuḡmiut* can serve as an example of the complexity of each nations subsistence lifestyle and subsistence rounds. They occupied the lower reaches of the Noatak river basin, a segment of the Chukchi Sea coast and the area between. Their understanding of their origins are that they have been there “always.”<sup>22</sup> Their population in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, by Burch’s careful methodological estimation was 264-336. They were coastal people who depended on sea mammals, but were not whale hunters. Their seasonal rounds illustrate the range of resources from which each nation made their living. For the Napaaqtuḡmiut these included fish, marine mammals, and caribou from the Western Arctic Caribou herd.<sup>23</sup>

In early summer the population was settled in seven or eight small settlements along the coast of the Chukchi Sea. Men were engaged in hunting for the large bearded seal on the sea ice. Later in the season, six or eight men would go out together in *umiaq* to harpoon for swimming bearded seals. Women dried the seal meat, and cooperatively processed the hides and sewed them together to make new covers for the umiak. Duck and goose hunting with long handled nets supplemented the diet of seal meat. They also fished for Dolly Varden, as the fish left the rivers and travelled out along the shore close to the beach.

---

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.alaskapublic.org/2013/08/01/archaeologists-uncover-pre-contact-inupiat-village-near-kiana/>. There is a new documentary on the discovery, “Igliqtisiugvigruak [Swift Water Place],” <http://juneauempire.com/art/2014-12-11/brice-habegers-swiftwater>

<sup>22</sup> Burch, *Inupiaq Eskimo Nations*, p.67

<sup>23</sup>The following from Burch, *Inupiaq Eskimo Nations*, p.67

All this was in preparation for the move to the late summer camp and trade fair at *Sisualik* (Sheshalik). The inhabitants of the northernmost settlement left first, packing everything in their boats, as soon as the ice was out. People and dogs on shore pulled the boats south to the next camp where all the people joined in to travel to next camp and so forth until the entire nation joined to travel together in order to arrive together in a show of unity and strength.

At *Sisualik*, a long sand spit in Kotzebue Sound, the Napaaqtuḡmiut joined people of other nations from the upper Noatak and Kobuk rivers, Kotzebue, and the Kobuk River Delta, each camped at their traditional sites. The other nations had been engaged in hunting Beluga whales although the hunt was mostly over by the time the Napaaqtuḡmiut arrived.

After the trade fair, the Napaaqtuḡmiut left *Sisualik* and headed back up the Noatak River, walking and pulling the loaded boats, to return to their fall/winter settlements for salmon fishing. It was the women who fished with seines, drying the fish in early fall, and freezing them when the weather got colder. Women also picked berries and harvested *masru*, an indigenous potato. The men headed further upriver into the mountains to hunt caribou. Like most indigenous people in Alaska the Iñupiat cooperated on caribou hunts, using technology like caribou fences and corrals. Of course the construction of fences as much as a mile long took collective action, organized by community leaders. After the caribou were herded into a limited area, hunters would have easier access to shoot the caribou. Sometimes hunters would use snares to capture caribou as they attempted to get through a fence, or out of a corral. Men also drove caribou into a lake where they could be speared from kayaks. Hunters liked to get the early fall caribou because the skins were best for clothing. The meat would sometimes be dried, or cached to be hauled into camp later. Women played an important role in construction the clothing and footwear for the entire family, and sometimes a surplus for trade.

Fall settlements were located at good fishing spots with an abundance of willows both for fuel, and to camouflage dwellings from enemy raids. Salmon, char, ling cod and grayling were important food sources. Settlements were dispersed, with some only one or two hoses.

For all of the Iñupiat in the Arctic the shortest days of the year were a time of celebration. People might celebrate themselves, or travel to a messenger feast in a larger settlement for feasts, dances, games and athletic contests.<sup>24</sup> Winter, January to March, was a time to hunker down with food that had been cached, or if necessary, move to place with more fish or caribou.

Around the spring equinox, the Napaaqtugmiut loaded their umiaq and kayak frames and covers on sleds and began to head down to their spring villages on the coast where men hunted bearded seal and ringed seal, either from shore or from the ice, ready to move to *Sisualik* again when the ice went out.

### **International relations trade and warfare**

Iñupiat nations maintained international relations of both war and trade. They were extremely territorial, with borders that were recognized by themselves and their neighbors. Traditional historical accounts note that citizens were quick to take up arms to defend their territories, and that raids on other nations and villages were not uncommon.<sup>25</sup>

Trading relations were of three types. The first was a series of trade fairs, or trade that happened at specific times and places. Rules about travel across the territory of other nations were specifically suspended for travel to these fairs, as they were for travel for specific

---

<sup>24</sup> Burch, *Inupiat Eskimo Nations*, 75. Messenger feast because a community would send out messengers to invite guests.

<sup>25</sup> The following is distilled from Burch, *Alliance and Conflict*, with some observations from Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers*

subsistence activities. Trade also took place between trading partners, who maintained long standing relationships across the boundaries of nations, and even cultures. And third, trade also took place to a lesser extent at the Messenger Feasts in the winter.

## **Trade Fairs**

### **Sisualik**

Iñupiat people from across Western Alaska gathered in the spring at *Sisualik*, (sometimes Sheshalik) a sandspit on the coast of Kotzebue Sound, for a major trade fair. In addition to being in an advantageous location for access, the site also offered a seasonal gathering of beluga whales, enough to sustain the 1,000-1,700 people who would be gathered there for as long a few months.<sup>26</sup> In addition to trading and harvesting beluga whales, people from many nations participated in ceremonies and dancing. Sisualik was a gathering of nations attended from King Island, Sledge Island, the Diomed Islands, as well as Point Hope, and Wales. Chukchi and Siberian Yup'ik from across the Bering Straits also were regular visitors, along with Koyukon from the interior. Iñupiaq arrived with walrus ivory and seal skin pokes full of seal and whale oil, muktuk and caribou skins. Chukchi arrived from Siberia with reindeer skins, and iron knives and spear heads traded from other Asian people and Dené from the Interior arrived with caribou and moose skin, and woodland furs like muskrat, and fox, and fur garments, as well as obsidian from an important source in the Koyukuk River drainage on the south side of the Brooks Range. Obsidian, chert from various sites in the Brooks Range, and jade from a site north of the Kobuk

---

<sup>26</sup> Bocstoce, *Furs andF* gives the upper number of 1,700. P. 145

River were all mined and traded for making tools.<sup>27</sup> However, some Inupiaq acted as middle men, having previously traded for these good from the Koyukon or Gwich'in from further East.

Despite the use of “contact” as a dividing line, first engagement with western explorers did not immediately change life for the Iñupiat. Nevertheless, the continuing impact of outsiders on Iñupiat over the period 1820-1880 ultimately led to extensive death and destruction. When I hear the word contact, I imagine two men walking toward each other on a remote beach, or a group of Iñupiaq hunters as they sight a large sailing ship for the first time. And for the Iñupiat, this indeed happened, at least a few times. But when we use the word contact to designate a dividing line between pre-contact and post-contact for an entire era region, it becomes a euphemism. Burch defines the “early Iñupiat contact period” as between 1800-48 on the Northwest Arctic Coast, and defines its significance as “the earliest time on which both oral and documentary sources can shed light, but the latest time period in which Iñupiaq societies were essentially free of western influence.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, not a specific dividing line. By the time the first English and Russian explorers arrived beginning in 1819 the Iñupiat were already involved in sophisticated system of international trade. They certainly knew of the existence of Europeans, white men who came from afar. They had undoubtedly always traded with their neighbors across the Bering Sea, the Chukchi. The Chukchi had access to goods from Asia, including iron tools and pots. In turn, they were eager to get ivory walrus tusks.

The first British and Russian explorers had little impact: life for the Iñupiat remained roughly the same until whalers from Boston discovered the resource in the early 1850s. Hundreds of whaling ships came to the Bering Sea and decimated the resource in just a few short

---

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey T. Rasic, “Archeological Evidence for Transport, Trade and Exchange in the North American Arctic.” CH. 5, *Oxford Handbook of the Prehistoric Arctic*, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Burch, Social Life?

years. Their arrival brought disease which led to the death of many people. Then the whalers began to establish shore stations, as many as thirteen south of Point Hope alone. While at first the Iñupiat had no need to interact with the whalers, with the demise of some nations and dislocation due to disease and famine, eventually there were some Iñupiat who found it expedient to take jobs with the whaling companies. The whaling companies, with their access to capital from the East Coast or San Francisco were able to hire individual Iñupiaq to build umiaq, and to hunt for them, quickly outcompeting the traditional whaling captains. Many of these white whalers also married, or co-habited and had children with Inupiaq women. They also introduced the Inupiat to alcohol which had devastating effects. The result was wholesale cultural change and by the late 1880s and 1890s the geography of Iñupiat nations had broken down into a mostly displaced multi-national population of refugees.

Russians hunters reached the Bering Sea after pursuing furs from Moscow through Siberia. They began moving into Siberia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, pursuing furs which were an important commodity both in Russia and in Europe. Their customary practice was not to trade, but to demand *iasuk* or tribute from those they conquered. Thus, their practice was very different from that of, say the French in North America, who recognized the autonomy of the indigenous people and initiated trading relationships in order to obtain furs for the European market. By the beginning of the 18th century, Russia was attempting to subdue the indigenous Chukchi, on the Bering Sea coast, and they had established a fort at the mouth of the Anadyr River. During this period, the Chukchi had access to more Russian goods, and became more interested in securing furs that they could trade into the Russian markets. The Chukchi territory was not generally forested, and so the Chukchi themselves did not have direct access to furs they could trap. While some of the Iñupiat nations had access to fur-bearing species, others were now motivated the

Iñupiat to secure furs from their Koyukon neighbors. Thus, while indigenous trade networks had always existed, the amount of trade probably began to increase during this period.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike nations to the west of them, the Chukchi in eastern Siberia successfully defended their nations against Russian imperialism, and were never really subject to *iasuk*. Instead, they established a trade agreement, and the Russians developed an important trading entrêpot at Ostrovnoe, nearly 800 miles from the Bering Sea Coast. This coincided with a trading treaty between Russia and China, giving Russia a direct entrée into the insatiable market for furs in China. Some of the Chukchi responded by becoming full time traders, making an annual trip across the Bering Sea to acquire furs at Sisualik, as well as the six month round trip to Ostrovnoe, to trade the furs for Russian goods, now including guns, gunpowder and supplies, tobacco and alcohol, as well as iron tools and the ubiquitous blue glass beads still found all over Alaska.<sup>30</sup>

Thus by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the Iñupiat were tied into international commodities markets in which Alaska furs were an important commodity. When the first Europeans arrived, they found that the Iñupiat already had iron tools and iron pots as well as Russian beads and trinkets. Meanwhile, by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the British had consolidated the fur trade in the Canadian Arctic, and some British goods were also being traded to the Alaskan Iñupiat through the Inuit on the Mackenzie River Delta.<sup>31</sup>

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the Iñupiat had traded for Russian goods, mostly directly from Chukchi and Siberian Yup'ik, for at least a century. When the Russians became aware of this

---

<sup>29</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*

<sup>30</sup> Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers*

<sup>31</sup> Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers*



trade, they attempted to insert themselves as middlemen, between the Koyukon and the Iñupiat and Chukchi. They at first sent trade ships to travel up the coast, but the Chukchi in particular attacked the ships, defending their own trading empire. In 1833 the Russians established a trading post, Redoubt St. Michael at the mouth of the Yukon, just south and east of the Seward Peninsula. But the Russians had trouble supplying the post, and maintaining an effective stock of trade goods, Furthermore, various groups continued to attack the post. The Russians never maintained effective control over trade in the region, and never effected a monopoly of trade.

Many Iñupiat had seen, and some even interacted with the Russian Kashevarov expedition in 1838, as their party included an interpreter as they made their way up the coast. Kashevarov's party consisted of fifteen men paddling five unusual three-hatch Unangan kayaks.<sup>32</sup> While the documents we have include translated information the Iñupiat conveyed to the Russians, the interpreter must have also attempted to explain the Russians to the Iñupiat. Kashevarov himself was a Creole, part Russian, and the translator must have explained that the Russians had conquered the Unangan people of the Aleutians. Traveling in the kayaks, Kashevarov and his party were mistaken for enemy nations by many of the Iñupiat. With their history of hostile relations with each other, the Iñupiat carefully warned Kashevarov of the hostile intentions of other tribes. Most early explorers reported that the Iñupiat they encountered were at first hostile and often violent.<sup>33</sup>

By the 1850s the Iñupiat had learned to trade meat, skins, walrus tusks, and furs with visiting ships, but they could not have imagined that the white men in their sailing ships would

---

<sup>32</sup> Bockstoce, John R. *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North: The Contest Among Native and Foreign Nations for the Bering Strait Fur Trade*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. This seems to be the most comprehensive description of the expedition.

<sup>33</sup> Bockstoce, *Furs*.

come to compete for their whales. As we have seen, a good portion of the Iñupiaq Nations were intimately tied to whaling both materially, and spiritually. Hunting the whales defined them, and organized their communities.

From 1852 to 1854 British explorers overwintered in the north twice looking for the lost Franklin expedition, making contact with the Iñupiat, and naming important geographic features. None of these expeditions by themselves would have had a significant impact on Iñupiaq life if the explorers had not mentioned the presence of bowhead whales in the area. As a result, American whalers began to mount commercial whaling expeditions. Europeans and New Englanders had already developed a technology to hunt whales in the North Atlantic seeking whale oil, the first commercial product to replace candles for light.

The demise of the Iñupiaq Nations as independent nation states came about during the whaling era, but as a result of both natural and man-made calamities including resource appropriation, disease, and a crash in the populations of the great caribou herds. Anthropologist Barbara Bodenhorn completed oral history research in the Northwest Arctic, and summarized peoples experience of the period as "traumatic."<sup>34</sup> The beginning of whaling did not in itself cause the demise of the Iñupiat nations. Rather, phenomenon coincided, and reinforced each other. The whalers brought diseases, which weakened the nations. This perhaps made them more susceptible to the ravages of a great famine in the early 1880s. And in weakened condition from the famine, people were likely more susceptible to disease.

---

<sup>34</sup> Barbara Bodenhorn, "'The Animals Come to Me. They Know I Share': Inupiaq Kinship, Changing Economic Relations. and Enduring World Views on Alaska's North Slope," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Cambridge, 1989),32. 10, quoted in Mark S. Cassell, 'If They Did Not Work for the Station. They Were in Bad Luck': Commercial Shore Whaling and Inupiat Eskimo Labor in Late-Nineteenth/Early-Twentieth Century North Alaska." Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, SUNY-Binghamton, 2000.

John Simpson Irish-born surgeon in the British Navy who participated in several Arctic voyages recorded the first reported epidemic in the region, in 1830, possibly from an Asiatic source, which killed many people in *Tikigaq*, Point Hope; *Qayaiqsigvik*, Icy Cape; Cape Smyth, and two villages at Point Barrow, *Ukpiagvik*, and *Nuvuk*. Simpson noted an immense cemetery, indicating recent epidemic at Point Barrow and reported that 40 people died, out of 360.<sup>35</sup> One of the earliest reported epidemics in Alaska was a smallpox epidemic which killed people from Kodiak to the Yukon/Kuskokwim delta 1838-1840, and then worked its way up the Yukon into the interior.<sup>36</sup>

In the early 1850s, about the time that American whalers arrived in the Arctic, an epidemic of respiratory disease hit Port Clarence, an important whaling station on the Seward Peninsula. At the same time an influenza outbreak in Point Barrow killed 40. Another severe respiratory epidemic struck the north shore of Norton Sound in 1882.<sup>37</sup> On one of his first trips in the Arctic, in 1885, Charles Brower, later a famous figure in Barrow, came across a deserted village, which his native tour guides attributed to starvation after influenza type illness several years previous.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the Iñupiat Nations were weakened by the time they had to face the greatest calamity, the crash of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd (WACH). At the same time, nearly all other food resources also strangely disappeared almost altogether in some regions, leading to a profound famine that lasted nearly two years. The timing of this famine is difficult to place precisely, but it was thought to have been 1881 to 1883.<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding the tremendous toll

---

<sup>35</sup> Burch, *Social Life*, 2, citing Simpson 1875:237, and Robert Fortune, *Chills and Fever*, 1992, 119, 210.

<sup>36</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*, 179

<sup>37</sup> Fortune, *Chills and Fever*, 1992. 209-210, and citing Russian explorer Netsvetov

<sup>38</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*, Brower, *Fifty Years*

<sup>39</sup> Burch, *Social Life*

of disease, it was principally the collapse of the caribou herds which had begun in the 1870s in various places, and accelerated till the time of the famine which seems to have begun the process of national collapse, according to Burch. Disease, and famine brought many deaths, which led to mass dislocation, as people left their homes, and regrouped. Weakened by disease, and loss of elders, tradition bearers, and hunters. People now confronted a savage and deadly famine in much of the interior Northwest Arctic, as the WACH crashed, caribou disappeared and other food resources also became scarce. Again, people left their homes and familiar subsistence resource patterns to move to other areas, traveling to go to places where they had relatives. Those who waited too long starved.<sup>40</sup>

For example, the Kivilingmiut were a substantial nation located on the coast between Kotzebue Sound and Point Hope. They also depended on the Western Arctic Caribou herd. The crash of the caribou herd led to a profound famine that lasted nearly two years. Many of the Kivilingmiut died of starvation, the rest saved themselves by migrating to other nations where they had friends and relatives. “Starvation and disease brought by outsiders wiped out more than 70 percent of Kivalina’s original population in the early 1900s. In 1920, Kivalina was estimated to have 87 residents, down from 350 to 400 in 1906.”<sup>41</sup> When the famine waned, some the Kivilingmiut returned to the area, an area of plentiful resources. But meanwhile, others, some from the Seward Peninsula also settled in the area which appeared after the famine to be unutilized. When the BIA established a school, they induced the population to move yet again to establish a permanent village site. The population in Kivilina today consists of some of the original Kivilingmiut families, plus descendants of people from other nations.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Burch, *Social Life*

<sup>41</sup> Nana.com

<sup>42</sup> Burch

The New England whalers appropriated the resources of the Iñupiat, first the whales, and then the walrus, without any regard for the Iñupiaq people who depended on the resource.<sup>43</sup> The first commercial whaling ship entered the Bering Sea in 1848 and confirmed the large population of bowhead whales. Up to 200 ships arrived in 1849, and 1850, killing 2,000 whales. Then in 1852, whalers killed 2,682.<sup>44</sup> The catch that year was valued at a record \$14 million.<sup>45</sup> “By early 1880s whalers had nearly exterminated bowhead whales and walrus.” But it wasn’t only whalers, “Whalers were accompanied by independent trading vessels whose masters quickly discovered the potential of the Native fur trade.”<sup>46</sup>

When they first arrived in the Western Arctic, the American whalers stuck to their customary technology for hunting whales at sea, called pelagic whaling. By the 1880s 15,000 whales had already been taken, and whales were becoming more difficult to hunt. As whaling became more difficult, the Americans appropriated Iñupiaq lands for on-shore stations so they could winter over and catch whales in the early spring. Then in the mid-1880s a few of the American whalers decided to copy the Iñupiat whaling techniques. They appropriated the Iñupiat technology, hunting from *umiaks* hiring local Iñupiat as laborers on the whaling ships, and their wives to sew and cook.<sup>47</sup>

The Iñupiat whalers had always been organized with a system of *umialik*, whaling captains, wealthy men who owned the boats and equipment and organized the hunts. The *umialik*

---

<sup>43</sup> Burch *Social Life*, 2

<sup>44</sup> Murray Lundberg <http://www.explorenorth.com/library/yafeatures/bl-whaling.htm>

Graeme Wynn, *Canada and Arctic North America: An Environmental History*. Must be in Bokstoece etc.

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.akhistorycourse.org/northwest-and-arctic/1732-1871-age-of-arctic-exploration-and-whaling>

<sup>46</sup> Burch *Social Life*, p2

<sup>47</sup> Analise Jacobs, “Shore Whaling”

earned their status through wealth generated through trading ability, and through the production of their extended family. The position was sometimes, but not always passed down through families. But their responsibilities extended from the physical to the spiritual realm, they needed to make sure that all spirits were appropriately appeased and all taboos were respected.

When the white whalers began to build their own boats and hire and organize their own crews, they took advantage not of their extended kin group, but of conventional access to capital based mostly in San Francisco, companies willing to finance this new approach. Second of all they took advantage of the dislocation of populations due to disease mortality, and the great famine of 1881-1883.

Charles Brower, an enterprising young man from the states was the first to think of organizing his own whaling crews. He had worked on whaling ships, and also wintered and traveled in the Arctic, and as an adventurer, had even gone out with Iñupiat crews. He persuaded a San Francisco company to finance his efforts with a shore station at Utqiagvik, Pt. Barrow. The powerful umialik, *Atunauraq*, of Point Hope prohibited the white whalers from locating shore stations within the Point Hope territory.<sup>48</sup> Whaling companies instead located just south of Point Hope, creating a new settlement which became known as Jabbertown. Historian Analise Jacobs points out that not all of the ‘white’ whalers were necessarily white. Lt. Berthold, of the famous revenue cutter the *Bear* observed in 1898 that there were thirteen whaling stations at Jabbertown, “owned and run by white men, that is men who were not Iñupiat, no matter what nationality or race.” Jacobs cites whalers of many ethnic backgrounds: African Americans, Azoreans, Japanese, Europeans, and Kanakas; Hawaiians. Thus the nickname Jabbertown

---

<sup>48</sup> Burch, Brower, Bockstoce, Jacobs.

apparently referred to the many languages spoken by the whalers, as well as the numerous dialects of Iñupiat.<sup>49</sup>

By the 1880s, when white whalers began shore whaling, Iñupiat cultures and nations had been substantially disrupted. Refugees from many nations journeyed to the whaling coast and were willing to join the crews of the white whalers. Some Iñupiat men prohibited by taboos from joining an Iñupiat crew, were willing to disregard tradition and hunt with the new white whalers.

While traditionalists continued their whaling under the umialik in Pt. Hope, the white whalers took advantage of the dislocated populations, many from the Seward Peninsula, or even from the interior who were not traditionally whaling people. These refugees were only too willing to work for the whalers. This was all part of the cultural change that Bodenhorn's informants characterized as chaotic; one of her informants stated that the problems of modern life are "only approaching" the troubles of that time.<sup>50</sup>

The new whaling stations, and the overwintering nations established nearby led to epidemics of syphilis and tuberculosis. Just a few years after that, more than one hundred Nunamiut died during a trading feast from flu and fever epidemic on the upper Noatak. The same epidemic hit the community of Wales killing 26.<sup>51</sup>

The famine and disease together disrupted the geography of Iñupiat nations, especially in the Northwest Arctic, the area studied by Burch. Jacobs points out that "At the shore whaling stations ... as at fur trading factories.....women stood at the center of cultural encounter,

---

<sup>49</sup> Analise Jacobs, "Shore whaling in Western Alaska," in *Routledge History of Western Empires*, 2014, 135-179.

<sup>50</sup> Barbara Bodenhorn, quoted in Cassell

<sup>51</sup> Fortune, *Chills and Fever*, 162, 211

exchange and friction.”<sup>52</sup> The labor of Iñupiat women was central to Iñupiat existence and to whaling. Women processed the skins and sewed clothing. They also processed the seal skins and sewed the covering for the *umiak*.

The whaling stations at Jabbertown did not really become new year round settlements for the Iñupiat. Instead, many Iñupiat used them as another seasonal activity as a part of a subsistence round that still depended on traditional foods.<sup>53</sup> Iñupiaq hunters found a new market trading meat including caribou, ptarmigan, and fish, to the whalers. Iñupiaq women traded clothing and footwear. But the whalers also began hunting on their own. Thus, once they established shore stations, the whalers were not merely decimating the whale population, but further taxing all of the resources that the Iñupiat depended on. The whalers also appropriated and depended on Iñupiaq technology and Iñupiaq techniques of whale hunting in small boats from the shore, as opposed to the pelagic whaling they had arrived with.

By the time whalers were establishing their shore stations, there were many women who were dislocated migrants or orphans, cut off from their support network, and therefore exceptionally vulnerable.<sup>54</sup> These women often found it advantageous to make alliances with the whalers who overwintered. The whalers also sought to make alliances with Iñupiaq women. Should these “informal alliances” be categorized as rape? Sexual servitude? Or were these consenting relationships? For the Iñupiaq women, such an alliance might have been an opportunity to secure food from the stores of the whaling company for herself, and possibly her family. Furthermore, an Iñupiaq woman could take advantage of an alliance with a whaler to help to cement strategic alliances with her extended kinship network, securing jobs for her kin on

---

<sup>52</sup> Jacobs

<sup>53</sup> Jacobs, 146

<sup>54</sup> Jacobs



her partner's whaling boats. Some of these relationships evolved into sanctioned marriages, but far more were simply temporary, often with whalers who were already married. As Jacobs notes, "The end result meant that the hourglass figure-the iconic image of white feminine desirability and respectability (until the first decade of the twentieth century.....) –and the torturous daily ritual of cinching up the whalebone corset were partly made possible by the friction, intimacies and alliances of the floe edge."<sup>55</sup>

The historian Frederick Hoxie observed that indigenous people who confronted people from a new world arriving on their shores, "identified limited-but genuine-areas where they could participate in their discoverers' world, areas where whites and Indians could interact." "Being discovered provided Native Americans with a limited set of tools for asserting and defining their presence in the modern world.....In a sense, they saw avenues open before them for an Indian discovery of non-Indian America [and world]."<sup>56</sup> After the disasters of the 1880s and 1890s, the Iñupiat confronted missionaries and agents of the U.S. government who came to "save" them, but who, acting on the common understanding at the time, grouped them with the "dying Indians" assuming that they must be assimilated to survive. Thus the Iñupiat who survived were urged to give up their languages and their cultures. Again, Jacobs asks, "Were the whalers agents of modernity and civilization as they saw themselves, or agents of cultural destruction as they broke down traditional leadership and labor patterns."<sup>57</sup> It was a difficult and traumatic time. The Iñupiat response to missionaries and Christianity will be examined in later chapters.

---

<sup>55</sup> Jacobs? Note 69

<sup>56</sup> Frederick E. Hoxie, "Exploring a Cultural Borderland: Native American Journeys of Discovery in the Early Twentieth Century," *JAH*, Vol. 79 (1992) 976.

<sup>57</sup> Jacobs