

## Chapter 2 Iñupiaq Nations

*“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 Alaska Native Studies Conference, in 2015, 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 sewing of the boat cover. The *Kijiginmiut* hunted 75-ton sea mammal in leads in the Arctic ice with harpoons, from the skin covered *umiaq*, fifteen to twenty-five foot boats carrying up to fifteen men. Men met each day, in the *qargi*, when they weren’t hunting, to work on and

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Riddington, “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

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 prominent whale hunters died, the community laid them 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 Iñupiaq 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 Wales including Whale Mountain, and Granite Mountain, where whale bones mark successful hunters' graves.

Iñupiat<sup>5</sup> 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 inland areas, where they sustained rich lives and cultures by exploiting a variety of resources, including caribou, fish, sea mammals, and small game. Politically organized as Nations with recognized citizens and territory, they controlled and defended their resources and boundaries. But by the time anthropologists and others arrived in the North, after the 1880s, these Iñupiaq nations had

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

<sup>5</sup> The name "Inupiaq," meaning "real or genuine person" (inuk 'person' plus -piaq 'real, genuine'), is often spelled "Iñupiaq," particularly in the northern dialects. It can refer to a person of this group ("He is an Inupiaq") and can also be used as an adjective ("She is an Inupiaq woman"). The plural form of the noun is "Inupiat," referring to the people collectively ("the Inupiat of the North Slope") ANLC

mostly 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. Survivors of imported diseases and natural disasters, like the crash of the important caribou herds joined others in reconstituted villages with multi-national populations. Thus, until quite recently, outsiders wrongly imagined Iñupiaq cultures as primitive, nomadic, hunter-gatherers, living in small family units with unchanging culture and lifeways stretching back into the mists of pre-history.<sup>6</sup>

Anthropologists, historians, oral historians, and Native intellectuals have worked to illuminate the histories of 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?

### **Iñupiaq Nations**

Iñupiaq Nations, while small, were, as anthropologist Ernest Burch states, “the Iñupiaq counterparts of modern Nation states.”<sup>7</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 nineteenth century, each Nation spoke its own subdialect of Iñupiaq. Anthropologist Dorothy Jean Ray noted in the 1960s, while not using the term Nation, that each sub-group constituted a “well ordered society

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<sup>6</sup> See also, Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, Alfred Knopf, 2005. Mann makes the point that this was a common mistake of anthropologists surveying cultures across the Americas.

<sup>7</sup> Ernest S. Burch, *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2006 p.1

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> While anthropologists have described these sub-groups as societies, nations, or tribes, the Iñupiat called their traditional social groups *nunaqatigiich*, in Iñupiaq, and Nations in English.<sup>9</sup> I refer to them as Nations, but I will use Nations and Tribes somewhat interchangeably.

Native people have always had their own ways of remembering and preserving their history. A number of Iñupiat historians including Simon *Paniaq* Paneak, Charlie *Sagaluuzaq* Jensen, Martha Swan, and Robert Cleveland, shared oral histories and place names with anthropologist Ernest Burch over more than forty years, trusting him to transcribe it accurately.<sup>10</sup> Burch was able to travel widely, visiting many different villages, and interviewing the most knowledgeable elders. He made an intensive effort to study the early nineteenth century, which he referred to as the “traditional period” prior to extensive Inupiat engagement with outside influences. He was able to interview recognized Iñupiat historians from fourteen villages between 1960 and 1990.<sup>11</sup> Through this extensive effort, Burch was able to correlate the stories told in various places and corroborate them with evidence from other 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>

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

<sup>9</sup> Burch, *Societies*.

<sup>10</sup> Detailed in Burch, *The Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska*, (Fairbanks: U. of Ak. Press, 1998.)

<sup>11</sup> Ernest S. Burch, *Alliance and Conflict: The World System of the Inūpiaq Eskimos*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. p10, 48-50)

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

The Iñupiat were and are divided generally into two regions, those on the Northern Coast, from Point Hope to Barrow, and those on the Northwest Coast from Kotzebue to Point Hope. These divisions are reflected today in the division between the modern Native organizations, Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, ASRC, and NANA, the corporation for the Northwest. In addition, Iñupiaq people on the Seward Peninsula and the coastal lands of eastern Norton Sound are represented by the Bering Straits Regional Corporation (BSRC.) The Bering Straits region also includes Siberian Yupik people on St. Lawrence Island, and Central Yup'ik on the eastern shores of Norton Sound,

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 had its own distinct subsistence pattern, responding to, and designed to best exploit the resources available. Traditional subsistence patterns depend upon location and season of the resources.

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>14</sup> However, these are generic terms, like “Midwesterners,” or “people from the East Coast” or “New Englanders.” In practice, each region includes both *Nunamiut*, and *Taremiut*. The Arctic Slope region includes the *Nunamiut* on the Colville River and in Anaktuvuk Pass, while the Northwest region includes Inland Iñupiat on the Kobuk and Noatak rivers. Furthermore, many if not most Iñupiaq Nations depended on a range of resources including both marine mammals and

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<sup>13</sup> See Burch

<sup>14</sup> Iñupiat is the plural form, while Iñupiaq is singular and Iñupiaq (from iñuk 'person' - and -piaq 'real', i.e., 'real people' (ANLC)

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.<sup>15</sup> The Nation may use resources in the territory of another Nation, as we will see with the example of the *Noatagmiut*, but this is only at a specific time, with express permission,

### Whaling Villages

Where geographic points of land extended out into the sea, the Iñupiaq 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 materially and spiritually, and extend back through unknown time.<sup>16</sup> The Iñupiat have inhabited *Tikigaaq*, Point Hope, 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 twenty to thirty houses in any one generation. The people who built and lived at *Ipiutak* hunted ringed seal and walrus, and also hunted caribou in mountains to the south.<sup>17</sup>

On the shores of the Arctic Ocean, Utqiagvik was and is the most important Iñupiaq village in the northern Arctic.<sup>18</sup> Over the last few thousand years, Iñupiat have occupied a

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<sup>15</sup> Adeline Peter Raboff, *I'nuksuk: Northern Koyukon, Gwich'in & Lower Tanana, 1800-1901*, Fairbanks, Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 2001; and Burch

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

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

<sup>18</sup> The people of Barrow voted in 2016 to return it to the traditional name, *Utqiagvik*. Just after a local vote to adopt the name Utqiagvik, 'place to gather wild roots,' 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.

number of village sites near Point Barrow. The Utqiagvik archaeological site consists of over sixty mounds representing prehistoric winter dwellings and associated archaeological features. Many house mounds are still visible in the village of Barrow today.<sup>19</sup>

While some Iñupiaq Nations were centered on coastal estates and others were centered in inland regions, like the Colville, Kobuk, and Noatak River basins, 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.

All of the Iñupiat relied on migrating caribou particularly the Western Arctic Caribou Herd which migrates generally north to south and back again, crossing the Kobuk and Noatak Rivers. 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..

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

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<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/>

<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)

population of around 200 people. Radiocarbon dating established likely dates from the late 1700s or early 1800s, just before first the first European explorers reached the area.<sup>20</sup>

### **Example: The Napaaqtuḡmiut**

The *Napaaqtuḡmiut* can serve as an example of the complexity of each Nation's subsistence lifestyle and subsistence rounds.<sup>21</sup> 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 is that they have been there "always."<sup>22</sup> Their population in the early nineteenth 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.<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*, large skin boats, 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 *umiaq*. Duck and goose hunting with long handled nets supplemented the diet of seal meat. They also fished for Dolly Varden trout as the fish left the rivers and travelled out along the shore close to the beach.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.alaskapublic.org/2013/08/01/archaeologists-uncover-pre-contact-inupiat-village-near-kiana/>. There is a new documentary on the discovery, "Igliqtisigvigruak [Swift Water Place]," <http://juneauempire.com/art/2014-12-11/brice-habegers-swiftwater>

<sup>21</sup> The following account is from Burch, *Inupiaq Eskimo Nations*

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

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

<sup>24</sup> Dolly Varden trout is a species of salmonid.



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 *Napaaqtugmiut* 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 *Napaaqtugmiut* arrived.

After the trade fair, the *Napaaqtugmiut* 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 seine nets, 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 group caribou hunts, using technology like caribou fences and corrals. 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 a vital role in constructing 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 consisting of only one or two houses.

For all of the Inupiat in the Arctic the shortest days of the year were a time of celebration. People might celebrate by themselves, or travel to a messenger feast in a larger settlement for feasts, trade, dances, games, and athletic contests.<sup>25</sup> Winter, January to March, was a time to hunker down with food that had been cached, or if necessary, move to a place with more fish or caribou.

Around the spring equinox, the *Napaaqtuḡmiut* 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**

*Inupiaq* Nations maintained international relations of both war and trade. Each Nation maintained distinct borders that were recognized by themselves and their neighbors. Traditional oral 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>26</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

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<sup>25</sup> Burch, *Inupiat Eskimo Nations*, 75. Messenger feast because a community would send out messengers to invite guests.

<sup>26</sup> The following is distilled from Burch, *Alliance and Conflict*, with some observations from Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers*.

travel to these fairs, as they were for travel for specific subsistence activities. *Iñupiaq* men also maintained long-standing relationships with specific trading partners across the boundaries of Nations, and even cultures. And third, Nations traded with each other when they gathered at messenger feasts in the winter.

### **Trade Fairs**

The most important trading fair was at *Sisualik*, on the Northwest coast, near present-day Kotzebue.<sup>27</sup> *Iñupiaq* Nations also gathered to trade across national boundaries with *Inuvialuit* from Herschel Island and the Mackenzie River Delta in what is now the Canadian Arctic. There was also an important trade site at the mouth of the Colville River, called *Nigliq*. In the Brooks Range, people from the Upper Colville, Upper Kobuk and Arctic Coast maintained trade in an area near the headwaters of the Colville River.

*Iñupiat* 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, as well as to harvest beluga whales, and participate in ceremonies and dancing. *Sisualik* was a gathering of nations including people from all of the nations of the Northwest Coast, and Noatak and Kobuk Rivers, as well as people from King Island, Sledge Island, the Diomed Islands, and sometimes Point Hope, and Wales.<sup>28</sup> Koyukon from the Interior and Chukchi and Siberian Yup'ik from across the Bering Straits were also regular visitors. The *Iñupiat* arrived over a period of weeks, but at the height of the fair, there might be as many as 1,700 people, with hundreds of tents spread for a mile or more up the sandspit. *Iñupiat* arrived with walrus ivory and seal skin pokes full of seal

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<sup>27</sup> For more about trade, see John R. Bockstoe. *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

<sup>28</sup> Bockstoe, *Fur Frontiers* p. 18

and whale oil, muktuk and caribou skins. The seal and whale oil were valuable everywhere for fat content. Chukchi arrived from Siberia, with reindeer skins, valued for making clothing, and later, with iron knives and spear heads traded from other Asian people. Dené from the Interior arrived with caribou and moose skin for making clothing and mukluks. Their woodland furs like muskrat, and fox were especially valuable to be traded to the Chukchi, who in turn transported them through eastern Siberia to be traded to the Chinese. The Koyukon also had access to 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 River were all mined and traded for making tools.<sup>29</sup> Thus, even prior to contact, with actual agents of Russia or Europe the Iñupiat were already engaged in international trade.

### **The Early Contact Period**

Anthropologist Ernest Burch defines the early *Iñupiaq* 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>30</sup> The *Iñupiat* first engagement with western agents did not immediately change their lives or material circumstances. Nevertheless, the continuing impact of outsiders on *Iñupiat* over the period 1820-1880 ultimately led to extensive death and destruction. 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

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<sup>29</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>30</sup> Ernest S. Burch, *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2006.

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. By the eighteenth century, 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 decimated the whales in just a few short years. 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 *Iñupiaq* who found it expedient to take jobs with the whaling companies. The result was wholesale cultural change. By the late 1880s and 1890s the geography of *Iñupiaq* Nations had broken down, Visitors after this time saw a displaced, multi-national population of refugees. They were rarely aware that there had in fact been independent Nations.

Imperial Russia began moving into Siberia in the sixteenth century pursuing furs which were an important commodity in Russia, China, and Europe. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Russians were attempting to complete their conquest of Siberia by subduing the Indigenous Chukchi in the Far East and establishing a fort at the mouth of the Anadyr River. During this period, the Chukchi gained 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 Iñupiaq Nations had access to fur-bearing species, others were

now motivated to secure furs from their Koyukon neighbors. Thus, while Indigenous trade networks had always existed, the amount of trade increased during this period.<sup>31</sup>

The Chukchi in Eastern Siberia successfully defended their Nations against Russian imperialism and were never specifically subject to Russian tribute payments, *iasuk*. Instead, they established a trade agreement, and the Russians developed an important trading entrepôt 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*, followed by 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>32</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 eighteenth 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>33</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth 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

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<sup>31</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.

<sup>32</sup> Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers*.

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

this trade, they attempted to insert themselves as middlemen between the Koyukon and the Iñupiat and Chukchi. At first they 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 Nations continued to attack the post. The Russians, while nominally the controlling colonial power, in fact never maintained effective control over trade in the region, and never effected a monopoly of trade.<sup>34</sup>

Many Iñupiat on the Northwest Coast had seen, and some even interacted with the Russian Kashevarov expedition in 1838 with fifteen men paddling five unusual three-hatch *Unangan* kayaks. Their party included an interpreter as they made their way up the coast.<sup>35</sup> While Russian documents 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. This echoed the reports of most early explorers that the *Iñupiat* they encountered were at first hostile and often violent.<sup>36</sup>

By the 1850s the *Iñupiat* had begun 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

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<sup>34</sup> Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers*.

<sup>35</sup> Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers*. This seems to be the most comprehensive description of the expedition.

<sup>36</sup> Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers*

come to compete for their whales. The coastal 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 attaching English names to 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. By the time they extended the hunt to the Arctic the product most in demand was baleen, the boney plates in a whale's mouth to which are attached the hairs used by the whales for filter-feeding on tiny krill. The baleen was mostly used for corset stays in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

Anthropologist Barbara Bodenhorn completed oral history research in the Northwest Arctic, and summarized Iñupiaq experiences of the commercial period as "traumatic."<sup>37</sup> But the beginning of whaling did not in itself cause the demise of the *Iñupiat* Nations. Rather, various 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.

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<sup>37</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 a recent epidemic at Point Barrow and reported that forty people died, out of 360.<sup>38</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. Another severe respiratory epidemic struck the north shore of Norton Sound in 1882.<sup>39</sup> On one of his first trips in the Arctic, in 1885, trader Charles Brower, later a famous figure in Barrow, came across a deserted village, which his *Iñupiaq* guides attributed to starvation after influenza type illness several years previous.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the *Iñupiaq* 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, according to Burch, nearly all other food resources in the interior Northwest Arctic 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>41</sup> Notwithstanding the tremendous toll 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, as well as the loss of elders, tradition bearers, and hunters.

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<sup>38</sup> Burch, *Social Life*, 2, citing Simpson 1875:237, and Robert Fortune, *Chills and Fever*, 1992, 119, 210.

<sup>39</sup> Fortune, *Chills and Fever*, 1992. 209-210, and citing Russian explorer Netsvetov

<sup>40</sup> Bockstoce, *Fur Frontiers*, Brower, *Fifty Years*

<sup>41</sup> Burch, *Social Life*

People left their homes, abandoning familiar subsistence resource patterns to move to other areas, and traveling to go to places where they had relatives. Those who waited too long starved.<sup>42</sup> Thus, by 1900 the Inupiaq were no longer in their home Nations. However, the 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>43</sup>

The New England whalers appropriated the resources of the *Iñupiat*, first the whales, and then the walrus, without any regard for the *Iñupiat* who depended on the resource.<sup>44</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>45</sup> The catch that year was valued at a record \$14 million.<sup>46</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>47</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 shore stations so they could winter over and catch whales in the early spring. Then in the mid-1880s a few of the American

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<sup>42</sup> Burch, *Social Life*

<sup>43</sup> Ernest Burch, *The Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska*, Fairbanks: U of Alaska Press, 1998. Also, Charles Brower, *Fifty Years Below Zero*.

<sup>44</sup> Burch *Social Life*, 2

<sup>45</sup> Murray Lundberg <http://www.explorenorth.com/library/yafeatures/bl-whaling.htm>

Graeme Wynn, *Canada and Arctic North America: An Environmental History*. And Bockstoce.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.akhistorycourse.org/northwest-and-arctic/1732-1871-age-of-arctic-exploration-and-whaling>

<sup>47</sup> Burch *Social Life*, p2

whalers appropriated Iñupiaq whaling techniques and technology, hiring women to construct *umiak* and local Iñupiaq as laborers to hunt from them. They hired Iñupiaq as laborers on the whaling ships, and their wives to sew and cook.<sup>48</sup>

The Iñupiaq whaling Nations 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* 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 of first, conventional access to capital based mostly in San Francisco, companies willing to finance this new approach. Second 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 Iñupiaq 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>49</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,

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<sup>48</sup> Analise Jacobs, “Shore Whaling”

<sup>49</sup> Burch, Brower, Bockstoce, Jacobs.

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 apparently referred to the many languages spoken by the whalers, as well as the numerous dialects of *Iñupiat*.<sup>50</sup>

The new whaling stations, and the overwintering Nations established nearby led to epidemics of syphilis and tuberculosis. Just a few years later, more than 100 *Nunamiut* died during a trading feast from flu and fever epidemic on the upper Noatak. The same epidemic hit the community of Wales killing twenty-six.<sup>51</sup>

The famine and disease together disrupted the geography of *Iñupiaq* Nations. Jacobs points out that “At the shore whaling stations ... as at fur trading factories.....women stood at the center of cultural encounter, exchange and friction.” The labor of *Iñupiaq* 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*.<sup>52</sup> But the foreign whalers also appropriated *Iñupiaq* technology and *Iñupiaq* techniques of whale hunting in small boats from the shore, as opposed to the pelagic whaling they had arrived with. This caused them to look to hiring *Iñupiaq* men to hunt with them, and to coopt the labor of *Iñupiaq* women to sew boat covers.

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<sup>50</sup> Analise Jacobs, “Shore whaling in Western Alaska,” in *Routledge History of Western Empires*, 2014, 135-179.

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

<sup>52</sup> Jacobs

While traditionalists continued their whaling under the *umialik* in Pt. Hope, the foreign 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. Some *Iñupiaq* men prohibited by taboos from joining an *Iñupiaq* crew, were willing to disregard tradition and hunt with the new arrivals. 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>53</sup>

Still, 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>54</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 foreigners 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.

By the time foreigners 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>55</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* woman, such an alliance might have been an opportunity to secure food from the stores of the whaling company for herself, and possibly her

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<sup>53</sup> Barbara Bodenhorn, quoted in Cassell

<sup>54</sup> Jacobs, 146

<sup>55</sup> Jacobs

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 her partner's whaling boats. Some of these relationships evolved into sanctioned marriages, but far more were simply temporary, often with foreigners 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>56</sup>

### **Kivilingmiut**

The experience of the *Kivilingmiut*, a substantial Nation located on the coast between Kotzebue Sound and Point Hope, dependent on the Western Arctic Caribou Herd, can serve as an example of the fate of Native Nations as a result of the Great Famine in 1880 and 1881. Many of the *Kivilingmiut* died of starvation, the rest saved themselves by migrating to other Nations where they had friends and relatives. When the famine waned, some the *Kivilingmiut* returned to their original territory, 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 from the northern tip of the island to the southern tip.<sup>57</sup> Again in the early 1900s, nearly 70% of this new population died due to new epidemic disease. "The population of Kivalina estimated to have been 350 to 400 in 1906, was reduced to eighty-seven by 1920; Kivalina was estimated to have eighty-seven residents,

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<sup>56</sup> Jacobs? Note 69

<sup>57</sup> Burch

down from 350 to 400 in 1906.”<sup>58</sup> The population in Kivilina today consists of some of the original *Kivilingmiut* families, plus descendants of people from other Nations.

The historian Frederick Hoxie observed that Indigenous people confronted with 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.” As he continues, “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>59</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>60</sup> It was a difficult and traumatic time. The *Iñupiaq* response to missionaries and Christianity will be examined in later chapters.

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<sup>58</sup> NANA.com

<sup>59</sup> Frederick E. Hoxie, "Exploring a Cultural Borderland: Native American Journeys of Discovery in the Early Twentieth Century," *JAH*, Vol. 79 (1992) 976.

<sup>60</sup> Jacobs