



Climate Change and Cultural Survival in the Arctic: People of the Whales and Muktuk Politics

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the interface of climate change and society in a circumpolar context, particularly experienced among the Iñupiat people (Iñupiat) of Arctic Alaska. The Iñupiat call themselves the “People of the Whales,” and their physical and spiritual survival is based on their cultural relationship with bowhead whales. Historically the broader indigenous identity, spawned through their activism, has served to connect disparate communities and helped revitalize cultural traditions. Indigenous Arctic organizations such as the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) and the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC) are currently building upon a strong success record of their past to confront the environmental problems of their future. Employing what the author calls *muktuk* politics—a culturally salient reference to the bowhead whale skin and the underlying blubber—the Iñupiat have revitalized their cultural identity by participating in international debates on climate change, whaling, and human rights.

Currently, the ICC and the AEWK identify Arctic climate change and its impact on human rights as their most important topics. The Iñupiat relationship with the land, ocean, and animals are affected by a number of elements including severe weather, climate and environmental changes, and globalization. To the Iñupiat, their current problems are different than those of the past, but they also understand that as long as there are bowhead whales they can subsist and thrive, and this is their goal. This new form of *muktuk* politics seeks to bring their current challenges to a wider audience by relying on more recent political experiences.

1. Introduction

For the Iñupiat,¹ the indigenous people of the North Slope Borough of Alaska (Fig. 1), their survival relies upon the right to hunt their culturally salient bowhead

whales (*Balaena mysticetus*; *agviq* in Iñupiat).² For thousands of years Iñupiat worldviews have revolved around the whales that they revere, hunt, and consume. Not surprisingly, the Iñupiat call themselves the “People of the Whales,”³ and they depend on the bowhead for sustenance and cultural meaning. The bowhead whale is the foundational entity through which all elements of Arctic life are integrated—sea, land, animal, and human.

¹ The native residents of the North Slope Borough are called the Iñupiat, the “real” (*piat* or *piaq*) “people” (*iñu*; Nelson 1980; Lowenstein 1993) or the “authentic human beings” (Burch 1998). The term Iñupiat is plural but it also indicates the possessive. The singular, possessive, and the adjective form of the word is Iñupiaq (Burch 1998; Wohlforth 2004). Iñupiaq is also the name of the people’s language, which remains vital to their everyday life. Sometimes known as one of the “Eskimo” peoples, the Iñupiat extend from the Arctic Ocean to the west central portion of Alaska’s Bering Sea.

² Bowhead whales are among the largest and longest-living animals on the earth. They can grow to 20 m, weigh approximately 1 ton ft⁻¹ (30 cm), and can live up to 200 yr, or 130–150 yr, on average (Reeves 2002).

³ “People of Whaling” is another phrase that is commonly used by the Iñupiat as the term is employed in the “People of Whaling” exhibition at the Iñupiat Heritage Center in Barrow. Boeri (1983) refers to indigenous peoples on the Arctic coast “People of the Ice Whale” in his work. Although the book primarily focuses on the Siberian Yup’ik of St. Laurence Island, one of the chapters discusses whaling in Barrow extensively.

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FIG. 1. Map of the North Slope Borough, Alaska (courtesy of J. Jelacic). Currently there are eight villages in the North Slope Borough: Barrow, Wainwright, Point Hope, Kaktovik, Nuiqsut, Point Lay, Anaktuvuk Pass, and Atqasuk.

Indeed, the bowhead remains central to Iñupiaq life and sustains traditional rituals and ceremonies (Boeri 1983; Stoker and Krupnik 1993; Bodenhorn 2001; Brewster 2004; Hess 1999; Lowenstein 1992, 1993; Turner 1990, 1993; Sakakibara 2008, 2009, 2010; Zumwalt 1988).

This article explores the intersection of climate change and the relatively recent formation of an indigenous cultural identity in a circumpolar context, particularly experienced among the Iñupiaq people (Iñupiat) of Arctic Alaska. By using the phrase *muktuk* politics, I hope to show that the Iñupiaq have revitalized their cultural identity by participating in international debates on climate change, whaling, and human rights. In so doing, I then explore how *muktuk* politics empower the circumpolar indigenous perspective on global climate change, which is a continuous and complex negotiation of the maintenance of the traditional ways of life and the need for economic development in the context of a rapidly changing climate. As a premise, however, we should note that there is a broad social movement that involves mobilization around climate issues and whaling. In other words, indigenous participation is widespread but not entirely uniform.

Muktuk is an Iñupiaq word that means the combination of the whale skin and blubber, or the underlying layer of fat below the skin. *Muktuk* is indispensable for the people's survival, because it cleans blood vessels with so-called omega-3 fatty acids, and provides the necessary vitamins A and C, thiamine, riboflavin, and niacin in an environment where they cannot practice agriculture (Freeman et al. 1998). Whale is a unique food among circumpolar peoples and is an essential element of their long-term survival (Fig. 2).⁴

The cultural importance of *muktuk* as a symbol of indigenous identity was a topic frequently broached by my Iñupiaq interviewees, and the term was often used as a metaphor for cultural survival but also an acknowledgment of pride in regaining whaling rights. *Muktuk*, as an emblem of Iñupiaq identity, serves to affirm Iñupiat relations to the world. It also serves as an Arctic icon to have

⁴ In addition to *muktuk*, bowhead whales provide a number of food types. There are also a wide variety of marine mammals that sustain indigenous lives, such as the beluga whale, bearded seal, ringed seal, walrus, and occasionally polar bear, in addition to various geese and fish.



FIG. 2. Muktuk consumed by Iñupiat family members in Barrow (photo by author).

outsiders recognize the distinct cultural values and cultural rights of the Iñupiat. Therefore, I call their efforts invested in securing their rights and homeland muktuk politics.

I begin this paper with a review of the origin and development of this iconic Iñupiat symbol. This section is followed by a description of the recent political roots of contemporary Iñupiat self-awareness. Then, I show how politics, ethnic sentiments, identity, and whaling rights have become entangled and tied to their self-empowerment as the People of the Whales just in time to deal with issues incurred by climate change. A broader pan-indigenous identity, spawned through their activism, has served to connect disparate communities and helped to revitalize cultural traditions. Indigenous Arctic organizations, such as the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC; or *Inuit Issittormiut Siunnersuisoqatigiffiat*) and the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC), are currently building on a successful record of their past to confront the environmental problems, including climate change, offshore oil exploration, and gas development in the region. I end this paper with a discussion on how Arctic climate change and threatened cultural rights are two of the most prominent topics that the ICC and the AEWC emphasize collectively. Contemporary Iñupiat relationships with the land, ocean, and animals are affected by a number of elements, including severe weather, climate and environmental changes, and globalization. In the Arctic, their current problems are different than those of the past, but they also understand that as long as there are bowhead whales they can subsist and thrive, and this

is their goal. This new form of muktuk politics seeks to bring the plight of the Iñupiat people to a wider audience by relying on more recent political experiences.

2. Methods

This study is based on my fieldwork among North Slope Borough (NSB) whaling communities between 2004 and 2007. Throughout the fieldwork, my goal was to investigate how Iñupiat maintain their physical and spiritual links with the bowhead whales in ways that sustain their cultural identity and help them cope with environmental change. I was also interested in how this desire to retain their identity as the People of the Whales might be manifest in their participation in the global climate change discussion and policy making. While based in Barrow (71°18'N 156°44'W; population 4212), Alaska, I also spent a good deal of time in Point Hope (68°20'N 166°45'W; population 674), Alaska, where I conducted a series of ethnographic interviews (individual, group, and questionnaires) with 92 participants from various generations, through formal and informal discussion forums with community members, and engaged in participant observation in seasonal and cultural events, including subsistence activities (Sakakibara 2008, 2009, 2010). My interview sources are cited as “personal communications” throughout the text. Participant observation in various subsistence activities also played a crucial role in my fieldwork. I was also able to participate in the ICC held in Barrow in July 2006 in which the northern

indigenous communities played significant roles in representing whalers, the whaling tradition, and cultural survival. In the field, I learned about the people's efforts to adapt to the changing world on both physical and political levels by reinforcing their traditional relationships with the whales. Overall, throughout my fieldwork, which was complimented with ethnographic interviews and participant observation, I explored how the people developed their cultural identity as a means of coping with unpredictable climate and environmental changes.

3. Muktuk as a cultural emblem

We are often only aware of culture and identity when we confront difference. We can live in our worlds without recognizing our daily lives as being "cultural," but when we interact with people who behave in unfamiliar ways, such unquestioned features and customs suddenly require an explanation to justify ourselves and to better communicate with outsiders (Briggs 1997). This is when we become aware of our own culture and distinguish ourselves from the rest of the world. Cultural exchange or social change often incurs a sense of cultural crisis, and when our worlds are felt to be endangered, then cultural "traits" may turn into "emblems" or cultural icons—emotionally charged markers that we use to construct boundaries and barriers in self-defense (Briggs 1997; Dorais 1988; Kishigami 2004; Linton 1943; Wagner 1975). A cultural emblem reinforces the distinctiveness of collectivities, which are often bound by a shared kinship, language, history, and sense of place. The power of indigenous collective identity is crucial when we try to understand the rise of ethnic movements in relation to colonial entities, which marginalized indigenous peoples as minorities (Maaka and Andersen 2006).

Similarly, indigenous activism supported by cultural emblems established the foundation for philosophical and jurisprudence organizations to implement indigenous rights that are clearly recognized by the United Nations (UN), the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the World Bank (Maaka and Andersen 2006). Recognizing an emerging consciousness of a global indigenous identity in which unique, yet universal characteristics are identified and conceptualized, the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted in September 2007, outlining the rights of an estimated 370 million indigenous peoples. The declaration sets out individual and collective rights as well as the special importance of culture, identity, and subsistence for the world's indigenous peoples. Articles 32 and 34 of the UNDRIP particularly highlight the responsibility of national states to respect indigenous

rights to determine the use of their lands, territories, and resources in addition to promoting and developing their own institutions, distinctive customs, and spirituality.

The employment of a cultural emblem to better represent oneself is common among ethnic minorities. Briggs (1997, p. 229) explains how the cultural traits that the Inuit in Canada had unselfconsciously taken for granted suddenly appeared clear when they began interacting with *Qallunaat* (Euro-Canadians) who only saw the subsistence seal hunt as "wild" and the seal meat as a bloody "carcass." To the Inuit, hunting the seal is a vital activity for obtaining sufficient resources to sustain their lives, and the hunt was done with proper respect within an intricate cycle of culture and life. This sense of respect and reciprocity is the basis of their traditional values and it is the hunt itself that distinguishes Inuit from *Qallunaat*. In the context of cultural exchange, Briggs (1997, p. 228) makes a distinction between cultural traits, which are derived from the daily life of Inuit and emblems, which are chosen as "emotionally charged markers" by Inuit from among those cultural traits to elucidate their worldview. Once transformed into emblems, the traits are strongly connected to a cultural identity in times when an ethnic group has to firm up their unity as one people to communicate with dominant others.

Among the Inuit, in addition to the act of hunting and other cultural traits, claiming their own territories and identity became cultural emblems. In the case of the Canadian Inuit, their incorporation into the Canadian mainstream as a dependent population has clearly enhanced their own sense of selves. In the mid-1970s, several groups of Inuit in the Canadian Northwest Territories (NWT) called themselves Inuvialuit to negotiate their own land claim agreement with the federal government in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, which was eventually signed in 1984. Following the negotiation process, the Inuvialuit became more established and organized as a distinctive ethnic group, separate from other Inuit. The land claims agreement further facilitated political claims by the Inuvialuit, and the other Inuit also followed in their footsteps in their request for eventually establishing an autonomous territory called Nunavut. Such movements were not limited to the Arctic, because indigenous and ethnic revitalization was also occurring in Australia and Latin America (Bourque 1997; Díaz Polanco 1997; Maaka and Andersen 2006; Offen 2009; Offen and Rundstrom 2011; Yashar 2005). Cultural emblems, therefore, are products of recent globalization when ethnic minorities had to communicate with outsiders with a clear understanding of their own identity.

Among the Iñupiat, their cultural emblem took the shape of muktuk. Muktuk has been loaded with newly salient values and has become a boundary marker dividing Euro-Americans and Iñupiat. Iñupiaq experiences with

colonialism did not begin until the midnineteenth century, and the nature of their territorial concern is quite different from many other Native American peoples. However, the dispute between the tribe and the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the U.S. federal government regarding subsistence whaling reflects colonial influences that seek to negate the cultural rights of Arctic peoples. Empowered through muktuk politics, Iñupiat–whale relations have become vital not only for physical survival but also as a tool to justify whaling rights and a healthy environment in which to subsist.

4. The power of muktuk politics

Sustained Iñupiaq contact with the “south” was initiated in the midnineteenth century by commercial whalers who followed the migration path of the bowhead whales into the Arctic. It is ironic that their desire for muktuk (known by commercial whalers as simply the profitable whale oil–producing “blubber”) severely depopulated the bowhead whales. The indigenous society also quickly declined with the rise of alcoholism, measles, small pox, tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted diseases. Presbyterian and Episcopalian missionaries reached Arctic Alaska in 1890. While they saved many lives with their medical treatments, the missionaries’ religious proselytizing resulted in the abolition of many traditional beliefs and rituals. Children were sent out of their communities to boarding schools to be taught English, other subjects, and Western codes of conduct. This is when many traditional ceremonies were banned, including the culturally important *Kivgiq*—an intercommunal messenger feast to be discussed later—and were not reestablished until 1988.

To survive, the Iñupiat combined the advantages of traditional practices with the benefits of modern technology. Their descendants—the People of the Whales today—applied similar thinking when they filled out their whaling kit with handheld very high frequency (VHF) radios, snowmobiles, radio-equipped floats, and GPS receivers. Wenzel (1991) also examines Inuit examples in the Canadian Arctic to see how new technology, such as snowmobile and electronic equipment, has become part of traditional hunting gear. Survival disciplined the Iñupiat by requiring skills in walking in multiple worlds, for example, in the creation of new traditions, but also in a new era of political survival (Bodenhorn 2001). Current expressions of muktuk politics are based on Iñupiaq–whale integrity and reflect four decades of political mobilization among the indigenous peoples of the Arctic to fend off unwanted intrusions, protect the environment, retain their homeland, and defend their traditional whaling rights. For the Iñupiat, political activism has helped foster a pan-Iñupiaq identity that has

connected disparate communities and reinvigorated cultural traditions. In other words, the unity between various villages above the Arctic Circle was officially recognized and embraced for the first time in this manner. This period also coincided with the era in which petroleum in the Arctic Ocean became part of the evolution of indigenous political consciousness.

In the 1970s, a loose federation of Iñupiaq villages gave way to four prominent indigenous organizations: the Iñupiat Community of Arctic Slope (ICAS; in 1971), the NSB (the first home-ruled government in Alaska, in 1972), the ICC (a pan-Arctic indigenous peoples’ organization, in 1977), and the AEW (in 1977). The AEW organizes representatives of Iñupiat and neighboring Yup’ik⁵ whalers to negotiate with the IWC. The activities of the AEW have been particularly important in connecting isolated Alaskan villages and organizing them around political and environmental issues associated with bowhead whaling. The intertribal and intercommunal nature of this alliance broadens the definition of the People of the Whales. It no longer only refers to the Iñupiat, but also to their neighboring ethnic groups whose subsistence also relies upon the harvest of whales. To both Iñupiat and Yup’ik, muktuk is more than just a rich food source; it can serve as a cultural emblem of the AEW for both groups. The emergence of intertribal organization revealed the sense of urgency felt by these communities to explore their own ways of life and true values. This, as a result, rejuvenated many villagers’ appreciation of the whale. In this respect, muktuk brought various people together to form one cultural group with a common political necessity.

To summarize the history of the 1970s that marked a watershed in Arctic politics chronologically, the ICAS was formed in August 1971 to represent the Iñupiat villages in the Arctic Slope region as an Alaska Native tribe to exercise its sovereign rights to retain tribal lands and environmental justice. It was governed by the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, but was amended to directly reflect Iñupiaq voices in 1971. Then, the seven Iñupiaq villages north of the Brooks Range were bound together in the governing institution called the NSB in 1972.⁶ Although the NSB is a subdivision of the state of Alaska, Eben Hopson Sr., a visionary elder and the leader of the Iñupiaq community, initiated the formation of the

⁵ The Yup’ik people are an indigenous people of western and southwestern Alaska. Formerly known as a group of Eskimo peoples, the residents on St. Lawrence Island and Little Diomed Island, along with coastal villagers of southwest Alaska, annually harvest the bowhead whales from a traditional boat covered by the walrus hide, which is larger than Iñupiaq *umiak*.

⁶ Currently there are eight villages in the North Slope Borough, but Atkasuk (population 203) had not been established until 1982.

borough. Hopson defined the primary goal of the borough as the promotion of indigenous interests with the rise of indigenous identity, which was to be accompanied by the same basic services enjoyed by other Americans (see Eben Hopson Memorial Archives online at <http://ebenhopson.com>). The borough is demarcated by the Brooks Range to the south and the Chukchi Sea and Beaufort Sea of the Arctic Ocean to the north, encompassing 143 200 km². Overall, the NSB region included 9434 residents in 2010, of whom 53.5% were Iñupiat.

Through this incorporation, the Iñupiat confronted a new set of social and environmental problems associated with pollution, oil exploration, planned nuclear testing, and continued outside interference. As problems grew, Eben Hopson Sr., the inaugural NSB mayor, invited the representatives of the Yup'ik, the Canadian Inuit, and the Greenlandic Inuit to Barrow in June 1977 to discuss the preservation of the Arctic environment and indigenous self-determination. In retrospect, this meeting helped stimulate a pan-Arctic indigenous identity that spawned political institutions such as the AEW, which successfully confronted the IWC whaling regulations. The meeting also provided a platform for a unified native voice to be heard by the nonnative south. Similar drives for self-determination were taking place at this time in Greenland and across the Canadian Arctic (Briggs 1997; Dahl 1988; Dorais 1988; Kishigami 2004), but the newly developed symbolism attached to the consumption of muktuk to retain their whaling tradition distinguishes the Iñupiat from other groups. This 1977 assembly became the origin of the ICC, the pan-Arctic organization driven by indigenous initiatives. Today, the ICC General Assembly meets every 4 yr. When it was hosted in Barrow in July 2006, the guests were generously fed with muktuk from bowheads captured during the spring whaling season. The most recent meeting took place in Nuuk, Greenland, in June and July 2010.

International whaling first became controversial in 1946 when 42 whaling nations, including the United States, signed the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW). As part of the convention, the IWC was established as the intergovernmental body that would regulate global whaling. The original mandate of the IWC—to promote and maintain whale stocks as a common resource for productive whaling—changed after the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden. Reflecting the activism of whale rights activists and the growth of their organizations, the IWC started strongly regulating international whale harvests, which was a dramatic change in their mode of regulation. Although “aboriginal whaling” was originally exempt from IWC regulations, global activism against whaling inspired the IWC to ban even aboriginal whaling

in 1977 when concerns were raised about the status of the Bering Sea stock of bowhead whales (Albert 2001; Huntington 1992). In the process they singled out the Iñupiat, claiming that “the Eskimos were killing too many bowheads” (Boeri 1983, p. 104). Worse, Iñupiat whalers were not informed of the decision until the dispatchers “came to tell us what to do and what not to do after the fact” (F. Kuutuuq Akpik 2005, personal communication), effectively precluding any future indigenous cooperation. Fannie Kuutuuq Akpik, an Iñupiat elder and educator from Barrow, remembers the day when federal dispatchers sought to appease her and her family following the decision on the whaling prohibition: the government officers “. . . came to this village one day and distributed 25 pounds [11 kilos] of beef and cheese per household to convert us into the People of the Cows” (F. Kuutuuq Akpik 2005, personal communication). The federal efforts to replace a traditional diet with a food foreign to Iñupiat lifestyle upset the people. This anger and the tension it created are at the heart of the pan-Eskimo drive to form their own political organization, suggesting an explicit link between an outside restriction of traditional life and the emergence of the AEW.

Muktuk is a food of survival with its high calories, because it serves as a vital energy source for travel in extremely cold conditions. Furthermore, muktuk is a social food, one with multiple cultural meanings, including ideas of care, reciprocity, and unity. While supermarkets do exist in the Arctic and are frequently utilized by native customers, prepackaged supermarket food involves cooking and a specific calculation of the number of eaters who can be fed, and thus it is not easily shared with unexpected visitors; on the other hand, an indefinite number of visitors can be invited to help themselves from a harvested animal from the land or the sea (Briggs 1997). In this way, consumption of purchased food is not compatible with the traditional Iñupiat value of sharing and reciprocity, which once again highlights the cultural differences between native (Iñupiat) food and readymade (European-American) food. Another fact to consider is that the number of supermarkets in the Arctic started growing around the time when the IWC came to terminate indigenous whaling rights, as if the supermarkets arrived to the Arctic to replace indigenous food culture. However, by encompassing nutrition, cultural significance, and emotional and social importance, muktuk has undoubtedly come to serve as a predominant cultural emblem representing the People of the Whales since the beginning of the whaling war.

The IWC prohibition against indigenous whaling occurred in July 1977, 1 month after the ICC first met. Just as northern whaling communities were redefining their identity beyond ethnic boundaries, an outside force pushed

them even closer together. To take back the powers that they had traditionally exercised, representatives from whaling communities decided to create their own organization. Building on the precedent of the NSB and the ICC, Iñupiat and Yup'ik representatives from the whaling communities got together in August 1977 and founded the AEW. The AEW's mission reflects native calls to protect and enhance indigenous cultures, traditions, and activities associated with bowhead whales and whaling. The AEW's major task is to negotiate with nonindigenous organizations, primarily the U.S. federal government and the IWC, about management plans in general and the whale quota system in particular.⁷ Not surprisingly, founding members of the Whaling Commission were also involved in the ICC assembly that was held 2 months prior. In this way, the ICC and the AEW originally shared the common goal of cultural survival and retention of whaling as a crucial dimension of native sovereignty. As a witness of the 1977 bowhead whaling ban, Jack Schaefer of Point Hope told me: "We survive on the animals. If we lose animals or lose access to them, we are gone. And the views of outsiders and others, it may be considered as an ethnic cleansing. We stood together and our energy was charged with muktuk" (J. Schaefer 2005, personal communication).

The strength of muktuk politics lies in the link between politics and cultural identity by encouraging traditional whalers to sponsor scientific studies of bowheads in order to engage with outsider idioms. The central problem to the IWC-imposed ban from the Iñupiaq perspective was that the size of the actual population of bowhead whales that migrate through the Bering Strait was much higher than the number estimated by the IWC. Federal

⁷ While the NSB has eight Iñupiaq communities, only coastal communities of the Borough participate in this organization. For this reason the inland communities such as Atkasuk and Anaktuvuk Pass are not part of this list. Currently, the Yup'ik and Iñupiaq villages that participate in the AEW are as follows: Gambell, Savoonga, Wales, Little Diomedea, Kivalina, Point Hope, Wainwright, Barrow, Nuiqsut, Kaktovik, and Point Lay.

⁸ The quota system was introduced as a middle ground between the IWC and the AEW. The agreement sets limits on the number of whales that can be hunted in a 5-yr block. For example, up to 280 whales could be landed between 2003 and 2007 (International Whaling Commission 2004). For each of these years, the number of bowhead whales struck could not exceed 67, but any unused portion of the quota could be carried forward to subsequent years. Within the quota of 67 whales per year, the AEW allocates the number of whales that can be harvested by each whaling community, such as 22 whales for Barrow and 9 whales for Point Hope annually during the 5-yr block period. Currently the bowhead population is estimated at 80 000 and increasing. For the next block period of 2008–12, the AEW and the NSB successfully renewed the quota in the IWC meeting that was held in Anchorage in May 2007.

government scientists estimated that the Bering Sea bowhead whale population was 1300, at a best estimate (Tillman 1980). Simultaneously, to prove to the IWC that the bowhead population had recovered from the overharvest by commercial whalers in the past, the NSB created a scientific program with the Department of Wildlife Management to count and study the whales, the efforts of which were supported by the newly organized AEW. Subsistence whalers worked with outside scientists to measure the whale harvest and shared their knowledge on whales, their behavior, and how whaling is meticulously linked to migration. Their "way of knowing," a form of traditional knowledge or native science, it was shown, actually subverted the "conventional wisdom" supported by the IWC scientists (Albert 2001, p. 267).⁹ In this way muktuk politics also is based on collaborative efforts involving traditional knowledge and scientific perspectives. With the combination of traditional knowledge and a census method, the Iñupiat managed to prove there were more bowhead whales than the IWC assumed.

Following the successful defense of whaling rights, Eben Hopson Sr. hosted the Bowhead Whale Conference in Anchorage, Alaska, in January 1979. Hopson stated the importance of a "democratic-scientific partnership" between scientists and subsistence hunters to defend both Iñupiat and the bowhead whale from unsafe offshore Arctic oil and gas operations, and further stated that Iñupiat and the bowhead whale have become the "index species in the Arctic," because the bowhead is "more than a political pawn in the international politics of commercial fishing" (Eben Hopson Memorial Archives 2007). In 1981, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) delegated the management authority of bowhead whales to the AEW.

Muktuk politics is also revealed in how the NSB and the AEW have developed their outreach activities to facilitate the understanding of their whaling outside of the Arctic. These efforts include cultural exhibitions of the People of the Whales at the Iñupiat Heritage Center in Barrow, and active participation in the Education through Cultural and Historical Organization (ECHO) grant projects sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which unites the people in the NSB; Hawai'i; and New Bedford, Massachusetts, to promote cultural exchange among peoples with a shared whaling heritage. These reciprocal and intellectual exchanges are tied to broader expressions of cultural and political autonomy.

⁹ Scientists at the time often held different views from environmental groups and animal rights activists, and many scientists actually did not support the IWC whaling ban.

In addition to the new political turn of Iñupiaq whaling, traditional events also serve as emblems of cultural identity. Along with the formation and the development of the AEW, the Iñupiaq revitalized an older form of self-representation—*kivgiq*, a feast that renews a whaling year. Previously known as the Inviting-In Feast (Hawkes 1914) or the Messenger's Feast (Riccio 1993, 2003), *Kivgiq* now takes place in Barrow in February every other year. It is a 3-day gift exchange feast that culminates with a traditional drum dance. *Kivgiq*'s intercommunal nature also nurtures the alliance between the Iñupiaq villages and their neighboring Yup'ik villages, the two ethnic groups that comprise the AEW. The AEW is in fact one of the sponsors of the event, and IWC representatives are also invited to the feast to which the invitees make every effort to attend (R. Koonuk 2005, personal communication). The Chukotkan people from Siberia, Canadian Inuit, and Greenlandic performers are also invited and feasted with whale meat and *muktuk*.

In 1988, after 74 yr, the renewed *kivgiq* festivities, the accompanying and pan-Arctic display of a shared cultural heritage, and the celebration of recent political victories rejuvenated Iñupiaq identity and gave new life to *muktuk* as a cultural emblem. "It's all about whaling," said George Ahmaogak Sr., the former NSB mayor who originally brought back the *Kivgiq* tradition. The primary purpose of this resurrection was to return to the traditional Iñupiaq values to combat recent environmental and social problems. The resurrection of the event indicates how the social function of Iñupiaq tradition has changed more than its form—it is now more secular and more invested with political meanings because it also invites the participation of nonindigenous organizations and individuals, especially representatives from the State of Alaska and the IWC. *Kivgiq* has become a way to communicate with other cultural groups and help the Iñupiat reaffirm their pride as the People of the Whales.

Any clear division between a symbolic meaning of *muktuk* and the People of the Whales' cultural identity dissolves in discussion.¹⁰ "Whales and traditional food are the core of our cultural survival, and we are made of the whale," says Caroline Cannon, former mayor of Point Hope (C. Cannon 2005, personal communication). Beverly Hugo of Barrow put it this way: "Muktuk is the source of our power and the symbol of unity within ourselves to retain our whales" (B. Hugo 2006, personal communication). For Jeslie Kaleak Sr., whaling captain from Barrow, the bowhead whales are the "only animals

that keep us strong as the real Iñupiat" (J. Kaleak Sr. 2005, personal communication). When I approached Jeslie's wife Julia with the question of whether there could be "life without *muktuk*?" her answer was an emphatic "Unthinkable." For Julia, "Whaling brings healings, blessings, unity, and renewal. When whales come to us, we tend to forget anxieties and problems in life. Everyone gets together to help process the whale properly and enjoy sharing *muktuk*" (J. Kaleak 2005, personal communication). She knows this to be true because when access to *muktuk* declined, social problems such as mutual distrust, alcoholism, domestic violence, drug abuse, and suicide rates all increased (J. Kaleak 2005, personal communication). For Iñupiat, to consume *muktuk* is to be whole, to be one with the whale, and to be one with the community, and there is no substitute. However, the latest crisis of *muktuk* politics is more environmental than political.

5. Muktuk politics and Arctic climate change

Undoubtedly, the Arctic peoples are standing on the northernmost frontier of climate change.¹¹ However, their current survival is a delicate balance between subsistence and economic development. Several groups of indigenous people are reliant upon the oil industry for secure, well-paying jobs. The Iñupiaq situation is complicated, by necessity, in that they have had to adopt many of the environmentally destructive activities that are actually causing climate change: jet planes, automobiles, homes heated with gas and petroleum, powerboats, and snowmobiles just to name but a few. They often have to pursue these venues even if it might contradict the ICC role in the climate change debate. However, Iñupiat, their indigenous neighbors in the Arctic and subArctic, and most climate scientists agree that anthropogenic climate change is the major cause of recent alterations in physical, biological, cultural, and social systems across the north.¹² The Arctic has warmed at nearly twice the rate of

¹⁰ *Muktuk* is adopted into Iñupiaq popular culture, and "Got *muktuk*?" and "Muktuk power" tee-shirts, sweatshirts, and other products have been produced by various Iñupiaq artists across the NSB.

¹¹ That said, their social movement is broad and participation is not entirely uniform. For example, Greenland promoted at COP15 that climate change might do the nation a favor (Nuttall 2008). Moreover, as sea ice recedes and opportunities for resource development increase, many community members and indigenous groups see the potential advantage for economic development. Studies have shown the dilemmas faced by communities trying to balance economic growth and maintain traditional ways of life.

¹² While climate change in general brings rapid environmental transformation to the region, there are differing opinions with the community on what the effects of climate change are and future effects might be. There are some "benefits" of climate change, such as extended fall whaling season and longer berry harvest season. However, these environmental changes also heighten the level of uncertainty about the future among Arctic residents.

the rest of the world over the past century, and scientists predict that warming trends in the Arctic will continue to outpace other global regions, and that the Arctic Ocean will be ice free in the summer in 20 yr, with most of its melt occurring in the next decade. Native peoples are cognizant of these observations, and they are also concerned about the actual and potential impact of climate change on their cultural, spiritual, and economic health. The Pachauri and Reisinger (2007) asserted that impacts on ice, snow, and glaciers would be significant, which would result in a tremendous impact upon the people's subsistence. Updates to these reports suggest that changes are occurring faster than anticipated: in 2007, Arctic sea ice reached a record low (NASA Earth Observatory 2007), and in 2008 both the northeast and northwest passages were ice free for the first time in recorded history (Revkin 2008). In September 2010, the minimum level of sea ice is the third lowest ever recorded in the Arctic Ocean (National Snow & Ice Data Center 2010) and the early melting of the snow and ice was continuously reported in spring 2011.

The transformation of the Arctic environment puts unbearable stress upon northern peoples. In the past, the governments of Arctic nations transformed indigenous groups from seminomads into residents of permanent settlements to efficiently incorporate them into national governance. This history resulted in making the rural communities more vulnerable to coastal erosion, unpredictable weather patterns, and changes in animal migration routes. In the Iñupiaq community of Shishmaref, Alaska (population 562), villagers will be forced to relocate to a nearby mainland location that is accessible to the sea because of problems induced by climate change such as coastal erosion caused by frequent storms, early sea ice reduction, and tundra thawing (Louter 2008). Relocation from, and the loss of, a homeland often causes strong reactions among place-based people. My fieldwork also confirmed this dilemma in Point Hope, a community that experienced relocation in 1977, which inflicted onto the villagers long-lasting emotional trauma (Sakakibara 2008). "Overnight, everything was gone. Bang, a storm took our houses one right after another," one of my interviewees described. To him and many other villagers, the disappearing Old Town still remains a special place they call home.

In addition to the eroding homeland, the continuity of the whaling tradition is threatened by decreasing and deteriorating sea ice conditions and changing ocean currents, as well as new wind directions, frequent storms, high seas, and other hazards. The hunters in Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Chukotka struggle to find new and safe hunting routes and encounter weather that is less predictable than in the past, as has been revealed by the

recent scholarship on dangerous climate change experienced by the Inuit (Crowley 2010; Crump 2008; Fenge 2001; Folkestad et al. 2005; Ford 2009; Wenzel 2009). Although climate change rarely acts alone to jeopardize human lives, some of these changes have contributed to death of men and women by drowning in the sea and lagoons that are covered by unprecedented conditions of fragile ice in the early spring or even in the winter.

Environmental change disrupts the subsistence calendar and associated practices. Recent shifts in climatic conditions, which also cause current changes, influence both migration patterns and timing of the ice-loving bowhead whales and hunters' access to them (Dixon 2003). With the warming oceanic temperature, the bowhead whales arrive earlier in northern Alaska from the coast in the spring and return from the Beaufort Sea to the coast later in the fall. Bowheads have evolved as ice whales, feeding on krill that live near ice, and it is unknown if the bowheads or their food supply can adjust to ice-free waters (Moore 2009; Thompson 2007; Tynan and DeMaster 1997). As the sea ice thins and the water temperature goes up, the whales now have to take a further northern route to get to their summer feeding ground. As a result, the distance between their migration path and whaling communities increases. Furthermore, the potentially ice-free Arctic Ocean—the Northwest Passage, in particular—will open the major routes for increased shipping and resource extraction activities along with industrial noises, disturbing bowheads further still. The northward shifts in bowhead migration require whalers to use more fuel, gear, physical strength, and time (E. Brower 2005, personal communication). Some whalers cannot afford to go whaling because of the sacrifices involved with this change. On the other hand, gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) are expanding their range as ice cover decreases (J. Reynolds et al. 2005, personal communication). Can the Iñupiat learn to hunt and eat the gray whale? "Gray whales?" offered Richard Glenn, a whaling captain in Barrow: "No, we will only hunt the bowhead" (2005, personal communication). Iñupiaq whalers are now obliged to make adjustments to their whaling cycle in order to accommodate environmental changes, but so far hunting the gray whale is not an option.

This is where the ICC comes into the intersection of cultural adaptation and indigenous cultural rights. The ICC—the international and intertribal organization that was originally fueled by Eben Hopson Sr.'s vision of muktuk politics—works to promote Iñupiaq and Inuit rights and to advocate for the preservation of their Arctic homeland. The current logo of the ICC—a stylized drum designed by Greenlandic artist Ninan Spore Kreutzmann—symbolizes the unity among the Arctic peoples. In addition to being a common instrument employed across the Arctic,

the northern drum is a pan-Arctic symbol of harmonious human–environmental relations. Drums are symbolic of the inseparability among humans, animals, and the Arctic environment. The drum is a metaphor of the whale because its membrane is often made of whale liver linings, stomachs, or lungs. More importantly, the drummers are often physically energized by muktuk before and after their performance. As it was shown above, muktuk has nourished, energized, and even politicized the Inupiaq efforts to have the outside world recognize their cultural rights since the 1970s. As the ICC and the AEWG have grown to tackle various political challenges, however, the people are now aware of the fact that the availability of muktuk itself may be jeopardized in the near future. For them it is time for muktuk politics to take a new turn to confront the emerging problem that may directly influence the future of human-whale relations.

The ICC has used international forums to remind the world that the Arctic is the home of many people and is a barometer of the world's environmental health. The ICC developed a Global Summit held in Anchorage in May 2009 where global indigenous peoples raised the visibility, participation, collaboration, and role of themselves in local, national, regional, and international processes. It was a five-day UN-affiliated conference with the involvement of approximately 400 people from 80 nations. The organizer and participants' intention was to develop strategies and partnerships that engage local communities and formulate proposals for climate change mitigation and adaptation to be presented at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP15) in Copenhagen, Denmark, in December 2009. Here, they discussed and promoted public awareness of programs and proposals for climate change adaptation, and assessed proposed "solutions" to climate change from their perspectives. It is also their goal to develop an Arctic-specific Circumpolar Climate Change Plan within each ICC country reflecting traditional knowledge and the social and cultural impacts of climate change.

These voices from the Arctic have become part of the moral and ethical foundation that seeks strong leadership on climate change mitigation policy. In this way, the ICC has served as a vehicle for northern peoples to internationally represent indigenous perspectives at the COP15 in addition to the meetings they hosted immediately before the international congregations in Barcelona, Spain; Bangkok, Thailand; Bonn, Germany, and other locations. The ICC began working with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and others to organize Arctic events. Prior to the COP15 and the Global Summit meetings of 2009, the ICC called upon global leaders to listen to their northern voices through various meetings and by drafting an international position

statement on climate change titled "Inuit call to global leaders: Act now on climate change in the Arctic," cosigned by the ICC's Chair and Vice-Chairs from Alaska, Canada, Chukotka, and Greenland. These visions are also enhanced by the Amundsen Statement, which is also known as the 2012 ICC Climate Change Roadmap. The climate change scientists and indigenous representatives at the Amundsen workshop pointed to the importance of the ICC developing a climate change strategy to build on its existing expertise and achievements in relation to environmental stewardship, international climate change negotiations, and the protection of Inuit traditional and intellectual rights.

The pan-Arctic indigenous peoples clarified their requests and goals in the Amundsen Statement, which was addressed to developed nations. The statement requested the governments below the Arctic Circle to (Inuit Circumpolar Conference 2009b)

- 1) respect indigenous subsistence and environmental rights by ratifying a post-Kyoto Protocol agreement to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations at 350 ppm by volume to keep the long-term temperature rises below 2°C;
- 2) designate the elimination of Arctic climate change impacts as one of the main theses of post-2012 efforts;
- 3) incorporate and facilitate indigenous perspectives and feedback as a crucial component of the IPCC—in-depth integration of traditional knowledge into a future assessment on climate change and human survival must be considered vital to informing policy decisions;
- 4) collaborate with the indigenous peoples and assist them in their efforts to adapt to the changing environment by creating an International Climate Change Adaptation Fund sponsored by G-20 countries (An immediate investment of \$20 billion U.S. dollars is requested to successfully relocate and reestablish villages such as Shishmaref that is to be relocated to Canada in a timely manner.);
- 5) provide vulnerable groups and communities in developed nations with financial support and technical assistance: focus on grassroots communities based on the guidelines established in the UNDRIP; and
- 6) incorporate sustainable development technology into local communities in ways that sustain local economies and peoples (Inuit Circumpolar Conference 2009b).

These expectations and requests, if met, would provide a solid foundation for the native cultural survival and indigenous collaboration with western scientific knowledge and environmental policy. Furthermore, the Amundsen

Statement reveals the importance of indigenous participation in key international processes and work programs related to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Sustained Arctic Observing Networks (SAON) initiative, the UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol, and others by developing Arctic-specific case studies. Indigenous peoples recognize the importance of working with the research community, governments, relevant organizations, such as the Arctic Council and its member states, the UN Environment Program, the World Bank, and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to encourage appropriate climate change decision making. The ICC is currently developing local coping strategies and mechanisms for inclusion in the UNFCCC database created under the Nairobi Work Program on Vulnerability and Adaptation to Climate Change. They also plan to share the Arctic science and knowledge generated from Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Chukotka, including the Greenland Siila and Siku Inuk Project, Snowchange, the International Polar Year, and ArcticNet, among other programs, to influence and inform policy through the development of an Arctic-specific position.

The current ICC focus and commitment on climate change has gone beyond the original scope of muktuk politics, but these efforts and emerging strategies fit into the framework of muktuk politics as a culmination of global political engagement that began in the 1970s. By collaborating with western scientists and their organizations, Arctic peoples have shown that epistemological diversity can better identify and mediate the cultural impacts of climate variability (Eicken 2010; Druckenmiller et al. 2010; Fienup-Riordan and Rearden 2010; Gearheard et al. 2010; Holm 2010; Krupnik et al. 2010a,b; Taverniers 2010). Through the development of muktuk politics, the Iñupiat and their indigenous neighbors have come to realize how the power of self-representation can be applied to other critical issues that endanger cultural continuity, sovereignty, and their physical existence. In the late 1970s, the negotiation with the IWC also clarified the importance of understanding nonindigenous perspectives to build their own constructive argument upon it. This realization facilitated their understanding of how traditional indigenous knowledge and its incorporation demonstrate great values for understanding climate change and its impacts worldwide. As such, the ICC has called upon the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to develop a future assessment on climate change and indigenous peoples and the important role of traditional knowledge in informing policy decisions (Inuit Circumpolar Conference 2009a,b).

The most recent ICC General Assembly in Nuuk, Greenland, emphasized that the Arctic environment is under dramatic stress from global climate change.

Discussions were developed from the foundation from the preceding assembly meeting in Barrow in 2006. Iñupiat and other Arctic groups' responses to climatic change linked muktuk politics, whaling, and environmental conservation to human rights. Specifically, the ICC and the AEWI have begun working collaboratively to draw international attention to the human plight of the Arctic region and, as Sheila Watt-Cloutier, former chair of the ICC and a Nobel Peace Prize nominee put it, to put "a human face on the global warming map" (S. Watt-Cloutier 2006, personal communication). Following the ICC's submission of a climate change petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Watt-Cloutier elaborated that human-induced global warming violated fundamental Iñupiat human rights, including health, physical integrity, security, subsistence access, and cultural well being (S. Watt-Cloutier 2006, personal communication).

Climate change in the Arctic informs us of the essential interconnection of the climate, weather, and society. The ICC raised the awareness of how the Arctic has played an essential role in helping humanity come to terms with climate change and continuously discuss how indigenous groups solicit the developed nations to reduce and eliminate environmentally destructive habits and policies. The organization also aspires to foster a discussion on how indigenous knowledge and experience may be able to contribute to the international climate change debate and policies. In 2009, Patricia Cochran, the succeeding ICC Chair who also represented Iñupiat, organized the Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change. Muktuk politics have now become fully circumpolar by taking the strategic turn from whaling rights to human rights seeking to force corrective measures to combat global warming in industrialized countries that have not signed the Kyoto Protocol, particularly the United States.

Despite making some headway with the Inter-American court case, the Iñupiat continue to struggle to give global warming a human face. Collaborating with the NSB Department of Wildlife Management, the AEWI annually provides Arctic thoughts and voices on climate and environmental changes as observed by whalers. These messages are directed to non-Arctic regions in hopes of drawing attention to the Iñupiat environment. These reports typically reveal difficult hunting conditions and declining whale hunt efficiencies resulting from persistent ice-choked leads, dangerous ice conditions, strong ocean currents, and wind directions, all of which influence the success of the bowhead hunt (Suydam et al. 2006). This new form of self-representation seeks to bring the plight of the Iñupiat to a wider audience, but it relies on more recent political experiences. As Harry Brower Jr., chair of the AEWI, explains, "Our fight to keep the IWC from taking our bowhead whale away from us has taught us

some very important lessons that we can use as we face global warming and [other] industrial threats” (H. Brower Jr. 2006, personal communication).

Recognizing the importance of their organizations to protect their rights and future plans, Brower considers that the future agenda for his people will always keep the triumph of muktuk politics at heart: “Our fight to keep the IWC from taking our bowhead whale away from us has taught us some very important lessons that we can use as we face global warming and [other] industrial threats,” such as offshore oil and gas development (H. Brower Jr. 2006, personal communication). Raising their own cultural identity through the consumption of whales to raise awareness about themselves and the environment, the Iñupiat seek to extend their reciprocal relationship into the future to ensure the traditions of their past.

The current range of activities administered by the ICC and the AEWG has, in many ways, outgrown the original muktuk politics, yet muktuk will certainly keep enriching the core of this ethnic movement to overcome the reinvigorated pain and fear imposed upon peoples resulting from unpredictable weather and climate. While the objectives of the circumpolar meetings are critical to their survival in their homeland, the participants also take the advantage of reuniting with their circumpolar kin and neighbors. These occasions often turn into extensive sharing and exchange of traditional native food, for instance, Iñupiaq participants exchange the bowhead whale muktuk with narwhal muktuk brought to them by their Greenlandic neighbors. As was the case in the past, the intensified social situation solidifies the intertribal kinship through the distribution of and faith in muktuk as a strong cultural emblem.

6. Conclusions

I have discussed how current indigenous experiences of climate change and self-representation have been empowered by muktuk politics that has its roots in the 1970s when Iñupiaq whalers successfully defended their whaling rights for the first time. The importance of the bowhead whale to the Iñupiat eventually added special meaning to muktuk as a newly developed cultural emblem, which was later applied to defend and advocate for circumpolar indigenous cultural rights. I have illustrated how politics, ethnic sentiments, identity, and whaling rights have become entangled, which eventually contributed to effective self-representation in more recent global for addressing climate change and its impacts.

Indigenous Arctic organizations such as the ICC and the AEWG have their origins in muktuk politics, and are currently building on a knowledge of their past to confront the environmental problems of their future through

their active participation in international assemblies. Currently, as much as the threat imposed by offshore oil extraction and gas development, climate change and endangered human rights in the Arctic are two of the most prominent topics that the ICC and the AEWG emphasize collectively. The Iñupiat realize that their current problems are different than those of the past, but they also understand that the new crisis consolidates their ties with the bowhead whales and their indigenous neighbors. This new form of muktuk politics seeks to bring the cultural plight of the Iñupiaq people and their circumpolar neighbors to a wider audience. The indigenous organizations are now ready to combat broader environmental problems, including climate change, and to protect their relations with the bowheads. As a symbol to unify the Iñupiat, muktuk will keep nourishing the People of the Whales and their cultural vitalities for many years to come.

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