

# ENTANGLED LIVELIHOODS: ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND DIVERSITY IN THE WESTERN ARCTIC

Katherine Reedy-Maschner

Department of Anthropology, Idaho State University, 921 South Eighth Avenue, Pocatello, Idaho 83209; reedkath@isu.edu

## ABSTRACT

No arctic society can live today without a source of cash income, nor do they want to. Many people sell fish, skins, and carvings, among other items, within and beyond their local communities either for profit or for redistribution, or engage directly in commercial fishing. Yet many of the most accessible anthropological depictions of Native peoples in the western Arctic minimize their participation in the modern economy no matter how small or large the scale, preferring instead to document more “authentic” human-animal-environment relationships. These depictions are at odds with those in other parts of the Arctic and indeed the world. Problematizing the role of the anthropologist, this article pulls together the scant references on modern articulations of indigenous peoples in the western Arctic, highlighting their entangled livelihoods in the commercial and subsistence worlds.

**KEYWORDS:** commercial economies, subsistence, tradition, modernity

## INTRODUCTION

During my fieldwork on the Alaska Peninsula, a couple sold me three bags of homemade salmon strips and a pair of beaded earrings made with porcupine quills. The salmon had been caught while the husband was crewing on a cousin’s commercial fishing boat, prepared by him, and smoked in his brother’s smokehouse. The quills came from a porcupine that the husband clubbed, his wife plucked, and the family ate. The money from this sale went to buy beer and some fishing line for the husband’s rod and reel.

This rather mundane series of events can actually be quite sensitive in that there is a commercial activity (fishing), there are subsistence fish (salmon) taken from commercial catches (a legal practice), a purely unregulated subsistence activity (porcupine clubbing), products (smoked strips and quill earrings) from these activities sold to an outsider (me), and the money used to purchase alcohol and supplies for subsistence gear, which he will use for future catches and perhaps sell portions of them. Similar events involving commodification of subsistence

harvests occur every day and yet are only barely documented around the Western Arctic. Why?

When I first began fieldwork in the eastern Aleutian region, I was immediately faced with contrasts. The eastern Aleut seemed barely comparable to the other descriptions of Alaska Native people I had read as a student. The Aleut, in fact, seemed bent on breaking every mold that I understood the rest of Native Alaska to be formed with, particularly in the realm of economics. As I have gradually expanded my fieldwork range in Alaska, these differences have begun to blur. Similar kinds of sales and exchanges occur everywhere. During a trip to Nome for the Kawerak Regional Conference, for example, ivory carvings, fur-lined gloves, bundles of dried salmon, and polar bear fur-covered jewelry boxes were all for sale. A brief trip to Bethel yielded opportunities to buy some dried pike and fur-trimmed kuspuks. Many people also participate in commercial fishing, guiding, trapping, and other “traditional” activities that earn dollars.

Placing Native peoples in the real world, where people need clothing, medicine, toilet paper, heating oil, and gasoline, for instance, and may want snowmobiles, televisions, iPods, and beer, for example, has not often been discussed by many western anthropologists. Many anthropological depictions of Native peoples deliberately omit or downplay their participation in the modern economy, preferring instead to document more “authentic” human-animal-environment relationships. Many chapters in Langdon’s (1986) edited volume on contemporary Alaska Native economies, for example, have anthropologists insisting on continuities of subsistence production and exchange in the face of new economic developments. These threads continue in more recent examples as well (Fienup-Riordan 2000; Hensel 1996). Others have considered the commercial developments of fishing and hunting (VanStone 1960; Wolfe 1984) but mostly for how they complement or contradict subsistence practices. Likewise, many arctic societies define themselves by subsistence in speech and practice, and anthropologists follow their lead and undervalue trapping, guiding, commercial fishing, and other practices that Native people choose to engage in that actually bring wages and allow for living in the modern world (e.g., Hensel 1996).

This article considers reasons behind the influence of subsistence in shaping ethnographic work and contemplates some potential consequences of the perpetuation of commercial-subsistence divisions. I then consider a selection of grey-literature examples of ethnographic works that are more economically inclusive but are rarely consumed outside of the Western Arctic, thereby contributing to traditional understandings and expectations for how arctic peoples behave. These works indicate that commercial and subsistence practices are mutually supporting and should not be separated in our analyses, situating Native peoples squarely within the modern world.

### MODERN PEOPLES/TRADITIONAL ETHNOGRAPHIES

It is the interplay between political and economic institutions and processes, the political economy, that sets many anthropological parameters in Alaska. The history of subsistence legal protections reveals contentions between state, federal, rural, urban, commercial, sport, Native, and non-Native interests (Thornton 1998). A subsistence priority over other consumptive uses in both state and federal law, for example, can appear threatening to some com-

mercial interests (Thornton 1998). However, boundaries between user groups are fuzzy, and those trying to protect one interest may find it difficult to acknowledge their other practices in the process.

Given the legal matrix surrounding subsistence, fear that more inclusive descriptions of contemporary people might be detrimental is not unfounded. Certainly we must take care in our depictions of people, but perhaps there is too much social editing. Native peoples’ actual activities continue discreetly, perhaps even under a guise of illegality, but if they are not documented as Native practices, then they are seen as beyond the behavior of Native peoples and no protection for the practices can ever be attained.

One consideration surrounding the role of the anthropologist is that most funding for ethnographic work is responsive to state and federal subsistence programs, ostensibly with the goal of informing managers about subsistence pursuits and justifying future subsistence rights. These rights must be closely guarded, yet validating political claims at the expense of a range of richer behaviors may do greater damage in the long run. Furthermore, these studies are influenced by narrow definitions of subsistence put forth by state and federal regulators. The Division of Subsistence of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game certainly has documented “mixed economies” for several decades, but it is the notion of the “mixed economy” itself that seems no longer relevant. Informants who are asked about subsistence may conform their answers to meet these limited subsistence definitions. Anthropologists conducting interviews about subsistence may be narrowing the scope of inquiry by using limiting terms.

The illegality of many of these mercantile practices that involve subsistence-caught foods could be a reason they are left out of so many stories. If sale and exchange of subsistence foods approaches the realm of commerce, that is, if high dollar amounts exchange hands, then the illegality question is heightened because only Alaska residents can engage in subsistence harvesting, and the state cannot provide a commercial opportunity solely for its residents (Magdanz 2007:125). All activities must be “customary and traditional, limited, and noncommercial” to meet the definition of customary trade and be acceptable (Magdanz 2007:124). These activities appear to occur at low levels, and thus acknowledging practices is not likely to lead to village raids by law enforcement. Wild foods and goods that are sold and bartered in Alaska certainly gain “value-added processing” in peoples’ kitchens and homes, however, and dollar values are negotiated between producer and

buyer. Langdon noted that subsistence itself is not taxed or recognized as income, thus making it “invisible or of little or no consequence” to state agents and resource development corporations (1991:287). I am not suggesting that subsistence should be treated as income, but with no record of the full range of economic practices that truly sustain families and villages, these practices cannot be guarded.

While these concerns explain the needed caution when working in the regulatory realm, many Alaska anthropologists work outside of it; they are not employed or funded by state or federal regulatory agencies. It is possible that the ideas about indigenous peoples promoted by Murphy and Steward (1956) still underpin notions of purity, that money has no place in hunter-gatherer hands (see also Bohannon 1967). These characterizations have long been debated for hunter-gatherers in general (e.g., Leacock and Lee 1982), and are generally discarded today (e.g., Schweitzer et al. 2000). In the Arctic, the added dimension of “tradition as inertia” that Riches warned us about two decades ago (1990:73) is still with us, where “a new ‘trend’ in monographic writing” still finds that “the dictates of subsistence, the encounter with the environment and the predicament of the isolated community are the predominant foci” (1990:78). Riches noted that the Arctic, and the Eskimo in particular, are upheld in anthropology as “beyond the pale” regarding social anthropological debates because of the predominantly static theoretical treatment of arctic traditions (1990:72).

In Alaska, there are dominant paradigms about “being Native” that have become authoritative, eclipsing any attempt to shake them. Endless descriptions of the “subsistence way of life” tell the same story again and again. For example, “for most Natives, subsistence is synonymous with culture, identity, and self-determination” (Thornton 1998:31). “The values associated with subsistence have become key symbols of Yup’ik ethnic, social, and spiritual identity, particularly as traditional subsistence practices and Yup’ik identity are challenged and threatened in what is effectively a postcolonial setting” (Hensel 1996:3–4). Here, identity is subsistence, and it is being threatened by non-Natives. Hensel carried these divisions further, saying that the prevalence of cash and non-Natives in Alaska force a stronger hold on these hallmarks of being Native. “The symbolic importance of subsistence as an ethnic marker has been heightened most obviously for those Yupiit heavily involved in the cash economy and in continuous contact with Euro-Americans” (Hensel 1996:4). For Hensel, engagement in the wage economy is seen

as mimicking Euro-Americans and cannot be a Yup’ik practice, even though most Yupiit do this. Many Alaska Natives echo this rhetoric, essentializing themselves with the aim of protecting rights to resources. Across the Arctic as well, “‘tradition’ exists because of its potency as a symbol of opposition to the political and economic activities of governments/Europeans in the north” (Riches 1990:72).

Another facet is that contemporary realities of arctic life can be difficult, and describing these difficulties can create vulnerabilities for the anthropologist. Living in or near one’s field site, such as in Anchorage or Fairbanks, engenders a sensitive editing process in one’s writing. Safe topics like human-animal relationships or sharing patterns preserve the anthropologist’s relationship to the people and ensure future access. However, anthropologists who validate desired images of people may only mask problems, thereby contributing to their perpetuation. This was certainly an issue for filmmaker Catherine Mullins. Regarding her recent film *Being Innu* (2007) about youth substance abuse, sexual abuse, suicide, and despair in Labrador, she stated that film is a powerful tool to reflect the community back onto itself and that the people did not want “just another film made about them” but for her to film “what it’s like to be here.” The leaders told her, “for once, someone has understood us” (C. Mullins, pers. comm.). I was unsettled by the film, but primarily because I knew that it could never be made in Alaska, even though the problems are similar. The story could not be told because of backlash to the filmmaker and researcher. If a nonsubsistence economy produces such research difficulties, how can other social problems be investigated?

Instead of featuring in popular (and more easily available) ethnographic texts of the contemporary Native peoples of Alaska (such as Chance 1990), descriptions of varied economic practices are tucked away in technical reports (e.g., Wolfe and Ellanna 1983), unpublished theses and dissertations (e.g., Wheeler 1998), presented papers that have yet to be published (e.g., Bodenhorn 2000), or documented primarily to inform potential changes in regulations (e.g., Moncrieff 2007). As an Alaska anthropologist who does not live in Alaska, and who is trying to teach students that no one lives in igloos, this is a concern. Moreover, it remains that most anthropological work consumed outside of Alaska is in the form of ethnographies—books. Many key Alaska ethnographies, while fascinating reads, leave me with large burning questions such as “how do they make a living?” If the only arctic treatise you read was Mishler and Simeone’s *Han: People*

*of the River* (2004), by all accounts an excellent historical and cultural volume, one might be left with the conclusion that fish wheels were and are purely for subsistence fishing instead of part of long commercial traditions as well. Or if the only book you studied was Jolles's *Faith, Food, Family in a Yupik Whaling Community* (2002), another excellent but stylized ethnography, one might wonder how the people of St. Lawrence Island make a living altogether. She mentions their dependency on cash, but is unclear about its sources. Certainly these volumes are not mainly about economy, but a few textual additions could provide a modern context.

Nevertheless, the scant references on modern economic articulations of indigenous peoples tell quite another story of entangled livelihoods in the commercial and subsistence worlds. Certainly, there is tremendous diversity in these economic practices; local capacities, population density, location, and resources available are just a few of the dimensions affecting this diversity. In the following sections, I consider particular contemporary instances across the Western Arctic in which commercial and subsistence practices occur jointly and are difficult to separate conceptually or practically and which should point towards fresh standards in anthropological research of Western Arctic Native economies.

### **CUSTOMARY TRADE IN THE NORTON SOUND AND PORT CLARENCE REGION**

Customary trade (defined by the state as the exchange of subsistence fish for cash) and barter (the exchange of subsistence fish for items other than cash) (Alaska Statute 6.05.940) has been a widespread practice in the Western Arctic as part of a range of reciprocal exchanges. "Trade fairs" in the Kotzebue Sound region were described in the early nineteenth century, reflecting a redistribution of fish, furs, sea mammal products, and even some minerals (Beechey 1968:290–292). Long-term trading partnerships between individuals were also common (Burch 2006). Skins and sea mammal products were also traded across Bering Strait, including trade for money, since different species and materials were available on either side (Bogoras 1904–9:56). Intensive commercialization of sea mammals and fish in the late nineteenth century diminished overall resource availability, and by Alaska statehood in 1959, in an ironic twist, commercial fishing was allowed and even encouraged while a small-scale individual selling of fish and game was banned for resource protection (Wolfe and

Magdanz 1993). This began to change with the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, the Alaska state subsistence law of 1978, and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980, which all included the role of cash in exchanges of subsistence products (Magdanz et al. 2007).

Wolfe and Magdanz (1993) described these exchanges of subsistence foods for small amounts of cash as occurring long before Alaska statehood and even before European contact. It appears that these practices have remained in play as a way to distribute subsistence fish and game to people outside sharing networks, to those who may not be able to fish or hunt for themselves, and to distribute specialty products that are not commercially available (Magdanz et al. 2007). A joint study conducted by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and Kawerak, Inc. (Magdanz et al. 2007), documented customary trade practices throughout this history and showed how they remain vibrant parts of life on the Seward Peninsula. This study, and studies by Moncrieff (2007) in the Yukon Delta and Kreig et al. (2007) in Bristol Bay, were responses to a research need that arose out of a 2003 Federal Subsistence Board meeting. Customary trade is also provided for under Title VIII of ANILCA, providing for limited sale of subsistence items, but allowable levels were never defined nor does it allow for regional variation. The board called for research projects to provide descriptive information on the nature and extent of customary trade across Alaska, which were then funded through the Federal Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program.

Customary trade practices bring food to houses that might not otherwise have access, they redistribute products such as seal oil and muktuk that are hard to obtain, and they maintain social relationships. "This trade does not appear to be conducted for profit, nor is it conducted in isolation from other subsistence activities" (Magdanz et al. 2007:5). Rates of purchase are determined based upon need or the rarity of the item, but also on an intense awareness of the costs to harvest and process the item as well as the seller's circumstances. As one Shaktoolik man said, "You are always conscious of the cost. Even if muktuk is given to you, you are always aware of how much it cost to get" (Magdanz et al. 2007:40–41).

At the 2007 Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim Alaska Board of Fisheries meeting in Anchorage, divisions between commercial and subsistence were blurred by people from the region. Testifiers from western Alaska described subsistence and commercial users as similar or the same people who

have similar problems. They need to replace nets and motors, repair boats, feed and clothe their families, heat their homes, and care for extended relations. A proposal to adopt regulations recognizing customary trade was made in order to “make what is currently in existence legal,” stated a woman from Nome, who says her father regularly bought bundles of red salmon from Teller. The proposal writer, also from Nome, described the long history of small-scale customary trade and barter; for example, turning in dried salmon to stores for credit whose owners then sold the salmon to dog-team mail carriers. “Trade for cash” was described as an entrenched part of life, alongside other practices such as barter, a legal practice that includes trading subsistence fish for other fish, food, or nonedible items excluding cash.

While the Board of Fisheries has recognized customary trade in a few cases because of litigation, it is otherwise a Class A misdemeanor, punishable by up to a \$10,000 fine or one year in prison. A board member also noted that simply because a practice is widespread does not mean that they should provide a regulation for it. Magdanz et al. (2007) found that some people were reluctant to participate in their study, knowing that most of their customary trade occurred with species harvested on state land. Often, respondents were vague about details or reported that they only did it one time, but then went on to recount other instances (2007:60). Large producers of chinook salmon strips, although well known, did not participate in the study because of the legalities. Despite these widespread practices, law enforcement does not seem to see these as a priority and only became involved in a few egregious cases, preferring “bureaucratic cognitive dissonance” (Magdanz et al. 2007:72). The report’s customary trade and barter maps illustrate large networks of traders and buyers, even though the study experienced limited participation and limited revelations about their practices.

The pervasiveness of these practices came to light during discussion sessions at the meeting and when preliminary findings from Magdanz et al.’s (2007) study were presented. Fish are sold at basketball games as a “concession,” dried salmon bundles are advertised on grocery store and post office bulletin boards, fish are sold over the phone and air freighted to other villages or to Anchorage, short-term sales are made for money to buy items immediately needed (milk, diapers), and products are sold publicly at the Alaska Federation of Natives annual convention. Products include caribou meat, berries, seal oil, walrus meat, muktuk, whitefish, crab, salmon, moose, halibut, and even some plant species, among many other products.

At the end of the March 2007 meeting, the Alaska Board of Fisheries adopted a new regulation allowing customary trade in the Norton Sound–Port Clarence area, amending the original proposal. The regulation was created July 1, 2007, and requires a permit to sell subsistence-caught fish. Sales cannot exceed \$200 in a calendar year, the details of the transactions must be recorded on the permit, all transactions must begin and end in the Norton Sound–Port Clarence area, and no purchased fish can be resold (Magdanz et al. 2007:73).

### **YUKON-KUSKOKWIM DELTA CUSTOMARY TRADE**

A study on the practice of selling subsistence fish in three Yukon River communities (Moncrieff 2007) was also responsive to the Federal Subsistence Board’s need for more regional information on the nature of customary trade. Part of Moncrieff’s study considered a new rule for fish that is sold to meet health safety standards under the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation. Moncrieff describes how this rule limits the sale to only whole unfrozen salmon, which is “the customary trade activity that they least consider is a part of their traditional and present trade practices” (2007:3). Nevertheless, Moncrieff documents the nature and extent of customary trade in Alakanuk (Yup’ik), Holy Cross (Yup’ik and Athabaskan), and Tanana (Koyukon Athabaskan), describing a fluid system with reference to cash and fish. All three communities reported a long history of sale and trade, and these practices continue.

Alakanuk reported the least amount of selling; it is more of an “opportunistic” activity that occurs when someone needs fish and someone is willing to sell it. Customary trade of fish is reportedly more prevalent in Holy Cross, with a greater demand for fish products reported. People reported the same buyers year to year with popular products such as half-dried bellies and smoked strips. Fish are not just sold within the community to family and friends; they are also sold to travelers passing through Holy Cross and to relations in Anchorage. Cash received in Anchorage for the fish is used to cover travel expenses, groceries, and school clothes. Cash from the sale of subsistence fish is also poured back into subsistence gear, gas, and other supplies, making subsistence practices possible. Tanana’s customary trade practices are also alive and well, with most people selling within their home or neighboring communities. Many reported that elders and others depend upon them for their fish and they had regular customers. The money

here too was put towards maintaining fish camps as well as other living expenses.

Langdon (1991) conducted a comprehensive study on the role of cash in two Yup'ik communities, still with the guiding notion that subsistence is intact despite expanding economic ties to the larger society. He characterized cash as a major way of supporting the "high degree of subsistence activity and commitment" (1991:270) and considered the sources and quantities of cash for their roles in subsistence, but ultimately found that cash had no significant effect on people's subsistence. Those who were the large subsistence producers were also the largest commodity producers. For those in wage employment, a system of substitute employees filled in during subsistence harvesting time. Langdon found that "the pursuit of cash as end in itself either as a store of value or in order to pursue primarily personal desires is relatively undeveloped" (1991:288), but the situation could be quite different today. Instead, cash is "merely a means to certain specified cultural ends" (1991:288).

In other Yup'ik studies, exchange and sale practices are referenced, but not highlighted. The nature of urban-rural subsistence exchange is introduced as a "cooler ring," in which an urban Native woman takes her cooler filled with, in this case, doughnuts on her journeys to Yup'ik villages and gives them to people who replace them in the cooler with ducks, caribou and seal meat, fish, and berries (Lee 2002). While the costs of this travel, harvesting, freight, and time are implied (as well as dimensions of consumption and social class due to travel and harvesting costs, citing Fienup-Riordan 2000:279), we are left to imagine the keen awareness of these costs that this woman and her sharing network must possess. Days-old doughnuts for seal meat seems like a lopsided exchange. But Lee's article also brings the new Norton Sound–Port Clarence customary trade rule into a more problematic arena. Exchange networks between urban and rural people (see also Fogel-Chance 1993) are allowed if no money is involved under state law, but not allowed if money is exchanged as well. This is not true under federal regulations, further complicating matters for the people in the networks.

Money matters nonetheless. Fienup-Riordan says, "Yup'it in Anchorage with the highest-paying jobs are also those best supplied with Native foods. Rather than spend their money on steaks at the store or dinners out, they save for four-hundred-dollar plane tickets for hunting trips and berry-picking expeditions," and these foods are shared across Anchorage (2000:162). Villagers also go to Anchorage to "'harvest' what they need for multivillage

exchange dances, spring seal-party giveaways, and Russian Orthodox Christmas feasts. During a long weekend in town a couple may spend money earned fishing commercially or cash annual Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend checks to buy and ship cases of everything from Pampers to pilot bread back to the village" (2000:162).

There is time depth to these trade, sale, and exchange practices as well. In the Yukon and Kuskokwim Delta, Wolfe (1984) provides a good treatise of resource commercialization as it relates to subsistence practices, even though he starts with the premise that Yup'ik society was integrating a "new economic enterprise" into its subsistence-based economy and that a transformative power of the commercial arena places these systems in opposition. Still Wolfe does identify local trade of dried salmon (to feed dog teams), sea mammal oils and skins, and reindeer skins among other products at the time of contact, although with an indeterminate volume (Wolfe 1979, 1984).

## FISHING AND SHARING IN AREA M

The scale at which the Aleut combine commercial and subsistence practices makes them a very interesting case. In the eastern Aleutian region, known by its state Board of Fisheries designation as Area M, the Aleut engage in intensive commercial fisheries for salmon, crab, halibut, cod, pollock, and herring. Commercial fishing is more than an economic base that allows people to afford to harvest subsistence resources, it is a cultural foundation encompassing family, politics, education, material culture, diet, and economy. The majority of fish enters the villages on commercial boats, captured using commercial gear, during commercial openings, and is delivered to the cannery dock using cannery personnel and equipment such as bags and bins (Reedy-Maschner 2010). This is a legal practice, and canneries help facilitate the movement of fish from boat to household. While the Aleut are limited to 250 subsistence salmon using subsistence gear, no limit exists for subsistence fish taken using commercial gear, although quantity is determined by need and rarely exceeds the subsistence limit.

The villages are located in areas that are perfect for canneries but are not particularly good locations for subsistence harvesting. When out on their boats, fishermen and crewmen often use time between fishing openings to harvest other species from nearby beaches and uplands. Bags of bidarkis (black katy chitons), cuttlefish (small octopus), clams, and numerous other resources are frequently handed over on the docks along with salmon after the

end of a commercial opening. Fishermen may also set nets near shore with skiffs, but only in good weather.

Fishermen also sell fish and shellfish (especially crab) to cannery workers. These are not conceived of as “side businesses,” but the workers want the food and the fishermen are in a position to supply them. Rates are variable depending upon the species and the need. Mass quantities of salmon, crab, and halibut, for example, also travel in coolers out to Anchorage and to a sizeable Aleut population in the Pacific Northwest for both sharing and sale. All of these activities are mixed seamlessly and with banality; it is simply what you do.

Historical dimensions contribute to the modern scale of commercialization. The Aleut were well versed in trade before Russian contact in 1741. They were complex foragers who traded fish, sea mammals, raw materials, women, and slaves to create alliances between villages and for chiefly self-aggrandizement (Jochelson 2002; Maschner and Reedy-Maschner 2005; Veniaminov 1984). Initial contact between Russians and Aleuts involved conscripting Aleut men as hunters and producers for the Russian Crown. Russians married Aleut women and produced several “Creole” generations; these descendants also became ship’s captains and merchants within the Russian-American Company. The American period also began with Aleut and Creole participation in commercial fisheries and fur seal industries. Salmon were a commercial commodity for the complex foragers of the North Pacific Rim for millennia, and the market-driven global salmon economy began in the 1890s as a byproduct of the Sea of Okhotsk/North Pacific cod and halibut fisheries.

In contrast to the Yupiit and Iñupiat, the Aleut are not commodifying subsistence foods; rather the people, gear, fish, and other subsistence foods are so intertwined that disentangling the commercial and subsistence as two separate systems is difficult (and unnecessary).

### YUKON RIVER ATHABASCAN ECONOMIES

Priscilla Wheeler (1998) gives the most thorough example of a single economic system comprising fish, game, and cash in four Deg Hi’tan and Doy Hi’tan Athabaskan villages of the lower Yukon River. For Wheeler, cash is derived from sources such as limited wage employment, craft sales, commercial sale of fish and furs, and state and federal transfers. Game is hunted in season and fish are harvested when running up the rivers. Thus all resources, including cash, are seasonally and variously available. “Once in the

system (regardless of how it got there), cash is a resource like any other resource” (Wheeler 1998:35).

By documenting resource and land use for these four communities alongside the costs and the sources of cash, Wheeler is able to show that cash and capitalism have not corrupted or dominated a pure subsistence economy; rather, they are simply another facet of the economy. Cash value is not strictly monetary, nor is it fixed.

When cash is limited, expenditures are minimized; and other resources are maximized. Similarly, when cash is commonly available, for example, after a ‘good’ fire fighting season or when Alaska Permanent Fund dividend cheques are received, expenditures tend to be high; and the force on other resources may not be as intense. In a sense, when cash is available, investment in the necessary equipment required for efficient subsistence utilization effectively banks or caches a resource (cash) for future use. Similarly, when moose or fish is in large supply, the meat is banked for future use by being made into dry meat or dried fish. The resource form is changed (fresh meat to dry meat; cash to boats, snow machine, etc.) to accommodate future use. Viewed within a common framework, household monetary income and subsistence yield (resources harvested) are complementary aspects of a single system; i.e., the total economy of the communities. (Wheeler 1998:142–143)

In contrast, Phyllis Fast (2002) characterizes participation in a cash economy as a form of “addiction” on par with substance abuse for the Koyukon Athabascans. The dollar, she argues, both erodes and replaces trade partnership and alliances. However, she places her study communities squarely within a world where one must have money for housing, transportation, freight charges, clothing, and fishing licenses, listing actual costs and the sources of cash. She describes how wooden houses have replaced skin tents and must now be electrified, plumbed, filled with “mainstream furniture” (2002:116), heated, and maintained, but all of this must come at great expense and drives their need for cash. Initially people may have been moved into more modern homes by the government against their will, but I suspect it is the desirable thing today. Still, for Fast, the use of cash is assimilating, and she argues that Athabascans themselves do not fully understand what they are participating in, which leads to other negative behaviors such as bootlegging and gambling. While I do not doubt that there are social struggles occurring in these communities, cash as the corrupting element seems too simplistic an explanation.

## THE PRICE OF WHALING

In the Alaska Arctic, Bodenhorn provides a fine example of the “costs of sharing” (2000) in which she describes how “whaling wealth,” previously earned through selling whaling products, now must be earned elsewhere. Any financial returns from whaling cannot be used to fund whaling expeditions. Whaling is expensive and risky, since a positive outcome is not guaranteed. Bodenhorn lists the commitments of time and energy required for men and women, such as maintaining a boat or sewing skin clothing. She also lists the actual items that need to be purchased in order to whale, such as coffee, tarpaulins, outboard motors, fuel, camp stoves, and ammunition. The different seasons and ecological conditions demand different preparations and equipment.

Just as it is impossible to separate fully “cash” and “subsistence” economic spheres in social life, it is virtually impossible to separate fully “whaling” and “other” subsistence costs. Tools, rifles, trucks, snow-machines and the like are certainly used for activities that are not necessarily in support of whaling. But whaling could not happen without them and so, at some level, need to be taken into account. (Bodenhorn 2000:6–7)

While Bodenhorn resists listing the actual costs in dollar amounts, she emphasizes the large organizational efforts requiring people and things. On the other hand, these whaling communities are long distances from regional centers, and most equipment is air freighted from Fairbanks to the villages at high costs. I suspect there is a keen awareness of the dollar value of these items.

## WESTERN CANADIAN CASES

In the western Canadian Arctic, the Inuvialuit Harvest Study (IHS) defines subsistence in a cooperative document called the Inuvialuit Final Agreement (IFA) between federal and local bodies as “the taking of wildlife by Inuvialuit for their personal use for food and clothing and includes the taking of wildlife for the purpose of trade, barter and sale among Inuvialuit and trade, barter and sale to any person of the nonedible byproducts of wildlife that are incidental to the taking of wildlife for their personal use” (IFA section 2, IHS 2003:7). For the purposes of the study, hunters were asked to keep a daily record of their harvests. The hunters were not asked to report small or large-scale commercial harvests of fish and game such as caribou and musk oxen, nor were

they asked to report the disposition of the harvest (for personal or family consumption, gifts, barter, or commercial sale) but they did anyway. Separation “on the ground” was difficult for the hunters, so they reported what they did.

Richard Condon (1996) described the transformations of the Northern Copper Inuit in the community of Holman as rapidly moving from an “isolated trapping and trading outpost” to modernized with television, telephone, and daily air service in a thirty-year period (1996:159). Snowmobiles replaced dog teams, large plumbed and electrified housing units were constructed, and Holman was incorporated as a hamlet. Their economy has also experienced changes, but the before and after picture painted by Condon is one of scale, not necessarily transformation. Before these changes in the community, “Holman residents supported themselves by subsistence hunting, trapping, limited arts and crafts production, and modest amounts of social assistance” (1996:172–173). After the community “modernization” he describes, these practices became more secure and were supplemented with employment in housing, health care, local government, and education.

As Condon et al. (1995) describe,

Holman Inuit use the term subsistence in everyday conversation, but are less likely to engage in the hairsplitting that is characteristic of subsistence researchers, government administrators, and wildlife regulators, all of whom often distinguish between hunting for domestic consumption (thus subsistence) and harvesting that ultimately involves selling animal products for cash (therefore commodity production). While this may at times be a useful conceptual distinction, we documented many cases in which hunters were involved simultaneously in both activities. (1995:44)

Thus, sale of “country food” is common across the Canadian Arctic (Condon et al. 1995). In Nunavik, the moral imperative to share foods is tempered by an institution that buys country foods and then gives them away (Gombay 2005).

## ECONOMIES

“Mixed economy” has been used to describe contemporary Alaska Native subsistence and commercial practices, since they often go hand-in-hand (e.g., Dinero 2004; Langdon 1986; Wolfe and Ellanna 1983), but in ethnographic description, monetary/commercial is still often separated



from subsistence/noncommercial. Wheeler challenges the treatment of subsistence and cash sectors of the economy as separate in these ethnographies, saying that “the relationship between the two is typically characterized as a fragile balance and a transitory state” (1998:259). She aptly roots this dichotomy in the “transformative powers” (citing Bohannan 1967) that cash is assumed to have, arguing that it is the ethnographers that bring the “western cultural baggage” attached to cash (1998:259).

On the other hand, assuming cash enters the local system absent its associated western values/understandings, then the transformative powers would, in fact, be negligible. It is not the cash per se, but its associated meaning and values, which potentially undermine local economies. If western values are not attached to cash, and cash is instead imbued even partly with local values, then it logically follows that the use of cash in and of itself would not spell demise of the local economy; but could, in fact, support it. (Wheeler 1998:259–260)

Echoing Wheeler in Alaska and arctic anthropologists outside of Alaska (especially Dahl 1989), I am suggesting that this division need not be made at all, because it obscures a range of critical socioeconomic behaviors. The Aleut present the clearest case of these economic amalgamations, but the grey and dissertation literature shows how many other societies in the Western Arctic merge these practices with equal ordinariness.

Another consideration for why Alaska anthropologists omit large dimensions of the stories from their field sites has to do with how the Arctic, and Alaska specifically, might still hold a special significance for anthropologists (Riches 1990). During Fienup-Riordan’s 2006 American Anthropological Association presentation on traditional landscapes as viewed by the Yup’ik of Nelson Island, she set the scene by describing the communities and people on the island and how most homes have satellite televisions and computers with internet access. A wave of incredulity spread across the room.

If we step outside the Western Arctic, these economic distinctions are not made (Caulfield 1993, 1997; Dahl 1989, 2000; Gombay 2005; Wenzel 1991; Ziker 2002), practices that Magdanz et al. (2007) were keenly aware of. They had been seeing, and perhaps answering, local advertisements in the Norton Sound area stores selling dried salmon bundles for many years.

We knew that small quantities of subsistence foods often were sold person-to-person through-

out Alaska. We knew that in Inuit communities in Canada and Greenland, “country food” sales were permitted and routine. We knew that in Alaska, such sales had been prohibited by state regulation for decades. Nonetheless, people kept buying and selling: a bundle of salmon, a sack of frozen cod, a jar of seal oil, or a bucket of berries. Rarely was anyone cited, even when products were sold at public venues like the annual Alaska Federation of Natives convention. (2007:72)

Maintaining low levels of sale is necessary because the state cannot legally provide a commercial opportunity to a select group of people. Legal issues notwithstanding, customary trade still strikes me as a technical guise for commercial practices; the term allows anthropologists to document the practices without using the “commercial” word, and the people themselves can still do commercial things they can call “customary and traditional.”

Many arctic peoples have faced difficulties in the commercial world. For example, many indigenous Canadians who were part of a local subsistence-commercial economy in which the furs were sold and the meat was consumed were negatively affected when the European Economic Community boycotted the sale of furs and the fur markets plummeted in the 1980s (Wenzel 1991). Today, there has been an acceleration in development involving oil, natural gas, and minerals in the Arctic, and Native peoples are sorting out their roles relative to these changes (e.g., Dinero 2005; Stern 2006).

In Alaska, Native identity is sometimes used to promote the sale of wild fish. At the corporate end of the spectrum, for example at the Boston International Seafood Show, Kwik’pak Fisheries and Aleutia, Inc., were among several Alaska local value-added processing companies who are breaking into upscale seafood markets (Lee 2008). Aleutia was created, managed, and is supplied by Aleut fishermen of the North Pacific/Southern Bering Sea. It is marketed with statements such as “Aleut fishing families from the remote coastal villages... share with you their most treasured resource” ([www.aleutia.org](http://www.aleutia.org)). Kwik’pak fish are also caught by Yup’ik Eskimo fishermen in the Yukon River Delta and marketed as rich in oils, delicious, and coming from the “cradle of Eskimo civilization” ([kwikpakfisheries.com](http://kwikpakfisheries.com)).

## CONCLUSION

Among Native peoples of the Arctic, wild resources are foundations for multiple societies that are variously managed,

harvested, processed, consumed, gifted, traded, and sold. In the Western Arctic, Inuit, Yup'ik, Iñupiaq, Athabascan, Alutiiq, and Aleut peoples each harvest, consume, trade, share, and sell mass quantities of the five species of salmon (Langdon 1986; Reedy-Maschner 2010; Wolfe 1984). Non-Native peoples also engage in the commercial, subsistence, and sport salmon fisheries in diverse ways and variously fish alongside and in opposition to Native people. Rather than begin with the assumption that cash has been integrated into local economies, and then evaluate whether it enhances or destroys local culture, it is more useful to start with one economy and explore its operation, meaning, and value.

The subsistence-commercial division in Alaska is partially a product of state and federal management and has been criticized by anthropologists for the way subsistence is defined. But when “righting” the problem, anthropologists further “authenticate” the people and swing too far towards the perceived “traditional” to document sharing, well-being, mental health, community, and ideology. When money is involved, the practice gets categorized as nontraditional, further removing Native people from the modern world. Anthropologists perhaps bend over backwards to insist that traditions are alive and well, but step over other key practices to get there.

Biased portrayals can harm those societies that do not market their representations in particular ways, since others expect them to mirror “timeless peoples” and are disappointed to find them watching American Idol, eating tacos, and using GPS on hunting trips. The Aleut have certainly faced difficulties for not behaving as expected in negotiating access to fisheries (Reedy-Maschner 2010). Further, during the 1997 autumn whale hunt in Barrow, for example, Bodenhorn (2000/2001) photographed a bowhead whale being transported from the shore to the butchering site with a front-end loader. This scene disappointed outside spectators, and it should not have. Hopefully Bodenhorn's descriptions of Iñupiaq tradition as “the customary practice of change—of the constant modification of the things people do when whaling and of the technology they incorporate to do it” (2000/2001:25) will reach wider audiences.

In the Aleutians, if you ask someone to talk about their “subsistence lifestyle,” the description you get is very limited, and I suspect this is the case across Alaska. Leaving the question more open-ended by asking about daily routines, activities, where things come from, how they acquired certain possessions, for example, leads to richer responses.

Economies surrounding harvested wild foods have variously and necessarily involved barter and sale that can be related to, or outside of, sharing practices: these practices redistribute goods, solidify relationships across and between communities, and provide needed income, among many other purposes. If we can get beyond the subsistence-commercial dichotomy and start thinking about whole systems, then, like Mullins (2007), we can better address some of the other sociocultural and behavioral issues.

The discussion here is far from exhaustive, but the works cited represent some of the rare published and grey literature examples of western arctic peoples embedded in broad economic activities in which the people, relationships, hunting and fishing equipment, money, and food are all intertwined. These challenge many key and even “definitive” ethnographies and disarticulate the Alaska arctic anthropological notion of the “traditional.”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An anonymous reviewer of another manuscript inspired the title. Herbert Maschner provided helpful commentary. I also thank William Simeone and two anonymous reviewers for valuable criticisms as well.

## REFERENCES

- www.aleutia.org  
Website for Aleutia that markets wild sockeye salmon from the Alaska Peninsula. Accessed December 15, 2009.
- Beechey, Frederick William  
1968 [1831] *Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Bering's Strait to Co-operate with the Polar Expeditions Performed in His Majesty's Ship Blossom in the Years 1825, 26, 27, 28*. 2 vols. Da Capo Press, New York.
- Bodenhorn, Barbara  
2000 The Cost(s) of Sharing? Buying; Sharing; Whaling—A Very Modern Tradition in the Western Arctic. Spring 2000 Whaling Workshop, Anchorage.  
2000/2001 It's Traditional to Change: A Case of Strategic Decision-Making. *Cambridge Anthropology* 22(1):24–51.
- Bogoras, W. G.  
1904–9 *The Chukchee*. Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, Volume XI; Reprints of Vol. VII, Parts 1–III of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, 1904–1909. G. E. Stechert & Co., New York.

- Bohannon, Paul  
1967 *Law and Warfare: Studies in the Anthropology of Conflict*. Natural History Press, Garden City, NY.
- Burch, Ernest  
2006 *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Inupiaq Eskimo Nations*. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.
- Caulfield, Richard  
1993 Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling in Greenland: The Case of Qeqertarsuaq Municipality in West Greenland. *Arctic* 46(2):144–155.  
1997 *Greenlanders, Whales, and Whaling: Sustainability and Self-Determination in the Arctic*. Dartmouth College/University Press of New England, Hanover, NH.
- Chance, Norman  
1990 *The Inupiat and Arctic Alaska: An Ethnography of Development*. Harcourt Brace, New York.
- Condon, Richard  
1996 *The Northern Copper Inuit: A History*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK.
- Condon, Richard, Peter Collings, and George Wenzel  
1995 The Best Part of Life: Subsistence Hunting, Ethnicity and Economic Adaptation among Young Adult Inuit Males. *Arctic* 48(1):31–46.
- Dahl, Jens  
1989 The Integrative and Cultural Role of Hunting and Subsistence in Greenland. *Etudes/Inuit/Studies* 13(1):23–42.  
2000 *Saqqaq: An Inuit Hunting Community in the Modern World*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Dinero, Steven  
2004 Analysis of a “Mixed Economy” in an Alaskan Native Settlement: The Case of Arctic Village. *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 23(1):135–64.  
2005 Globalization and Development in a Post-Nomadic Hunter-Gatherer Village: The Case of Arctic Village, Alaska. *Northern Review* 25/26:135–60.
- Fast, Phyllis  
2002 *Northern Athabascan Survival: Women, Community, and the Future*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
- Fienup-Riordan, Ann  
2000 *Hunting Tradition in a Changing World: Yup'ik Lives in Alaska*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ.
- Fogel-Chance, Nancy  
1993 Living in Both Worlds: “Modernity” and “Tradition” among North Slope Inupiaq Women in Anchorage. *Arctic Anthropology* 30(1):94–108.
- Gombay, Nicole  
2005 The Commoditization of Country Foods in Nunavik: A Comparative Assessment of Its Development, Applications, and Significance. *Arctic* 58(2):115–128.
- Hensel, Chase  
1996 *Telling Our Selves: Ethnicity and Discourse in Southwestern Alaska*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Inuvialuit Harvest Study  
2003 Data and Methods report, 1988–1997. Inuvik, NT. [www.fjmc.ca/publications/IHS.htm](http://www.fjmc.ca/publications/IHS.htm). Accessed October 15, 2009.
- Jochelson, W.  
2002 [1933] *History, Ethnology, and Anthropology of the Aleut*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.
- Jolles, Carol Zane  
2002 *Faith, Food, and Family in a Yupik Whaling Community*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Krieg, T. M., J. A. Fall, M. B. Chythlook, R. LaVine, and D. Koster  
2007 Sharing, Bartering, and Trade of Subsistence Resources in the Bristol Bay Area, Southwest Alaska, FIS 04-454. Technical Paper 326, Division of Subsistence, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Juneau.  
[www.kwikpakfisheries.com](http://www.kwikpakfisheries.com).  
Website marketing wild Alaska Yukon River salmon. Accessed December 15, 2009.
- Langdon, Stephen  
1991 The Integration of Cash and Subsistence in Southwest Alaskan Yup'ik Eskimo Communities. *Senri Ethnological Studies* 30:269–291.
- Langdon, Stephen (editor)  
1986 *Contemporary Alaskan Native Economies*. University Press of America, Lanham, MD.
- Leacock, Eleanor, and Richard Lee (editors)  
1982 *Politics and History in Band Societies*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Lee, Molly  
2002 The Cooler Ring: Urban Alaska Native Women and the Subsistence Debate. *Arctic Anthropology* 39(1–2):3–9.
- Lee, Jeannette  
2008 Yukon Salmon Fishery Faces Tough Times. *Juneau Empire* March 10: [http://juneauempire.com/stories/031008/sta\\_255503245.shtml](http://juneauempire.com/stories/031008/sta_255503245.shtml), accessed Feb. 10, 2010.

- Magdanz, James  
2007 Customary Trade of Fish in the Norton Sound-Port Clarence Area, Proposal 148. Briefing Note to the Alaska Board of Fisheries. Division of Subsistence, Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Document online at [www.cf.adfg.state.ak.us/region3/pubs/nortonsound/06bofsubcusttrd.pdf](http://www.cf.adfg.state.ak.us/region3/pubs/nortonsound/06bofsubcusttrd.pdf). Accessed April 2008.
- Magdanz, James, Sandra Tahbone, Austin Ahmasuk, David Koster, and Brian Davis  
2007 Customary Trade and Barter in Fish in the Seward Peninsula Area, Alaska. FIS Project 04-353. Technical Paper 328, Division of Subsistence, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Juneau.
- Maschner, Herbert D. G., and Katherine L. Reedy-Maschner  
2005 Aleuts and the Sea. *Archaeology* March/April:63–70.
- Mishler, Craig, and William Simeone  
2004 *Han: People of the River*. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.
- Moncrieff, Catherine  
2007 Traditional Ecological Knowledge of Customary Trade of Subsistence Harvested Salmon on the Yukon River. Report to the Office of Subsistence Management, Fisheries Information Service, 04-265, Juneau.
- Mullins, Catherine (director and producer)  
2007 *Being Innu* (film). Green Lion Productions, Canada.
- Murphy, Robert, and Julian Steward  
1956 Tappers and Trappers: Parallel Processes in Acculturation. *Journal of Economic Development and Cultural Change* 4:335–353.
- Reedy-Maschner, Katherine  
2010 *Aleut Identities: Tradition and Modernity in an Indigenous Fishery*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston.
- Riches, David  
1990 The Force of Tradition in Eskimology. In *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing*, edited by Richard Farndon, pp. 71–89. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC.
- Schweitzer, Peter P., Megan Biesele, and Robert K. Hitchcock (editors)  
2000 *Hunters and Gatherers in the Modern World: Conflict, Resistance, and Self-Determination*. Berghahn Books, Oxford.
- Stern, Pamela  
2006 Land Claims, Development, and the Pipeline to Citizenship. In *Critical Inuit Studies: An Anthology of Contemporary Arctic Ethnography*, edited by P. Stern and L. Stevenson, pp. 105–118. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
- Thornton, Thomas  
1998 Introduction: Alaska Native Subsistence, A Matter of Cultural Survival. *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 22(3):29–34.
- VanStone, James  
1960 A Successful Combination of Subsistence and Wage Economies on the Village Level. *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 8(2):174–191.
- Veniaminov, I.  
1984 *Notes on the Islands of the Unalashka District [1840]*. Translated by L. Black and R. H. Goeghega, edited by R. A. Pierce. Alaska History 27. Limestone Press, Kingston, ON (distributed by University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks).
- Wenzel, George  
1991 *Animal Rights, Human Rights: Ecology, Economy and Ideology in the Canadian Arctic*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Wheeler, Priscilla  
1998 The Role of Cash in Northern Economies: A Case Study of Four Alaskan Athabaskan Villages. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta, Edmonton.
- Wolfe, Robert  
1979 Food Production in a Western Eskimo Population. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles.  
1984 Commercial Fishing in the Hunting-Gathering Economy of a Yukon River Yup'ik Society. *Etudes/Inuit/Studies* 8(supplement):159–183.
- Wolfe, Robert, and Linda Ellanna (compilers)  
1983 Resource Use and Socioeconomic Systems: Case Studies of Fish and Hunting in Alaskan Communities. Technical Paper 61, Division of Subsistence, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Juneau.
- Wolfe, Robert, and James Magdanz  
1993 The Sharing, Distribution, and Exchange of Wild Resources in Alaska: A Compendium of Materials Presented to the Alaska Board of Fisheries. Division of Subsistence, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Juneau.
- Ziker, John  
2002 *Peoples of the Tundra: Northern Siberians in the Post-Communist Transition*. Waveland Press, Prospect Heights, IL.