

# IMAANGMIUT ESKIMO CAREERS: SKINBOATS IN BERING STRAIT (1969)

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Edited and Annotated by Igor Krupnik

The following are excerpts from Sergei Bogojavlensky's 1969 Ph.D. dissertation, submitted to the Department of Social Relations, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, which exemplify the style of his anthropological fieldwork and analysis. Between 1966 and 1968, Bogojavlensky spent almost 20 months in four Bering Strait communities: in Nome, among the group of relocated former residents of King Island; at Ukivok, then a seasonal (summer) village on King Island; also in Diomedede and Wales. "Imaangmiut" was the Inupiaq ethnonym for King Islanders used by Bogojavlensky in his thesis, meaning "people of the open water." These days former residents of King Island and their descendants prefer to be called Ugiuvaṅmiut (from *Ugiuvak*, their name for King Island + "miut," meaning "people").

The five excerpts below represent the key components of King Islanders' social system analyzed by Bogojavlensky: walrus hunting (economy), skin-boat building (technology), hunting crews and "factions" (social relations), men's houses (organization of social life), and the Polar Bear ceremony (social and spiritual cycle). The excerpt titles match the chapter (section) titles in Bogojavlensky's 1969 dissertation, though not all of his chapters are represented here. Deletions and explanatory notes were made by Igor Krupnik and are indicated by brackets. Lawrence D. Kaplan, Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks, provided modern spellings for the King Island words; these updated spellings are given in brackets. In 1969, when Bogojavlensky wrote his thesis, there was no established orthography for the King Island Inupiaq dialect. Original page numbers from Bogojavlensky's dissertation are given in parentheses at the beginning of each excerpt.

Copies of Bogojavlensky's thesis are available at the Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, the Alaska Resource Library and Information Services (ARLIS), University of Alaska Anchorage, and, according to WorldCat, at eight other libraries worldwide.

## ECONOMY (BOGOJAVLENSKY 1969:79–86)

### BOAT HUNTING

Boat hunting [on King Island] is characterized by close cooperative effort, extending over many months of the year and by sharing within an exclusive group. Skinboats are usable only after the pack ice begins to recede and break apart so that there is considerable open water and a boat will not be caught and closed in by shifting ice fields. Conceptually, but not always exactly, boat hunting and [winter] hunting on foot belong to different times of the year and do not overlap.

The year in Bering Strait is regarded as beginning after early April. The latter half of March and early April signal the end of the winter's hunting. Ringed seals, the predominant prey from December on, become extremely scarce. [...] There is precious little game and very few leads in the ice. It is the lunar month of *iluvaittuwik* [*iluvaituwik*], "boat readying time," when the villagers' attention focuses intensively towards refurbishing their boat hunting gear.

It is only after the walking hunting ends that the putting on of skins on boat and kayak frames is considered appropriate. By the same token, after the ice reappears in the fall, this activity may not be undertaken. The sewing of clothing and equipment such as the hunting bags is restricted to the time of the sea ice. The key item of equipment for boat hunting is, of course, the shipshape skinboat; for walking hunting, it is the hunting parka, which always is most meticulously and even reverently cared for. Even though the lending of equipment is not altogether uncommon, to my knowledge, it is inconceivable that a hunting parka ever be lent. The only other article for which the same is equally true is the skinboat.

### WALRUS

Even though hunters in a skinboat may take a few potshots and make a haphazard try at any of the northward migrating pinnipeds that are often encountered in great numbers as the ice pack rapidly recedes, their relentless attention is focused on the walrus herds that drift north through Bering Strait resting on the broken floes in great numbers. The timing of this migration is somewhat variable because ice conditions differ from year to year, but generally, large concentrations of walrus reach the Strait at the end of May and the whole migration has passed by July 1<sup>st</sup>.

The islands are strategically located for exploiting the [migrating] North Pacific walrus herd [Fig. 1]. Around the narrow waters at the Diomedes, a north wind of several days may often drive ice-fields with the same walrus back south through the Strait from the Chukchi Sea several times, so that they conveniently drift by the villages more than once. However, in some years the walrus are unavailable to the hunters. Fog or high winds may paralyze the boats. In a winter when ice conditions are extremely thick, breakup will, reportedly, occur off the coast of the Chukchi Peninsula, and the larger part of the walrus population will be gone by the time the ice opens around King Island. [...] In overall terms in a good year, all the crews of one village will be reasonably successful in the harvest, and conversely, failure is a general plight.

During the southern migration of the walrus herds, usually in October and November, the hunting is very poor. Many of the walrus travel in open water and do not present the easy targets of the great pods hauled out on slow-moving floes of the spring. This migration coincides with a time of rough seas and formation of new ice, both conditions dangerous for travel in open skinboats. In general, walrus prefer to travel with the drifting sea ice. Ice provides rest and also tends to diminish rough waves. Therefore, after the bulls and barren cows have passed south over open water, nursery herds [mothers with calves] may come drifting down through the Strait with the Arctic pack ice quite late in the fall. Since, for reasons to be outlined below, cows have a special importance in the economy, some skinboat captains will take considerable risks in struggling through the new sea ice and rough and unpredictable weather to reach such herds.

The main walrus harvest is therefore in the spring. The lunar month associated with this hunting is termed *ikpin-giilaq* [*ikpinjailaq*], "numb time" suggesting the feverish, round-the-clock activity for both the hunters and the women who process the kill. After the darkness and cold of the winter, the warmth and perpetual daylight of May and June are utterly exhilarating. The boats are in keen competition, and if one crew ventures out, then all will follow, even when it is clearly fruitless, and all hands are numb with fatigue. For the men of Bering Strait, spring boat hunting is the highest state of existence, brightening even the most lackluster and inspiring the dullest. It is a value in itself.

Among the first to pass through Bering Strait northwards are the nursery herds. Ice conditions may be still

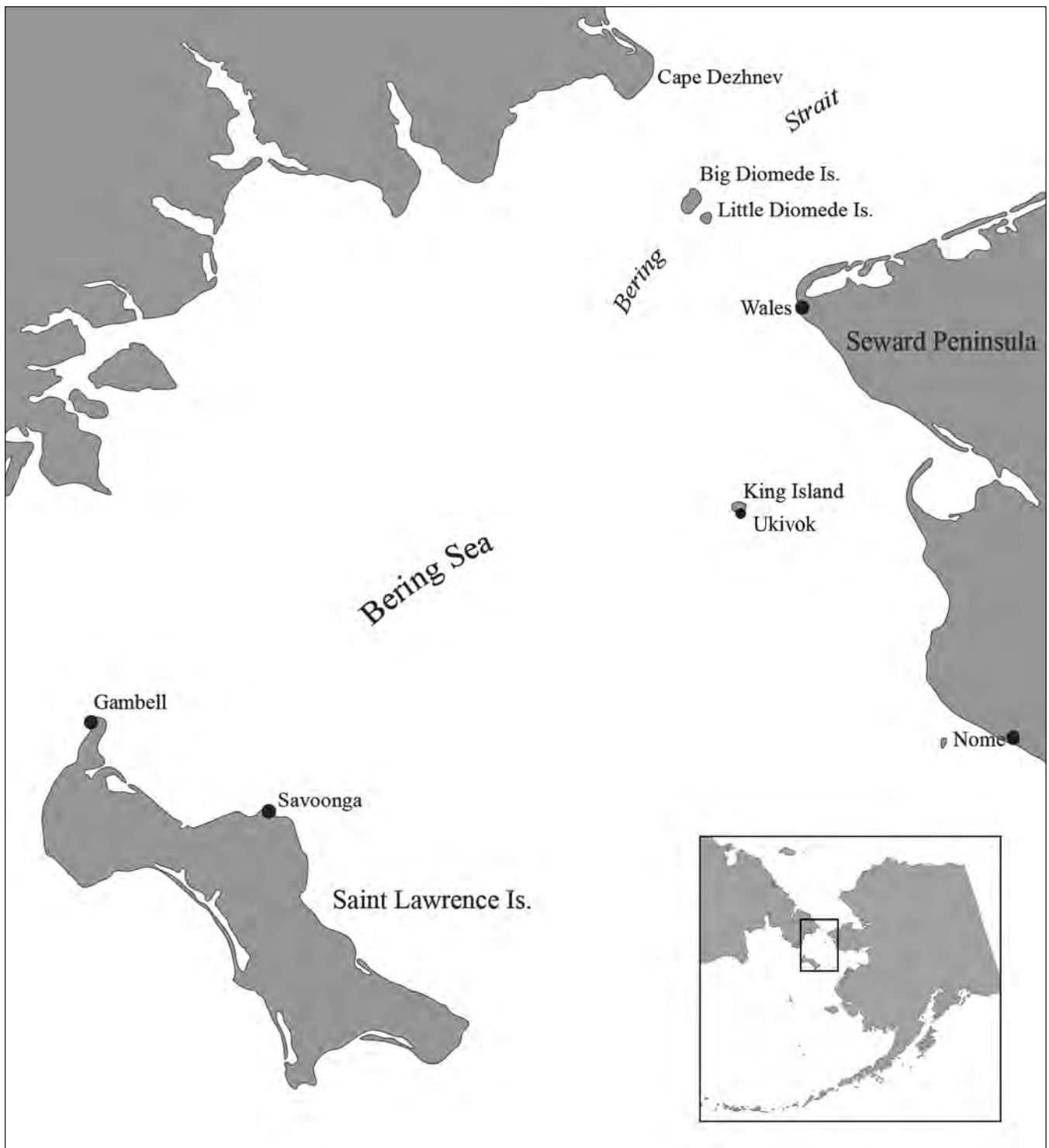


Figure 1. King Island relative to Bering Strait and the Diomedes. Map by Dale Slaughter.

extremely difficult with much pack ice choking off access to these early herds. Nevertheless, it is highly necessary to harvest some cows every year. The lumpy tubercles on the hides of the bull walrus, a secondary sexual characteristic,<sup>1</sup> make them unusable for covering boats. Since boatskins must be changed every two or, at the outside, three years, and a standard boat takes four or five such hides, the boat captains have to make sure that they have enough of these. Moreover, hides prepared for boat covers must be used in two years or they lose their resiliency and must be discarded.

Since only a large skinboat can load up on walrus hides, (which, when green, weigh up to 300 pounds) and in some years the hunting of cows is a one shot operation as a skinboat is dragged over miles of rough ice and weaves its way through thick floes, the earlier weeks of the spring hunt involve very hard work and much anxiety. A successful kill and butchering may often come to naught as the crew of a skinboat caught in the pack ice jettisons the cargo to make the boat light enough to drag to open water. In some years, there is no difficulty about reaching the nursery herds and cows and calves are annihilated in such numbers that conservationists in Alaska now impose a limit of five cows per hunter per season. This has caused considerable annoyance among the people of the Strait.<sup>2</sup>

[...]While there are walrus available, it is considered proper that all boats hunt as much as the crew's endurance will permit. As mentioned before, the most energetic crews will venture out sometimes merely to force other crews to launch forth. A skinboat idle when others are out is a laughing stock. Mere cruising around still amounts to an expenditure of gasoline. By springtime, seven or eight months have passed since the last visit of the Bureau of Indian Affairs supply ship, the *North Star*. Fuel is in short supply and competing captains may try to force each other to run out of fuel.

Overall, walrus hunting today is best described as a mass slaughter. Walrus are highly gregarious and surprisingly unafraid of men. The skinboat can usually approach within fifty to a hundred feet. If the pan of ice is large, all the crew, except for one who always stays with the boat for safety, will climb out and approach the walrus. Volley after volley is poured into the compact pods at close range. Often small caliber rifles are used. Wounded and dead animals slip into the water. Hunting loss is exceedingly high;

by my calculations, there is perhaps as high as an eighty percent loss of all animals killed or wounded.

When the season first begins, the boats carry meat back to the village. The butchering is selective, however, and only choice cuts are hauled back. After several tons of meat are accumulated, the hunting turns exclusively to ivory. Typically, a boat will return after twenty-four or thirty-six hours out with fifty to a hundred sets of tusks, a pile of penis bones, a few tongues, noses, livers, flippers, perhaps tripe, and several stomachs with half-digested clams, a great delicacy. Fifty to a hundred decapitated carcasses are left to float north.

Harpoons are used along with rifles. Their main use is for holding wounded animals and for preventing dead ones from sinking. If a pod with one or two barren cows mixed in with bulls is attacked, a cow may first be harpooned and then shot, to insure retrieval.

According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the figures for walrus harvested in Bering Strait [including Wales, Teller, and Diomed] in recent years are as follows:<sup>3</sup>

Year	Number
1960	1,646
1962	1,128
1963	993
1964	450

The 1966 spring harvest at King Island was about 590 animals, of which 260 were bulls, 315 cows, and 15 were calves.<sup>4</sup> The 1967 harvest at King Island was 86 bulls, 14 cows, and four calves, totaling 104 walrus. The kill was distributed over three boats [named after their captains]:

Maktuyaq	36 bulls, 8 cows, 2 calves
Maayaq	41 bulls, 1 cow
Kunnuk	9 bulls, 5 cows, 2 calves

The 1968 harvest at King Island was a disaster due to ice conditions and only seventeen walrus were retrieved, all of them bulls [...].

The ideal crew consists of nine men, with the captain at the stern with his hand on the throttle, and the second in command at the bow, responsible for navigation, locating game, and harpooning. The man at the bow usually

has the biggest rifle on board. Crew size of nine or ten men *and* boys is rather rigidly adhered to, even though skinboats can carry up to twenty people with cargo for several months' camping on the mainland, and despite the fact that ivory hunting usually does not load the boat to capacity.

#### SHARING

The sharing of the harvests is handled in an established way under the direction of the captains for each boat. The procedure is somewhat different at King Island and at Diomedé.<sup>5</sup> [...] At King Island the butchering is done by the hunters on the ice. The meat is carried to shore and piled up. The sorting and the sharing are done by the wives and mothers of the crew; the men are not even present for this process. All crewmen receive an equal share after the captain's wife takes at least one extra share "for the boat." The captain's young sons are reckoned into the sharing so that his total share may amount to four out of ten shares: one "for the boat," one for the captain, and often two for his sons. Sharing at King Island tends to be more formal than at Diomedé, for this arrangement continues through the whole season.

The same procedure as at Diomedé applies to the ivory and penis bones. The captain keeps around half of the total, and evenly doles out the rest. His young sons do not receive full shares. The crew gets to divide the rest evenly. Cow hides are entirely the property of the captain. It is common among King Island captains to grant one hide to two crew members. Kayaks are often partially covered with walrus hides, though bearded seal is a perfectly good substitute. Since kayaks are used [at] King Island and have not been used at Diomedé for at least thirty years, the demand for even one hide is greater among King Islanders.

The Diomeders make malicious fun of the King Islanders because the women do the sharing of the meat. The King Islanders are, in fact, somewhat defensive about this practice. They, in turn, like to counter with the proposition that husbands at Diomedé do not help their wives in the work with meat and hides. This is relatively true, according to my experience, but not in the categorical fashion alleged by the King Islanders. [...] I will in later chapters discuss the sociological implications of these insinuations about the division of labor.

## TECHNOLOGY (BOGOJAVLENSKY 1969:64–71)

After more than fifty years of intensive contact with Western technology, the survival of an aboriginal material item like the skinboat, for which there would seem to be a number of equivalent Western watercraft, may be surprising to the reader who is not acquainted with the maritime North. There are, however, precise engineering advantages in retaining the skinboats which may outweigh the drawbacks in comparison with the Western craft which could be substituted. A strong argument can also be developed that even if the performance qualities of Western craft were superior, the Eskimos of Bering Strait would retain the skinboats, because the facts of their construction and maintenance have important connotations for social structural processes and for symbolic representations of these processes.

The average skinboat in use today [i.e., in the 1960s] is about 36 feet from prow to stern, and requires four and part of a fifth walrus hide for a cover. The frame provides all the structural support. It is made out of spruce driftwood from the Yukon delta. Driftwood is lighter and more easily worked than lumber. It does not splinter as does lumber. Also, the many different parts that are neatly adzed out of appropriately shaped pieces of driftwood often have to be irregular in the grain. The many curved and multi-faceted pieces simply cannot be cut from squared stock. Needless to say, it may take more than one summer's beachcombing to find all of the right types of driftwood. The frame is lashed together with rawhide line cut from sealskins. Lashing is mandatory, for otherwise the frame would not be flexible and metal joints would wear through the wood.

The boatskin is sewn together with double-lapped seams and stitching of beluga sinew going halfway through the hides. It is lashed down only around the gunwales, and is unattached anywhere below the waterline, which can be two inches from the gunwales with a heavy load. The reason for this is that when a boat hits a piece of ice, the whole boatskin will absorb the shock. When the skin is first put on it is wet, and is allowed to dry and shrink taut over the frame. After a boat has been in the water, the skin is loose and very pliable, even flapping with the waves. Nothing is put on the skin; one steps and piles cargo on the frame only.

Until the 1930s, the [King] Island skinboats were made with flat bottoms [as elsewhere in the Bering Strait region] and slatted sides. Now they are made with steam-bent hardwood ribs fastened into a keelson. Since outboard motors have become common, this change in hull design has made a craft more capable of cutting through seas. The King Islanders use a “well” [usually, a square cut in the boat cover closer to the stern, framed with a wooden “box” for the motor] for one outboard motor; most boats use at least two motors, and sometimes even three, for faster travel in good ice-free weather.

The advantages of the skinboats lie in their resistance to ice punctures. If they do develop a hole from ice or from an attack by a walrus, it is an easy and quick matter to patch the skin with a piece of blubber temporarily, and to sew a permanent patch later.

Skinboats are extremely light for their size. This means that they can carry a tremendous cargo and that they can be dragged over ice if necessary. They are handily dragged out on the beach when need be and lifted up the steep slopes (especially King Island) for storage.

Their disadvantages, which could be eliminated if either Western whaleboats or covered boats of the type used by Southern Alaskan fishermen were put into use, are as follows. The skins must be renewed completely every two (three if the boat is not used too much) years. After several days in the water, the skins become waterlogged and besides being heavy, begin to leak. The skinboat must be dried out roughly every thirty-six hours. Skinboats, having no decks, are extremely uncomfortable, and fully loaded, take in spray. The skins are subject to being eaten by hungry dogs, and can easily be sabotaged, as does happen, with a small knife.

Western whaleboats, which are extremely similar to the hull shape of Bering Strait skinboats today, were for a while the only kind of boat used on St. Lawrence Island, some 150 miles south of the [Bering] Strait. Whaleboats were also used on the Alaskan mainland and are still exclusively used among the Siberian Eskimos encountered among the walrus herds in the spring ice pack. The people of St. Lawrence Island reverted to skinboats after the whaleboats became increasingly unavailable on the market after World War II. Other Eskimos, however, built their own. [...] I am told that a dry whaleboat is not appreciably heavier than a waterlogged skinboat.

The islanders never did use whaleboats. (In the 1920s, several men on Diomedé and one at King Island con-

structed small motor-driven schooners for summer trading and hauling between Nome and Siberia. These were left on the mainland during the winter.) Today, practically all Seward Peninsula Eskimos use wooden boats for their hunting and hauling, except for the islanders and one skinboat at Cape Prince of Wales. Concurrently, all of the mainland people, including the St. Lawrence Islanders and the Siberian Eskimos, have undergone more fundamental social change than the islanders. Both reindeer herding and the white fox trapline forced basic shifts in settlement patterns, cooperating groups, and economy among the other American Eskimos, and the Siberian Eskimos have, according to local Eskimo reports, been forced to hunt commercially for the Russians.

In this region of Alaska, only the islanders of Bering Strait have retained as a social structural focus the institution of the skinboat captains and crews and the men's houses, and have remained fully sovereign in their villages. Since the arrival of the possibility of summer employment for wages, it has been something of a paradox that for most Eskimos it is easier to obtain cash than certain aboriginal goods. One of these is a skinboat, for especially difficult to amass are usable boatskins. The cow walrus hides used for this purpose are tightly controlled by established skinboat captains who do not wish too many of these to become available at large. Nonetheless, the islanders have not followed their mainland counterparts and have bought neither wood, fiberglass, nor metal boats.

There is a strong feeling that skinboats and kayaks can only be built by older men. The idea that perfect construction is mandatory for safety is very strongly held. Younger men are considered “too fast and too impatient” in their workmanship to undertake a task of such responsibility. These feelings apply to most other artifacts to a somewhat lesser degree, for it is the rule that hunting equipment and tools of a younger man are made and maintained by some older, less active person, usually a man's father or his wife's father. I have known fully competent hunters in their thirties who never sharpen their knives, make rawhide line, or fix their harpoons. These tasks were customarily done for them by their fathers, but I also noted that when it was necessary, such young hunters could do a perfectly adequate job.

The ideology also holds that in this way the strongest young men are freed to devote more time to hunting. These ideas work to strengthen ties of dependence between sons and fathers and, often, such ties between

a man and his father-in-law. The loyalty of sons is a jealously guarded commodity. Sons learning to hunt will be taken out by their fathers only. The Eskimos themselves will also indicate that [a] man's father's brother and sometimes his mother's brother may also take charge of the young hunter. However, these alternatives are permitted only if the father and the uncle in question are closely allied. Since a man's support usually belongs wholly to his father and his brothers or, lacking these, wholly to the faction of his male-in-laws, one and only one of these alternatives is allowable in each case. In general, it is considered improper to make overtures to other people's sons.

I discovered these themes when I decided to use the months I spent in the men's house for building a boat. After it became evident that I would finish the job, I encountered an inordinate amount of opposition from the older men, and a degree of admiration from the younger men which was highly out of proportion to my skills in carpentry. It was at this point that I discovered that I was considered extremely young, and that I worked far too fast. I then conducted a poll of what men had built what boats and discovered that boatbuilding was an activity for much older men. The next winter I was approached by an enterprising man of thirty about building a boat with him. He did not dare do it himself, and decided that I was enough of an outsider to bear the brunt of the older men's hostility.

[...] Driftwood selected for a skinboat frame is unmistakable. When a man begins to haul such pieces into the men's house to dry them out for working on them, it is a public announcement that he intends to make a bid for a crew. Skinboats are constructed piece by piece, and the parts may be stored over a number of years before they are lashed together. While this work goes on, the aspiring captain will be engaged in the political struggles involved in establishing his headquarters for his clientele of younger men in the men's house.

Contemporary skinboats are powered by expensive motors that burn expensive gasoline and oil. The people of the Strait do not reload their ammunition, and so every round fired costs at least twenty cents. The ratio of ammunition expended to animals harvested is extremely high, especially in walrus hunting. [...] Consequently, the retirement of the older men into the men's house is also an economic necessity, for the money for this equipment must be raised. The only means is ivory carving.

One's own old men are venerated; those related to others are usually viciously ridiculed. One King Islander who tried very hard to put his sons into the skinboat business, but apparently never had any realistic chances of success, in the process became obsessed with carving and, driven out of the men's house, built himself a loft over his house where he continued carving until he went blind. He became a common butt, and his pathetic ambition was summarized by the nickname "Ivory Joe." The English name was used to rub it in about his delusions of buying a crew. Another man who is the old carver behind the boats, motors, and guns of his sons' faction is ridiculed for his carver's stooped shoulders by the opposing faction. The idea is that cash is essential, but not the foundation. This is what these old men confuse.

The opposition to the building of boats by younger men is jointly mounted by all the older men, even though they may be political antagonists of one another. It appears to be regarded as a threat to the social system of which they are, or potentially will be, the beneficiaries. In the same way, they are opposed to the purchase of manufactured craft and will denounce them in often irrational ways. This contrasts markedly with the general Eskimo attitude toward utilizing Western material goods. In other spheres of technology, Western artifacts are invariably experimented with. Whenever I asked if the islanders had tried substituting some manufactured product for some native implement, I discovered that all of my ideas had been tried before and discarded by the Eskimos themselves.

A man can, with sufficient patience and luck, accumulate enough of the right kinds of driftwood from the immediate vicinity of the islands to construct a boat frame. Though there are far greater accumulations of driftwood on the mainland beaches, and it is far easier to find it there and to haul it to villages by boat, this is not absolutely essential. Hence, one need not have the implied permission of an established captain to construct a boat frame. The real problem comes with finding the right number of walrus hides. As will be shown in detail in the next two chapters, the availability of boat hides is carefully controlled by the skinboat captains. Boat hunting is the only efficient way of harvesting walrus. It is sometimes possible, though, to obtain such hides by individual effort in kayaks and very small boats. Even then a man who intends to skin a boat will have to rely on the help of others to obtain enough. Walrus hides

prepared for covering boats deteriorate in two or three years and must be discarded. They cannot be stockpiled for longer than this period. Obviously, the introduction of manufactured boats would break the captains' hold on boat skins, and is probably another reason why skinboats are so unyieldingly upheld.

As we shall be developing in some detail in later chapters, the boat crews on the islands constitute the basic segments of each village. They provide solitary identity for their members and access to material benefits. The maintenance of the skinboat requires the services of the crew, and certain aspects of these chores exhibit a strong ritual component. This is especially true of the ceremonious occasion of the outfitting of the boat frame with skins, and of the general cleaning up of gear for the spring hunt, when weathered wooden parts are scraped white. Finally, walrus hide is a pervading symbol of social solidarity in many different contexts.

Consequently, even though the performance aspects of skinboats are impressive, a certain important cause of their persisting use and status as cherished objects stems from their central role as a physical focus for the ongoing social life of the Bering Strait islands.

### THE POLITICS OF CREWS AND CAPTAINS: SOME INTRODUCTORY POINTS (BOGOJAVLENSKY 1969:108-117)

#### CREWS AND FACTIONS

The King Islanders like to ironize about the fact that a boat frame is easier to construct than the frame of a kayak. This is true, but only from the carpenter's point of view. When asked what they regard as the most valuable piece of property of all, the islanders of Bering Strait will invariably reply that it is a large skinboat. The ironic rub is that mere ownership of a boat gives a man very little. There usually are skinboat frames and sometimes even covered boats that are never used, and their legal owners are ordinary men, not powerful captains. It is command over a crew that counts for everything.

Skinboat crews and village political factions are one and the same thing, though during the months that the boats are not operating, the factional divisions of the island villages are not immediately apparent. The members of a given faction will usually think of themselves as a particular group of *umiam inuit* "people of the boat," since

collective hunting and the material aggrandizement described in the last chapter are the activities of the group most clearly understood by them. Indeed, it is true that no head of a faction is not an active boat captain, but this observation does not adequately represent captains' potentially far-reaching political capabilities.

#### A LIMIT ON FACTION SIZE

There is one condition which is imposed on the composition of village factions which is highly important and possibly unique to Bering Strait. That is the rule that the full complement of a skinboat is nine adult men. Ten men is the maximum permissible with a rationalization about the youngest of the crew and the oldest adding up to one man, since the former is said to have no skill and the latter no strength. Captains and their closest associates will also make a point of taking their sons along, beginning at about the age of twelve. These may or may not be counted in the allowable ten as the political situation dictates, i.e., depending on whether it is desirable to exclude certain men from the crew, or not.

It is my observation that six or seven men is the minimum by which a water-logged skinboat can be safely operated when there is a chance that it will have to [be] extricated from piling ice fields by dragging, or paddled in the case of complete motor breakdown. On the other hand, a large skinboat can comfortably carry close to twenty people with summer baggage and provisions. The figure of nine possibly is not entirely a result of technological imperatives, therefore.

No one captain ever has jurisdiction over more than one boat. Since material incentives for the allegiance of crew members are essential, captains are not able to win over any supporters without giving them a seat in the boat. Consequently, the gross calculation of dividing the number of males of age twenty and above in any given village by ten, and subtracting one, yields the number of crews at any given time in that village. One is subtracted because there are always leftovers, men too old and feeble, outcasts and the like.

Each crew represents a political faction within the village. The crews compete intensely in the harvest of walrus, and the factions, spurred by their leaders, the captains, contend with one another. Despite the fact that these groups are numerically even, one group invariably emerges as the dominant for many years.



**FACTION DOMINANCE AND  
ACCESS TO OUTSIDE BENEFITS**

When I first began to grasp the outlines of King Island political groups, I attributed the ascendancy of the dominant faction to its monopoly of such goods as the village “chieftaincy,” the straw boss role for certain employers in Nome, the tools and funds released by the Department of the Interior to subsidize ivory carving,<sup>6</sup> and the consultancy to the State Department of Welfare. “Chief” is the official title of the president of the village governing body called the Council, which is imposed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. These Councils have no political authority in their own right, but have to be maintained in order to gain government subsidies. Outside agencies deal through the “chief.”

[...] However, I was to correct my initial evaluation of why one faction comes to dominate and I realized that the matter of exclusive access to the resources of the outside was actually one of the commodities over which the factions fought, using purely Eskimo means on the exclusive grounds of Eskimo society. [...] Exclusive access to outside resources and benefits is one of the more obvious commodities for which the political factions in Bering Strait society today battle. Once it is acquired, it becomes a device for continued self-enhancement and the maintenance of dominance, but it is not the foundation of power.

Nonetheless, a dominant faction always does emerge, and my information for the past forty years corroborates this pattern through time. Therefore, a key problem for Bering Strait sociology is to understand what it is about one faction and its leadership that enables it to gain an upper hand. The question of the recruitment of crews or factions and their internal organization is clearly crucial. With this it will also be necessary to describe the manifestations of political conflict.

The process by which certain men become captains and the process by which specific crews are consolidated are inextricably intertwined. Moreover, as we shall later see, the maintenance of the crews, or internal faction organization, is behind much of Bering Strait politicking.

**LOCAL CONCEPTIONS OF CAPTAIN  
AND CREW RECRUITMENT**

There exists a body of Eskimo folk sociological ideology about the skinboat trade. These ideas are categorical in

nature: certain individuals, because they possess certain attributes, take over certain positions. Captains are conceptualized as older men, in their fifties usually, because older men are deemed wiser, and captains are chosen for their hunting skill. They also have to be rich and generous. A certain kind of cognitive capacity is one dimension of the alleged wisdom of captains. Bering Strait Eskimos make a distinction between the mental ability of calculating the practical outcome of the interplay of a number of simultaneous variables such as the current, wind, ice and human fatigue in hunting, for example, and the mental capacity to recall lengthy stories, both historical and mythological. One of the commodities that are counted as wealth and are displayed as such is mythology. Myths are gathered in trade from other villages and brought back to be told publicly at strategic times, such as at the ceremonious occasion of the cooperative skinning of one’s boat.

Let us consider the explanatory usefulness of these folk concepts in turn. The notion that mature men are in regular line for promotion to captaincy is belied by the following figures from King Island:<sup>7</sup>

Year	Number of men aged over 50	Number of captains
1930	14	3
1940	14	3
1950	9	3
1968	16	4

Hunting skill is a slippery variable, because the very preponderant majority of men in Bering Strait are competent hunters, and the stereotyped verbal formula for registering general positive feeling about any man is to say that he is a good hunter. Sometimes a distinction is pointedly made between skill in hunting on foot and skill in boat hunting. A captain may be described as a mediocrity in the winter seal hunting on the sea ice, but his walrus harvesting capacities have to be granted, since the collective talents of very few boats ever miss catastrophically relative to other boats. This is another indication that hunting on foot is ultimately regarded as more beneficial for the general well-being of the community, while the boat business is the root of all troubles.

When speaking well of their dead relatives, the islanders will invariably mention that an individual was a “good provider” and that “he had stamina and strength

for harvesting seals and polar bears on the moving sea ice.” Strength and endurance are extremely highly regarded as characteristics for men: nonetheless, no stars are touted.

To kill a polar bear is the highest hunting honor. Polar bear hunting is extremely competitive, as I have mentioned before, [and] makes some hunters, specifically young ones, take dangerous chances with the sea ice. Polar bear kills are tallied and the hunters do keep mental records of one another’s successes. Therefore, since the polar bears are such prizes, and their captors are celebrated in the most resplendent ceremonies, and because tallies are kept, suggesting a clue as to the islanders’ own perceptions of hunting skill, I tentatively will use the number of polar bears killed as a measure of hunting skill. Following is a list of the hunters of King Island of an appropriate age to the captains and the number of bears killed by each. [Boat] captains are marked with an asterisk.

Hunter	Number of bears	Hunter	Number of bears
F.I.*	9	L.S.	2
D.T.*	0	S.M.	7
E.M.*	4	T.K.	6
C.M.*	13	J.I.	7
C.P.	11	E.P.	0
P.N.	14	J.K.	1
A.P.	0	L.K.	4
T.P.	9	J.K.	6
P.T. (ex-captain)	0		

There is no association between captaincy and the number of polar bears killed. Yet, there is a difference between the attributes of age and of hunting success. The latter seems to be an automatic component in the verbalized ambience of Eskimo glory. The former is accurate, since careers in Bering Strait take fully as long to develop as in the professional and business worlds of American society. The question for Bering Strait sociology is to determine the reasons for the emergence of only a particular subset of all the men of eligible age.

The issue of the generosity of captains in their continuing redistribution of the spring harvest is usually raised when a man is about to break away from a crew and either founds or joins the nucleus of another crew. The winter redistributions affirm faction solidarity. Complaining

about the adequacy of these shares signals potential political fission.

The above paragraphs have sketched out the categories with which the people of Bering Strait feel most comfortable in discussing the institution of the captains and crews. I have mentioned that even though the use of boats is limited to four months at the most, the political factions will usually think of themselves as a group that hunts together every spring, the *umiam inuit* “people of the boat.” This and the above ideas are clearly ritual verbal formulae. To say that the Eskimos do not understand their own political life any better than these crude idealizations would also be grossly misleading. Nonetheless, this account is what is taught to children, conveyed to outsiders and tacitly promoted by the captains. It is the only self-contained and consistent local account of the institution.

At the same time, the deals and struggles that generate the political reality of the skinboat business are in each specific instance consciously enacted. Individuals, bent on building their careers, are constantly tuning their perception of this reality as it unfolds. Other institutions are manipulated to yield advantages in terms of this political reality. The Eskimos themselves, however, do not tie these processes together into a verbalized overall integrated view.

The question of how and how much the actors in the Bering Strait social system perceive long-term political developments is not easily answered. Individuals vary in their perceptiveness: the captains who have been in the system for a long time and have been able to reap its benefits often have extremely sharp insights into political tactics that they do verbalize at reflective moments in private talks. As a rule, tactics such as arranging marriages are perfectly clearly understood in each specific instance, but generalizations are, to my knowledge, hardly ever formulated.

In my analysis here of the skinboat trade and its repercussions, I will seek to map out a coherent scheme of how the system works. As I collected my field materials, I encountered a number of institutions which appeared isolated and somehow out of the main stream of Bering Strait political life. When I had the opportunity to gather more information about specific cases relating to these institutions, I often found that their use became somewhat more understandable in the light of careers in the skinboat trade. When I ask the Eskimos what they thought about such interpretations, they neither agreed nor disagreed, though some were clearly intrigued.

## MEN'S HOUSES (BOGOJAVLENSKY 1969:172–183)

In this chapter I shall discuss the social processes that surround the “men’s houses,” *kagrit* [*qagrit*] (plural). The social workings of the men’s houses are generated by the interplay of the phenomena of what I have termed elementary kinship ties with political factionalism. But before proceeding with an analysis of this interplay, I shall first give a brief overview of the various functions of the men’s houses.

Each men’s house is a specific physical structure with a name and an origin that reaches back to mythical times. Until the mid-1950s there were three such semi-subterranean lodges at King Island: *agulliit* [*aguliit*], *kaluilit* [*qaluilat*], and *nutaat*. Later, only the last two functioned. The members are called by the name of the men’s house plus the postbase for “people” [i.e., *-miut*]. Thus the King Islanders today classify themselves as either *agullanimiut* [*aguliigmiut*], *kaluilmiut* [*qaluilamiut*] or *nutaagmiut*. In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were at least three other men’s houses on King Island and possibly even more.<sup>8</sup> Their names are known and the sites on which they stood can be pointed out. During the period of my research the King Islanders maintained two functioning men’s houses in their village. I literally spent months in these structures.

[...] At King Island, no legal men’s house “owners” ever appeared. Instead, the pattern [was] of a new captain and his clique taking over each men’s house for a while, and then, with the passing of time, being replaced by a new political personage.

Consequently, my remarks about men’s houses derive mainly from participant observations and questions among the King Islanders. [...] Through most of the year, if a man is not either asleep at home or out hunting, he will be in his men’s house.<sup>9</sup> The quality of relations between many men is such that one could say that if they did not congregate in the men’s houses, [...] they would very rarely interact together. One function of the men’s house is therefore a kind of neutral meeting place. One can ignore those present, or interact with them as one chooses. But members of one men’s house do not visit the other men’s houses, unless invited for a dance or ceremonial.

The men’s houses are many times larger in area than the family dwellings<sup>10</sup> and serve as workshops for the constant carpentry and carving. Larger skins, like those of

the bearded seal, are stretched and put to dry inside. The sewing of skins for boats and kayaks is done in the men’s houses and this is the one time that women are allowed to stay inside longer than for a momentary errand. Various ceremonials are held in the men’s house as are the entertainments of singing, dancing, story-telling, card playing, and games of chance, strength and agility.

Every established captain at King Island has dominated a men’s house. Men’s house domination entails taking over the mundane details of running the building, making repairs, and issuing orders about cleaning, hauling drinking water, and emptying the honey bucket. More prestigious is the assumption of the function of social director and master of ceremonies at dances. Evenings of songs and dance are an occasion when the members of one men’s house invite the others to be dazzled. A repertoire of new songs and dances is composed every winter. The leader of a men’s house must exhort his fellow members to produce these and to stage rehearsals—usually very early in the morning before hunting. He also provides the wood for the hoops of the drums and the prepared walrus stomachs to cover them. The usual spruce driftwood cannot be bent. Only the very densely grained wood from the section of a spruce that has been damaged and has healed is amenable to bending into hoops.<sup>11</sup> This is rare, and is another prestige commodity that captains accumulate.

We have noted that captains head village political factions. Not all the members of a faction, as a rule, come from the same men’s house. Obviously, a man’s father and his brothers will be in the same men’s house, but no faction is solely recruited in this way. Each men’s house consequently contains men from all the factions in the village, but is dominated by the captain of only one.

The dominant faction of each men’s house makes its ascendancy continually felt. The members will store more of their belongings in the building, talk and laugh louder, permit themselves to make fun of members of other factions behind their backs, but in front of their fellow faction members. For example, I have seen a son repeatedly exposed to a crude pantomime of his crippled father.

The tensions are the greatest between the captain, the more important members of his faction, and the individuals in the men’s house who are prominent in other factions. Day in and day out in a men’s house, as the carpentry and carving go on, it is blatant how certain men make every effort to pretend that they are unaware of the presence of each other. Especially invidious comments

and demands from the members of the dominant faction are usually directed towards the youngest and very aged members of other groups. Whereas tools are not loaned across factional lines within the men's house, I have seen the tools of young men expropriated without permission and never returned, even though they were continually used in full sight of all.

The annual high point in the domination of a men's house by a captain occurs at the time of putting [...] skins on his boat. Then all the other members not of his faction vacate the premises. His whole faction, including all the members from other men's houses assemble with their wives. The sewing of the soaked skins lasts all day and well into the night, for all the sewing must be completed and the boatskin lashed on before drying begins. The captain feasts the gathering, often inviting the other members of the men's house (though bitterest enemies make sure they are nowhere in sight) and entertains with myths.

The men's houses are regarded as always pitted in rivalry with one another. Their relations are compared to the insulting and joking relationship of two persons who stand in the *illua* [cross-cousin] relationship.<sup>12</sup> When a captain takes over a men's house he automatically becomes a competitor of the heads of the other men's houses. There are a number of traditional areas of competition between men's houses: singing and dancing, athletic events such as the high-kick and wrestling, and the furnishing, maintenance and lighting of the men's houses. In 1947, the new head of *kaluilit* [*qaluilat*] (on King Island) made a large production of enlarging the building. Surrounding ledge and boulders made it clearly impossible to extend the walls more than a few inches, but he gained greatly in prestige.

The continuing promotion of such men's house activities is just as much part and parcel of a captain's status and prestige as the operation of the skinboat and a huge annual walrus harvest. The last shaman of Bering Strait died in the early 1950s.<sup>13</sup> When shamanism flourished, [...] shamanistic performances were also arranged for the men's houses by the captains. A captain was not necessarily a shaman, but it was important to count such a practitioner in one's retinue. The captain is directly supported in these activities by the members of his faction who are in his men's house, but he can also call on help and materials from his crew in other men's houses.

Men's house membership is determined by the rule that sons permanently enroll in the men's house of their father.<sup>14</sup> [...] However, behind the categorical façade of this formal rule of membership lie key social processes that determine the actual structures of men's houses. [...] Let us look first at the circumstances surrounding the cases that depart from the norm of men's house enrollment. I have previously mentioned the cases of boys whose fathers died after they had reached an age of some understanding of village politics. Each of these lost his sponsor in a men's house. In several documented cases, where the boy had no older brothers and was said to have resisted the blandishments of all other men because the dead father had not taught him to trust anyone, (i.e., the father had not yet made his career alliances and was keeping his distance so as not to enter into a burdensome subordination) he stayed away from all men's houses through life.<sup>15</sup>

Adopted sons enter the men's houses of their adopted father. In this way, biological brothers may be members of different men's houses.

For an adult man to move into a new men's house is rare. The actual instances of such a move that I was able to document involved rather old men and very young men. The young men moved to the men's houses of their wives' fathers. In all cases, their own fathers were not alive: they had no other brothers and no more than one younger brother; and the father left behind no close political allies in his men's house.

The two old men cited had no sons or brothers and no political weight. They moved to men's houses where "they had few relatives among the men who would be good to them." The local explanation was that the moves were made "because there were too many people in the men's house." This is exactly the same reason that is given when a man leaves a skinboat crew, and represents a conventional euphemism for a political shake-up, even if it is a minor one. Eskimo decorum dictates no further explanation. But tactful questioning on my part established that men who moved felt that the other members of the men's house they abandoned were "too domineering and abusive."

In order to complete our analysis of the social processes that determine men's house membership we can also profit from considering one more dimension. In addition to the above cases of the rare men who were never members of men's houses and the men who changed men's house affiliation, we may also consider the problem of ac-

counting for the considerable number of men who do not change men's houses, in spite of the fact that the factional leadership with which they are allied is situated in another men's house.

All of these phenomena emerge as mutually consistent if we regard them from the point of view of the building of careers. We may say that each man seeks to consolidate a clientele of followers which will be enough for a skinboat crew and therefore a political faction, or at least enough to have a key role in a faction. (I would say that most men never lose hope for such an outcome for themselves until it becomes clear that they will not have any sons.)

Usually, a man's first political asset will be his father (or a father surrogate such as an older brother, and adoptive father, or in the case of the older orphan, a man whose ties with the dead father were such that he inspires loyalty and trust in the boy). The second secure political resource is brothers. The final and most dependable are, of course, sons.

Quite a few men marry women whose fathers do not belong to their own men's houses, but few move to their wife's father's men's house. The position of a son-in-law is generally less advantageous than that of a son, a cherished asset to his father. To be a member of a cohort of brothers is already to be part of a unit with potential political weight. However, lacking such ties, it is best to affiliate with the wife's father. A man owes continuing respect and service to his wife's father, but can also expect some aid in return, e.g., a position in a skinboat. When he moves into his wife's father's men's house, he takes his wife's father as his sponsor, and therefore asserts a son-like status. The wife's father in one case of this sort, was described as being "better to his daughter's husband than to his own sons. He made him feel at home."

[...] The best asset for a young man is a father and brothers: a mutual political interest has been incited all along in the basic processes of socialization and the feeling of mutual responsibility is high. All other arrangements that a man might make with any other men are less dependable.

We can also see that other men who abandon the men's houses in which they spent most of their lives were in a rather similar predicament to the younger men who moved out. They had no independent political assets of their own. The older men had no sons or daughters' husbands to fall back on. Obviously they were not part of the dominant group in their men's house, nor did they have

any manpower to bargain with the other cliques in the men's house. Therefore, they moved to the men's house where there were still men who had been factional allies and on whom they could make some small claims.

The model situation of men who do not leave their original men's houses can be shown graphically [Fig. 2] [...] Each men's house is dominated by one factional captain and the members of his crew who are in the same men's house.

As long as a man has any of the political assets given him by elementary kinship ties—a father whose own father may still be alive and who may have brothers who are allied with him, brothers, and sons—it is to his advantage to cleave to them, even if they are not the dominant group in the men's house at that particular time. Inevitably such basic assets will be in Ego's men's house. Day in and day out, they will continuously interact with one another.

If they happen to be the dominant faction in a given men's house, their goal will be to preserve this dominance. If they are not, then their common goal will be to attain eventual dominance. The alternative of joining the present dominant men's house captain would involve entering into a subordinate-superordinate relationship with that captain. Maintaining factional ties with a captain in another men's house sustain[s] the independence such of a clique of men within the men's house, and gives its members room to make their own political deals independently from the wishes of the captain of the men's house and in such a way so as to eventually wrest control from him.

The strategy is to forge together and to preserve intact a closely linked clique of men within the men's house for eventual takeover.<sup>16</sup> By allying with a captain from another men's house they can arrange the right marriages, make deals of reciprocal support with others, and continually participate in the spring walrus hunts, without subordinating themselves to the dominant captain in their men's house.

Men who have a realistic chance to take over a men's house would gain no advantage whatsoever in moving to another men's house. Even if their short range position might improve if they joined a dominant clique in another men's house, they would, in the long range, be at a disadvantage for they could hardly bring over with them all of their existing affiliates from the original men's house. The young man who does move in with his wife's father has only the prospect of future sons to bank on. The time in which such assets can begin to be utilized is of course



of village factions to consider—i.e., an incipient village faction;

2. it establishes a declared boundary between each of the exchange partners and his former affiliates in the men's house. In the diagram [Fig. 2], I have drawn in the facts of a hypothetical wife-exchange, graphically showing how such a relationship is the beginning of the creation of new boundaries within the men's houses and new lines of village-wide mutual support and alliance across the men's houses.

The fact that men in Bering Strait think in the long-range terms of struggling to take over the men's house to which they belong means that the men's house is not a social unit capable of consistent ordering of action. Rather the alliances that are generated across men's houses as a result of the struggles of cliques of men within men's houses (usually linked by elementary kinship ties) become the maximal units for continuous coordinated action in Bering Strait.

### POLAR BEARS, WALRUS HIDES, AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY (BOGOJAVLENSKY 1969:235–247)<sup>17</sup>

In this chapter, I shall explore the main sociological themes developed in this dissertation as they are treated in local Bering Strait systems of ideas and symbols. [...] We have seen that the skin boat is the tangible nexus of a political faction in the Bering Strait and the factional participation is conceptualized as membership in a boat crew. Boat operations provide important incentives for both captain and crew; and factions are knit together and their reclusiveness continually defined by the continuing redistributions of meat and even ivory through the non-boat-hunting months of the year. The activities of factions, however, cover many areas besides the spring harvest of the migrating walrus and the summer promotions for which the boats are mandatory. The boat crews are simultaneously production groups and political segments.

The other basic production unit in Bering Strait is the solitary hunter on the moving sea ice. For men, other types of production groups do not exist. The random first-come-first serve *ningiq* [*niniq*] sharing rule [associated exclusively with winter hunting on foot] that applies solely in the realm of the moving ice is logically an extension of

the fundamental facts about the harvesting of the live seals to killed seals: seals make themselves visible at random, and are captured by the man who is closest. *Ningiq* sharing profits hunters who are closest to the kill. After this rule that reflects only the minimal solidarity of living in the same village is applied, or becomes inapplicable as the hunter escapes the dangerous sphere of the moving ice, the hunter's produce is his own exclusively. *Ningiq* is sharing in the most mechanical and impersonal sense and is really a reflection of the fact that hunting on foot is a very private enterprise. Men do not share the harvest of such hunting with other men unless compelled to by the *ningiq* rule, a usage often resented.

The harvest of the solitary hunter is handed over to his wife, who then may independently circulate it to other women in other households. I have mentioned the clichéd innuendo about King Islanders that the Diomedes savor: that the sharing of the meat harvested by a boat crew is handed over to the women of that crew. Its invidious meaning lies in the implication that the members of King Island boat crews are as distant to one another as the hunters walking out on the moving ice in the winter. It is a somewhat indirect imputation that King Island factions even are anomic and non-solidary.

One tendency for powerful Bering Strait factions is to become almost like sovereign villages with their outward hostility untrammled by any cross-cutting positive ties. Men who fail to affiliate with vital factions tend to feel like vulnerable outcasts. I have explored the themes of personal political failure, suicide, and drifters on the moving ice. The drifter [*tiktaq*] cannot enter any village, for he has relinquished his place in his own village and must be killed. But it is not village membership which is treated in the drifter complex for that is a birthright and final, but factional support. The drifter complex utilizes the blatancy of inter-village animosity to draw a parallel with what the social world looks like to a man adrift outside solitary crews.

We therefore have as a perennial theme in Bering Strait social life the contrast between the individual man, potentially in danger of becoming his own independent productive political unit, and the constellation of a crew focused on the leadership of a captain and providing mutual support and security. Most men find themselves forever anxious as to the degree of support that their factional affiliation will really provide if put to a severe test,

e.g., what if someone rapes my wife, or kills my dogs? Time and again, I felt the fear that the men of the Bering Strait have of one another. The normal relationship between men is given by the term *talluġiyaa* [*taluġiyaa*] which is etymologically derived from the root for “curtain” or “hanging partition,” but which hides richly anxious connotations of fear, suspicion, respect out of fear, and social distance. “Jealousy” was also often given as a component of this concept. Some men further articulated the feelings that they would categorize with this concept by sentences such as “I’m always afraid of what they will do” and “Maybe they do not know me anymore. No one seems to know that I am a good boat hunter.”

These themes of the solidary crews and the solitary hunters have their symbolic and ritual representations. The scope of this dissertation does not permit anything even beginning to approach a full account of the Bering Strait systems of ideas, symbols, and ceremonials. However, one strand in this material is interesting as a local Bering Strait complex of symbols and ideas that, after a fashion, deals with the precise social structural themes to which I have devoted this dissertation. The following exegesis will consequently serve as a foil to the previous analysis and as a summary restatement.

By unanimous agreement, the most glorious of all Bering Strait occasions is the ceremonial observance of a polar bear kill. Its joyousness was said by one King Islander to be “much more than Christmas.” The capture of the polar bear is the pinnacle of achievement in the sphere of hunting on foot on the moving ice. The ceremonial is called *aniġsaak* [*aniġrsaak*; mostly used as a verb meaning “to hold a polar bear dance”] “polar bear dance,” and the term is etymologically derived from the base referring to “departure.” This refers to the fact that between the time the bear is killed and the night the final ceremonies are performed, the soul (*taġnanga* [*taġnana*]) of the bear visits the community, and the observances eventuate in a placated soul and propitious departure boding a return in the body of another polar bear.

The main details of the polar bear observances are as follows. *Ningiq* is applied to the kill, but in contrast to the other game, shares are cut with the hide. The skull is directly taken by the hunter to his men’s house where he puts it on a bench, where it will sit for four days for a boar and five for a sow. The dance to be described below takes place on either the fourth or fifth day. After the dance, the skull is taken out on the moving ice, and when the ice makes

a noise as if it moves, the spirit of the bear is regarded as having departed.

The hunter with his bear’s skull enters the men’s house in his hunting clothes, i.e., in his hunting parka. This is the only time that a man may enter the men’s house without having left his hunting clothes at his own house. As the skull is placed on the men’s house bench, myths are told by those skillful in such things. During the days between kill and the final dance, the wife or mother of the hunter prepares new clothes for him: boots, gloves, and perhaps even a headband of wolverine fur, if available.

For the evening of the final dance, the wife or mother of the celebrant hunter collects and prepares the following dishes:

1. *qaqpatak* [*qaqpataq*]—a mixture of sour greens mixed with seal oil and reindeer tallow.
2. *alluk* [*aluk*]—a pounded mixture of snow, seal oil, and berries (*Rubus chamaemorus*), cloudberry (*Vaccinium uliginosum*), but preferably bog blueberries.
3. *agutaq*—a whipped mixture of reindeer tallow, seal oil, and dryfish.
4. aged walrus skin
5. aged walrus liver
6. frozen choice cuts of walrus such as from the nose, mammaries, or flipper cut into thin strips.

As the mob of people begin to arrive in the men’s house, the wife or mother of the hunter hands him and the man who received the first *ningiq* share of the bear dishes of these delicacies. They dole out all of the food to the guests. What is important to note about these foods is that they are all rare and high in prestige. Their ingredients are those that are only available through skinboat trading operations in the mainland. Reindeer tallow and dryfish (salmon only is dried) are obviously not available on the islands. There are a few anemic cloudberry on the islands, but no bog blueberries at all. Aged walrus skin and walrus liver are delicacies which are usually cached by captains for important factional occasions such as skinning days in the winter. In fact, all of these foods are almost exclusively associated with feasts sponsored by skinboat captains. To anyone on the islands the first four items taste very different from daily island fare; they are gourmet luxuries from the mainland.

The other important point to note is that the first *ningiq* recipient assists the hunter. In all other cases except for polar bear, no such pairing is recognized on the basis of



*ningiq*. *Ningiq* is a mechanical doling and not the basis for social links to be displayed in public. But this is precisely what is done at the Polar Bear Dance.

The next step is for the hunter's wife or mother to give out strips of sealskin large enough to be useful for sewing. These strips are given to women.

After all the food and sealskins are handed out, the celebrant hunter changes into new clothes. He then takes coils of bearded seal rawhide line or walrus line, and, measuring off the length between his outstretched arms, cuts off such a piece for every man present. Attendance at Polar Bear Dances is open to all and everyone of both sexes and from all the men's houses.

Then the dancing begins. First the hunter dances with the recipient of the first *ningiq* share and after that the separate dance is done for each other *ningiq* recipient who join the hunter and the others one by one. The first dance is called *mingmaqtuaq* [*mimmaktuaq*] meaning "receiving one hind quarter" (the first share). The second is called *talliktuaq* "receiving one front quarter," etc. Finally, the traditional pantomimic Polar Bear Dances are performed. The whole ceremony consumes a whole evening and may go well into the early morning.

In the previous chapter on men's houses, the various conventional types of dances were defined. Each different type corresponds to a different variety of crucial social tie. The performers of these dances are already linked with each other in these ways. The Polar Bear Dance scraps all of these socio-choreographic categories and celebrates the randomly and momentarily established *ningiq* links.

The Polar Bear Dance is considered the most important resplendent ceremonial in Bering Strait. It is the only celebration of the solitary hero of *mauqsatuat* [*mauqsratuat*] "hunting on foot." All other ceremonials, dances, and commensal occasions are ritual enhancements of factions and especially their boat hunting activities. The ceremonial motifs enumerated above take certain ingredients associated only with the context of hunting on foot and mix them with ceremonial ingredients of factional solidarity. The foods above are in all other usages provided by captains for exclusive consumption by their crews.

The exceptional custom of letting the hunter celebrating his polar bear kill wear his hunting clothes in the men's house is extremely suggestive. Worn only for hunting is the hunting parka and the implements of the

unit, which are locally considered part of the wardrobe. These include the hunting bag with its numerous ingenious devices, the rifle, the hunting knife worn just under the parka in the front, and the winter harpoon, used in part for balance and as a support in the moving ice. It is considered an impropriety to wear the hunting knife while in the village and especially in the men's house. Rifles are entirely taboo in the men's houses. Conversely, no man would venture out on the moving ice without his weapons. Not only are they needed for killing seals, but the moving ice is considered the realm where one is most vulnerable and in danger of the murderous attacks from other men.

In the inter-village context, it is considered impolite to go visiting in one's hunting parka, as when the Diomedea boat comes to Wales during the break-up of the sea ice. One woman at Wales told me she was very frightened of the Diomedea when they did not leave their parkas in the boat, "because they always have a knife underneath."

When three King Islanders, having just disembarked from a skinboat, went directly to the Anchor Tavern in Nome with their bloody hunting parkas on, the other Eskimos in the bar demanded that the bartender force them to take them off. Instead, they pulled up their parkas to show everyone that they had taken off their knives.

The men from the islands quite often will voice the suspicion that some other man, even without his hunting parka, may have a knife hidden on his person while he is in the men's house. [...] The wearing of the hunting clothes in the men's house during the Polar Bear Dance, is therefore, a striking reversal of customary security. Symbolically, it clearly announces a temporary abeyance of the pervading suspicion and anxiety of the Bering Strait social life. This is paralleled in the dances that link men on the basis of the *ningiq* sharing of the polar bear. The social cleavages and the exclusive cliques stemming from factional associations which are emphasized in all other dances are obliterated on the occasion of the Polar Bear Dance.

It is also important to note that the distribution of sealskins and rawhide line constitutes a major segment of the polar bear celebration. This distribution can take at least an hour for it is done methodically and ceremoniously. I shall now take up the symbolic significance of these items by enumerating the connotations of other contexts in which hides carry a symbolic charge.

We may begin by recalling that in hunting on foot on the moving ice, the normal procedure after *ningiq* sharing has diminished is for the hunter to keep the whole skin (with the blubber on), wrap whatever meat is left, and drag such a package home. Only for a boy's first kill are the *ningiq* shares cut with the skin. *Ningiq* shares with the skin are also cut for the polar bear. After a first kill, a ceremonial dance is observed. After a boy makes a first kill of each of the main species of marine mammals hunted in the Bering Strait, he is considered mature: i.e. he enters the social order of his village as a member in full standing. The polar bear shares determine the individuals who will figure in the Polar Bear Dance with the celebrant hunter. Thus, in *ningiq* sharing, the cutting of the hide is associated with an eventual social celebration. When the hide is kept intact, the *ningiq* shares go their own ways, and the solitary hunters return alone, uncelebrated.

I have frequently underscored the fact that political factions are conceptualized as boat crews and that the essential appurtenance of a captaincy is the skinboat. As a captain sustains skinboat operations through the years, so does this faction persist. Every two years the skins of a hard-working boat must be renewed. I have pointed out that there are some natural obstacles that can make the obtaining of cow walrus hides difficult. Furthermore, the availability of boatskins is carefully controlled by captains. The atmosphere surrounding the procurement of boatskins is one of anxiety, some furtiveness, and great interest, especially when there might be indications that an attempt to launch a new boat and consolidate a new factional constellation is in the offing. The occasion of skinning the boat is a very important one. Every two years, a captain must be able to muster a sizable number of women to do the sewing. The feasting and myth-telling that accompany these boat skinning bees testify to the momentousness of the affair in the political context of the Bering Strait village. When the boatskin is ready, it is lifted high by the men of the crew and ceremoniously carried out to the frame. When the skins of a boat rot away, it is a sign that a faction has disintegrated and that there has been a political shake up.

Perhaps the most publicized Alaskan Eskimo practice is the high jump. Old boatskins are used as a kind of trampoline. The edges are held by a circle of people who hurl the individual standing in the center into the air. The high jump is used at Diomedes as part of the celebrations when a whale is killed. The successful crew holds the

trampoline, while a child is bounced up. While in the air, the child throws little pieces of whale skin, a delicacy, to the bystanders.

We have also noted that when political disputes escalate, dogs are killed in order to bring the matter to a head. The reason given for killing the dogs is invariably that they have been eating a man's boatskin. Finally, a suggestive point is that it is often mentioned in folk tales that people in famines manage to survive only because they had boatskins to eat.

We can therefore summarize the above paragraphs by saying that walrus hides are associated with social solidarity, which in Bering Strait is derived from factional participation. This proposition throws light on some other seemingly unrelated instances where walrus hides figure prominently.

There exist a number of myths about the society of walrus. They have men's houses, taboos, and so forth. There are walrus of two types: those that allow themselves to be killed by men and those that do not. Herds of the latter are described as being surrounded by an impenetrable armor of *kauk* "aged walrus skin." The significance of this rather surprising phenomenon is understandable in the light of the analysis we are making here. Walrus hides symbolize factions and their solidarity, thus, defense against outside aggression. Aged walrus skin is one of the gourmet foods that captains feast their crews with; it is also the prestige food to offer visiting outsiders, signifying solidarity again.

Finally, the traditional King Island children's song that I recorded becomes comprehensible only in the light of an exegesis of walrus hide symbolism. By the same token, it corroborates the analysis.

I went to Diomedes. They gave me some aged walrus skin (*kauk*) to eat. It was tough.

So I went to Wales. They gave me some *kauk*. It was too soft.

So I went to King Island. They gave me some *kauk*. It was just right. So I ate lots.

If we allow the assumption that the Bering Strait connotations of "too soft" are similar to those evoked by this image of the Westerner, then the above characterization of the village of Wales is rather appropriate. For, Wales is the most socially fragmented of all the Bering Strait communities. In any case, the singer of this song finds only King Island *kauk* palatable, which is to say that only a King Islander feels at home in his own village.

Having thus established the symbolic connection between walrus hides and solidarity, we can return to the analysis of the symbolic significance of the doling out of sealskins and rawhide line during the Polar Bear Dance. It should be noted that rawhide line is cut from hides that are prepared in the same way as boatskins. (Clearly, since boatskins are a very valuable commodity, they are not to be distributed at ceremonials.)

In *ningiq* sharing the cutting of hides relates to associated expressions of solidarity, either in first kill observances or in the Polar Bear Dance. In other contexts, walrus hides imply situations of mutual support and closeness of social ties. Consequently, we can conclude that the doling out of the rawhide line and the sealskins is yet another in the series of ceremonial ingredients taken from the solitary realm of factions and skinboat crews and applied to the celebration of glory in the solitary, suspicious domain of hunting food.

I have previously noted that sealskins are not used for the clothing of women. The winter walking hunter brings his wife seals. She sews him trousers, boots, mittens, and various bags and straps out of these sealskins. She will also share some of her surplus sealskins with other women, as it is customary with the produce of winter hunting in general. Some of such shared skins will be used to equip other men. This economic circuit goes on independently of the social world of men. Therefore, the doling out of sealskins in the Polar Bear Dance by the wife or mother of the celebrant is a public and formalized rendition of this informal network of mutual assistance. These informal reciprocities of the women go on through the winter behind the backs of men, so to speak, outside the arena of men's social relations which are concentrated in the men's houses. The mutual support of women contrasts markedly with the sharp competitiveness of the men. It is an arrangement that counteracts the potential economic dangers in the always serious struggles of the men by establishing an alternative network for the circulation of the real Bering Strait staple of seals. In the Polar Bear Dance, these facts are dramatized in the men's house, the very place that least recognizes them.

We are now in a position to characterize the whole Polar Bear Dance as an occasion when the fundamental social structural polarities of Bering Strait society are reversed and the hostile lines of factional politics are obliterated in the spirit of the solidarity of the whole community. Throughout this dissertation, we have dwelled on the

contrasting themes of the solitary hunter and the solitary crews. For the men of the Bering Strait islands, support, political security, and political potential come only via factional participation. When this for some reason fails, a man is in danger of becoming his own island, to paraphrase Donne. It is my opinion that this danger gnaws to some extent at the hearts of most men in Bering Strait. One culturally codified projection of this theme is the figure of the *tiktak* [*tiktaq*] "drifter."

A man comes closest to the antisocial realm of the drifters as he almost daily ventures out on the moving ice. In the Polar Bear Dance, this solitary figure who is Everyman in the Bering Strait and his *ningiq* brothers are momentarily enveloped in all of the symbols and glory of the rich, tough and secure skinboat crew.

## NOTES

1. Perry 1967:69–70.
2. The tusks of cows are preferred for carving [...]; the meat from the cow walrus is vociferously preferred. [...]The meat of calves is also prized. [...] I would therefore argue that it is the difficulty, danger, and unpredictability of cow hunting in general, which is of most interest to the hunters. Like polar bear, [walrus] cows are the mark of a skillful and daring hunter. On the cash market of today, raw ivory, whether from bulls or cows brings the same price per pound. However, bulls have heavier tusks and the penis bone which sells for almost as much as a tusk [...] (Bogojavlensky 1969:90).
3. Burns 1965:21.
4. *Marine Mammal Report*. Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Juneau, 1967, p. 19.
5. The trimmed section describes the distribution of walrus products on Little Diomedé.—*Ed.*
6. Here Bogojavlensky is referring to the Rural Alaska Community Action Program (RurAL CAP) that, during the 1960s, channeled state and federal OEO (Office of Economic Opportunity) funds to delegate local Community Action Agencies, Native economic cooperatives, and regional non-profit corporations, which it helped to organize. RurAL Cap started the Community Enterprise Development Corporation (CEDC) in 1968 which established Native fishery and consumer arts and crafts cooperatives around the state. One of these cooperatives included the Sunarit

Association in Nome chaired by Peter Seeganna, an artist from King Island. The Sunarit provided workshop space and tools for local Native carvers to use. Seeganna also served as advisor of the cooperative Sunarit Associates of King Island Village established in 1968. Ivory carvings produced under the auspices of Sunarit were sold to tourists, local gift stores, or the Alaska Native Arts and Crafts Clearing House in Juneau (pers. comm. Amy Philips-Chan, 2014; for more information see [http://ruralcap.com/?page\\_id=335](http://ruralcap.com/?page_id=335); Senungetuk 1969).—*Ed.*

7. The figures in the table should be interpreted with caution for various reasons. First, there had been an outmigration of younger families from King Island to Nome and other communities at least since the early 1900s, so that there was a certain “surplus” of elderly men on the island. Second, in a relatively small community of 150–200 people, there was always a limit on the number of boat crews of nine to ten men and youth—three to four historically—that such a community could support, irrespective of the number of ambitious senior men. On p. 32 of Bogojavlensky’s thesis is a table featuring the composition of the island population by age cohorts, according to the local school records for 1930, 1940, and 1950. There were 47, 63, and 42 men aged 16–59 on the island in those years, enough to support five, seven, and four hunting crews respectively. The actual number of active crews was, in fact, smaller, as some men were traveling or living elsewhere, while a few others perhaps could not hunt for some reason. So, out of 40 to 55 adult men, only about 5–10% eventually became boat captains.—*Ed.*
8. Bogojavlensky (1969:31) stated that there were reportedly *six* men’s houses (*kagrit* [*qagrit*]) on King Island prior to the famine of 1890, when the island population was cut at least in half. Burch (1975:12) and Ray (1975:166) estimated the size of the island population at 275 and 250 people in 1850 and 1867, respectively, that is, substantially higher than in Bogojavlensky’s time (180 people residing in Nome) and about 150 people in the 1950s, to which most of his ethnographic data referred. According to Bogojavlensky (1969:31), “seventy and eighty year old King Islanders report that there were two other villages besides [*U*] *giuvuk* [Ukivok] on the island at the time that their grandfathers were young adults. They were destroyed by an epidemic, possibly the smallpox that ravaged Alaska between 1836 and 1839.” This gives a rough average number of 50 people (10–12 adult men) per one active men’s house.—*Ed.*
9. It is clear from Bogojavlensky’s statement that on King Island the men’s houses never served as men’s residential quarters, as they did among the Central Yup’ik to the south and at some Yup’ik villages on the Seward Peninsula. I am grateful to Kenneth Pratt for this observation.—*Ed.*
10. Unfortunately, Bogojavlensky did not provide any measurements to support his statement that the men’s houses were substantially larger than common family dwellings.—*Ed.*
11. On the use of driftwood on King Island, see Alix (2012).—*Ed.*
12. Bogojavlensky (p. 149) describes the *illua* relationship as “a customary joking and insulting relationship [between cross-cousins]. [. . .] Since the sexes of Ego and Alter are irrelevant to the definition of the relationship, these joking relations can and often [do] occur between a man and a woman. Insults are traded back and forth in public.” Such institutionalized “joking” relationships between cross-cousins have been widely documented across the Eskimo/Inuit area (Burch 1975:188–189, 2006:91; Krupnik and Chlenov 2013:159) and elsewhere (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, 1965:90–91).—*Ed.*
13. This is a highly doubtful statement and it is not supported by any evidence from Bogojavlensky’s thesis. He probably referred to actively (openly) *practicing* shamans, who were ridiculed and oppressed by Christian missionaries on the Alaska side and by the government authorities on the Russian side. Yet some of the activities associated with shamanistic practices were performed secretly or in the family context, as in Chukotka.—*Ed.*
14. Charles C. Hughes, in his study of the St. Lawrence Island community of Gambell (Hughes 1960; also Hughes 1958), attempts to show that this Eskimo society is “patrilineally” organized. The argument for “patrilineality” rests on the presence of “patri-clans” in the community, which have every earmark of being vestiges of a system of men’s houses. The institution of the men’s house is defunct on St. Lawrence, however, and the “patri-clans” are a categorical attribute passed from fathers to sons. The members of these “patri-clans” coordinate in ceremonial observances after a

whale kill. Hughes claims that there is sentiment for sharing meat on the basis of “patri-clan” membership, but does not substantiate beyond repeating Eskimo verbal formulae to this effect.

[...] The rule that men’s house membership is inherited by the son from the father is an instance of pure “patrilineality.” Furthermore, the closeness of the father-son and brother-brother bonds could also be adduced as evidence of “patrilineality,” though the wife’s father-daughter’s husband bond, also often key for the formation of groups in Bering Strait, is a counter-indication (Bogojavlensky 1969:188).

[...] Following Hughes, we should therefore be justified in labelling the island societies of Bering Strait as also being “patrilineal.” But this would really only amount to a willful emphasis on certain aspects of Bering Strait society, and an implicit and unmotivated sloughing off as only peripherally important those social facts that are not amenable to facile labelling as “patri-.” My conclusion is that until recently extremely fashionable “total” characterization of societies by such categories as “patrilineal,” “matrilineal,” or “ambilateral,” etc., is profoundly unrewarding for understanding actual social processes in the societies in question (Bogojavlensky 1969:189).

15. In a special section of his thesis, Bogojavlensky (1969:201–205) compared such men who failed to establish political ties to “drifters,” lonely hunters taken away on the drifting ice, always scared of being discovered by other people, because of common inter-community hostility.—*Ed.*
16. A special chapter in Bogojavlensky’s thesis called “Thirty Years of Crews” (1969:206–234) provided several examples of how the ownership of the three men’s houses on King Island had passed from one dominating faction to the other, as certain factions acquired members and became more powerful while others declined.—*Ed.*
17. This chapter from Bogojavlensky’s thesis was published in an expanded version and with several of Father Hubbard’s photographs of 1937–1938 as illustrations in Bogojavlensky and Fuller (1973).—*Ed.*

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