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Contemporary Inuit Food Sharing : A Case Study from Akulivik, PQ. Canada

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Contemporary Inuit Food Sharing: A Case Study from Akulivik, PQ. Canada

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1 Introduction¹

Food sharing practices are most often observed among hunter-gatherers and small scale cultivators. Appendixes A and B of Sahlins' "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange"(1965, 1972), for example, suggest that we consider this topic. Sharing is more frequently practiced during periods of food shortage than in periods when food is abundant. Furthermore, in times of extreme scarcity, sharing ceases to be practiced by these groups. These ethnographic facts strongly indicate that food sharing is an important strategy for individual survival when they lack sufficient food. This further implies that food sharing is an adaptive mechanism among such groups (cf. Langdon and Worl 1981; Gould 1982; Wiessner 1982; Cashdan 1985; Winterhalder 1986a, 1986b; Smith 1988; Watanabe 1990; Levesque et al 2000). Moreover, anthropologists have also pointed out that food sharing practices reproduce social solidarity (Kent 1993) and/or political and economic equality (Woodburn 1982, 1998) among the hunter-gatherers and small scale cultivators.

In this paper, I will focus on several cases of contemporary food sharing among the Inuit of Akulivik, northern Quebec, Canada. Then, I will delineate some common features of food sharing and point out the social, economic and cultural significances of it to the Inuit.

2 Contemporary Food Sharing in Akulivik, PQ, Canada

Akulivik is a Nunavik village whose population was about 450 in 2003. Akulivik society is composed of about 7 large extended families² whose elders share at least one ancestor in 4 ascending generations. Thus, almost of all the Akulivik Inuit are related by blood or by marriage.

For the purposes of this paper, I will distinguish sharing practices that have existed before in the 1980s from those that developed because of the Nunavik Hunter Support Program that was instituted in the mid-80s (Kishigami 2000). I will call the former "informal (customary) food/game sharing" and the latter "formal food/game sharing".

2.1 Informal (customary) Food/Game Sharing

In Akulivik, food items that are shared are the meat of land animals and sea mammals, fish and many kinds of store-bought-food. The process involves (1) an immediate distribution of game among hunters in the hunting group, (2) a distribution of the game between the hunters and other camp members or villagers, and (3) a distribution of the divided meat through meals and/or gift-giving among camp members or villagers.

Hunters usually eat meat or the liver of game at the kill site soon after the hunting or during the butchering. Then, the hunter who killed the animals takes the fur and some meat for himself. He then distributes³ the remaining meat to the other hunters. In most cases, hunters who participate in the hunting or butchering of game will take enough meat for their needs, while also taking into consideration the number of hunters and the total amount of meat remaining. Although there were rules for division of large game such as beluga whale

¹ Paper read at the "Effective Local Institutions for Collective Action in Arctic Communities"(organized by Dr. Sharman Haley), Fifth International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences (ICASS V), 22, May, 2004 at University of Alaska, Fairbanks

² Each extended family is a kind of kindred. In a broad sense, the Akulivik society constitutes a large kindred

³ To give one's game or food to others is termed "*niqimik aittuijuk*" ("to give meat"). To receive the game or food is called "*ningiqtuq*" ("meat being shared").

and walrus in the past (cf. Graburn 1969:68-70), the Akulivik Inuit do not abide by such rules now.

Once hunters bring meat to their camp or village, they usually deliver in person part or all of it to their close kinsmen (e.g., parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and/or children) in other households⁴. Furthermore, they sometimes give meat to their neighbors, elders, sick persons, namesake partners (*sauniq*), and ritual midwives (*sanajik*) in the village. Sometimes, too, Inuit in need of meat may visit a successful hunter to obtain some. A needy Inuk also may telephone the local FM radio station to announce his/her need for food when he/she cannot get any from kinsmen or neighbors. Inuit in Akulivik seldom lend food to or borrow it from others. Native food is regarded by the Inuit as something to give or receive gratis. In camp or at hunting sites, Inuit tend to share food with all those present. However, in the village they tend to share food primarily within their extended family.

A hunter who harvests a large animal such as a beluga whale gives *maktaq* (skin parts of beluga) or meat to all the villagers or camp mates even if the pieces are small. In hunts involving large private boats, the boat captain and hunters on board retain shares from the hunt. Then, if there is surplus, the boat captain gives⁵ some of it individually to other villagers who meet him on the shore. Meat is also shared with a hunter's kinsmen and neighbors through meals. In Akulivik, many Inuit often visit their relatives, especially their parents or grandparents, for lunch and supper or are invited⁶ to meals by their kinsmen and others. If a person's parents or grandparents are alive, he or she tends to have his/her lunch and supper at his/her parents' or grandparents' place. Meals in Akulivik are most often shared with members of the extended family composed of several households.

2.2 Formal Food/Game Sharing: Food Distribution by the Hunter Support Program

The primary use of the Hunter Support Program⁷ in Akulivik between 1990 and 2003 was 1) to employ the community boat for walrus hunting for a week from late September to early October, 2) beluga whale hunting for a week in October, and 3) for the free distribution of seal meat, caribou, ptarmigan, arctic char and mussels bought from local hunters to give to the villagers (Kishigami 2000). The following summary of food sharing practices was made during this period:

In winter during this time period, the village officials purchased the meat of bearded and ringed seals for CA\$2.5 per pound from local hunters and distributed this meat without charge to the households of elders and widows. When there was sufficient meat, the officials also distributed it to other households.

In early spring, the village officials purchased seals and caribou through the program. They distributed the meat to the households of elders, widows, and others. A few times per season, the meat of 10-15 caribou, which were purchased from local hunters with the program funds, was distributed to all the households in Akulivik.

From late spring through summer, food was plentiful in Akulivik because of large harvests of Canada geese and snow geese. At the same time, arctic char were abundant near the shore. Thus, during this time, the village officials did not purchase any food through the program.

⁴ This distribution is called "*pajuttuq*" ("one bringing food to other houses").

⁵ This distribution is also called "*pajuttuq*" ("one bringing food to other houses").

⁶ To invite others to one's meals is called "*qaiqujjuk*".

⁷ The "James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement" [1975], resulted in a "support program for Inuit beneficiaries for their hunting, fishing, and trapping activities" of the Nunavik region. The Inuit requested the government of Quebec to establish the program to maintain their vital hunting and fishing activities and to obtain country food. The program was legalized in 1982, through Bill 83 of the Quebec Provincial Government. The aim of the program is "to favor, encourage and perpetuate the hunting, fishing and trapping activities of the Inuit as a way of life, and to guarantee the Inuit communities a supply of produce from such activities." Each village administers the program.

Contemporary Inuit Food Sharing: A Case Study from Akulivik, PQ. Canada

In Akulivik, Inuit use a large community boat and two large private big boats to catch walrus and beluga whales in the fall. The village council sends the community boat with 6 hired hunters to catch these animals. Once an adequate amount of the game is brought back to Akulivik by hired hunters with the community boat, it is divided equally and distributed by community officials to all 78 households.

In November, many Akulivik Inuit engaged in net fishing for arctic char at a traditional fishing area Kuuvik about 100 kilometers away from the village. In this case hunter support funds were used to buy fish from the local Inuit and to distribute the fish to all households. In 1997, the village officials purchased 2000 pounds of arctic char with CA\$5000 (CA\$2.50/lb) from the program. Each household was given about 10 fish, supplemented by meat of several caribou that were bought and distributed to a few needy villagers in that month.

In December, the village officials purchased 200 pounds of arctic char with program funds for the community-wide Christmas feast.

Usually, meat and fish purchased by the hunter support program was distributed among the households soon after it arrived in the village. But some meat and fish were retained for future needs in community storage. When anyone needed the meat or fish, he/she might go to the storage to get some for himself/herself or would ask a village official to deliver some to him or her at home.

The village council and the church committee host feasts for the whole⁸ village on the several occasions: New Year Day, Easter Day, Canada Day, Christmas Day, etc.. Meat and fish from the support program are served at these community feasts

2.3 Characteristics of Akulivik Inuit Food Sharing Practices

Many Inuit in Akulivik express the opinion that sharing food/game is the only way to survive in Inuit society. I will now point out several characteristics of Akulivik food sharing practices.

In Akulivik, most sharing practices are carried out among persons in close social relationships such as family, kinship, namesake, midwife, or friends relationships, or among those who share labors such as hunting and fishing, or among those who share a location in a given time such as a spring or summer camp. Furthermore, the giving of food to widows, elders, and sick persons are often observed and remarked upon by others. Also, sharing through the Hunter Support Program aims as much as possible to provide country food to the needy as well as to all the other village households equally. Taken together, all these sharing practices constitute a form of one-way giving or of re-distribution (Kishigami 2002, 2004).

In the most cases, Inuit who give food to others do not expect to be paid back or reciprocated by the same receivers. To them, giving food to needed persons is obligatory (ex. Riches 1981). They simply give their food to others or they receive food from others. Each transaction is completed by the single action of giving or receiving. The transaction is not reciprocal between two persons. Thus, I argue that for the most part, Inuit food sharing does not constitute a form of reciprocal exchange but that of a one-way transfer of food. It should be emphasized that because most Inuit food sharing is practiced among particular persons in close social relationships, food seems to be intentionally and reciprocally exchanged between them over a long period in appearance.

3 Socio-economic and Cultural Significance of the Food Sharing Practices

I argue that Inuit food sharing has economic and social effects as well as contributing more generally to feelings of ethnic identity. First of all, Inuit food sharing has economic effects. To share food with others contributes to people's survival because in this way the have-nots can obtain food.

Secondly, Inuit food sharing has social effects. Food sharing constitutes a part of the Inuit social subsistence system. Among the Inuit, the harvesting, sharing and consumption of animals are organized practices carried out by Inuit social relations (ex. Lonner 1980; Ellanna

⁸ To have a meal together is called "*nirimatuf*".

and Sherrod 1984; Langdon 1991; Wenzel 1980; 1991). In turn, social relations and subsistence activities are integrated into a socio-economic system. Within this system, the sharing of food with other Inuit maintains or reproduces the social relations between givers and receivers of food/ game (Kishigami 2000; Wenzel 1995; 2000; Hovelsrud-Broda 2000).

Thirdly, Inuit sharing practices are closely linked to identity and pride as the world view of the hunters is shaped by the relationship between humans and animals. A hunter retains his reputation through the harvest of many animals/fish and through sharing them with other Inuit. Also, Inuit believe that because animals give themselves up to hunters it is incumbent upon the hunters to give them in turn to others (Fienup-Riordan 1983:346; Nuttall 1991: 219; Bodenhorn 2000: 44-47). These psychological and cultural factors support Inuit to continue sharing food with others.

4 Conclusion

In Akulivik, food-sharing practices include the allocation of game among hunters, between hunters and their co-villagers, and the sharing of food in the community, as well as the community-wide sharing of game provided through the Hunter Support Program, etc. One common characteristic of these practices, however, is that they do not constitute the reciprocal exchange of food between specific persons or groups⁹, but instead represent one-way food-giving from one person to another/others or a re-distribution of game from the community to its members.

To the contemporary Inuit, food sharing practices are economically, socially, and culturally significant because they correlate with several aspects of the Inuit value system. Changes in these practices, furthermore, might bring about fundamental alternations of a world view on a special relationship between Inuit and animals.

In the current socio-economic context of Nunavik, the existing sharing system is in decline due to the growing prevalence of the cash economy, diversifying Inuit lifestyles, rapid population increase, and the implementation of beluga whale management. I argue that Inuit food sharing, as it is organized and practiced in the specific social relationships I describe here and as it reflects the Inuit world view, is thus a reliable indicator of social change in some cases and of continuity in others.

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⁹ There are several cases of reciprocal exchange in Inuit societies. Trade between trading partners among the Inupiat is characterized by the reciprocal exchange (Burch 1988). Also, seal meat sharing among the Nestilik Inuit partners takes the form of the reciprocal exchange (Van de Velde 1956; Damas 1972).

Contemporary Inuit Food Sharing: A Case Study from Akulivik, PQ. Canada

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Contemporary Inuit Food Sharing: A Case Study from Akulivik, PQ. Canada

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