

Levels of Inequality in the North Pacific Rim : Cultural Logics and Regional Interaction

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Levels of Inequality in the North Pacific Rim: Cultural Logics and Regional Interaction

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This paper suggests that social stratification in the North Pacific Rim, which was once neglected by anthropologists, has been overemphasized in recent years. Notwithstanding the well-known cases of ranked societies on the Northwest Coast of North America, a large number of traditional societies on both sides of the North Pacific were characterized by low-level inequality among individuals and not by institutionalized hierarchies. In providing a basic overview of the patterns of social and political organization among North Pacific Rim societies, the limited distribution of ranked societies is demonstrated. The ideal-type of ranked societies (or “societies with internal hierarchies”) is contrasted with another ideal-type, “societies with limited status positions” (or egalitarian societies). In the area under consideration, societies with internal hierarchies tend to be associated with unilineal descent, while societies with limited status positions are typically bilateral.

In addition to a “bird’s eye perspective” of the North Pacific Rim, a more detailed analysis of one sub-region of the area, namely the Bering Strait region, is provided. Here, within a prevailing egalitarian/bilateral framework, several variations of low-level inequality are found. It is argued that these variations can be understood within a framework of cultural continuity with ever-changing economic, environmental, and social conditions.

In contrast to most authors on social inequality, the present author does not intend to explain the emergence of inequality. Instead, the central question addressed is why different types of social and political organization are distributed so unevenly within a region of comparable ecological conditions. Since many previous explanatory attempts focused on demographic, ecological, and economic factors, the perspective selected here highlights the role of (practice-mediated) cognitive models as well as the role of the interplay between the models (ideal types) and practices at the interregional level. The work of cultural anthropologist Marshall Sahlins serves as a starting point for theorizing the phenomena under question. His concept of “cultural logic” or “cultural order”, however, can easily be misunderstood to imply a problematic correlation between cognitive models and ethnic boundaries. On the other hand, established approaches focusing on inter-group contacts (be they diffusionism or world-system theories) tend to underestimate the role of these boundaries by employing a mechanistic understanding of cultural reproduction.

Social and political practices in the region under consideration always transcend

— at least partially — group and cultural boundaries. As a result, cognitive models of “proper” behavior are constantly redefined and “diffused” beyond their areas of origin. However, interaction and mutual amalgamation of distinct models are limited by the systemic properties of particular constellations of social and political organization. It is at these “fault lines” of interaction — i.e., in situations where only one of two antagonistic structural principles can succeed — where the impression of clear-cut boundaries between ideal-types arises. In conclusion, the paper suggests that more attention be paid to the concrete processes of interaction among structurally distinct modes of social and political organization.

INTRODUCTION

The conference “Man the Hunter,” conducted in Chicago in 1966, served as a trigger for renewed interest in the comparative study of hunter-gatherer societies. Lee’s and DeVore’s [1968: 12] statement in the published proceedings — “we postulate a generally egalitarian system for the hunters” — was quickly accepted by mainstream anthropology, and hunter-gatherer societies became textbook examples of egalitarianism. The known cases of social inequality and political stratification among hunter-gatherers (e.g., in California and on the Northwest Coast of North America) had, therefore, to be treated as curious exceptions to the stereotype.

Since the 1970s, there have been several attempts to focus on these exceptions instead of dismissing them. Driven largely by ecological and materialistic approaches, a number of hypotheses have been presented to account for the existence of egalitarian and non-egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies [e.g., BEGLER 1978; TESTART 1982; WOODBURN 1980]. The main result of these attempts was to break up the once unified category of hunter-gatherers into two, variously labeled, categories (e.g., “simple” and “complex,” “egalitarian” and “semi-egalitarian”). To a certain degree, these typologies were reminiscent of Grosse’s [1896] early distinction between “lower” and “higher hunters.” Similarly, most of these typologies implicitly or explicitly assume an evolutionary trajectory from “simple” to “complex” or from “egalitarian” to “non-egalitarian.”

In recent years, “non-egalitarian” hunter-gatherer societies have received even more attention. Especially among archaeologists, the study of “social complexity” [e.g., ARNOLD 1996a; HOOD 1995; PRICE and BROWN 1985] and of “intermediate societies” [e.g., ARNOLD 1996b; GREGG 1991] has become a veritable specialization within the discipline. Despite a variety of approaches employed, materialist explanations based on cultural ecology and/or evolutionary ecology dominate the discourse.

If we turn to the North Pacific Rim, two conferences held at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka in the late 1970s became important in addressing the topic of “complex” foraging societies of the region. The first of the two conferences was held in 1978 and resulted in the publication of *Alaska Native Culture and History* [KOTANI and WORKMAN 1980]. For our purposes, the most important paper at the conference was delivered by Townsend, an ethnohistorian of South Alaskan groups. Later published as “Ranked Societies of the Alaskan Pacific Rim” [TOWNSEND 1980], the paper addressed issues of social and political inequality

among native societies of the region.

One of Townsend's major goals was to overcome the practice of treating South Alaskan societies as isolated entities, structured merely along the linguistic divisions of "Aleut," "Indian," and "Eskimo." Instead, she proposed to view the peoples of the southern Alaskan Pacific Rim as having been organized into a common network of inter-societal relations. The dominant aspect of socio-political organization of all these groups was ranking. Ranking — minimally defined as the presence of at least two social classes (free and non-free) — was understood as having been triggered by favorable environmental conditions, which — in their turn — allowed large population concentrations [TOWNSEND 1980]. In the context of then dominant anthropological perspectives, Townsend's emphasis on inter-societal contacts was especially laudable. Likewise, her comparative approach to ranked societies in Alaska was important, because the topic had been little explored before her contribution.

In 1979, another conference was convened in Osaka: its goal was "to compare the foraging economies of prehistoric Japan and California" [KOYAMA and THOMAS 1981: 1] and it resulted in publication of the landmark volume *Affluent Foragers: Pacific Coasts East and West* [KOYAMA and THOMAS 1981]. Its contributors were mainly archaeologists and the emphasis of the contributions was not so much on emerging social hierarchies as on productivity, carrying capacity, and on organizational complexity (with or without social hierarchies). Similarly, the causal models employed in the volume to account for historical changes gave privilege to population growth, resource availability, and other material causes. Nevertheless, the volume was exemplary in demonstrating the usefulness of limited comparisons between the eastern and the western Pacific coasts.

As in other areas of the world, recent contributions to the discussion of social complexity among hunter-gatherers of the North Pacific Rim have come almost exclusively from archaeologists [see e.g., AMES 1991, 1994, 1995; FITZHUGH B. 1996; HAYDEN 1995; MASCHNER 1992]. Among cultural anthropologists, Kasten [1996] is one of the few who recently have addressed the issue of "political organization among North Pacific maritime peoples". Interestingly, he views all the societies of the North Pacific Rim as ranked. I will detail my disagreement with this point of view below.

My approach to the problems under consideration differs on several accounts from those mentioned so far. First, instead of focusing exclusively on the ranked societies of the region as most authors have done, I will concentrate on societies of the region with low-level inequality. This is partly due to the fact that my own ethnographic expertise stems primarily from the area surrounding Bering Strait. More importantly, however, I thereby want to express my belief that it is not only institutionalized hierarchy that needs to be explained. Equality needs as much explanation as ranking. Secondly, although my perspective is diachronic, my data are derived from historic and ethnographic sources (see below), which date from the 18th to the 20th centuries. Thus, in contrast to archaeological approaches to the subject, I am dealing with a rather microscopic time-scale. Nevertheless, I will argue that certain social models can be extended into a more distant past, while at the same time addressing the issue of structural change. Thirdly, the regional scope of this paper is limited to the northern part of the North Pacific Rim, an area which encompasses the coastal regions of Alaska from Ketchikan to Barrow and the coastal regions of the Russian Far East from the northern tip of Chukotka to

the southern tip of Kamchatka (see Figure 4.1). The indigenous inhabitants of the area speak languages of the Eskimo-Aleut (various Inupiaq and Yupik groups and the Aleut), Na-Dene (Athapaskan groups, Eyak, Tlingit), and Paleosiberian (Chukchi, Itel'men, Koryak) language families. Finally, in contrast to many other authors, I do not intend to explain inequality as such. Rather, I would like to address the question of why forms of social and political organization in this region differ.

As a first approximation to the topics under consideration, I will present a broad overview of the distribution of the basic modes of socio-political organization in the North Pacific Rim region. Only as a second step will I discuss the theoretical assumptions of my perspective, thereby attempting to address some of the issues raised in the regional overview. Subsequently, I will take a closer look at one area within the region, the Bering Strait area, in order to account for local variations within the broad picture. Finally, I will note a number of regional and theoretical implications of the Bering Strait case study. However, since this is more an "ideas" than a "facts" paper, any preliminary answers will trigger additional questions.

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW: PATTERNS OF SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANIZATION IN THE NORTH PACIFIC RIM

As mentioned above, Townsend [1980] proposed a "ranked/egalitarian boundary" in South Alaska: the Aleut, one Yupik group [the Alutiiq, consisting of the Koniag and Chugach], two Athapaskan groups [the Denaina and Ahtna], the Eyak, and the Tlingit were classified as "ranked," while Yupik, Inupiaq, and Athapaskan societies north of this imaginary line were labeled "egalitarian" (see Figure 4.2). Townsend adopted Fried's [1967: 109] definition of rank society as "one in which positions of valued status are somehow limited" and noted that these status positions carry authority but no power to coerce [TOWNSEND 1980: 130]. If we extend Townsend's basic typology into the northern part of the Russian Far East, all societies indigenous to the area — Siberian Yupik, Chukchi, Koryak, and Itel'men — have to be added to her "egalitarian bloc" of central, western, and northern Alaska. Although it is possible to debate how "egalitarian" these societies really were, it is clear that their political organization does not qualify as "ranked". As I will argue in more detail below (at least, for the Bering Strait area), even these societies who lived in extremely resource-rich environments (e.g., the Naukan group of the Siberian Yupik, Bering Strait Inupiaq, Itel'men), did not develop lasting hierarchies, although limited social inequality was certainly present. Thus, I suggest the label "bilateral societies with limited-status positions" to replace Townsend's label "egalitarian societies" for the Russian Far East and for western and northern Alaska. At this point, the combination of bilateral descent and limited social inequality is not intended to suggest a causal relationship but merely reflects the co-occurrence of those traits in the ethnographic record.

If we take a second look at the North American side of the North Pacific Rim, the historical preponderance of ranking among the South Alaskan societies listed by Townsend cannot be questioned. However, it is possible to suggest that the geographical scope of "structural ranking" in Alaska should be expanded beyond the limited distribution of "de-facto ranking" in historical times. Most Athapaskan societies in Alaska were historically characterized by elements of internal hierarchies and fixed leadership positions, although full-blown ranking was only

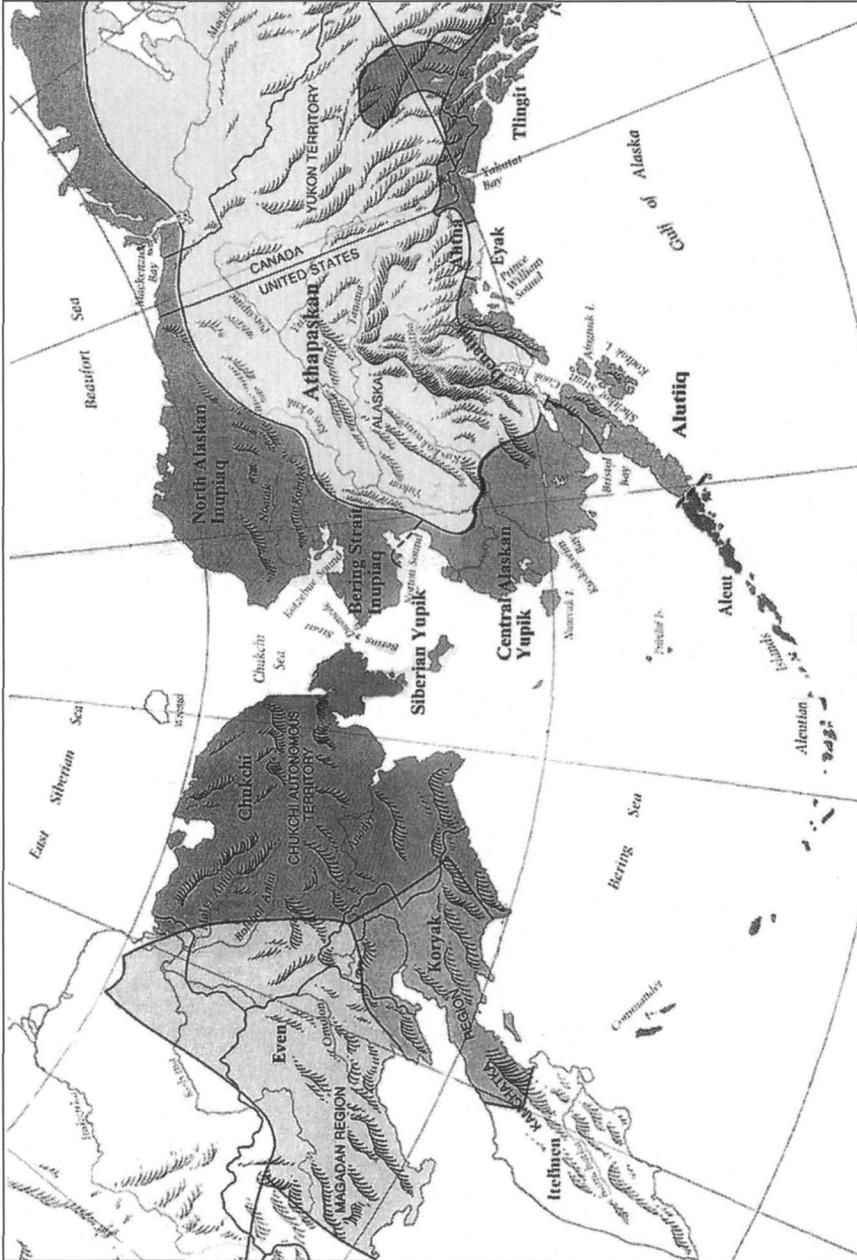


Figure 4.1 Languages and cultures of the North Pacific Rim (adopted from FITZHUGH and CROWELL [1988: 10-11]).

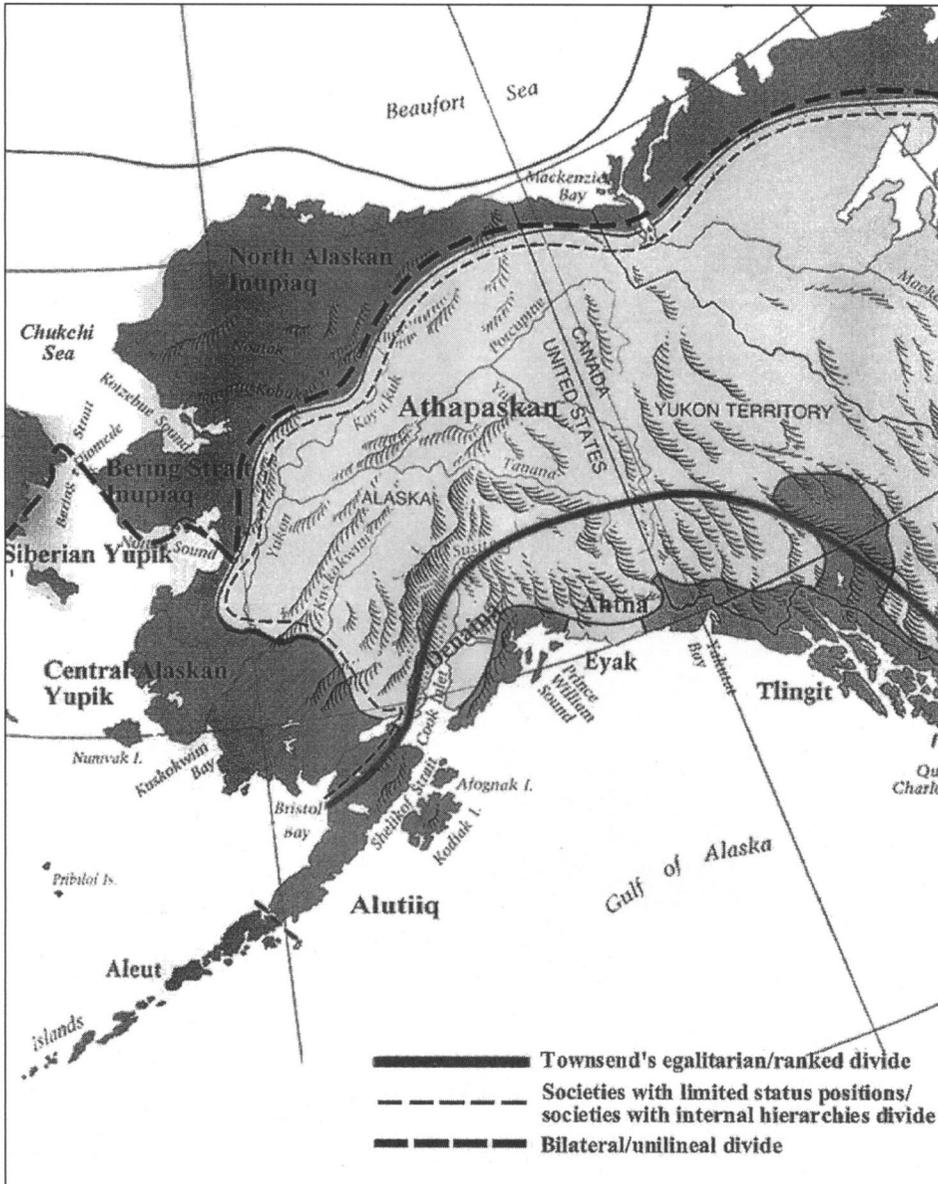


Figure 4.2 Social boundaries suggested by TOWNSEND [1979] and by this study.

realized in some of them. In this context, it is highly relevant to point to some recent discussions about Proto-Athapaskan social organization. Ever since de Laguna demonstrated that matrilineal clans and moieties among the interior Athapaskan were not recent borrowings [DE LAGUNA 1975], more researchers have argued for tracing distinct realizations of social organization among Athapaskan groups, Eyak, and Tlingit to a common source. While Rosman and Rubel [1986] have provided further argumentation in the sphere of social relations, Kan [1989] has

supplemented the case with evidence from the spheres of religious beliefs and rituals. Similarly, in the field of linguistics, Proto-Athapaskan and Eyak kinship terms can be traced to a common structural base [KRAUSS 1977] and there is evidence for the former existence of a “northern Northwest Coast language area” [LEER 1991], encompassing Haida, Eyak, Aleut, Tlingit, and Athapaskan. Thus, it seems possible to reclassify the Athapaskan societies of interior and south-central Alaska into the “ranked” category (see Figure 4.2). However, I suggest the more general term “lineage societies with internal hierarchies” to label this category. Again, the correlation between unilineal descent and social hierarchies (with or without ranking) is not to be misunderstood as a causal relationship or as a universal trend but merely as an observation resulting from Alaska’s ethnographic record.

Thus, by revising and extending Townsend’s typology, the correlation of linguistic and social boundaries she wanted to overcome is — at least partly — resurrected. The new dividing line would run almost exactly along linguistic/cultural boundaries. Speakers of Paleosiberian (Chukchi, Koryak, and Itel’men) and Eskimo (Siberian Yupik, Central Alaskan Yupik, all Inupiaq groups) languages would be classified as belonging to the “egalitarian” camp, while speakers of Na-Dene languages (Athapaskan peoples, Eyak, Tlingit) would find themselves on the hierarchical side of the equation. Only the Alutiiq and Aleut — speakers of Eskimo-Aleut languages and historically clearly in the hierarchical camp - would defy this overly neat cultural border. I will now turn to a few theoretical considerations, before revisiting open questions of the proposed typology.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Townsend’s explanatory model, as well as most other attempts to deal with social complexity in the North Pacific Rim, made prominent use of ecological variables. However, what has been presented so far seems to defy straightforward ecological interpretation. If we look at the broad regional distribution of the categories discussed, we see that “lineage societies with internal hierarchies” are only represented in the North American sector of the area under consideration. By and large, the environmental conditions on both sides of the North Pacific, however, do not differ significantly (i.e., the internal differentiation within the two regions is greater than distinctions between the two). On a more specific level, the question arises of how the “egalitarian” structure of Itel’men society in a resource-rich environment reminiscent of the Northwest Coast [*pace* SHNIRELMAN 1994] fits conventional cultural ecology approaches. Without belittling the fact that human thought and action are interactive processes between human actors and their social and natural environments, I will not employ ecological perspectives in the remainder of this paper. It seems to me that environmental factors (be they abundance or reliability) have been over-stressed in approaching the subject.

Alternative approaches to the study of hierarchy have traditionally been dominated by blatantly idealist positions. From Dumézil’s [1973] study of Indo-European ideology to Dumont’s [1980] exploration of the East Indian caste system spans an impressive line of research. From a circum-Pacific perspective, it has been primarily its south-central part, namely Polynesia, which triggered a multitude of comparative studies of socio-political systems. In the sphere of cultural anthropology, the works of Hocart [1969, 1970], Sahlins [1958, 1970], and

Goldman [1970] come to mind. Goldman's *Ancient Polynesian Society* [1970], the most detailed study of ranked societies of the era, is an impressive compendium of social and political facts which the author explained by reference to "principles of aristocracy." This radically idealistic position appeared untimely, as its publication coincided with the rise of neo-evolutionism and cultural ecology within American anthropology. Thus, the subsequent boom in archaeological treatises on the subject was much more informed by Sahlins' early work, than by Hocart's or Goldman's. Polynesia became the testing ground for Service's [1971] model of chiefdoms. Notably, Kirch [1984] and Earle [1991, 1997] examined Polynesian societies as prime examples of "intermediate-level societies."

However, during these heydays of ecologically informed research on the nature of social evolution, Sahlins, one of the initial instigators of this approach, began to explore alternative explanatory models. Starting with "Culture and Practical Reason" [1976], he provided a thorough critique of utilitarianism in anthropology, in the form of both economic and ecological reductionism. His emerging counter-position was basically a culturalist approach. In other words, he assumed non-reducibility of cultural reason to practical reason. In a subsequent work, "Islands of History" [1985], Sahlins made a decisive step in overcoming seemingly solid dichotomies of past research. On an abstract level, this entails not only going beyond the materialism/idealism debate, but also arguing that anthropology and history, structure and event, cultural order and cultural praxis are not mutually exclusive conceptual tools, but mutually dependent ones. The plea "to explode the concept of history by the anthropological experience of culture" [SAHLINS 1985: 72] leads to a project of structural history that goes beyond the *long durée* of Braudel's [1980] historiography. Specifically, by interjecting the concept of "structure of the conjuncture," Sahlins is able to overcome the traditional weakness of structuralist approaches, namely their inability to account for change. Incorporating important clues from practice theory [see e.g., BOURDIEU 1977, 1990], Sahlins argues that cultural schemes are constantly "put at risk" by their practical realization. A corollary is "that different cultural orders have their own, distinctive modes of historical reproduction" [SAHLINS 1985: x]. In the following, I will adopt Sahlins' terms "cultural logic," "cultural order," and "cultural scheme" — which he never clearly defined — and will use them interchangeably in the broad sense of "systems of meaning". While my use of the terms will remain restricted to aspects of socio-political organization, this is purely an artifact of the goals of the present paper, since the terms themselves are applicable to any cultural domain.

If we now apply such a model of "culturally structured practice" to the "broad brush" picture of social and political organization in the North Pacific Rim, the revised results are not particularly surprising. The seeming fit between linguistic boundaries and the distribution of socio-political ideal-types can be understood in reference to deeply rooted cultural schemes. At the same time, since these cultural schemes — in contrast to older idealist explanations — cannot be understood outside of history and practical reality, but as practice mediated, local variations can be easily accounted for. However, the above-mentioned case of ranking among the Aleut and Alutiiq seems to defy a purely culturalist scenario.

While Sahlins' model of cultural schemes, by incorporating aspects of practice theory, is able to address the question of how cultural logics are reproduced and changed over time, it is unclear how the regional interaction of different cultural schemes is supposed to work. Although

Sahlins' most prominent case study addressed the encounter of two distinct cultural logics, namely of the Hawaiians and the British [SAHLINS 1981], his model assumes — by and large — bounded cultural schemes. Earlier attempts to address the dynamics of regional interaction resulted mainly in unsatisfying mechanistic models of diffusion and/or migration, while more recent attempts have centered around world-system approaches. World-system models, despite their benefit of incorporating issues of economic and political power, have been rightly criticized for being euro-centric in their assumption that the capitalist logic of expansion is universal [see e.g., SAHLINS 1994, 1996 among others]. Thus, the question arises of how regional interaction can be conceptualized without sacrificing the notion of culture.

If we now return to the unsettling case of ranking among the Alutiiq and Aleut, two conventional explanatory scenarios come to mind. On the one hand, “old-fashioned” diffusion/migration could be brought into the picture. Indeed, there is some — albeit weak — evidence of Tlingit expansion not only into Eyak territory, but at least as far as Kodiak Island (in Alutiiq territory). Since the Tlingit never advanced into Aleut territory, it would afford a stretch of imagination to explain all non-Na-Dene forms of ranking in South Alaska with culture contact processes. At the same time, such an explanation would seem to go against the grain of my approach, which argues for the persistence of cultural schemes. Thus, diffusion as such does not explain anything, unless the received “culture elements” were simply substitutions of similar elements in the pre-existing schemes.

The second possible explanation suggests a split of socio-political models within societies of the Eskimo-Aleut language family. This split would have to be situated along the boundary between Inupiaq and Yupik groups and have to include the Aleut under the Yupik model. This proposed split could be related to the prehistoric expansion of the Thule tradition, which provided the cultural basis for contemporary Inupiaq groups. For the Yupik side of the divide, the archaeological hypothesis of western Alaskan Paleoeskimo roots relatively undisturbed by Thule influences could be mentioned [see e.g., W. FITZHUGH 1988]. At the same time, this would lead to one more revision in situating the dividing line between “bilateral/limited status positions” groups and “unilineal/hierarchical” groups. Now, the Yupik would join the class of societies characterized by unilineal descent. The dividing line between bilateral and unilineal descent would follow the boundary between speakers of Eskimo-Aleut and Na-Dene languages roughly down to Norton Sound, from where a Yupik wedge would be protruding north to the western shore of the Bering Strait (see Figure 4.2). While it is relatively easy to postulate a common Yupik/Aleut principle of kinship structure (patrilineal tendencies with weakly developed unilineal endogamous descent groups and no moieties), there seems to be no Yupik/Aleut unity regarding permanent social hierarchies. In taking a brief comparative look at societies with Yupik languages (Siberian Yupik, Central Alaskan Yupik, Alutiiq), lasting internal hierarchies were only found among the Alutiiq.

Thus, it seems necessary to combine the notion of cultural schemes with non-mechanistic models of regional interaction, in order to arrive at a more realistic interpretation. For example, it could be suggested that Proto-Yupik/Aleut socio-political organization was amenable to diffusion processes from Proto-Athapaskan societies — that is, the two socio-cultural orders were different but compatible. Further, given the favorable environmental conditions of South Alaska, Tlingit/Eyak/Athapaskan northward expansion along the coast could be hypothesized

to have led to structural transformations in the socio-political make-up of Aleut and Alutiiq, leaving the more northerly Yupik groups outside its sphere of influence. At the same time, it could as easily have been the other way around: a Proto-Athapaskan south Alaskan population was, sometime around the end of the first millennium A.D., removed/assimilated by Yupik-speakers from the North [DUMOND 1988]. The above-mentioned linguistic analysis of a “northern Northwest Coast language area” by Leer [1991: 188] actually suggested that Eskimo languages (such as Alutiiq) are intrusive to the Pacific Coast. Therefore, the minor socio-political differences between Yupik and Inupiaq societies could be contrasted with the more substantial Eskimo/Aleut split, which would realign our view of linguistic and socio-political realities.

The preceding lines indicate the dangers of abstract reasoning when applied to concrete questions of cultural history. Theoretical considerations can only provide guidance but cannot serve as substitutes for historical and cultural details. I will present these within a much narrower geographical context, namely the Bering Strait region. According to the bilateral/unilineal and egalitarian/ranking distinctions noted above, this region is generally characterized by bilateral egalitarian societies. However, a closer look will reveal significant regional variation, which will be discussed within a framework of cultural schemes and diachronic processes of regional interactions.

A CLOSER LOOK: LEVELS OF INEQUALITY IN THE BERING STRAIT REGION

Since 1990, I have been conducting fieldwork among several of the indigenous societies of the Bering Strait region, including the Chukchi and Siberian Yupik of Chukotka, and the Bering Strait Inupiaq of Alaska (see Figure 4.3). The following discussion is largely based on abstractions resulting from my fieldwork, as well as on ethnohistoric reconstructions presented earlier [SCHWEITZER 1990]. Data about the neighboring North Alaskan Inupiaq are derived from secondary sources. All the ethnic groups mentioned above used to be part of a regional network of societies, which dates back at least several hundred years. A major dividing line within this network separated two vastly different modes of subsistence. Most of the Inupiaq societies (with the exception of inland groups along the Kobuk and Noatak rivers) and all Siberian Yupik groups, as well as the maritime Chukchi, were coastal dwellers, who specialized in various forms of sea mammal hunting, supplemented by land hunting, fishing, and gathering. On the other hand, the Reindeer Chukchi had become pastoralists sometime between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries — they were large-scale reindeer herders [KRUPNIK 1993]. In the following, I will summarize what I consider the core elements of social and political organization among these groups, highlighting similarities and differences.

In terms of basic aspects of kinship structure, the entire area can be characterized as predominantly bilateral. However, this generalization has to be immediately qualified: among the Siberian Yupik (both in Chukotka and on St. Lawrence Island), there are clear indications of a patrilineal tendency regarding descent, as well as named groups reminiscent of unilineal descent groups. Although I have argued elsewhere that it is misleading to call these groups “clans” or “lineages” [SCHWEITZER 1992, 1994], the difference warrants mentioning. As noted earlier, there seems to be a Yupik/Inupiaq split on this matter: Yupik societies from Chukotka

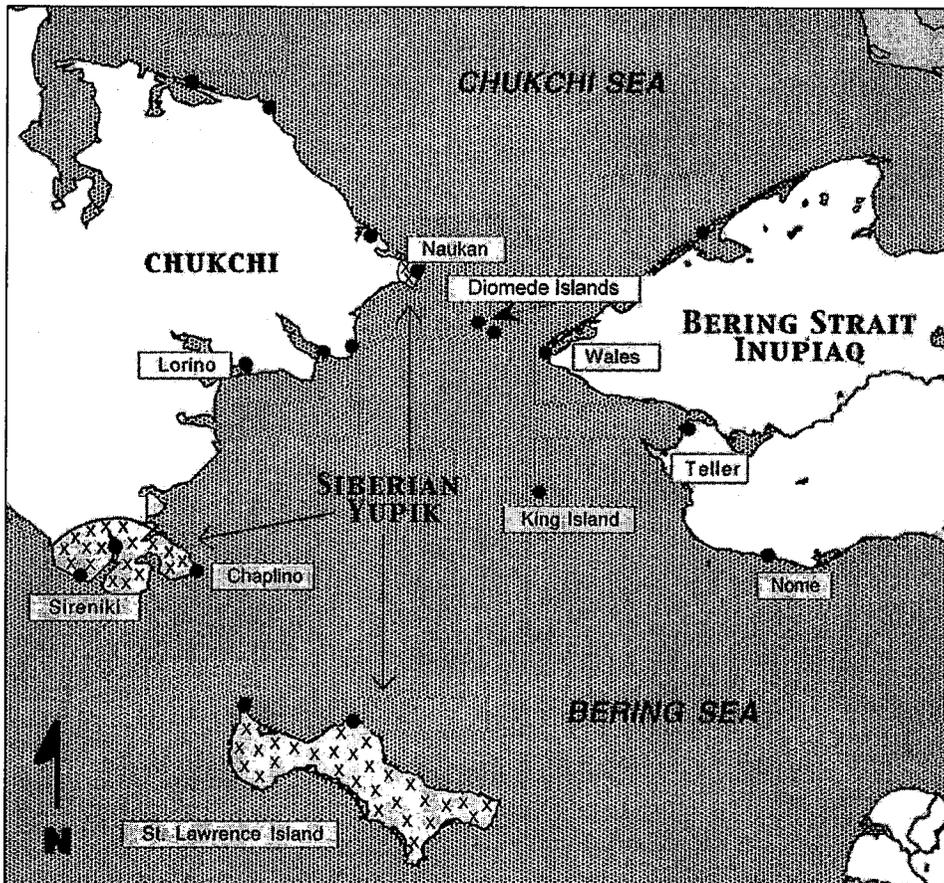


Figure 4.3 Peoples and communities of the Bering Strait area.

to Bristol Bay display this kind of patrilineal tendency, or “patrilineally tainted” bilateralism. Thus, the St. Lawrence, Chaplino, and Naukan groups of the Siberian Yupik counteract the overall bilateral tendency, although their unilineal systems are less developed than among Tungusic groups (such as the Even) to the west or Athapaskan groups to the east.

Turning exclusively to the coastal population for a moment, all the large-sea-mammal-hunting groups of the area display a similar structural element of labor organization, which was and continues to be influential in all spheres of social life. This social unit — the boat crew — consisted, before the advent of outboard motors, of eight to nine adult males. One of them was the captain who owned the boat (*umialiq* in Inupiaq, *an'yaliq* in Siberian Yupik, *ättw-e'rmecin* in Chukchi), another was the designated harpooner, and the others were primarily engaged in paddling. It could be argued that this form of cooperation was determined by the ecological and technological constraints of large sea-mammal hunting conducted without industrial means. However, the specific details of how this group is recruited, how the catch is distributed, and which forms of boat ownership and inheritance are followed, are in no way a given. In the

following, I will therefore compare the specific ways in which the boat crews were constituted and how this correlated with leadership patterns.

There seems to be basic agreement among all three groups that crew members were recruited largely along kinship lines. Among the Chukchi and Inupiaq, the bilateral concept of descent led to an extensive use of patri- and matrilineal, as well as affinal ties. As is to be expected, among the Siberian Yupik there was a clear preponderance of patrilineal ties (either in the form of father-son or patrilineal parallel cousin relationships). Nevertheless, matrilineal and affinal ties were also used, albeit to a lesser degree than among Chukchi and Inupiaq. However, one other aspect deserves mentioning. While Chukchi and Siberian Yupik recruitment choices were limited by "centripetal" tendencies — that is, they selected "relatives" from within the limits of "clan" or "neighborhood" pools — the North Alaskan Inupiaq selection process was much less constrained and thus contained more elements of competition. In particular, good harpooners were much sought after and they often came from other villages, lured by presents and demonstrations of competence by the captain [SPENCER 1972]. Kinship links which did not exist before came into existence by joining a boat crew, which also necessitated joining the "community house" or *qargi* of the captain.

If we now turn to the political aspect of crew organization, the status of the captain shows interesting variation throughout the area. The Inupiaq *umialiq*, at least since the late nineteenth century, was clearly the dominant figure in all aspects of their social and political life. This included redistributive functions (in the process of distributing the harvest), which served to consolidate his "following." Thus, his position can be compared to "Big Man" statuses elsewhere. On the other hand, neither the Chukchi nor the Siberian Yupik captains ever rose to such a level of social prominence. They were generally well respected members of the community, whose influence was confined to sea-mammal hunting pursuits. For example, among the Siberian Yupik, in addition to the captain and the shaman, there were the leadership positions of *nunaliq* ("master of the village", a largely ritual office) and *umeliq* ("strong man"). Thus, status positions were dispersed and situational and did not allow any one person to claim all-encompassing authority.

We can see a number of distinctive features within the seemingly similar systems. On the one hand, the "broad" Inupiaq interpretation of kinship (almost everybody can become a relative if mutually beneficial) contrasts with the "narrower" Chukchi and Siberian Yupik interpretation (fewer means of "kinship extension" in Chukchi than in Eskimo kinship; "clan organization" as a limiting factor among the Siberian Yupik). This difference overrides the bilateral/patrilineal split, making the bilateral Chukchi in this respect closer to the patrilineal Yupik than to the bilateral Inupiaq. In addition, Chukchi and Yupik status positions are more diversified and balanced than among the North Alaskan Inupiaq. However, even among Chukchi and Yupik, the position of the boat-captain was potentially the most dangerous for social and gender equality. In North Alaska, this potential was more fully realized: the absence of other strong political positions (except the shaman), coupled with a kinship system that served more as "ideology" than as relations of production, allowed the emergence of a powerful figure — the *umialiq* — who could fully engage in the individual maximization of prestige.

We still need to look at diachronic aspects of socio-political organization of coastal communities in the Bering Strait area. It is evident that the incorporation of Bering Strait

societies into global exchange relations, and especially the arrival of commercial whalers in the mid-nineteenth century, triggered socio-political changes. These also affected the position of boat captains. For example, for the North Alaskan Inupiaq, the earliest recorded discussion of the *umialiq*'s position [SIMPSON 1855] paints a picture of much less social influence than subsequent sources [SPENCER 1959]. Similarly, among the Chukchi and Siberian Yupik, there are indications that commercial whaling changed the redistribution patterns of indigenous whaling harvests. However, while outside change was ubiquitous, it had very different effects for the individual cases under consideration. While it can be argued that external change triggered a "Big Man" system among the North Alaskan Inupiaq, its effects were much more restricted in Chukotka and on St. Lawrence Island. Since the effects of commercial whaling and of the availability of Euroamerican goods did not differ significantly among those societies (if anything, foreign goods were more accessible in Chukotka), those different responses have to be explained otherwise, namely by reference to slightly different constellations in the overall socio-cultural organization, which formed the baseline for responses to external change.

The Reindeer Chukchi, the pastoral inland dwellers of Chukotka, have so far hardly been mentioned. It is important to note that their economic system presented very different possibilities in terms of economic and social stratification. Nomadic pastoralism in general, as a specialized economic pursuit highly dependent on other social groups, is inherently economically stratified. Under conditions of herd-size maximization (the typical pastoral mode), there will always be rich and poor reindeer herders. This was clearly the case among late nineteenth/early twentieth century Chukchi reindeer herders. At the same time, there were hardly any signs of social stratification. In contrast to Turkic and Mongolic pastoral groups of Siberia, no internal ranking of kinship positions ("conical clan") and no political integration beyond individual camps were visible among Chukchi reindeer herders. However, "slavery," mainly in the form of war captives whose descendants were fully incorporated into the local community, has been reported among the Chukchi prior to the twentieth century. These slaves, while not forming a distinct social class, were necessitated by the expansive nature of Chukchi reindeer economics during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus, Reindeer Chukchi society at the turn of the century was egalitarian in its socio-political aspects, but stratified economically. The power of rich reindeer herders was confined to the ability of attracting less affluent members of the society as labor force.

According to our previous "broad brush" scenario, all societies of the Bering Strait region would belong to a category of societies with limited status positions. This was possibly the case — by and large — before the nineteenth century. Even in the twentieth century, this seems to have been the case, at least from a distant or superficial perspective. However, as demonstrated above, the range of supposedly egalitarian modes of socio-political organization was substantial. Especially, North Alaskan Inupiaq and Reindeer Chukchi communities did not follow the predominant form of egalitarianism. At the same time, I would argue that these "aberrations" can be fully understood within a framework of cultural continuity under ever-changing economic, environmental, and social conditions. While the predominant cultural order did not provide Reindeer Chukchi with models of social stratification in the course of economic stratification, amongst North Alaskan Inupiaq the pre-existing potentially disruptive position of boat captains tipped the fragile equilibrium of egalitarian structures toward incipient social

ranking.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the main conclusions from the above is that we need to break up the general category of “egalitarian” into a continuum of what are actually constellations of inequality. While even ardent supporters of “primitive communism” agree that “perfect equality” does not exist [see e.g., LEE 1990: 236], I would add that inequality, or better the threat of inequality, is a perennial companion of human social action [see also HAYDEN 1995: 20]. Thus, the truly interesting question is not why inequality arises, but why it is seemingly limited to low-level inequality in certain societies. From what was been outlined above, cultural schemes and their historical transformations must be considered important factors in answering the question. Thus, low-level inequality cannot just be defined in negative terms, such as the absence of rich and predictable resource bases and/or demographic pressure. While the absence or presence of such external factors is bound to have socio-cultural consequences, their specific expressions have to be understood within the structural constraints of (socially) internal structures. Thus, I call for a structural history of socio-political variation, which combines the study of micro-historic changes with the pursuit of a “transformative grammar” of cognitive structures.

By advancing a largely culturalist approach, the issue of whether boundaries of social systems coincide with cultural/linguistic boundaries was inevitably brought to the fore. The macro-perspective of the North Pacific Rim region offered at the beginning of the paper seemed to indicate a correlation between social and linguistic domains. However, as soon as we look at the specifics within a smaller area, the seeming neatness quickly disappears. This indicates the relevance of social interaction across time and space. Not only do internal and external changes affect areas differently, but interaction among close and distant neighbors leads to syncretistic reworkings of one’s own and of foreign cultural models. After decades of neglect, the time seems ripe for a renewed confrontation with the social realities of these regional and interregional interactions. Whether one uses the old label “diffusion,” a redefined notion of “migration” [e.g., STRATHERN and STÜRZENHOFECKER 1994], a broad (beyond capitalism) and non-eurocentric understanding of “world system” [e.g., ALGAZE 1993; CROWELL 1997; KRISTIANSEN 1998], or the term “interregional interaction” [e.g., MASRY 1997], is of secondary importance as long as the structuring qualities of cultural schemes are not neglected. I prefer to use the term “regional (or interregional) interaction” (which has been used predominantly by archaeologists) simply because it seems to carry less conceptual baggage than alternative terms.

While here is not the place for a detailed discussion of the concepts mentioned above, I want to remind the reader of two basic facts regarding socio-political variation in the North Pacific Rim. On the one hand, it should not be forgotten that the ranked societies of southern Alaska are part of a much larger hierarchical network, which covers large parts of the Pacific Rim of North America, from Alaska to California. Thus, ranking in the North Pacific Rim cannot be sufficiently understood without reference to neighboring areas with similar socio-political constellations. On the other hand, there is a seeming discrepancy between the roles that regional interaction played on each side of the Pacific. While the ranked societies of the

Northwest Coast seem to have impacted neighboring societies (to the north, south, and inland) by encouraging the elaboration of social stratification, the maritime societies of Northeast Asia kept their low-level inequality despite their interaction with the state societies of China, Japan, and Korea. While this is not the place to elaborate on the question, it might be suggested that systemic differences between stratified state and non-state societies played an important role. The ranked societies of the Northwest Coast could only deal with similarly structured societies: if others did not want to be reduced to the status of slavery, they had to perform on comparable social scales. For the state societies of East Asia, on the other hand, the existence of non-state societies with low-level inequality did not create conceptual confusion. On the contrary, it could be argued that the existence of a “tribal periphery” was in the best economic and political interest of the region’s empires.

Social evolution has hardly been mentioned throughout this paper. I do not deny the general evolutionary trend of social systems developing from simpler to more complex organizational structures. However, at least for the purpose of the present paper, I believe it to be more important to look at the internal make-up of these systems. I definitely reject reductionist notions of social evolution which assume that social complexity is a mere function of external factors. On the contrary, I believe that evolutionary change can only be understood within the context of pre-existing structures. In particular, the developmental potential of particular socio-cultural systems under specific external conditions needs to be further examined. Ranking is not an automatic response to economic and demographic processes permitting social complexity. Instead, ranking is one specific cultural response to such processes, which has to be understood in the context of preceding forms of social organization. In the same vein, neither bilateral kinship nor social leveling mechanisms can be explained through external conditions that do not favor social complexity. Again, they are part of a cultural toolkit, which can be applied in different circumstances and which can lead to diverse social configurations. However, there are limits to the models that we can build from one particular kit. Investigating the structural limitations of particular cultural logics under various scenarios of change and interaction is one of the prime tasks for gaining a better understanding of social evolution.

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