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## **Hunting as a symbol of cultural tradition: the cultural meaning of subsistence activities in Gwich'in Athabascan society of northern Alaska**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the cultural aspects of hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering activities in one Northern Athabascan society.<sup>1</sup> In the subarctic area of North America, besides the Alaskan Eskimo and Canadian Inuit there are several groups of indigenous hunter-gatherers known as Northern Athabascan.<sup>2</sup> As with other Native American societies, they are involved in western industrial nation-states as minority groups. In general, their daily lives are very much involved with the modern monetary system and they are affected by western industrial culture. However, in several rural communities the traditional form of subsistence is still maintained.

Since 1994 I have had several opportunities to stay with members of one Northern Athabascan hunter-gatherer group, the Gwich'in,<sup>3</sup> in their rural communities in interior Alaska. I observed that Gwich'in living in rural communities still undertake traditional subsistence activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing or gathering. Their diet relies on food which has been obtained by those activities. They also maintain their tradition of sharing food of this kind with their relatives and neighbors.<sup>4</sup>

Talking with Gwich'in during my stay, I also observed that subsistence activities in Gwich'in society have strong cultural meanings. As one Gwich'in male said:

Our experiences in surviving in this land are our culture, our traditions. Other Alaskan natives like Eskimo people are proud of their traditions of dance, songs and crafts as their 'native culture', but you know, our land has had too extreme a climate for our ancestors to enjoy such fancy things. They struggled to survive. So, what our ancestors have maintained and passed to us is the way to live in and with this land. Our traditions are knowledge, wisdom and skills to survive in the bush.<sup>5</sup> You know, our way of living is the best to live here. Nobody can beat us. Our bush skills are our cultural traditions like Eskimos' dances and songs. This is our way to live.

He proudly told me this just after our return from a one-day river trip to catch fish for his dog team. On this trip he demonstrated a variety of his bush skills. Another time, while watching a television documentary about Alaskan Eskimo traditional dance, a different Gwich'in male also told me that the main body of their cultural tradition was their bush skills. During my stays at their settlements, I was often told things of this nature by

Gwich'in, especially males who are active hunters. These hunters explained that Gwich'in traditions include their lifestyle of hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering, and especially their bush skills which enable them to pursue this lifestyle.

The purpose of this chapter is to show that, among modern Alaskan Gwich'in, traditional subsistence activities, especially hunting and its associated bush skills, have come to be important as a symbol of cultural tradition and as a source of cultural identity in opposition to the wider, majority society. Having examined some aspects of the behavior and utterances I was able to observe in Gwich'in communities, I will consider how Gwich'in hunting and gathering traditions relate to their political/cultural situations and what meanings the people themselves give to these activities in the context of their modern lives.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Gwich'in**

### ***The Gwich'in and their territory***

The Gwich'in are one of the Northern Athabaskan hunter-gatherer groups who speak dialects of the Gwich'in language, a member of the Northern Athabaskan language family. They live on and around the flats of the Yukon and Mackenzie River systems of the Alaskan Interior (U.S.A.) and northern Canada. Thus, they live on both sides of the border between the U.S.A. and Canada, although their political status and social-cultural situations are different in Alaska and Canada. My main concern is with Gwich'in society and culture in Alaska.

Formerly nomadic, the Gwich'in now inhabit several settlements, including Fort Yukon, Circle, Venetie, Arctic Village, Chalkyitsik and Birch Creek in Alaska, U.S.A., Old Crow in Yukon Territory, Fort McPherson, Arctic Red River, Aklavik and Inuvik in the Northwest Territory of Canada. They live in these settlements throughout the year, occasionally engaging in traditional subsistence activities. It is very difficult to know how many people actually live in these settlements of northeastern Alaska and northwestern Canada (Fast 1995: 3-16), although according to statements by the Gwich'in Steering Committee the population numbers approximately 7,000 (The Gwich'in Steering Committee 2000).

The climate of their territory is interior subarctic and the land is, for the most part, covered by boreal forest (Slobodin 1981: 514). This is the habitat of both large and small mammals such as moose, caribou, muskrat, beaver, wolverine, porcupine, snowshoe hare, mink, marten, or lynx that are targets for Gwich'in hunting/trapping activities. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) is located in the north of Gwich'in territory and is a habitat for the Porcupine River Caribou Herd, the largest caribou herd in the U.S.A., which consists of approximately 160,000 animals. This herd regularly migrates through Gwich'in territory. Rivers of the Yukon and Mackenzie River systems that pass through Gwich'in territory also provide fish for the Gwich'in diet, such as chum salmon, silver salmon, king salmon, white fish, inconnu, grayling and northern pike. In their territory Gwich'in can also gather edible plants, including a wide variety of berries.

***The history of the Alaskan Gwich'in and their political situation***

At the time of their first contact with Europeans, the Gwich'in were nomadic hunter-gatherers who lived by hunting caribou, moose, or Dall sheep with bows and arrows or spears, and also caught caribou using caribou fences. They hunted a variety of wildfowl, trapped small mammals with snares or deadfalls, fished for fresh-water fish with leister spears or fish-traps, and gathered edible plants (Osgood 1936; Mckennan 1965; Slobodin 1962; 1981).

The earliest recorded encounter between the Gwich'in and Europeans occurred in 1789 when Alexander Mackenzie and his party met some 'Quarrelers' (Gwich'in) on the Mackenzie River (Osgood 1936: 17; Slobodin 1981: 528). From the 19th century, several European trading companies began to establish trading posts for the fur trade in and around Gwich'in territory (Yerbury 1986). From the middle of 19th century to the early 20th century, Gwich'in living in the drainage basin of the Yukon River began to have continuous contact with Europeans through trading animal furs for industrial products after the Hudson's Bay Company established trading posts (Slobodin 1962: 16-30; 1981: 529). That is to say, the Gwich'in, using their bush skills, came to have access to industrial tools for bush life such as guns, steel knives and adzes as well as luxury goods such as beads, tobacco and tea. This trading dramatically changed the Gwich'in lifestyle; instead of being nomadic hunter-gatherers they took up temporary residence around the trading posts where there was easy access to European traders, especially in the winter season which is the best time to trap animals with fur in excellent condition (Nelson 1986: 276-277; VanStone 1974: 96-104).

Following the inclusion of Alaska in the amended Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) in 1936, Alaskan Gwich'in communities established village councils to govern their lands in the early 1940s. The U.S. Department of the Interior created several reservations for Native Alaskans, such as the Chandalar Native Reserve which included Arctic Village and Venetie (Arnold 1978: 86-87). Around this period, most Gwich'in began to settle permanently, mainly because, as children became established in schools, their families found it impractical to stay away from permanent settlements (Nelson 1986: 279-280; Shimpo 1993: 13-59).

In 1971, the U.S. Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act or ANCSA (Public Law 92-203). This act was designed to transform Alaskan Native villages into economic entities based on village corporations, and each Alaska Native became a shareholder in one of these corporations. This act also legally determined who is a Native Alaskan. The word 'Native' was defined in Section 3 of ANCSA (U.S. Congress Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs 1971) as

a citizen of the United States who is a person of one-fourth degree or more Alaskan Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut blood, or combination thereof. The term includes any Natives as so defined either or both of whose adoptive parents are not Natives. It also includes, in the absence of proof of a minimum blood quantum, any citizen of the United States who is regarded as an Alaska Native by the Native Village or Native group of which he claims to be a member and whose father or mother is (or, if deceased, was) regarded as Native by any village or group.

In the same section it was established that 'any decision of the Secretary [of the Interior] regarding eligibility for enrolment shall be final' (ibid.).

Most Alaskan Gwich'in settlements are so-called 'ANCSA settlements'. Each of them has both one 'Native Village council', a non-profit administrative organization for individuals of Gwich'in and other indigenous Alaskan groups living in that settlement, and also one 'ANCSA Village Corporation', a profit-making corporation which receives and manages the land estate for Native individuals who are residents of these settlements and also stock holders of the corporation. However, the Gwich'in of Chandalar Reserve used a special clause in ANCSA and elected to take direct title to their former lands and establish 'Venetie Indian Reserve'. Two settlements located within the boundary of this reserve, Venetie and Arctic Village, have not established village corporations. 'The Native Village of Venetie Tribal Government' representing both villages, has authority over their land. Each village also has a separate tribal council to govern village matters.

### **The Gwich'in and their subsistence activities**

#### ***Modern daily life in Gwich'in local communities***

Gwich'in's daily life is now much involved with industrial material culture. Many shuttle planes come and go every day between each community and Fairbanks, providing transport to the largest city of the Alaskan Interior and industrial supplies to the residents of rural settlements. Apart from food that can be obtained through their traditional subsistence activities, Gwich'in usually buy and eat ready-made food and drink such as bread, hamburger meat, eggs, coffee, milk or canned soda. Purchased western-style clothes are generally worn. Likewise, life in the settlements relies on electrical devices such as electric lights and refrigerators. Most Gwich'in households also have radios, TV sets or video cassette recorders similar to other American households. Transportation relies on manufactured devices such as automobiles, four-wheelers (small buggies), snowmobiles and riverboats with outboard motors.

Consequently, most Gwich'in need a way to obtain enough money to purchase and run such manufactured items, but there is limited employment in and around their settlements. In addition, there are barriers for Gwich'in individuals seeking jobs, such as a lack of opportunities for business training, problems with adapting to western ways of working and job customs, and especially discrimination. Discrimination against indigenous peoples still exists in Interior Alaska. Most of the Gwich'in I interviewed have experienced discrimination, especially when trying to find jobs or at work. Due to these factors, there are few chances for Gwich'in people to get permanent jobs, and it is also difficult for them to work under westerners' orders.

Ideally, all Gwich'in are stock holders of an ANCSA corporation, and many Gwich'in are on different kinds of social welfare programs conducted by Federal and State Governments, which consider them to be part of, in western administrative terms, 'low-income households'. Such people can live in their villages without working to earn money, getting a share of the corporations' profits, being supported by welfare payments,

and with food and a place to stay supplied by relatives or neighbors following their traditional custom of sharing.

### ***Subsistence activities in the local community***

Despite this, most Gwich'in who live in local settlements continue to hunt, trap, fish and gather. Hunting and trapping, in particular, are actively and frequently practiced by Gwich'in men. They often go out to the bush with snowmobiles, four-wheelers or riverboats, and hunt moose and caribou with high-powered rifles. They also lay traps and snares to capture small mammals to obtain meat. I observed that many of the Gwich'in adult males whom I met in Fort Yukon regularly check their traps and catch snowshoe hares. Even Gwich'in living in urban areas, such as Fairbanks, sometimes visit rural settlements and hunt for moose or caribou.

Most Gwich'in males seem to give priority to hunting large animals over other activities. Many of them agree that it is not easy for them to ignore moose or caribou tracks they find on the way to other duties. One experienced hunter found a large bull moose on the way back from a trip to cut a Christmas tree for his family. He told me that it was very difficult for him not to chase it. I also observed that many Gwich'in males, especially those who are in their thirties or older, often help each other to prepare for hunting trips at the end of August, just before the start of the official hunting season for moose in September. Although late August was also the close of the salmon fishing season, their minds already had 'gone to the hunting field'. Checking their rifles or bartering their equipment with each other they were preparing to go hunting for caribou. Talking about hunting trips they looked very happy. For Gwich'in females it is important to be careful not to disturb fathers, husbands, brothers and sons, especially not to touch any of their hunting equipment.

Fishing arouses less excitement than hunting, although most Gwich'in households catch large quantities of fish of the salmon-trout species every summer, the peak season for fishing. Many Gwich'in households in local settlements have their own fish-wheel or fishnet. All of the Alaskan Gwich'in settlements are located beside tributaries of the Yukon River system, which makes it easy to access good fishing points from people's homes without requiring overnight stays in the bush as in the past. Generally the Gwich'in love fish and preserve stockpiles of them by drying or smoking, going back and forth to their fish-camps or fish-wheels during summer.

The Gwich'in also still gather several kinds of berries such as low-bush cranberries, high-bush cranberries and raspberries. They regularly go picking berries in August. They still have a thorough knowledge of the flora around their territory, especially how to find edible plants in the bush.

On the whole, the Gwich'in prefer to eat food obtained by their own efforts, rather than the ready-made food that comes from outside their subsistence economy. They hunt, trap, fish and gather not only on special occasions but also in their everyday lives. These foods are still indispensable in their everyday diet. According to a study by Sumida and Anderson, 'all Fort Yukon households used some type of wild resources during the course of the survey period (1986-87)', and they go on to say that 'an estimated 91.5

percent of all households made direct attempts at harvesting' (Sumida and Davidson 1990: 43).

They also practice traditional crafts such as beadwork, and ways of making clothes using furs or skins of animals that they have hunted or trapped. Traditional clothes and the products of traditional crafts are used in everyday life, but are especially important at times of festivities and/or as part of public presentations made by representatives of their ethnic group (Inoue 1999: 37-43) and as special gifts (Duncan 1997: 15).

Legally the Gwich'in are in a position to continue their subsistence activities. Although some animal species are protected from sport and commercial hunting by Alaskan state regulations, indigenous Alaskans, including Gwich'in, are exempt from this regulation due to their Native rights. Even during the closed season, if Natives genuinely need the meat of protected animals for traditional rituals or feasts, they are legally allowed to catch such animals. For example, at the time from Christmas to New Year a series of feasts called 'potlatch' are held in each Alaskan Gwich'in settlement.<sup>7</sup> Although this is the closed season for moose hunting, Gwich'in people are allowed to catch moose to use its meat for potlatch. I observed that many Gwich'in males repeatedly went out to the bush and caught moose during a potlatch which was held in Fort Yukon. They hunted not only bull moose with large antlers but also cow moose, against which non-Native people face strong prohibitions. Also, Natives can use government food stamps, normally only to be exchanged for food, to purchase ammunition or shells for their rifles/shotguns, or fishnets for their subsistence activities.

## **The cultural meaning of hunting in modern life**

### ***'Real foods' and the Gwich'in custom of food sharing***

According to Gwich'in, meat or edible plants which they have obtained from their land through their activities of hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering should be considered 'real foods'. 'Real foods' contain substances which are good for their bodies and minds. One Gwich'in told me that there are 'no poisons in it [meat from caribou, moose or fish]' so, 'it makes our bodies strong'. By contrast, ready-made food, which is sold in stores, is 'substitute' food. Moreover, fancy foods, such as coffee or candy, are sometimes considered to be 'poison' because they contain substances which are 'bad' for people's bodies and minds. In fact, some Gwich'in consume such 'poisons' everyday, sometimes exceeding the average consumption of westerners when they stay in permanent settlements. According to one Gwich'in, when she stays in an urban area her body always gets into a bad condition because of bad foods. Once she comes back to her home settlement her body always recovers because she can eat caribou, moose and fish.

'Real foods' should not be exchanged for money, even inside Gwich'in communities. Even today the Gwich'in share the meat of animals and fish obtained through subsistence activities with relatives, neighbors and friends. Sometimes they send caribou, moose or fish meat from their rural settlements to their relatives or friends living in other settlements or urban areas at their request using the postal service or local private

plane companies. They always offer plates of this kind of food to visitors to their homes. Visitors to a person's home can eat any of these dishes freely even when their host is not present, especially once the meat is cooked. On the other hand, Gwich'in also purchase food or drink from stores. This kind of food is also often shared with relatives or neighbors and can be given without payment to relatives or close friends who ask for it. But, it is only ready-made food which Gwich'in commonly exchange and barter with each other.

I believe that the primary reason for this taboo is that selling wild meat is illegal for any person in Alaska. However, the reason given by Gwich'in themselves relates, not to the illegality of this behavior according to a western regulation, but to the fact that these meats should be shared with relatives, friends and neighbors without being exchanged for money because that is their traditional way (see also Caulfield 1983: 58-59; Nelson 1986: 111). Indeed, the Gwich'in maintain their custom of sharing food within their society even today. By asking, people can obtain food from others without payment. I observed that, even when able to reciprocate immediately, people generally avoid doing so because that could be interpreted to mean that they do not wish to maintain a social relationship with the giver. Generally, Gwich'in people never try to pay immediately for 'real foods' which are given through their sharing custom, because such behavior could be understood as a refusal to keep their relationship with the giver.<sup>8</sup> They also seem to consider that a person should not refuse another's offer because this damages social relationships in their community. At the same time, Gwich'in usually feel uncomfortable being in the position of a one-sided receiver.

Many Gwich'in feel that this custom of sharing is very hard for outsiders to understand. According to one Gwich'in, 'white people' tend to feel uncomfortable if a Gwich'in offers them something without payment being involved - they tend to try to reciprocate immediately, if only with a small amount of money, to feel free.<sup>9</sup> They also pointed out that it is often hard for people to believe that the Gwich'in still maintain their traditional reciprocity, even for members of other Native American groups.

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### ***The superiority of matters concerned with 'living in the bush'***

Besides food, Gwich'in tend to put a high value on other items, such as garments, which are regarded as being associated with their traditional lifestyle. For example, the ideal outfit in the winter season for the Gwich'in traveler is a suit consisting of a caribou-skin jacket and a pair of caribou legging boots, completed with a fur hat. Gwich'in insist that this traditional wear is the very best for activities in extremely cold weather because it always keeps their bodies warm and dry, despite its feather-light weight, and makes no noise to disturb game when hunting in the bush, although it is not often that Gwich'in



wear this kind of traditional suit. They are also proud of the traditional technique of using a particular combination of fur for their fur hats to keep their faces from freezing. Even the newest models of commercial outdoor clothing, made of the latest synthetic materials, are not regarded as a substitute for their traditional wear.

One of the best-known Athabaskan crafts is beadwork. Gwich'in beadwork is made primarily using animal skins obtained by hunting. The beadwork, and various beads used for it, were introduced from Europe via the fur trade. It represents an extension of the Native tradition of garment ornamentation such as quill work. The Gwich'in still make a variety of beadwork items such as pairs of dance moccasins, mittens, gloves, gun cases, and baby straps. The Gwich'in apply beadwork to daily necessities and use it in daily life, but beadwork also plays an important role as a special gift to relatives and friends, that is, in maintaining social relationships within their community. It also has cultural importance as a visible symbol of their ethnic group. The representatives of Gwich'in groups or settlements at formal events, both within and outside their communities, often wear caribou or moose skin jackets with beautiful beadwork on the shoulders as their 'formal wear' rather than western suits. Although originally introduced by Europeans, nowadays beadwork is regarded as a Native craft by Athabascans and non-Athabascans alike (Duncan 1997; Inoue 1999).

There are exceptions to the Gwich'in rejection of things western. Gwich'in hunters never compare firearms, steel knives, outboard motor boats and the like to the bows and arrows, bone knives, or birch-bark canoes which their ancestors used. Indeed, these industrially-produced tools have largely or completely replaced traditional ones. The difference between these tools and other western goods, such as food, is that the tools are used mainly for hunting, trapping or fishing, and allow these activities to continue. Gwich'in hunters never hesitate to use these Western devices, and are proud of their knowledge of and their ability to handle them. Experienced Gwich'in hunters tend to be careful in their selection of equipment for their activities and prefer military surplus equipment because 'it is durable, reliable and useful'. All of them are proud of their thorough knowledge of their equipment and their skill in choosing the best equipment. They also have almost perfect skills for maintaining and repairing it.

In fact, such knowledge and skills are indispensable for modern Gwich'in hunting activities. They consider their ability to handle these tools as a part of their survival skills and regard these tools themselves as integral to their traditional activities. They do not compare western tools negatively with their traditional ones, but proudly compare their ability to handle them with that of 'non-Gwich'in people'. One experienced Gwich'in hunter, who was formerly a survival instructor for the military, told me a 'poor guy's tale'. A non-Native male went out into the bush around Gwich'in territory in winter and suffered an accident. Although he had brand-new equipment with the latest technology designed to enable him to survive for several days, he did not even survive for a couple of nights. After telling this story, the hunter analyzed this man's behavior and told me what we should do in the same situation. He said that he and other Gwich'in hunters would be able to survive in similar situations because they know about the land and its climate, how they should act in the bush, and also how to handle the equipment needed to survive.

During his lecture he showed me his survival kit. It included many industrial products such as batteries, matches, tea, a mirror, plastic bags and rubber balloons. Although it seemed to be similar to those sold as camping equipment in stores or issued to military personnel, he told me that their kit was 'very traditional' for him because he and other Gwich'in could use it in their traditional way. It is his bush skill which allows him to handle the tools, even those introduced from western culture, and to survive in their land. He stated that many survival skills which are being taught to military personnel nowadays originate from Native American traditions, including those of Northern Athabascans such as the Gwich'in.

***The role of hunting traditions in relationships between the Gwich'in and the outside world***

As I have mentioned before, Gwich'in, like other Native people, are usually disadvantaged in their relations with 'white people' mainly because of discrimination. On average, they were forced to work according to Western employment customs without having any control over their situation. However, there are exceptions. In some jobs, such as acting as hunting guides, military survival instructors, and advisors to the State's Department of Fish and Game, Gwich'in individuals have an advantage over 'white people' and are able to have power over their own situation. In particular, their orders are respected by others. One experienced Gwich'in hunter, who had worked as hunting guide, told me that on the first day of a hunting tour he always sets a severe schedule for guests to check their bush skills and physical strength. He listens to guests only after they passed his test. If he judges that they do not have enough ability, he cancels the tour or reduces the tour schedule. It is always Native guides such as this who have the power and authority to conduct tours.

It is important to note that in such jobs Gwich'in are required to share their knowledge of their land and game, and to use the bush skills gained from their personal experience of traditional activities, that is, their way of living with their land. In other words, such knowledge and skills are advantageous and enable Gwich'in to get better jobs. The experience and bush skills gained from subsistence activities are considered by most Gwich'in as the key to changing their social relationships with western people and western society.

On the other hand, the traditional Gwich'in way of hunting forms what could be called an 'untouchable' domain from which people of other societies are excluded. As I have mentioned, the Gwich'in put a high value on 'real foods'. It is important to note that both 'real foods' are never obtained through commercial transactions, nor is it permitted by law for non-Natives to catch wildlife for commercial purposes. Thus, obtaining and sharing 'real foods' form a domain of Gwich'in life which non-Natives can never invade. This domain is connected with their tradition of hunting and other subsistence activities. They obtain 'real food' only through these activities, and share in the traditional way.

All in all, in modern Gwich'in daily life, hunting activities and bush skills are very important not only for local subsistence but also for social life, especially in the context of relationships with members of the wider society.

## **Analysis of cases**

### ***'Real foods' as indispensable to maintaining group identity***

In the preceding sections I outlined several aspects of the meaning of subsistence activities in modern Alaskan Gwich'in society. The Gwich'in put a high value on matters related to hunting and other subsistence activities, such as 'real foods' and caribou jackets. 'Real foods' are obtained through their traditional activities, and should not be sold but shared among Gwich'in people in their traditional way. One Gwich'in stated, 'Caribou is not just a food but what makes Natives connect together and makes us "who we are"'. Thus, 'real foods' are connected with the traditional Gwich'in way of social life. The Gwich'in reciprocal behavior of sharing 'real foods' is a key to maintaining social relationships within their community. They never refuse someone's request for food, nor reciprocate immediately for what they are offered, because these behaviors could potentially disrupt their relationships of mutual aid and interdependence. Gwich'in people never behave in a way that could break the chain of reciprocity because in doing so they would have to give up their social relationships. Thus, 'real foods' provide opportunities for maintaining social bonds between Gwich'in people.

By contrast, ready-made food is purchased and owned by each individual using money which also is earned and owned individually. This capitalist form of economy allows only limited opportunities for Gwich'in people to maintain their social relationships. Thus, Gwich'in must obtain 'real foods' and share them with others to survive socially in their community.

Furthermore, maintaining their tradition of sharing is one source of group identity for the Gwich'in. As I have mentioned, most Gwich'in think that it is difficult for non-Gwich'in people to understand and practice Gwich'in ways of mutual aid and interdependence. In other words, Gwich'in can be distinguished from 'white people' or 'highway Indians' by their practice of this custom. In addition, their subsistence activities and sharing of 'real foods' form a domain which the non-Native can never invade. Thus, it is reasonable to say that maintaining traditional subsistence activities and the custom of sharing is necessary for the group identity of Gwich'in in their modern lives. The Gwich'in put a high value on 'real foods' because these foods are indispensable for them to maintain their group identity.

### ***Suitability for bush life***

We have seen that the Gwich'in put a high value on their caribou skin jackets because they are made from material obtained by hunting. But there is a further important reason; this kind of traditional garment is suitable for activities in the bush. The fact that Gwich'in hunters accept western equipment suggests that they set a high value on things which are indispensable for their activities in the bush. In other words, the Gwich'in put a high value on things suitable for their bush activities regardless of origin. For Gwich'in it is the suitability for hunting or other bush activities that is the important point to consider when evaluating such objects.

As noted above, for Gwich'in hunters 'bush skills' encompass not only their

traditional skills but also the ability to handle western tools such as guns and riverboats. They never reject such western products but put as high a value on the ability to handle them as on the bush skills which are a part of their cultural tradition. Thus, 'bush skills' are not an aggregate of mechanical skills but a system of potential abilities which enable Gwich'in to live in the bush. Also, as we have seen, it is Gwich'in bush skills, maintained through the practice of their way of living, that play a key role in changing their social relationships with western people and western society.

### ***The 'reality' of living in daily life***

In considering 'real foods' we have to understand what is 'real' for Gwich'in people. I put this question to an experienced Gwich'in hunter. His answer was as follows; 'Real is what we can touch, feel, or recognize. Bush is real world. We can feel everything in the bush'. On a hunting trip a Gwich'in hunter needs to feel and recognize everything around him to catch animals and also to survive.

The Gwich'in put a high valuation on 'real foods' which they have obtained from the bush, as noted earlier. However, for Gwich'in people, hunting, trapping, fishing or gathering are not just activities for obtaining food and energy. Actually, some Gwich'in do not like to define these activities as 'subsistence' but as their 'way of living' as a 'self-reliant' or 'self-sufficient' community. This is because they feel that the prefix 'sub' of the word 'subsistence' has negative or limiting connotations and, more importantly, 'subsistence' primarily means 'obtaining energy', whereas hunting and other bush activities have social importance for the Gwich'in. These activities are one of the most important parts of the system of their way of life which consists of a chain of 'real' activities in daily life: they maintain their equipment, make trips to the bush, wait for a game animal which comes to them to be taken, talk to their game, bring it back to the community, share it, preserve and cook the meat, tan the skin, eat and use it for subsequent activities. During these activities they have many chances to help and share with each other, that is, to maintain their social relationships. Thus, hunting can never be separated from the Gwich'in social system. These activities should not be considered as merely work to earn money in a capitalistic way. Gwich'in activities of hunting, trapping, and fishing are never completed without sharing 'real foods' through which they can maintain social bonds within their community. So, it seems natural for Gwich'in people to consider that their subsistence activities cannot be replaced by any other occupation or by money.

One Gwich'in hunter in his fifties stated that they 'can live a whole life', they can be 'independent' when they live in the bush and in rural settlements beside the bush. His son agreed with this and added, 'We do everything to live'. Indeed, most rural Gwich'in do a wide variety of work every day. They engage in different kinds of subsistence activities to obtain not only food but also other necessities, such as firewood, in the appropriate season. They also butcher meat, preserve fish, cut wood and share the products of their labors with each other. They can make their own decisions about everything they need to do. By contrast, according to the father, people living in big cities can do only one thing as their occupation. They live only a small part of a whole life,

'like a small piece of pie'. They do not have any control over other parts of their life. So they can never feel the 'reality of their life'. The father added:

Way up the hill [in Fairbanks or other large cities] people do nothing but counting money. But here [in a rural community beside the bush], we never go poor. We don't need money but other things such as 'discipline', 'wisdom', or 'skill' to live in the bush. We don't need to buy chicken from stores because we can catch grouse. If you know how to catch animals or fish and how to cook them, you never go hungry.

Living 'way up the hill', that is, within a western monetary economic system, people must buy ready-made foods and other products, and have no idea how they were made. But living in the bush, Gwich'in people can obtain food and other necessities directly from the bush by doing subsistence activities; in this way they can feel the reality of their life. Usually, the Gwich'in distrust a person living without any contact with 'reality'. But they know that it is this kind of person who has the political and economic power to be able to control the Gwich'in situation. According to the Gwich'in impression of them, they never do any 'real' activities but just sit down in front of a desk and earn a vast sum of 'virtual' money with only one click of a computer key. The Gwich'in in his fifties, whom I mentioned above, criticized western people as 'persons who have a brain and arms but no heart'. In this case, 'arm' meant both physical power, like the military, and the political/economic power which allows white people to gain control through other means. He completed his comments with, 'See? This is white people's way. It is different from ours'.

### ***Maintaining hunting traditions as a source of group identity***

We need to remember the quote from a Gwich'in male in the Introduction. This explains that Gwich'in traditions include hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering, and especially, as the most important factor, the bush skills which enable them to pursue this lifestyle.

Now we have to reconsider who is 'Gwich'in'. The ANCSA (U.S. Congress Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs 1971: Section 3) defines a 'Native' as 'a person of one of fourth degree or more Alaskan Indian, Eskimo or Aleut blood, or combination thereof'. Legally that is true, and this legal definition affects many aspects of Alaskan Native economic and social life. But for Gwich'in people the blood quantum seems to be less important than living as a Gwich'in. Of course, they never regard people like me, those who are not related to any descent group in Gwich'in society, as 'Gwich'in'. One Gwich'in person said, 'Any person has to be born Gwich'in to be Gwich'in'. However, for anyone related to a Gwich'in person, that is, someone regarded as Gwich'in by other members of their society, what is most important is how they live; whether they hunt, fish and gather to obtain 'real foods', or at least connect with and contribute to the Gwich'in system of sharing 'real foods'. Any person behaving in this way, even those who do not satisfy the ANCSA requirement of blood quantum, would never face alienation from a Gwich'in rural community, at least at the level of daily life.

Even for those living in urban areas it is very important to keep connected to the chain of sharing 'real foods' to affirm their group identity.

So, it is reasonable to argue that in modern Gwich'in communities subsistence activities, such as hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering in the bush, and related matters have cultural importance as sources of group identity. By engaging in such activities, Gwich'in people can live in their own way and maintain their social bonds. Also, they can distinguish themselves from others by maintaining these activities and their custom of sharing 'real foods'.<sup>11</sup>

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### **Notes**

- 1) This is a revised version of a paper read at the 8th International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies, 27 October 1998.
- 2) Several alternative spellings exist, including Athabaskan, Athapascan and Athapaskan (Osgood 1975). I use the spelling Athabaskan because several tribal governments and councils of Alaskan Gwich'in have used it.
- 3) The spelling Kutchin was formerly used for this group. In Canada the word 'Loucheux' was also used for members of this group (Slobodin 1981). Today, the spelling Gwich'in appears more frequently, especially in their own publications, which I have followed.
- 4) I visited Alaskan Gwich'in settlements as follows: August 1994, December 1994 to January 1995, August to September 1995, December 1995 to January 1996, August 1996, December 1996 to January 1997, December 1997 to January 1998, June 1998, and August to September 1999. I stayed mainly in Fort Yukon, but also visited other settlements, including Arctic Village, Venetie and Circle.
- 5) We should notice that, in the Gwich'in context, 'bush' does not mean just 'clumps of shrubs', but an 'uncultivated district', and is roughly similar to 'wilderness', including woodlands of boreal forest and damp ground in their territory. It is the antonym of 'city' or 'permanent settlement' (see also Shimpo 1993: 215).
- 6) All of the Gwich'in utterances, statements and remarks quoted in this chapter were personally heard by the author while visiting Gwich'in communities. All of the cases referred to were also directly observed by the author. The author is responsible for the quoting and wording of all of these.
- 7) The Gwich'in have maintained traditional practices of feasting, for which they use the folk term

'potlatch' in English. However, we must note that this is a borrowed word and that there are other terms for folk feasts and/or rituals in the Gwich'in language.

- 8) I usually brought small souvenirs when I visited my Gwich'in friends. They always received my gifts and then immediately gave something back or did something for me, such as freely offering a dog sled ride. I believe that the reason for this exceptional behavior was because they knew that I would leave soon after and were afraid to miss the opportunity to reciprocate.
- 9) The terms 'white people' should be regarded as Gwich'in folk terms used in their English conversation. They refer to European American or Caucasian people, but sometimes include all non-Native Americans such as Asian Americans. They often have negative connotations.
- 10) In this context we can understand why Gwich'in people think that welfare benefits spoil them. I believe that it is primarily because persons on welfare can obtain money without doing any work, and as a result they are forced to be one-sided receivers. As noted, being a one-sided receiver without making any contribution to their society, means to 'be a loser' for Gwich'in people. The western system of welfare programs defines the social status of such people as 'low-income households' and, as a result, as one-sided receivers. This forces the receiver of the benefit to 'be a loser' and hurts their pride badly. Another reason for the Gwich'in criticism of welfare benefits is that the way of paying such benefits, and also salaries, is likely to undermine traditional reciprocal relationships within Gwich'in society. According to their custom of reciprocity, Gwich'in should share 'real foods' with each other. But salaries and welfare benefits are paid to each individual and such monies, and the products they can buy from stores, do not have to be shared even among the Gwich'in community. Thus, by receiving payment in this way, Gwich'in people are likely to fail to maintain their relationships. In their reciprocal tradition, what they should share without payment is not money but 'real foods'. So, being one-sided receivers could cause some Gwich'in to become 'losers'.
- 11) Due to space restrictions, I have not considered in this chapter the link between the cultural importance of subsistence activities in Gwich'in society and Gwich'in political action to preserve their environment so as to continue their customary way of life. For example, in 1988 the State of Alaska and several oil companies started lobbying to develop oil and gas reserves on the coastal plain within the boundaries of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Although some village corporations of other Alaska Natives supported this development, the Gwich'in made legal and political moves to stop the drilling. They feared that this development in the calving and post-calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou herd could damage or destroy the herd and change its migratory route through Gwich'in territory and, as a result, put an end to the Gwich'in cultural tradition of living with caribou. Although I believe it is important to explore such actions, this is too involved a subject to be treated here in detail. I hope to discuss this case separately elsewhere.

Also, I have not been able in this chapter to present substantial data regarding Gwich'in subsistence activities and diet. Actually, most Gwich'in quietly but strongly reject outsiders' attempts to research and collect such data. I believe that it is important to discuss this refusal to understand the cultural meanings of their activities and customs, and will do so at the first opportunity.

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