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## What Is A Subsistence Activity? : With a Special Focus on Beluga Whale Hunt by Inuit in Arctic Canada

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# What Is A Subsistence Activity? :

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Nobuhiro Kishigami

## 1. Introduction

The basis for human existence involves food acquisition and consumption. Thus, human food production has been one of the main topics in anthropological research. Food obtaining activities of hunter-gatherers such as Inuit tend to be called “subsistence activities”. However, most of anthropologists do not give a clear definition of a “subsistence” activity in hunter-gatherer studies. Ellen argues that the analysis of modes of subsistence has received insufficient theoretical attention and points out that the anthropologists “accept subsistence practices as basically unproblematic, requiring for their analysis no more than simple typologies and a bit of common sense” (Ellen 1994: 197). Also, several researchers tend to regard a food acquisition activity as a “total social phenomenon” because it is related to all the aspects of life in a small scale society such as a hunting-gathering society. However, if we take this position, we cannot understand what parts of a subsistence activity are or how it is constituted.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a subsistence activity model of modern northern hunter-gatherers on basis of Inuit beluga whale hunting in Nunavik, Canada.

## 2. What is a Subsistence Activity?

A subsistence activity has been defined by anthropologists in two ways. In a broad sense, it is any human activity to survive in a given environment<sup>1</sup>. In a narrow sense, it is focused on or/and based on a food obtaining activity for human beings to make their living. In this paper, I will take the latter position.

Several researchers employ a narrow definition of a subsistence activity. Laughlin argues that hunting is an integrating biobehavior system and states:

“It is the organizing activity which integrated the morphological, physiological, genetic, and intellectual aspects of the individual human organizations ---. Hunting is a way of life, not simply a “subsistence

technique” , ---.” (Laughlin 1968: 304).

He regards hunting as an integrating sequence behavior including: (1) programming the child, (2) scanning or the collection of information, (3) stalking and pursuit of game, (4) immobilization of game, including the killing or capture of game, and (5) retrieval of the game (Laughlin 1968: 305).

Norman Chance suggests that an arctic hunter's subsistence activity is made up of harvesting, processing and sharing of animals, fish and plants (Chance 1987: 85). He argues that the processing includes not only physical processing but also conducting rituals. Also, several researchers suggest that the subsistence activity should include consumption and disposal, too (Langdon 1984:3; Honda 2005: 82). Thus, a subsistence activity process corresponds to the economic process of production, distribution, consumption and disposal.

George Wenzel argues that what the term subsistence actually describes is “the cultural values that socially integrate the economic relations of hunting peoples into their daily lives” (Wenzel 1992: 57). He stresses that Inuit's subsistence activity is socially as well as ideologically defined and organized by them (Wenzel 1991: 57-61; Wenzel, Hovelsrud-Broda and Kishigami 2000: 2).

Henry Stewart (Shunwa Honda) defines “a subsistence activity as harvesting, processing and consumption activities of natural resources and social relationships associated with the activities” (Stewart 1996: 126). He argues that Inuit subsistence activity is not such a simple activity of killing and eating games but an activity related to their world view. Recently, he redefines the subsistence activity to include 5 elements: (1)obtaining, (2)processing, (3) consumption, (4) disposal, and (5) social relationships<sup>2</sup> (Honda 2005: 82). The problem with this definition is that it does not include sharing/distribution as an element of it.

These definitions on a subsistence activity show that it is a system and process of several activities from harvesting to disposal with various aspects and elements. In this paper, I would like to elaborate the existing concepts of the subsistence activity and propose a synthesized model of northern hunter-gatherer's one.

### **3. Beluga Whale Hunting Complex as a Subsistence Activity of the Inuit of Canada**

#### **3.1 Beluga Whale Hunting Complex as an Activity System**

Beluga whales (*Delphinapterus leucas*) are present off Cape Smith Island near Akulivik in Nunavik from June to early November. Around October or November, several groups of the whales pass around Cape Smith Island toward Hudson Strait where they spend winter. Before 2001, hunters from Akulivik caught beluga whales near the village with small boats (5 – 7.5 m) with outboard engines in summer and fall as well as in Hudson Strait with a large community boat (10 – 15 m) in October or November.

In this paper, I use an example from a beluga whale hunt, including sharing and consumption data, that took place near Akulivik in October, 1999. I tentatively call a beluga whale hunt which includes harvesting, processing, sharing, consumption, and disposal “a beluga whale hunting complex”.

### 3.2 Beluga Whale Hunting Complex and Food Resources

Many Inuit have jobs in arctic communities to earn money. Persons without jobs, sick persons, and retired persons can obtain financial assistance from federal or provincial government agencies. Several researchers argue that hunting and fishing is not necessarily essential for their survival in the contemporary community because the Inuit can buy imported food from local stores in the communities with cash (e.g. Stern 2000; Stewart 1996). However, these Inuit eagerly continue hunting and fishing to obtain country food for nutritional and especially social and cultural reasons.

Recent Studies show a general trend of young Inuit becoming increasingly dependent upon store-bought food, and thus decreasingly reliant on food obtained through hunting and fishing (e.g. Kuhnlein et. al 2000). However, many Inuit still prefer local food to the southern food in terms of taste and cultural satisfaction. Arctic char, caribou meat, seal meat, *maktaq* (skin part with blubber) from beluga whales are called “real food” (*niqituinaaq*) and preferred by the Inuit (e.g. Stewart 1993, Searles 2002; Kishigami 2005). As Nunavik Inuit seldom sell and buy real food such as *maktaq* among them except through the Hunter Support Program (Kishigami 2000; Gombay 2010), they can get local food only by means of hunting and fishing as well as food/meal sharing. Sharing and eating the country food with family and friends enhances communal relations and reinforces Inuit identity (e.g. Searles 2002). Furthermore, country food is nutritious and a highly valued cultural product (Freeman 2005).

Hunting and fishing is still an important means by which Inuit obtain real food, express personal identity and reproduce social relationships.

### 3.3 Beluga Whale Hunting Complex and Material/ Technology Culture

The Inuit need specific tools, technology, and skills to conduct beluga whale hunting. For example, they use a boat, outboard engine, binoculars, rifle, harpoon, ropes, float, knife, bullets, gas, oil, etc. Also, they need carry provisions and several tools for tea making, etc. Without these material and tools, they cannot carry out the hunting. Furthermore, they need to know how to use these tools. In this way, the hunting has a material/technology aspect<sup>3</sup>.

### 3.4 Beluga Whale Hunting Complex and Traditional Environmental Knowledge

Inuit hunters need to know where and when they should hunt beluga whales, how to

reach these hunting places and the habits of the whales, in order to conduct their hunting.

For example, Akulivik hunters have acquired knowledge of beluga behavior and migration routes, and of favorable environmental conditions through their hunting experiences with elder hunters. Referred to as “Traditional Ecological Knowledge” or “Traditional Environmental Knowledge”, this information is communicated between hunters and transmitted to novice hunters by the more experienced and elder ones.

Thus, beluga hunting, like other kinds of hunting activities has both knowledge acquisition and transfer aspects.

### 3.5 Beluga Whale Hunting Complex and Social Relationships

Harvesting, sharing and consumption activities are organized and carried out in the context of particular Inuit social relationships (Wenzel 1991; Kishigami 2000, 2004, 2005).

Concerning the organization of beluga whale hunting groups in Akulivik, the groups tended to be made up of pairs of related men – typically father and son, brothers, cousins, or uncle-nephew. In other words, the beluga whale hunting tended to be organized and carried out by several members from the same extended family.

Generally, the *maktaq* and meat of a beluga whale are always shared among hunters and other villagers. While the food is shared on the basis of particular social relationships, those relationships are activated, reconfirmed and reproduced by the food-sharing practices. These relationships include kinship and functional bonds between hunters, between hunters and their distant kindred, between hunters and their neighbors, between hunters and/or friends. Finally pairs may be linked via fictive bonds as with their namesake persons (*saumiit*), between hunters and symbolic midwife persons (*sanajiiit*). Through second and third phases in the distribution of the meat and *maktaq*, kinship and neighbor relationships are further activated and reproduced (Kishigami 2000, 2004).

Also, Inuit food sharing practices reproduce a self-image of Inuit important to individual and community identity. In several communities in Nunavik, food sharing at the entire village level is organized and carried out by the Hunter Support Program begun under the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA), institutionally confirming and strengthening a sense of community or village and of being Inuit (Kishigami 2000). Thus, in the rapidly changing political and economic circumstances of contemporary Inuit life, hunting and food sharing practices are strongly related to the reproduction of Inuit social relationships and a sense of community (e.g. Ellanna and Sherrod 1984; Wenzel 1991; Nuttall 1991; Kishigami 2000, 2004). In this way, the hunting and sharing has a social aspect.

### 3.6 Beluga Whale Hunting Complex and World View

It is well known that Inuit maintain very special symbolic relationships with animals which they hunt and eat to live. Fienup-Riordan (1983:345-346), Nuttall (1991:219), Stairs and Wenzel (1992:5) and Bodenhorn (2000: 44-47) describe ideological aspects of hunting and food sharing in terms of an ideological relationship between humans and animals in Inuit, Inupiat and Yupiit societies. The critical elements in Inuit hunting are proper attitude and intent toward animals. The intent element is related to two aspects. First, the hunter must intend to utilize the remains of the animal for food. Second, food from harvested animals should not be for only the use of the individual hunter (Stairs and Wenzel 1992:5). Because animals give themselves up to hunters, it is incumbent on the hunters to give them in turn to other people (Fienup-Riordan 1983:346; Nuttall 1991:219; Bodenhorn 1990, 2000: 44-47; Tyrell 2007).

The hunting, sharing and consuming of beluga whales are closely related to the Inuit world views on the symbolic relationship between Inuit and animals. This is borne out in the several taboos and rituals, as well as magic practices, relating to the beluga whale hunting (Tyrell 2007) <sup>4</sup>.

A subsistence activity reflects cultural value of the Inuit (Chance 1987: 85; Fienup-Riordan 1983; Wenzel 1991: 57). Fienup-Riordan argues that subsistence activity is not a means but a goal for the Yupik people to achieve. She states that “subsistence production has been seen to be closely tied to a larger cultural framework of values and self-images that perpetuate it” (Fienup-Riordan 1983: 352). Thus, the hunting and sharing has an ideological aspect.

### **3.7 Beluga Whale Hunting Complex and Identity**

Although the beluga whale hunting is a very season-specific activity to Akulivik Inuit, it is very important to the Inuit hunters.

Firstly, the Inuit engagement in sea mammal hunting calls forth and maintains the culturally valued identity of hunter. Inuit hunters get great social satisfaction from the acts of hunting and sharing. Secondly, catching a large animal such as a beluga whale proves hunter's ability and gives social standing.

Thus, the beluga whale hunting is closely associated with the hunter's identity and self-satisfaction.

### **3.8 Inuit Subsistence Activity and, Inuit Society, State and International Society**

Since 2001, a new co-management regime to sustain beluga whale resources has been implemented in the Nunavik region. Thus, while many Nunavik communities may catch up to 15 belugas per year, whale hunting is restricted to Hudson Strait and not allowed in eastern

Hudson Bay or Ungava Bay. The contemporary beluga hunt is constrained by federal and international rules (external forces outside the Inuit society).

Also, Inuit subsistence activity requires inputs of money. Through its reliance on modern hunting tools, fuels and other commodities, Inuit subsistence is linked to the national and world market system and political systems.

The examples show that the Inuit subsistence activity is carried out within legal and economic contexts of the state and international society.

### 3.9 Characteristics of Inuit Subsistence Activity

Because Inuit subsistence is a complex of activities, it includes more than simple food-getting. As this beluga hunting case shows, the subsistence is still socially, economically and culturally meaningful and important to the Inuit daily life.

Furthermore, the subsistence activity has several social and political effects on the community and national levels. For example, community-wide food sharing or distribution of beluga's *maktaq* and meat contributes to the socio-cultural integration of a local community (e.g. Fienup-Riordan 1983; Dahl 1989, 2000; Kishigami 2000; Nuttall 1992; Wenzel 1991). Also, the Inuit subsistence activity is used by the Inuit as a political symbol or ethnic marker to demonstrate their distinctiveness or indigenouness within the nation state (Stewart 1996; Kishiami 2004b).

Thus, the Inuit subsistence activity is beyond a food-getting activity. I argue that the Inuit subsistence activity is not only a food-getting activity but also a complex behavior system in the Inuit in the current situations. Furthermore, I insist that the Inuit can use it as a political resource to distinguish them from others in Canada.

## 4 The Arctic Subsistence Activity Model

I construct an arctic subsistence activity model based on my research of the beluga whale hunting in Akulivik, Canada, in addition to the existing studies which I reviewed in this paper.

In the Inuit beluga whale hunting, there is a series of activities such as harvesting, processing, sharing/distribution, consumption and disposal of the whale, in addition to various types of ritual or taboos corresponding to these activities. These activities are strongly associated with behavioral rules, social relationships, technology and tools/equipment, world views, identity/emotion and environmental knowledge and so on. In other words, the activities have at least six aspects. I as well as Wenzel argue that ultimately, subsistence is a socio-cultural system constituted through the normative exercise of beliefs, behaviors and information that pertain to the harvesting, processing, sharing, consumption and disposal of real foods in the Inuit contexts.

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The components of this system are the following.

Activity System (composed of five types of activities)

Harvesting: obtaining food resources

Processing: cutting, storing, cooking of the food resources

Sharing/Distribution: sharing or distributing the whole or parts of the processed food resources

Consumption: use/eat the resources as food or raw material for other products

Disposal: giving the residue up<sup>5</sup>

Aspects of each activity (composed of six aspects):

- (1) Behavioral Rules: reference rules for each activity
- (2) Social Relationships: human relationships which are used to organize each activity
- (3) Technology/Material: tools and technology, and skills used in each activity
- (4) World View: views on relationships between animals and humans, and cultural values in each activity or the whole activity system
- (5) Identity/Emotion: identity and emotion produced and reproduced through each activity
- (6) Environmental Knowledge: indigenous knowledge about animals and plants, weather, land, etc.

Each activity of the system has (1) behavioral, (2) social, (3) material/technological, (4) ideological, (5) identity/emotional and (6) knowledge aspects. I illustrate the model as a diagram 1. I define this subsistence system as “the arctic type of subsistence activity model”.

Activity System	(1)harvesting ~ (2)processing ~ (3)sharing/distribution ~ (4)consumption ~ (5)disposal (* disposal can occur after or during any one of the activities.)
Aspects of each activity	Each activity has at least 6 aspects such as (1) behavioral rules, (2) social relationships, (3) technology/material, (4) world views, (5) identity/emotion, (6) environmental knowledge, etc.

Diagram 1. The Arctic Type of Subsistence Activity Model



This model of a subsistence activity may be useful in conducting research on hunting and gathering activities in a particular socio-historical context and in comparative studies of hunting and gathering activities in human societies. I argue that any subsistence activity is a total social phenomenon which can be described and analyzed on the basis of this model.

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<sup>1</sup> Hitoshi Watanabe, an ecological anthropologist, regards life as a system of various interrelated activities which allow human beings to adapt to an external environment. He defines an aim of ecological anthropology to explore relationships between life and environment and proposes a cubic model of life (Watanabe 1997: 6-7). In his terms, life is a survival system of human beings, which he calls a subsistence activity system. The life is made up of several subsistence activities such as (1)food-getting activity, (2)sheltering activity, (3)body caring activity, (4)defense activity, (5)territorial activity, (6)reproductive activity, (7)play activity, (8)investigative activity, (9)sleep and rest, (10)ritual activity, and (11)aesthetic activity. Each activity has (1) motor, (2) implemental, (3) communication and (4) social aspects. Furthermore, this life (activity system) has a temporal structure, which can be distinguished into three cycles such as a daily, annual and life ones (Watanabe 1977: 11-19). With this life (subsistence) model, he explores how the Ainu people adapted to their subjective (culturally defined) environment through various activities (Watanabe 1973). According to Watanabe (1997: 25-26), human beings' subjective environment is composed of material, supernatural and aesthetic aspects. They carry out technological, ritual or aesthetic activities to adapt respective aspects of the environment.

<sup>2</sup> The element (5) "social relationships" includes not only ones between human beings but also symbolic ones between human beings and animals.

<sup>3</sup> In the contemporary hunting, the Inuit need cash to buy the tools and material necessary for the hunting (ex. Müller-Wille 1978; Lonner 1980; Chance 1985: 85; Freeman 1993: 246-247; Langdon 1984: 5; Wenzel 1991). The Inuit are linked to the market economy through purchasing the tools with cash.

<sup>4</sup> This is eminent in the Inupiaq and Yupik bowhead whale hunts.

<sup>5</sup> Concerning disposal of animal carcasses, see Wenzel (2004: 246-247).

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