A Corporate Caribou Hunt

Documenting the Archaeology of Past Lifeways

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In seeking to understand the archaeological record, one of the most important conditioners of how well we infer a past and how accurate our inferences are is our naivete, or the scale of prior knowledge we bring to the task. Late in the 1960s, while I was working with archaeological materials remaining from the ancient past, in particular the era of "Neanderthal man," it became quite clear that my knowledge of two very important areas was inadequate to enable me to phrase reasonable questions—in other words, to place in context the data that was available from the remote era between 45,000 and 120,000 years ago.

Faunal, pollen, and geological studies indicated that the Neanderthals had been living in Arctic-like environments in what is today the warm temperate setting of southwestern France. I knew little about these environments, and this limited the direction of my thoughts regarding what problems people had to solve in order to successfully inhabit this type of setting. Similarly, at the time of my initial research it was thought that the Neanderthals were regular hunters of large migratory game—in some eras, the European reindeer. I knew very little about these animals and their behavior in near-Arctic settings.

I chose to try to correct my acknowledged ignorance by studying one of the few remaining peoples who both lived in an Arctic setting and depended heavily on terrestrial migratory mammals, or big game. My goal in going to live with the Nunamiut in Alaska was thus twofold: (1) to learn what problems of both the environment and the orientation in subsistence had to be solved to render life secure, and (2) to document in as much detail as possible the archaeological record generated by an ethnographically known system of big-game hunters.

I did not expect that the Nunamiut would serve as a model for the Neanderthals, nor did I expect that the solutions worked out by them for success in hunting and survival in
the Arctic would be the same as those worked out during the Paleolithic. I did hope, however, that understanding the problems that had to be solved, given the technological options available to the Nunamiat and the culturally transmitted knowledge to which they appealed in the execution of their adaptation, would permit me to postulate other solutions made by groups with a different technology and perhaps different knowledge and planning bases for behavior.

Nor did I study the Nunamiat simply to project them into the past; rather, I studied them to uncover certain general problem presentation by the environment and its subsistence potential that would have to be solved in some way to ensure successful adaptation. Simultaneously, I wanted to thoroughly document, both ethnographically and archaeologically, the Nunamiat system itself, since similarities to and differences from other systems, whether known ethnographically or archaeologically, constitute some of our best clues as to the living context of the variety apparent among cultures.

The research conducted by myself and my students took place among the last regular hunters of large game, the Nunamiat Eskimo of north-central Alaska, between 1969 and 1974 (Figs. 1, 2). The main goal was to link the dynamics of behavior with the static remains of this behavior as seen by the archaeologist. An additional goal was to use the memories and folk stories of the Nunamiat to aid in identification of archaeological materials remaining from the era prior to the use of guns to hunt caribou. After much study, our efforts were focused on Tulugak Lake (Fig. 3), which is the subject of a rich folklore referring to events in the lives of the ancestors of the contemporary Nunamiat. It is also an area covered with archaeological remains.

For the work described here, two old Eskimo men, Elijah Kalknya and Simon Paneak, were important sources of information. Both were born around the turn of the century, and their fathers had lived and hunted at Tulugak Lake during the last half of the 19th century. The story to be related here refers to a cooperative hunt in which the fathers of both of my informants had participated in thefall of 1892. When my informants were young men, they heard the story from their fathers many times. Thus, it is part of the “memory culture” of the Tulugak band of the Nunamiat Eskimo. Both Elijah and Simon had participated in similar hunts in other locations as recently as 1946; however, although neither was old enough to have taken part in the last communal hunt at Tulugak, many of the archaeological features could be identified confidently with the 1892 event and to the latter half of the 19th century in general.

Many of the stories told by the elders of this particular Nunamiat band have reference to the communal hunting of caribou, which often occurred in the fall in and around this lake. Success in this communal venture was essential to the lives of these people. The meat and other products from animals taken in these events were processed and stored, and were used to feed the entire group during the period from October to May of the following year. What follows is a discussion of some of the things we learned about the communal hunting of caribou during the late 19th century. We successfully identified many of the archaeological features remaining from these events. Obtaining this type of knowledge is crucial to the growth of archaeology, and, as the generations pass, important oral histories also pass, rendering this type of learning necessary for all of us who have such opportunities to learn.

The ideal situation, like that which occurred in September 1892 and is described here, was for about 3½ families to be camped at Tulugak Lake some weeks prior to the anticipated fall migration of the caribou (Figs. 3, 4). These people moved here because they had confidence in the judgments of the umiak or hunt leader and were therefore willing to invest their energy and time in an uncertain but potentially profitable venture. They had to arrive early in order to construct or repair the facilities needed to drive the caribou into the lake. A good hunt always included more than one plan; in the event one strategy failed, the group was prepared to initiate an alternative strategy. Let’s explore what this means in terms of labor for the families camped at Tulugak Lake.

At Tulugak, the major stand of willows is north of the lake, so the caribou migrating south along the east side of the river cannot see the

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Figure 2. Map of Alaska and location of the Nunamiat Eskimo. Caribou trails are shown with reference to the spring migration, when the herds move north to their summer grazing and calving areas. The same trails are used by caribou moving south in the fall when their summer range is covered with snow.

Figure 3. Archaeological features mapped and studied during ethnoarchaeological research among the Nunamiat. Features germane to the 1892 event are Soldier Rocks 2 and 3, Hunting Bluffs, and Caribou Trails. One can appreciate from this map how many sites and features are concentrated at Tulugak Lake.
Caribou approaching from the north on the west side cannot see very far ahead; from a distance this area looks like a dense and continuous stand of willows (although it is in fact a large number of willow patches). The spotters are well aware that the caribou are not concentrated in one place between the lake and the willows, but cross the river to the higher and less-vegetated east side some miles north of the mouth of the river. They also know the places where the caribou are most likely to cross the river.

While one hunter has gone to the camp at Tulugak to inform the working group that caribou have been spotted, the remaining spotters observe the southward movement of the herds along the west side of the valley with great interest. As soon as the runner arrives at the camp, word spreads rapidly. The people are anxious: the caribou have been sighted on the west side of the river! At this point the umiak may quickly proceed with the river or turn to the younger men, who position themselves along the edge of the hills to the east and north of the willow stand at Tulugak. If the caribou do in fact cross to the east side of the river above the lake, these young men must make the caribou “nervous” enough to turn west on approaching the willows, and then move through the chutes between the willow stands just north and west of Tulugak Lake rather than along the edge of the hills to the east of the lake. The men know what they are supposed to do, and their task is very important, as we shall see.

The umiak then runs northward, accompanied by the runner, who knows where the other spotters are located. The hunt leader brings along his small “shaman’s drum” (usually only about 15 inches in diameter). The Eskimo have a saying that “all men are shamans; some are just more powerful than others.” The umiak knows in detail the topography, landforms, and crossing places between the lake and the place where the herds were first spotted (Fig. 6). Part of the reason the umiak’s judgment is expected to be correct is because he is also considered a “better shaman” than most. He has power to influence the caribou. This power is demonstrated when he sings songs that have reference to conditions and experiences known only to him. His singing is accompanied by the slow beating of his small drum. Depending on the particulars of the shaman’s history of obtaining power, he may hold various amulets in his hand or strung through his fingers as he holds the uniquely carved handles of his small drum, or he may wear them under his clothes so their power is not “blown away to others.”

The umiak tries to position himself on a high kame (Fig. 7), in clear view of the caribou but a relatively long distance away. Shamans have a number of different songs; some to “contact” the moving caribou, some to “attract” them, and some to “inform” them of their situation (e.g., they are moving toward willows, or a good shallow crossing is located nearby). In this case the umiak wishes that the caribou would “respond” and begin moving toward the shallow river crossing, which would bring them nearer to them in the valley—exactly where the Eskimo need the caribou for their cooperative labor to pay off.

At first clear indication that the herds had “listened to the shaman” and crossed the river one of the younger spotters was dispatched back to the camp at Tulugak Lake with the news that the umiak indeed was powerful and that the caribou were moving in the desired direction. When the caribou were in the river, the shaman sang his last song, which thanked the caribou for giving themselves up to the people’s needs. He then ran back to Tulugak to be sure the participants were all in place and everything was ready. A number of sleds had to be performed in different places if the driving of caribou into Tulugak Lake was to be successful. We have already seen that several young men were positioned along the talus area north of the willows to influence the caribou to move around the willows and through the “chute.” In addition, a number of others were hidden on the flats between the lake and the river to frighten the caribou into the lake at just the right moment. A group of hunters (generally younger men noted for their kayaking skills) were concealed in kayaks along the eastern side of the lake, ready to take to the water when the main body of the herd had entered the lake (Figs. 3, 4). A number of persons, generally women and children, were hidden from view but were
ready to run along the margins of the lake as needed to scare the swimming caribou and prevent them from exiting the lake. Finally, another person, the “dog man,” took all the dogs from the Eskimo camp at Tulugak to an agreed-upon spot south of the lake and as far from a caribou migration route as possible, where the dogs would be muzzled (skin caps were tied in their mouths) and staked out at sufficient distances so they could not interact (Fig. 8). Dogs in the camp or near the lake could frighten the caribou in unexpected ways.

Before this narrative can be continued, we must understand a major pattern of caribou behavior that the Eskimo take very seriously. During migration, caribou move in multiple herds, and those following the lead herd follow theisor of the lead animals. Thus, the initial herd of migrating caribou is never hunted; it is allowed to pass the hunt location completely unmolested (Fig. 9). If the lead herd is scattered by foolish men or uncontrolled dogs, there is no way to predict the movements of the following herds. In this case the cooperative hunt is a failure, since the lead herd is never hunted.

In the Eskimo experience this pattern is very reliable; hence disruption of the pattern (which can occur) is very harmful to the reputation of a shaman since the failure of subsequent herds to follow a lead herd is viewed as a response by the caribou to the power of the shaman. The caribou are thought to be voluntarily rejecting the shaman’s power by withdrawing their cooperation with the people. Not only is the reputation of the umiaks damaged, the place where the umiak failed is considered “negatively charged” and not a safe place to organize hunts for some years, until the negative power sensed by the caribou has faded away. It is these types of events that turn a “good” shaman into a “bad” shaman or a person who has negative powers; “they could have good or bad power—you can’t tell until you see what happens.”

Let’s return to the hunt. The caribou have crossed the river to the east side, as desired. They are moving south toward the willows just north of Tulugak Lake; as previously mentioned, they can move around the willows either close to the mountains on the east end (trails shown south of willows, Fig. 3) or around the west end of the willow stand, which is exactly where the Eskimo would use the subsequent herds to be. The young men stationed along the talus slopes of the mountains north of the willows hope to encourage the herd to pass through the western chute just north of Tulugak Lake.

When the herd is within one-half mile of the willows, the drivers along the talus slopes begin moving in a slow pattern: they move their upper torsos in a circular, up-and-down motion, and they dip their heads as they lower their bodies. This motion is described as that of a female caribou calling its calf. These “rhythmic drivers” avoid all quick motion, and ideally their movements would be coordinated so the northernmost driver would move in the prescribed manner and then come to a stationary position, at which time the driver next to him (separated by about 80 yards) would begin his movement, and when he finished the next driver would begin. This slow movement on the landscape is apt to make the caribou nervous, and the caribou will move away from it. If the caribou go around the willows to the west no further contact would be made with the lead herd. Since subsequent herds generally follow the lead herd, the Eskimo do not expect that the herds then intend to hunt would pass around the willows at the desired place.

While the “rhythmic drivers” are making their slow movements, other Eskimos would be concealed in the willows, watching the progress of the herd. Regardless of whether the lead herd moved east or west of the willows, no further attempts would be made to influence their behavior. The herd would be allowed to pass uncontacted. In the event described here, the “rhythmic drivers” failed to influence the herd, and it passed east of the willows along the talus slopes.

The assembled Eskimos remained quiet and hidden until the last animals had passed and were on the open areas to the south of the lake. Then there was intense activity since the umiak had organized the labor force and prepared the iguak (the “soldier rocks” shown in Figs. 3 and 10), which would be used to drive later herds into the lake. In addition, because the labor needed to drive the caribou into the lake from the edge of the talus on the east was considerably greater than that needed if they had entered the western chute, many more drivers, these known as “fratric,” were required in different places. Days in advance of the spotting of the herds, a plan would have been devised and everyone would have practiced their parts in the activities to ensure success if the caribou took the eastern route.

This portion of the hunt is a time of uncertainty for the umiak since the appearance of the subsequent herds is the single assumption about caribou behavior that must be met if he is to remain an umiak. Herein we meet another pattern of caribou behavior: herds tend to follow one another with intervals of about 20 to 40 minutes between the passing of the last animals of one herd and the arrival of the lead animals of the next herd. Not surprisingly, the umiak behaves as a shaman during this crucial time. He goes to a special place just to the north of the willows, where boulders occur naturally. He watches for the anticipated herd and sings for the caribou with his most powerful songs, while beating his small drum in a crisp, continuous, slow, and unwavering rhythm. This particular place would have been prepared beforehand by the umiak; he would place amulets among the rocks and sing powerful songs each day for as many as 10 days before the spotting of the lead herd. This place is likely to have been used many times before by shamans about whom he learned when he was accumulating his knowledge from powerful men of older generations.

During the actual hunt, as long as the drum can be heard everyone knows they can still move about and
get ready for the arrival of the second herd. When the umiak catches the first sight of the second herd approaching it abruptly stops drumming and moves quickly down from the kame and into the willows, where he takes his place as a "frantic driver" along the south side of the willows.

At this point everything seems to be going according to plan. The private tension of all participants was described as being almost unbearable—tremendous inner excitement, yet not being able to move or make a sound. "Everyone is a little worried over the young ones, will they be good Eskimos and keep their feeling to themselves?" (Fig. 11). The children who could run well (more than 12 years old) were participants, the "little ones were in mother's parks," the ones in between were under the care of elderly women who remained in the tents during the crucial period.

The kayak hunters had moved from their hidden locations after the first herd had passed and were already out on the lake, spaced in an arc just south of the lake's midpoint. A second group of drivers was in position along the west side of the lake, hidden from view. Their job was to keep the caribou from getting out of the lake on that side. Other members of the group lined the slopes of Long Rope Mountain (the northernmost hill on Fig. 3). A very athletic group of "frantic drivers" positioned themselves across the trail of the lead herd where it had turned south along the upper talus slopes of the mountains. Still another group of "frantic drivers" lined up along the south edge of the willows. Finally, a very important group waited between the willows and a line of inuksuk placed south of the willows to direct the caribou into the lake (Soldier Rocks in Spring Caribou Drive 3).

If the drivers can successfully divert the subsequent herd from the lead herd's trail (the one in front of the hunting blinds, Fig. 3) along the talus slopes, the only path remaining where the caribou can see ahead of themselves will take them into the lake. The gap between the second stand of willows and the mountains is quite wide; hence, diverting the herd as they approach the turn in the trail established by the first herd is critical. (Keep in mind that the first herd did not turn aside and take one of the narrow chutes between the willow stands, which forced the umiak to resort to a backup strategy.) To reduce the uncertainty, the drivers must frighten the herd when it is still between the willows and the mountain (near Caribou Drive 4 on Fig. 3). "If they are running they are less likely to change their direction, they will keep on going where they can see ahead of themselves." You don't want them running too fast too early; however, if they panic, they could "go anywhere."

Once the drivers along the slopes of the mountain get the herd moving at a slow trot, it is up to the drivers across the open flats (between the talus slopes and the stream, along the line labeled A on Fig. 13) to panic the herd so they run toward the willows. Then the drivers in the willows move around and frictionally wave skins, directing the herd back to the south between the inuksuk ("all dressed up to look like people", Fig. 10) and right into the lake. As soon as a good number are in the lake (herds range from 300 to 1200 animals), the people stationed on the west side of the lake get in position to discourage the animals from coming ashore while the kayaks move north from the center of the lake, getting the animals to mill around in deep water. The drivers that were positioned in the willows run down to the outlet of the lake.
because the shallow water in that area could enable the animals to get out "easy" or overturn the kayaks. All of the people now gathered along the north shore of the lake wave animal skins frantically to keep the carcasses in the deep water.

The killing begins. Now almost everyone is around the lake shore, running back and forth to keep the animals confused and milling around in deep water. Animals approaching the shore might be shot by experienced bowmen, but most are frightened back toward the center of the lake. Everything is now in the hands of the kayak hunters. Initially there is much yelling at the hunters and joyful laughter and shrieks when the hunters' spears first find their mark.

The young boys are particularly active, throwing rocks to keep the carcasses in the lake, but all harbor the secret hope that they could kill one from the shore with a well-thrown rock. Shortly after the herd enters the lake the umialik and other elders will pass the word for silence, some of the drivers have been sent north to watch for the arrival of other herds following the spur of the lead herd, and word has arrived that another herd is approaching.

Many of the men who served as drivers may then leave the lake shore armed with their powerful single- or backpack bows, going out to hunt with a small party to keep the animals around in the deep water. Animals approaching the shore might be shot by experienced bowmen, but most are frightened back toward the center of the lake. Everything is now in the hands of the kayak hunters. Initially there is much yelling at the hunters and joyful laughter and shrieks when the hunters' spears first find their mark.

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