

REVIEW

ALLIANCE AND CONFLICT: THE WORLD SYSTEM OF THE INUPIAQ ESKIMOS

By Ernest S. Burch, Jr., 2005, University of Calgary Press

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Reading Ernest “Tiger” Burch, Jr.’s new book has been a pleasure. This work enfolds you in a vivid description of lives and regions now changed. Burch also provides a conceptual framework that unites individuals, extended families, regions and even “nations.” Anyone even modestly acquainted with the literature of the region cannot help being impressed with the high level of scholarship that Burch has applied to every scrap of the ethnohistorical literature. In addition, informing the work under review here, and acknowledged by Burch himself, is the collegial support provided by individuals such as Charles Lucier.

The time horizon for this book is 1800–48, a period “chosen because it is the earliest for which both the documentary evidence produced by Westerners and the oral accounts of Inupiaq historians can be reasonably applied” (Burch 2005:10).

The second date (1848) was selected because “it was then the most significant perturbations in the system for more than 1,000 years began to take place” (Burch 2005:226). The area under consideration for this account is putatively “northwest Alaska,” which Burch notes “nearly coincides with what is now known as the NANA Region” (Burch 2005:9). However, in line with the subtitle of the book, *The World System of the Inupiaq Eskimos*, the book actually provides a tremendous amount of information on areas we now refer to as the North Slope Borough, the Seward Peninsula (especially Wales/Kinikmiut), many of the “nations” in Norton Sound, St. Lawrence Island, the Diomedes, and the Chukotka Peninsula.

To help understand Inupiat territorial organization, Burch makes a distinction between an “estate” and “range,” where “an estate is the geographic area claimed by a set of individuals to be their property, whereas a range is the country over which those individuals ordinarily hunt and forage to sustain life. Together the two constitute a domain” (Burch 2005:26). This conceptual distinction between “estate” and “range” is a very useful heuristic device that allows us to understand how a geographically defined resource area could be exploited by multiple “political” entities. In essence, seasonal de facto usufruct rights allowed coastal and interior groups to use areas beyond their estates with minimal friction. Partnerships, which are described in some detail, also serve a similar function.

CHAPTER 2: HOSTILE RELATIONS

Chapter 2, Hostile Relations, contains considerable detail about Inupiat warfare. However, nothing conveys the levels of Inupiat concern for enemies better than when Burch describes how silent these communities were as the norm in everyday life. Settlements were bereft of children’s laughter given the expectation that noise, even from dogs, might give one’s position away to the ever-present possibility of attack (Burch 2005:75).

Again it needs to be emphasized that Burch is speaking about a very specific interval in time: 1800 to mid-century. And while Burch assumes these conditions to have been in place for several centuries, he is quick to point out

that a variety of impacts, including disease, changed the complete landscape in the 20th century. After the 1850s, or slightly later, warfare ceased rather abruptly (Burch 2005:38) and the general expectation of Inupiat communities was freedom of movement across the entire landscape with little anticipation of hostility.

Burch evaluates a number of possible explanations for why armed conflict and the threat of armed conflict were basic facts of life (Burch 2005:57). In a fairly systematic manner he dismisses pressures from outside colonial interests, territorial expansion, economic factors such as control of trade, and raids for the abduction of women. He finds this latter motive unreasonable in that in the vast majority of occasions, women that were abducted during a raid were raped and then killed.

In the end Burch concludes, "Inupiaq historians uniformly regarded revenge as the primary cause of warfare in northwestern Alaska" (Burch 2005:64). In his historical reconstruction, one raid or atrocity seemed to precipitate further retaliation. Rather wistfully Burch acknowledges "I never found out what started the chain of events" (Burch 2005:65). Burch does speculate on several possible proximate causes that could have initiated this cycle—individuals who were cheated in trade, insulted or humiliated in athletic contests, unexplained disappearance of a hunter, and any untoward incident or disaster that could be attributed to magic by members of another nation. The key to the escalation of this *causi belli* was for

the offended individual to persuade his countrymen to join him in avenging what began as a personal affront. The only way to do this was to appeal to the fund of grievances that had accumulated over the years in the population at large. (Burch 2005:66)

Burch also tried to put this in a comparative perspective by discussing similar phenomena among societies in other parts of North America, e.g., the northwest coast. Readers are urged to compare Burch's discussion of warfare with Jorgensen's (1980) chapter on political organization, sodalities, and warfare in his formal comparative study of 172 societies in western North America, entitled *Western Indians*.

In contrast to some indigenous polities in western North America, raiding for economic booty does not seem to be a motivation for warfare in northwest Alaska (although this generalization does not necessarily hold for raiders from Chukotka). Burch (2005:63) points out that:

Very little plunder was involved in Inupiaq warfare because most raiding and war parties traveled on foot and therefore traveled light. Once a battle or raid was completed, the aggressors usually tried to get home quickly and thus with little baggage, because they could never be sure that fellow countrymen or allies of the defeated force would not suddenly appear and retaliate.

In the end, as Burch's informants pointed out, the Inupiaq verb *anuyak*, "to make war between nations," means "to seek vengeance." This motive has to be emphasized, especially with respect to the uncomfortable feeling that one experiences when reading Burch's vivid narrative. With vengeance the motivating force, "the brutality that often characterized Native warfare in northwestern Alaska is more readily understood if this likelihood [war = vengeance] is kept in mind" (Burch 2005:67).

The remainder of the chapter on hostile relations contains detailed narrative and analysis of Inupiat tactics, weaponry, defensive preparations, conditioning of male warriors, and leadership. The chapter also contains an extremely edifying consideration of warfare across the Bering Strait, with two of the major players being the Ninikmuit (Wales) and the Uellyt (Chukchi from Uelen). As to the frequency of warfare; after careful consideration Burch concludes that "all one can say with certainty is that warfare was frequent enough and dangerous enough to be on people's minds almost all of the time" (Burch 2005:137).

CHAPTER 3: FRIENDLY RELATIONS

Chapter 3, Friendly Relations, is an extensive and sometimes humorous discussion that details all the social institutions and personal relations that brought people together in northwest Alaska. Burch describes in fascinating detail trading partnerships, kin relationships, intermarriage, co-marriages, adoption, messenger feasts, and above all trade fairs and the international trade networks. In fact Burch's description of these institutions is so thorough that the reader might become uneasy about the preceding descriptions of violence. Burch recognizes this and states:

If we were to focus on this aspect of the system (i.e., friendly relations) and ignore all other kinds of evidence, we would find it almost impossible to believe that the hostilities described in Chapter 2 could have taken place. (Burch 2005:165)

In fact Burch asserts friendly and hostile relations were equally widespread, were intertwined in complex

and subtle ways and that “one of the most intriguing aspects of early-19th-century life in the region was how the two kinds of relations coexisted” (Burch 2005:145). Given space limitations, only a couple of these mechanisms have been singled out for discussion.

Trading partnerships were the foundation for peaceful international relations because partners often saw each other twice a year and had definite obligations to fulfill each time they met. An exchange of gifts was key and often involved resources unavailable within one’s own area; for example, seal oil was often reciprocated with caribou hides. Actually our concept of “trading” is inappropriate because exchanges were always made at well below “market price.” If famine struck the family of one trading partner, his family had the right to go live with his partners in other “nations” until the crisis had passed. Most trading partnerships were imbued with considerable affection, and partners often requested obscure and frivolous items that were almost but not quite impossible to fulfill.

The partner from whom such a request was made then spent much of the time between meetings either trying to fulfill the request literally or, perhaps more often, trying to figure out how to do so metaphorically or in some ludicrous way. (Burch 2005:156)

Burch provides a thorough description of messenger feasts, which were often structured around the partnerships mentioned above. These feasts were almost always sponsored by *umialgich* and were invariably “international” in scope. Feasts were not an opportunity to establish new international connections but served to strengthen existing friendly ties.

Katnut, meaning peaceful gathering of people, were the annual trade fairs held at Point Spencer, Sisualik, Sulivik, or Nigliq. Burch provides a wealth of information and analysis on these events, including who participated, the number of people in attendance, the resources and goods exchanged, and the marked social controls that were employed in a situation where the potential for trouble lay everywhere. Also included in this chapter are detailed narratives concerning the trading relationships across the Bering Strait and between groups from differing language families within Alaska.

There is one issue in this chapter that has given me considerable pause for thought. Burch (Burch 2005:210) asserts that

By the late 1870s the Inupiat had acquired breech-loading rifles and were using them to kill caribou. With these weapons the Inupiat did, in fact, all but

exterminate the caribou populations of northwestern Alaska during 1870s and 1880s.

This assertion raises two points of concern for me. First, it seems that substantial weather-related events were occurring during the period 1878–83. For example, St. Lawrence Islanders report sea ice too far north during critical periods to hunt walrus and seals (Burgess 1974). In this context it would seem more judicious to attribute the decline in the caribou herds to both natural cycles (exacerbated or caused by climatological factors) and human predation but not posit the extermination of the herd to human agency alone. However, Burch (personal communication) feels he can “support the claim that the herds crashed primarily because of human predation rather than because of climatic variables. I spent years trying to connect the caribou crash of the 1870–90 period to climatic variables, . . . and failed.”

Second, Burch has documentation to substantiate the possibility that there was considerable harvest of terrestrial and marine mammals during this period that involved wastage of meat. Of course a contradiction between professed profound cultural values and actual behavior is not necessarily a surprise; members of all cultures do it. Nevertheless the question remains: why would northwest Alaska Inupiat harvest huge numbers of hides and leave the meat to spoil, a behavior which was (and is) anathema to traditional values? Such behavior, from a traditional viewpoint, would lead to disappearance of all caribou. Perhaps the commercial aspects of their hunting, supplying meat as a commodity to westerners and hides for their own international trade, were regarded as acts separate from respectful behavior to sentient animal beings?

For example, Jorgensen (1990) spends a great deal of time discussing the impacts of St. Lawrence Islanders’ early integration into the periphery of the world economy. These Siberian Yupik speakers were selling whale oil and baleen to commercial whalers by the 1850s, if not earlier. By the early 1860s they were selling their labor as hunters and guides for the whaling crews and were compensated in a variety of ways. The advent of shore-based stations in the 1880s led to increasing sales of meat to whaling crews by hunters in Wainwright. Were similar processes changing some Inupiat hunters’ perspective on the nature of animal beings, or were individuals able to rationalize or ignore such seemingly contradictory behavior?

At the end of the chapter on Friendly Relations, Burch discusses the formation of alliances. Many of the questions that arose for me during the reading of the book

until this point are answered here. For example, if the concept of “mass” (i.e., number of combatants available) was so important to Inupiat warfare, why didn’t a number of smaller groups coordinate an attack on a larger one? The short answer is that they did, although one should not discount, given the mid 18th-century landscape of northwest Alaska, the difficulties in communication, coordination, and logistics involved in such an effort. For example, in a very interesting narrative, Burch describes how the Napaqtugmiut, Nuataagmiut, Qikiqtagrunmiut, and the Kivallinigmiut formed an alliance to attack the capital of the Tikigagmiut (Pt. Hope). In general, given the title of this book—Alliance and Conflict—rationales for how and why alliances came about and their attributes seem to be particularly underdeveloped. What are the circumstances, attributes, and hypotheses that account for the Tikigagmiut being the most warlike of the Inupiat, while their counterparts of similar “mass,” the Kinikmiut (Wales), were noted for their diplomacy?

The contrast between the Tikigagmiut and Kinikmiut apparently resided in differences in their respective outlooks on how international affairs should be conducted. The Tikigagmiut, who are not known to have formed an alliance with any nation, evidently preferred to pursue their international goals primarily through naked aggression and intimidation; their neighbors responded accordingly. The Kinikmiut, on the other hand, preferred diplomacy, and most of their neighbors also responded in kind. (Burch 2005:244)

But this really begs the question of what predisposes the Kinikmiut to diplomacy. Their role in trade? Particular attributes of leadership? Extensive intermarriage? A resource base that contrasts significantly from the Tikigagmiut? Or are historical factors the key? This is all the more important when one realizes the underlying explanation for warfare in this book, revenge, seems not to be the key for either the Tikigagmiut, whose belligerence Burch characterizes as “*res ipsa loquitur*—the thing that speaks for itself,” or for the Kinikmiut, who seem to have discovered social institutions that blunt this psychology.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter I disagree with Burch when he assesses some of the “political” evolutionary implications from this Inupiat case study. Burch concludes that the international system in northwestern Alaska had not increased in complexity for more than a thousand years because these societies didn’t live in environments “with a higher carrying

capacity” (p. 246). I take from this that he thinks that the resource base available in their environment did not produce enough surpluses to support higher estate densities, which would provide the impetus for more complexity. To avoid this from becoming circular reasoning, we have to clearly define what we mean by “carrying capacity.” In the case of this book, Burch himself asserts that social mechanisms existed, e.g., among the Kinikmiut, that helped ameliorate revenge killings, which could have increased an estate’s carrying capacity.

This last chapter, Conclusions, is also where Burch systematically addresses “The World System of the Inupiat.” Readers familiar with world-systems theory from three decades ago may initially be disconcerted with some of the ways Burch used such concepts as “nation” and “world system.”

“NATIONS”

Burch describes the rationale for his use of the term “nation”:

In this study I have used “nation” as a full equivalent to “society,” partly in deference to the wishes of my senior informants and partly to make the point to others that Inupiat societies were comparable in their most general features to modern nation-states. (Burch 2005:238)

WORLD SYSTEMS THEORY

A “world-system” (notice the hyphen that indicates for some, including Burch, the original Wallerstein [1974] construction, while the lack of a hyphen indicates the more recent broader approach) is for Wallerstein a world economy integrated through markets where a “core” group of nations specialize in capital and technologically intensive production, whereas “peripheral” countries supply raw materials to core nations or engage in low-value, labor-intensive production. Wallerstein’s idea draws its heritage from the French Annales school (attention to geo-ecological regions and emphasis on empirical materials), Marx (the centrality of the accumulation process and class struggle), and dependency theory (the exploitation of the periphery by the core). At first glance none of these factors (markets, accumulation, capital, classes, “metropolises”) seem to be at play in northwest Alaska circa 1800–50.

However, Burch’s detailed chronological investigation of “nations” in northwest Alaska and their extensive relations, through trade and warfare, with other nations

within Alaska and on the Chukotka Peninsula demonstrates the reality to me of what Burch (2005:242) terms the “North Pacific Interaction Sphere.” This spatial and temporal sphere existed as “goods and information flowed from one end of this system to the other” and was “peopled entirely by hunter-gathers except on the extreme west, where some of the Asiatic peoples were reindeer-herding pastoralists.”

Burch decided to use some of the processes underlying the development of world systems, as identified by world-systems theorists, to organize his discussion of “international” relations among 19th century groups in northwest Alaska. These processes, “confrontation, negotiation, domination, alliance formation, intimidation, rivalry, intrigue, exploitation, trade, physical violence” (Burch 2005:2), have been endemic to international relations for millennia.

Following the lead of Chase-Dunn and Mann (1998), Burch is trying to redress the Eurocentric world-systems conceptual framework advocated by Wallerstein and others. Interestingly, Andre Gunder Frank was (prior to his recent death) one of the earliest and most influential of the dependency theorists to rethink his position and was very supportive of broadening the structure of world-systems theory. Frank (1996) organizes his rethinking of this problem in a book entitled *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?*

Space does not permit a careful review of all the issues contained in the “Conclusions” chapter, although I do want to examine one use of the “core-periphery” concept as radically amended by Chase-Dunn and Mann (1998). They state: “we divide the conceptualization of core/periphery relations into two analytically separate aspects: core/periphery *differentiation* and core/periphery *hierarchy*” (1998:14).

This formulation seems to me to engage in a form of intellectual sleight of hand, especially as a core/periphery *differentiation* can include intermarriage between groups. For me this substantially dilutes the underlying power of the core/periphery concept, whose locus lies in a differential economic exchange that is completely asymmetrical in favor of “core” entities. Thus I substantiate Burch’s conclusion on this issue where he states that “the portion of the interaction sphere described in this volume was so

decentralized most of the time as to make core-periphery issues almost meaningless” (2005:245).

In the end one must be impressed with Burch’s consideration of this issue of world systems. His analysis has certainly raised my awareness. Burch’s work has lifted the clouds on what was formerly terra incognita and has revealed some form of continuity from precapitalist economic formations, through the mid-19th-century transitional incorporation of this region into the world economy (e.g., Jorgensen 1990), to its present day integration into globalization, climate change, and dependency on money to sustain traditional subsistence activities. In conclusion, this book should be considered an essential reference for anyone interested in any aspect of the field of ethnohistory.

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