ESSAY

WHALING IN *TIKIĠAQ* (POINT HOPE)

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ABSTRACT

This paper consists of personal recollections and reflections of a Japanese independent photographer, Shingo Takazawa, who has been visiting and living with the Iñupiat in Point Hope (*Tikiġaq*) from spring to summer since 1993. Takazawa was fortunate to be culturally adopted into a *Tikiġaq* whaling family, participating in their subsistence traditions over the past 30 years. Learning through cross-cultural communication, basic Iñupiaq vocabulary, and by sharing Japanese and *Tikiġaq* meals with his adoptive family and neighbors, Takazawa has experienced *Tikiġaq* culture change for more than a generation. Through these experiences Takazawa offers a firsthand, nonacademic ethnography as experienced through his Japanese eyes.

INTRODUCTION

My name is Shingo Takazawa, and I live in Japan. I work for a private company in Tokyo. When I was in middle school, I read Japanese explorer Naomi Uemura's (1974, 1976) books about his experience living with Greenland Inuit people for dog-team training and traveling from Greenland to Kotzebue, Alaska, with his dog team.[1] I became interested in people living in the Arctic (in those days other people called most of them "Eskimo"). During middle school (when I was 13 to 15 years old), Uemura was my hero. I read his books again and again. That middle school boy thought, "I want to visit Greenland someday." After I started working, I visited Alaska. I chose to come to Alaska because I learned Inuit people live in Alaska and they speak English. Japanese people, including me, learn English at school (but I hardly spoke it, and I heard English for the first time when I came to Alaska).

My first visit to Alaska was for sightseeing on summer vacation in 1991. I took an overnight tour to Barrow (present-day *Utqiaġvik*) from Anchorage, but it was not interesting to me because the tour showed us the town by bus and showed us the "Eskimo dance" just for the tourists at the gym. I wanted to see their authentic culture and life. After the dance, they sold souvenirs such as ivory carvings, Eskimo yo-yos, and other handmade crafts. After that, I found a food stand selling "Eskimo doughnuts" outside of the gym. I wondered what kind of doughnut that was. I got one and learned that it was frybread. I wanted to eat seal or whale or any kind of Native food, but I couldn't find any at that time.

For my next summer vacation, I went to Kotzebue. There was a fish camp by the beach south of the Kotzebue airport. I went there, and I looked for a place to put my tent. I found a small space by somebody's wall tent—a canvas tent with a frame, upright walls, and a sloped canvas roof. That wall tent was a family from Kivalina; I spent time with them at their fish camp for a few days. They invited me for dinner, and I had boiled beluga *maktaaq* (beluga skin with blubber) for the first time. That was my first real Native food, and it was so delicious!

The following summer, in late August 1993, I wanted to go to another small village. I went to the airline company counter for Cape Smythe Air[2] at the Kotzebue office and checked the timetable, and found a place named

"Point Hope" that I knew. I remembered Uemura visited Point Hope and went whaling with the Iñupiaq people. So, I decided to visit Point Hope (*Tikiġaq*). When I first went to Point Hope, I didn't have any friends there, nor did I know anybody. I put my tent on the beach in front of the town. The residents could see my small yellow tent from the town.

During the first night, a lot of kids visited my tent like waves—some kids went home, and other kids came and asked me a lot of questions such as my name and why I came to Point Hope. The next day, I walked around town and the beach all day, talking with some people. Some kids bothered me, threw rocks, and stole some things from my tent, but most kids were good to me.

The second night was the same as the first night: a lot of kids visited my tent again. At midnight, a few kids went home; I was sleepy, so I decided not to answer when kids would visit. I heard a voice a little while after. That was not a kid, and so I opened my tent and saw a lady standing in front. Her son told her that some kids had been bothering a foreign guy, and so she came to check on me. She said I could stay at her house if I wanted. I did not understand what she said because my English was poor at that time—she might have said that. I went to her house and she introduced me to her husband and her family. We became friends and I kept going every summer; eventually, Point Hope people became my friends.

MY *TIKIĠAQ* WHALING FAMILY

In 2000, my friend with whom I stayed each summer became a whaling captain, and he caught his first whale (*Balaena mysticetus*, bowhead whale). The whaling season was over when I got to Point Hope (early June), but I asked him if I could help with their *Qagruq* (Whaling Feast) preparation, which is held in the middle of June. I helped cut whale meat for *mikigaq* (or *mikiaq*, fermented whale meat and blubber). *Mikigaq* needs to be prepared every day—it is stored in big wooden barrels and needs to be stirred by hand once or twice a day (females' job). I helped the women in this task almost every day. We went to get clean snow for making coffee and tea for the feast, and there were lots of things to do before and during *Qagruq*.

Also, I asked my friend if I could go whaling with his crew in the future. The following year, 2001, I went out whaling with the *Tikiġaq* people for the first time. Since then, I have been helping my culturally adoptive Iñupiaq family during and after whaling season, and with other daily chores (except in 2020 due to COVID-19). While I was participating and taking pictures during the activities, I witnessed and experienced the importance of whaling from my Japanese perspective. I asked my friend and his family if I could take pictures of their hunting. With their warm agreement (and support), I have been taking pictures of their activities, including hunting and *Qagruq*. I have not visited Greenland where Uemura traveled yet, because the community of *Tikiġaq* is very interesting, and I have a lot to learn from them.

WHALING TOOLS

I have observed that whaling is the most important type of hunting for the people of *Tikiġaq*. They used to use an *umiaq* (skin boat) for chasing whales before Yankee whalers arrived in northwest Alaska (Lowenstein 2008). The *umiaq* of *Tikiġaq* provides space for eight people on board, and its frame is made of driftwood and covered with bearded seal skins. These skins are sewn with caribou sinew. People harvest every material from the land and the sea. After the commercial store began to sell lumber and other kinds of parts for *umiat* (a plural form for *umiaq*), the whaling captains and crews started to use lumber, nails, screws, and any kind of metal materials, and nylon thread for skin sewing (Fig. 1).

When I went on the ice for whaling for the first time, in 2001, whalers were still mainly using *umiat,* but they were using a plastic buoy with the harpoon. I remember one crew had a traditional buoy—*avataqpak*—made from seal skin.[3] That was the last traditional *avataqpak* that I saw. Nowadays they call a plastic buoy *avataqpak* (Fig. 2).

I do not know when Iñupiat started using a darting gun (a black powder bomb) with a harpoon, but the *Tikiġaq* people in the twenty-first century still use the same style of darting gun that they used in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century in Alaska, some whaling crews started to use what they locally call a "super-bomb," the strongest bomb for the harpoon. However, for some reason I have not seen *Tikiġaq* whalers using the super-bomb; they continue using a regular darting gun (Figs. 3 and 4). Compared to the super-bomb that is ready to use at the time of purchase, whalers have to load a darting gun's bomb themselves. I believe *Tikiġaq* whalers do not trust a super-bomb that somebody has commercially loaded.

Figure 1. An **umiaq** *frame using many metal parts that was built before the 1970s. July 11, 2021. Photo by the author.*

Figure 2. Commercially made plastic **avataqpak** *in an* **umiaq**. *May 5, 2015. Photo by the author.*

Figure 3. Darting gun and harpoon (left) and "super-bomb" (right) on the umiaq. *May 5, 2015. Photo by the author.*

Figure 4. Sometimes a whale came up by the camp. May 21, 2014. Photo by the author.

GOING OUT WITH *TIKIĠAQ* WHALERS

The *Tikiġaq* people prefer to hunt for whales on the ice with open leads to the south of the present-day townsite because there is enough deep water for whales to pass by. When the whale appears in the eastern reaches of this open lead, the whalers slide the *umiaq* into the water and board the *umiaq* at the same time, except the man at the stern, who boards last. He is the most important person on the *umiaq* (in most cases the captain sits at the stern). He checks the whale's routes while paddling and steering at the same time. This time is the tensest period on the ice. Each hunter must be quiet and try not to make any noise—they must walk on the ice quietly and speak to each other by whispering. I get so nervous; my camera's shutter noise feels very loud. Even I forget about the temperature. Sometimes it drops below 20 degrees Celsius (–4 Fahrenheit), but I have never felt cold. I become nervous and excited at the same time (Fig. 5).

When the whale gets close, the man who was holding the *umiaq* by the stern boards, and the crew starts chasing the whale by paddling quietly but powerfully, paddling in sync. Sometimes the whale comes up behind the *umiaq*. The *umiaq* may turn around to continue chasing the whale. The crew keeps paddling until they catch the whale; otherwise, it dives and disappears. My arms get weak, and it feels like my paddle is getting heavy. On a cold day, water freezes on the surface of the paddle, making the paddle heavier and heavier. When we paddle in slush ice, the *umiaq* goes slower and the paddle gets heavier, but we keep paddling (Figs. 6 and 7).

I remember one day when we were paddling an *umiaq*, the whale dove right beside us. We stopped paddling and looked down into the water. We saw the gigantic red whale slowly passing under our *umiaq*. I did not know why the whale looked red. Everybody was quiet just looking down to the water. We could hear a low and loud whale voice from the bottom of the *umiaq*. *Tikiġaq* whalers bring a small outboard motor for the *umiaq* (Fig. 8), which helps to pull back the whale.

After getting back from the open water, men pull up the *umiaq* onto the ice. Men who were paddling used their paddles to scrape water or slush ice off the *umiaq*'s outside skin. If water seeps into the *umiaq*, crew members bail it out using a handpump or tin can. Whalers never let the *umiaq*'s skin freeze. They try to keep the skin soft always to maintain its flexibility. When the *umiaq* is placed on the ice, they put an ice block under the stern. This allows

Figure 5. Getting ready to go. Most exciting and nervous time. May 8, 2007. Photo by the author.

Figure 6. Paddling an umiaq. *They could see a whale in front of them. May 8, 2007. Photo by the author.*

Figure 7. Chasing a whale. May 8, 2007. Photo by the author.

Figure 8. **Umiaq** *with outboard motor, resting on a block of ice. May 16, 2007. Photo by the author.*

the *umiaq* to touch the ice on only two points (bow and stern). The *umiaq* never sticks on the flat ice, from which it is easy to launch into the water. If the water starts leaking through the seam of the skin, they quickly repair the leak with beeswax or resew it with thin skin string.

When they are using bearded seal (*ugruk*) skin, they take the skin off the *umiaq* frame and place the skin into storage after the end of the whaling season. Before the whaling season starts, they take the skin out of storage and soak it in saltwater from the ocean to make it soft, followed by placing it on the *umiaq* frame. After 2015, I remember seeing *Tikiġaq* people start using nylon for the *umiaq* skin (Fig. 9). Nylon is lighter and tougher than bearded seal (*ugruk*) skin and easy to maintain. Now they leave nylon skin on the frame and leave the *umiaq* on the boat rack (*ikiġġat*) outside for the whole year.

Almost at the same time, I started seeing *Tikiġaq* whalers using a motorboat (locally called a "speedboat") to reach the ice. Usually, the boat includes three or four crewmembers. Driving the motorboat through a sea-ice lead helps to widen the lead, allowing for passage that would otherwise require a longer and more difficult journey around the ice by paddling an *umiaq*. When the whale passes, the whalers slide the speedboat into the water and start chasing the whale. They keep chasing one whale with many boats until the whale becomes tired while other people are waiting on the ice.

They keep checking where the boat and the whale are going. During this moment, the whalers do not need to speak in a whisper, and I no longer mind my camera noise, because the motorboats are very loud (Fig. 10).

Sometimes the people on the ice see a boat catch a whale, but sometimes they do not understand what the crewmembers on the boat are doing because they are chasing the whale very far from the ice (Fig. 11). They can see boats moving around on the horizon, or boats going to the other side of the ice. Though it feels like a long time after (sometimes it is less than one hour), people text or call to or from the boat. People know what is happening on the water (Fig. 12).

The *Tikiġaq* people used to use a VHF radio for all communications to the home or other whaling camps

Figure 9. Nylon skin **umiaq**. *Ballistic nylon with waterproof coating. April 26, 2017. Photo by the author.*

Figure 10. Speedboat and **umiaq**. *May 3, 2016. Photo by the author.*

*Figure 11. A bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*) in the water. May 2023. Photo by the author.*

*Figure 12. A big bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*; about 50 feet long) pulled up on the ice. May 7, 2017. Photo by the author.*

before they had cell phones (Fig. 13). Everybody listened to the radio, and everybody knew what was happening on the ice. One time, after we had breakfast at the whaling camp on the ice, I brought breakfast foods back home and put everything in the refrigerator. After I came back to the ice, the VHF radio called our crew—it was my adoptive Iñupiaq mom. She asked, "Who put syrup [for pancakes] in the fridge?" She scolded me on the radio. I was embarrassed because everybody knew what I had done.

Since they started using cell phones, people talk with their family who stay at home and talk with other crews. They also use text messages to communicate with each other. But now, people in town know much less about what is happening on the ice. Earlier, when they used the VHF radio, which was frequently on, people could hear what they were talking about on the radio. Nowadays, only a few people use VHF radios. Nowadays, when the VHF radio is on, rarely is heard any voice from the radio. Some people still carry a handy VHF radio in their bag for boating, but these are used for emergencies.

In the 1990s, the only way I could contact people in Point Hope was by expensive international calls or by writing a letter and putting a stamp on it. Now everybody has a cell phone, and they are connected to the world through the internet. Lots of people have social media accounts and they post daily happenings. I could know what is happening at *Tikiġaq*; I could ask what is going on over there, with the use of these new technologies. The free internet phone application is a big innovation for us. We can call anytime without thinking about money, and we can see each other on the phone. We talk or text about families, hunting, and daily life.

I have witnessed that *Tikiġaq* whaling is changing slowly in some ways, but quickly in others. People learn new technology all the time. While using an *ugruk*-skin *umiaq*, they might not catch any whales for a year or more. Now with the adoption of more recent technologies, they can catch whales every year.

I hope they can continue to catch whales for years to come. *Quyanaqpak* (thank you very much).

Figure 13. VHF radio (on the right by the man). People having dinner (taco rice). May 28, 2009. Photo by the author.

NOTES

1. Naomi Uemura (植村 直己 February 12, 1941; disappeared February 13, 1984) was a Japanese adventurer and mountain climber who was known particularly for his solo treks, including Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, Aconcagua in South America, Mont Blanc in Europe, and Denali in Alaska. He completed the world's first successful solo winter ascent of Denali and disappeared a day after his 43rd birthday while still trekking in Denali.
2. Cape Smythe Air Service was an airline based in Barrow (*Utqiaġvik*). In 2005 it merged with Frontier Flying Service.
3. In this paper the words "traditional" and "traditionally" are not used as an opposite to "modern" but in their original meaning: a custom, behavior, or other cultural activity passed across generations. By this definition traditions can be old or new, and all cultures are in some ways traditional—practicing customs from previous generations.

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I would like to say thank you to my family members in *Tikiġaq*, especially my Iñupiaq brother Herbert Kinneeveauk III. If he had never talked about me to his mother Eva Kinneeveauk during my first visit to *Tikiġaq*, I would not have gone on the ice for whaling with his father, the former whaling captain Herbert "Popsy" Kinneeveauk Jr. Of course, I would like to say thank you to my Iñupiaq parents, Popsy and Eva Kinneeveauk. They taught me a lot of things about life and Iñupiaq culture. And I say thank you to the people in *Tikiġaq*. Every time I go back to town, people say to me "Welcome home!" with a big smile and a big hug.

If I had never read Uemura's books in middle school, I would not have come to Alaska, and I never would have met my friends in *Tikiġaq*. Uemura's books helped shape my way of life.

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