ESSAY

TIKIĠAQ WAY OF LIFE AND TRADITIONAL FOOD

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ABSTRACT

This paper originated from a dialogue between the co-editors of this special section, Michael Koskey and Yoko Kugo, and Alzred Steve Oomittuk. Oomittuk introduces the *Tikiġaq* way of life when he was growing up and how their lifeways have changed due to economic and climate change during his lifetime. With a focus on maintaining their whaling practices and other lifeways, and drawing from their worldview-based values and ethics, the *Tikiġaġmiut* continue to practice food sovereignty as a part of their cultural identity. This paper demonstrates *Tikiġaq* lifeways from a local, Indigenous, insider perspective.

INTRODUCTION

I am a *Tikiġaġmii* (*Tikiġaġmiut* who lives in Point Hope) and a historian of *Tikiġaq*, Point Hope. I was born in 1962. My grandparents are Jacob and Barbara Lane on my mom's side, who had just moved out of the sod house in the old townsite when I was born. We used to live in a wooden house, but it was covered with sod. We did not have a bed or anything; pretty much we slept on the floor. I was born in the house right next to the sod house built with whalebones.

When I was born, we had a small clinic and midwives. In the 1960s, the military left their power plant, and they connected wires to sod houses at the old townsite, but they did not have enough fuel to keep it running twenty-four hours a day. The school had a small generator for power. They only had school up to eighth grade. We did not have high school here until the mid-1970s.

On my father's side, my grandparents are Guy Oomittuk, born in 1900, and Daisy, born in 1902. My father, Othniel Art Oomittuk Sr., was born in 1937, and my mother, Georgian Lane, was born in 1940. Both of my parents were born in Point Hope. My mother was an older twin, and she was the oldest of 11.

My *aaka* (grandmother) Barbara was born in 1913, and she was adopted out to the man named Attunun. Her biological father was Macheena who was an *aŋatkuq*—a shaman. He was a good shaman. When I was born, they said I was not going to survive. Many babies who were born in the early 1960s did not live long. Many pregnant women had miscarriages when the army was there because Project Chariot was being carried out at the same time. The army base was about a mile east of the old townsite. They were doing a bunch of [nuclear] testing.

My *aaka* got scared because there were no hospitals. She took me to her father, Macheena, to heal me from whatever sickness I had as a baby. My grandmother wanted to take me. My father was not there and only mother was there. Macheena whispered something to me, to make me strong, inside of my body. He spit something from his mouth into mine to make me survive. He gave me three Iñupiaq names: *Sitchaqrauq*, *Attunun*, and *Inauqvik*. Back in those days, they named you after strong people to help you survive. And you become part of them through reincarnation. You live and grow up a part of that person. When a baby was born, they named the baby after the

person who recently passed away, whether the baby was a boy or a girl, it can be either way. Through name-giving and namesakes, people connected to each other. It was a different time.

I was the oldest son of my parents when I was born, so my grandparents (on my father's side) took me away from my parents to raise. I was my father's first son. It was the way of life. I was raised by my grandparents—they were in their 60s. They needed help around the house, so I grew up with them and slept by their feet. One of my older sister's daughters was also adopted. We slept together by our grandparents' feet when we were growing up. We all slept on one bed with caribou skin. I remember going to school having the caribou's white hair on my body and hair. My *aaka* on my father's side was a very good sewer. She made mukluks, parkas, pants, and everything—all different types of clothing for winter, summer, fall, and spring. I always had mukluks and clothing made from animals.

My father went to the military, and he was stationed in Nome from 1969 to 1970. He was in Barrow in 1969. I went to Barrow in the summertime in 1972. My parents wanted me to go to the larger school and to get a good education, so they took me away from my grandparents. But I did not like it. I went to the school in Barrow until 1980, but I went back to my grandparents' house every summer. My father built the house in the old townsite in 1961 and moved it to here (the present-day townsite) in 1976. I still live in the same house, the older part of house today. The village moved to the present-day Point Hope in 1976 and 1977. My parents and I permanently moved back to Point Hope in the winter of 1981, and my *aaka* on my father's side died in 1982.

I was a harpooner on Darryl Frankson's boat and caught my first whale as a harpooner in 1989. Later, I was a co-captain with my uncle Jacob Lane in the 1990s. I was always out there on the ice, hunting. When I was a co-captain, I learned how to mark the whales and pull up the whales by watching. I also worked on the ice cellar—*siġḷusaq* (underground ice cellar). I have participated in Christmas and Thanksgiving activities and have learned how to make drums and dance. I have been on the tribal council on and off for over 30 years. I was mayor of Point Hope for 12 years, fire chief for 12 years, assemblyman for seven years, school advisory councilor for 15 years, and currently I'm a chairman for the North Slope Subsistence Advisory Council and a board member on the Walrus and Beluga Commissions. I have always been concerned about our way of life, and our culture and traditions.[1]

LIVING WITH WHALES

Tikiġaq is made strong by our beliefs. We saw a lot of changes when the military and archaeologists came here in the 1940s. We still lived totally in subsistence, and everything was organized around the animals, and people were still living in sod houses at that time. We still had dog teams—that was the only way we traveled around. We hunt whales, and we have certain rituals to follow.

We are a whaling society that has passed down traditions for thousands of years. Whaling captains did not write books or learn skills in the school. The only thing they understood was that they were *umialik*, a whaling captain. This is the way they were taught to live. If they want whale meat and *maktak* (skin with blubber), they celebrate the gift of the whale in everything. They have to follow all those rituals. It was a way of life that is still embedded in our culture today.

In the old days, the *umialik* and his wife performed certain roles throughout the whaling period when the whalers were out on the ice. The *umialik*'s wife had to carry out proper behaviors at home to ensure her husband's hunting was successful. They had specific rituals and dances that were performed during the songs. They were really careful to sing the songs perfectly, otherwise the animals would not come for us. They had to act a certain way—the way of the people of *Tikiġaq*. They did not talk about it. They did not brag about it. They just lived with it. That is the way of life.

When the whaling boats chase the whale, people have to watch who harpooned and hit the whale with an oar, and which boats touched the whale after the whale is dead. By this they know which share they get. The captain and the crew who harpoon the whale wait on the ocean until the whale is dead. People watch which boats come to the whale next. Whaling boats will receive a certain part of the whale by the order of when they arrived at the whale in their boats—a process watched and confirmed by Elders. The first and second crews to reach and harpoon the whale are referred to as the *siḷvi* and *siḷvinaq*, respectively, and they receive the similarly named mid-section of the lower half of the whale—the top to the *siḷvi* (left or right side, whichever happens to be on top after the whale is brought onto the ice) and the bottom to the *siḷvinaq*. The *siḷvi*

and *siḷvinaq* from the whaling crew use an oar to make a straight line all the way across the whale, cutting it with a knife from the edge and from the center, to divide the certain parts of the whale. Whaling captains' wives cook certain parts of the meat, and men would eat at the *amu* (the place where the *umiaq* is ready to go into the water, and a place to pull up the whale).

The captain who caught a whale will keep certain parts of the whale for various occasions. They save *uati* (around the middle to bottom part) of the whale to make *mikigaq* (fermented meat and blubber) and *avarraq* (whale flipper) and inner parts of the whale are cooked during the annual *Qagruq* (Whaling Feast) (Fig. 1). In spring they store *aŋirrruk* (whale tail) in the lower part (*aŋirrugvik*) of the *siġḷuaq* (ice cellars). When new ice, *qinu*, arrives at the shore, the captains who have caught fewer than five whales in the past will take out their *aŋirrruk* from the *siġḷuaq*. They cut the corners off, providing that to the men who cut *aŋirrruk*. They cut up the rest of the *aŋirrruk* and distribute it within the community to celebrate the "birthing" of the ice. The whaling captains who caught more than five whales in the past will take out their *aŋirrruk* from the *siġḷuaq* and distribute in the same manner in March. After they had *aŋirrruk,* they clean the *siġḷuaq* to get it ready for a new whale. They start preparing the harpoon and the skin for the *umiaq* (skin boat) and put them in the water.

A long time ago, we had to follow the right direction, the right way, so that the whale will keep coming back to us. The whale's life has to follow the right ritual. So, we have to move slow. It has changed; it is not like the old days. It is too fast. We live in the faster world and people do not have patience anymore. We are living the cash economy way of life.

CHANGES IN *TIKIĠAQ*

By the 1970s, things started changing. After the [North Slope] borough became incorporated in 1972, and after the Native land claims and ownership of the land and subsistence way of life [was addressed, through the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act], we started seeing all this money coming into the community, and having ownership of the land and putting in boundary lines, saying, "Oh, this is my territory." It never was like that [before]. Everybody knew that, "Oh, this is his hunting route or camping area where he camps." There are always different stories. We learned those places and routes by storytelling because we did not have written language. It was about passing the culture and tradition on how people have lived from one generation to another, by storytelling. We had no TVs or electricity or anything like that. We had a radio by the 1960s.

Figure 1. Butchering of various meats during Qagruq (Whale Festival), June 2022. Photo by Yoko Kugo.

The North Slope Borough was incorporated on July 2, 1972. The community leaders said the point [old townsite] was too small and it was eroding in there. They needed to move the village to where there would be more land. In 1975, we had a big community picnic. We went to Beacon Hill (east side of the present-day townsite) and had a picnic and gathering and blessed the land. They thought of relocating the village from the old townsite to up on Beacon Hill.

But it never happened. The Elders said, "It's going to be bad." *Tikiġaġmiut* people—they were used to being by the point. They could see animals from walking distance to the seals, to the *sigluat*, to the ice cellars. When we traveled, we walked along the way; they didn't have cars or Hondas [all-terrain vehicles] or…still had dog teams in the old days. That is the reason why they moved the village only a couple of miles from where we are at now. They built half of the village in 1976 and the rest in 1977. The first ones who moved here in 1976 had no electricity still because the power [system, left behind by the U.S. Army] was old.

By 1978, we started seeing all those buildings coming up. Money started coming in. When I lived in Barrow in 1976 and 1977, we used to get $5 or $6 an hour for labor, and all the sudden, we got $31.80 an hour for construction. When we went to work on a house, $27 an hour for labor and $31 an hour for carpentry. All houses in present-day Point Hope were built in 1982 and 1983. We started building the school and big houses with garages. Those garages were not for cars, they were for snowmachines or three-wheelers at that time. The Native Store of Point Hope belongs to the tribe, and as a little boy, I remember all they had was milk, flour, sugar, tea, coffee, and some Lifesavers [candy]. Back in the old days, I only saw pennies and dimes, and nickels and quarters were worth something then.

We have seen the changes from a total subsistence [lifeway] throughout the 1960s. Growing up, the majority of the men would always have to go out of town and work for three or four months, then come back home, because there was no money in the community. Many people went to Fairbanks for working on the pipeline. Pipeline [work] offered a lot of money. They came home and started building wooden houses in the new townsite. After all, the [North Slope] borough started making money for the communities, and things started to change. Right after high school, at 18 years old, I was a carpenter, making $31.80 an hour when people used to make $5.13 an hour. People had never seen so much money.

Things started changing because of the money and modern lifeway. Native people were always gift-giving and sharing in their beliefs. You had that change of life from totally subsistence to suddenly a capitalist economy and jobs and everything. People from all nationalities came up to the North Slope to work because there was an abundance of money.

At the same time, alcohol and drugs started coming in because there's so much money. It was not just construction people, but there were some drug dealers coming into the community. They sold the drugs to make some quick money. And alcohol, it was a dry community. And that's when they started bootlegging, charging $100 for a bottle when it's only five dollars for a bottle [in a store in a city]. Big profit. And back in those days, they did not check the plane that was coming with tons of it. Alcoholism and drug addiction started.

All we spoke was the Iñupiaq language when I was growing up. The BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] schools and teachers forced students not to speak our language because the Iñupiaq children did not understand English. But the way they taught us to learn was very harsh. That is the generation of people who do not like teachers, but we now have to learn because this [former condition of life] was the past. This is the world we live in, today's world now. We had to accept what was happening in the past. And we try to get the best of the world even though we saw all the changes.

Polar ice has retreated so far back. It used to be 60 miles [from the ice-edge] to the mainland, and now it is [as much as] 300 miles away. And it does not freeze as early in the year. The people talk about the world shifting. Stars and the moon rise at a certain time. I used to see stars in certain areas, and I am not seeing them where they used to be when I was growing up. Over 60 years I have lived on the North Slope. Over 40 years in the same house I have been looking at the same window and seeing those same stars at the same time. They are not there. They are not in the same direction at the certain time of the year during the dark months.

FOOD SECURITY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Tikiġaġmii have lived around and with the animals, and animals make us who we are. Our identity as a people comes from the animals. Without the animals, we have nothing. That is the core of our food security—our way of life and identity. Through my advisory positions in various groups, I have advocated to tell them [e.g., resource managers, government researchers] that we can manage in our own way for the animals to come to us, to feed us, to clothe us, and to shelter us. We can regulate on our own so that animals will keep coming. Now, the whole world is changing so rapidly. Where and why are the animals

migrating south for the winter? Where do they spend the winter? Are they healthy? We do not want extinct animals. We do not want them contaminated. We are concerned about the animals that we hunt for. We do not want people to die off from our own animals that we depend on. We would like to ensure the safety of the animals that we have always depended on for thousands of years.

The ships that travel the coast dump sewage, and the ocean has become contaminated. The Northwest Passage is very delicate, and it is not very deep. We are concerned about the food chain, especially the smallest of all animals that strengthen the whales, the largest animals. They eat the smallest species in the food chain—the whale being the center of the livelihood. This food chain protects our food source. Whales live in a cold climate area. In recent years, we have been having warmer water and [unusual] currents coming up that prevent the ice from freezing.

Going to the new generation, the younger generations see a totally different way—from when it was all a subsistence way of life to where it became easy to go to the store and get what they want. Today, some among the younger generations love to go out hunting and others do not. They would rather stay home and play games and eat the food from the restaurant or from the store. They may not even touch their Native food. When we see the change, slowly; that is where the Western way of life is taking more control of the society that has been here for thousands of years. We have a lot of younger generations who love to hunt and catch the food. But they do not eat it. They bring it to the Elders. What is going to happen when their Elders are gone, and they have no more people to bring the food to? We learned how to preserve and age meat and *maktak* (whale blubber) to fermented stages, and how to take care of the *siġḷuaq*.

We can regulate our own food source and food security. We make sure that the younger generation has a strong understanding of history and culture and identity, and of the food sources they have right here in their own backyard. Many young people do not like to eat the fermented walrus flippers or *aŋirruk* (aged whale tail) that the people ate in order to survive in the past. We had to eat what we could eat and learned the food fermentation process. There was no other food and no other choice but to eat fermented meat. Our people learned to eat it to survive in the old days. We live in a different society now, so we do not have to do that anymore. But we still continue to do it because it is our way of life. I sometimes volunteer at the school and talk to the students about the history, culture, and the way of life. We want them to get education and come back and teach their own people. The local tribe is getting many grants and is looking at on-the-job-training to educate the employees, especially for the young ones to continue their own way of life here in Point Hope.

CLOSING REMARKS: UNDERSTANDING YOUR OWN IDENTITY

The cash economy can be good and bad. In every society you have good people and you have bad people—something that cannot ever change. We try to accept things and try to work with them. It is about moving forward or understanding your own identity as a person. I make my own trail. I make my own decisions. It is up to me to live the way I live. We cannot force people to be something that they don't want to be. It is up to them. They have their own minds. That is why we talk to younger generations now to help them understand the importance of understanding your identity that you have right there in front of you, what people went through and what they saw: the history, the culture, was totally a subsistence way of life.

Now, everything is all on the internet and on the smartphone. This little phone holds everything, and the younger generations are devastated when they lose their phones. It connects them to the outside world. It is everything in one little thing that they can hold in their hands. Technology has really changed in the last 40 years from what I have seen. But the community is still connected to the animals; we still eat a lot of seal, *ugruk* (bearded seal), walrus, whale, caribou, fish. We live a cycle of the life where we know the weather. We still have that connecting bond with animals. Without animals we would have never lived here this long. They feed us, they clothe us, they shelter us, they give us that bond of spirituality with each other. *Tikiġaġmii* always talked about how we are a part of the animals, like the animals are a part of us in our old stories. Animals have been taking care of us for thousands of years. Now, we are living in a different society with offshore drilling and other activities, such as tour ships and industrial passage in the Arctic Ocean. It is our turn to make sure that animals survive.

We live in a high-cost area where it's expensive to buy food at the store. We have to have a job to support our living, but not everyone has one. Thus, many of us still depend on the animals from the land and the sea for our food security. Younger generations need to have a strong voice to be the leaders to continue protecting the water

and the land. They have to understand the importance of food security if we want to keep our identity as a people. The animals are the identity. When the animals are gone, we are gone. We, *Tikiġaġmii*, live off the land, we live off the sea, we live off the sky. We celebrate the gift of life at *Qagruq*, the Whale Feast (Fig. 2).

This is our way of life. It has been passed from generation to generation since time immemorial. Food security is a big part of that. Those are the things that I have seen in my lifetime and how things are changing over 60 years.

NOTES

1. 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.

Figure 2. The author drumming after* Nalukataq *(blanket toss) during* Qagruq*, June 2022. Photo by Yoko Kugo.