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Smithsonian at the Poles

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International Polar Year Science

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and Scott E. Miller
Editors*

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The Art of Iñupiaq Whaling: Elders' Interpretations of International Polar Year Ethnological Collections

Aron L. Crowell

ABSTRACT. In the northern Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean, a 2,000-year tradition of Alaska Native bowhead whaling continues to the present day as a focus of both subsistence and cultural identity. In cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution, Iñupiaq Eskimo elders are interpreting the cultural and spiritual dimensions of whaling artifacts collected during the late nineteenth century, including material gathered by the International Polar Expedition to Point Barrow, Alaska (1881–1883). These artistic objects—hunting and boat equipment, regalia for whaling ceremonies, and charms owned by whale boat captains (*umialgich*)—were acquired during decades of rapid cultural change brought about by interaction with New England whalers, traders, and Presbyterian missionaries. Nonetheless, the social values and spiritual concepts that they express have survived and are carried forward in contemporary whaling. Current research and exhibitions benefit from both Iñupiaq expertise and a rich ethnohistorical literature from Barrow and other northern communities.

INTRODUCTION

In the northern Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean, a 2,000-year tradition of Alaska Native whaling continues to the present day (Brewster, 2004; Freeman et al., 1998; McCartney, 1995, 2003). The spring bowhead hunt in particular—and the preparations and celebrations that surround it—are a focus of cultural identity and survival (Worl, 1980). There are eight contemporary Iñupiaq whaling villages: Nuiqsut, Barrow, Wainwright, Point Hope, Kivalina, Kaktovik, Wales, and Little Diomed. Two Yupik whaling communities, Gambell and Savoonga, are located on St. Lawrence Island.

In cooperation with the Arctic Studies Center (Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution), Iñupiaq Eskimo community members are reexamining this ancient hunting heritage through the study of traditional whaling equipment in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution. This project is in part a legacy of the first International Polar Year. During the U.S. government-sponsored International Polar Expedition to Point Barrow, Alaska (1881–1883), commander Lt. Patrick Henry Ray and naturalist John Murdoch purchased more than 1,100 items from local Iñupiaq residents including a wide variety of clothing, tools, and hunting

weapons (cf. Burch, 2009, this volume; Fitzhugh, 1988; cf. Krupnik, 2009, this volume; Murdoch, 1892; Ray, 1885). Of special significance for the present discussion is a group of about 40 objects related to bowhead whaling and whaling ceremonies. In 2002, a group of cultural advisors from Barrow—Ronald Brower Sr., Jane Brower, Kenneth Toovak, and Doreen Simmonds—visited Washington, D.C., to examine some of the Murdoch–Ray materials, as well as other collections at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) and National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) (Figure 1). The latter include objects from Barrow, Point Hope, Little Diomed, and Wales that were acquired in the late nineteenth century by Edward W. Nelson, Miner Bruce, George T. Emmons, J. Henry Turner, H. Richmond Marsh, and others. Additional contributions to the indigenous documentation of these collections were made by Barrow elder and translator Martha Aiken, as well as Norton Sound region advisors Jacob Ahwinona (White Mountain) and Marie Saclamana (King Island/Nome).

This project is one focus of the Arctic Studies Center's Sharing Knowledge program, which seeks to document indigenous oral histories and contemporary knowledge about

objects in the Smithsonian's Alaskan collections (Crowell and Oozevaseuk, 2006). Outcomes include the *Sharing Knowledge* website (<http://alaska.si.edu>) and a large collaborative exhibition on Alaska Native cultures that will open at the Anchorage Museum in 2010. In cooperation with the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, the Iñupiat Heritage Center in Barrow produced its own community-based exhibition in 2005, *The People of Whaling* (<http://www.uaf.edu/museum/exhibit/galleries/whaling/index.html>). Its title places whaling at the core of cultural identity, underlined by the exhibition's theme statement, which reads, "Whaling is central to our lives. We continue to teach our youth to show respect for the whale and to share the harvest with the whole community."

CONTACT AND CHANGE IN IÑUPIAQ WHALING

The Smithsonian collections were acquired during decades of rapid cultural change. The American commercial whaling fleet came to the Bering Sea in 1848 and the Barrow area in 1854 (Bockstoce, 1986). During the 1880s,



FIGURE 1. Left to right: Kenneth Toovak, Jane Brower, and Ron Brower Sr. at the National Museum of the American Indian, 2002. (Photo by Aron Crowell)

the whaling industry shifted its focus to shore-based operations that employed many Iñupiaq residents and greatly increased the direct influences of nonnative culture and economy (Cassel, 2003). Although the first shore station at Barrow was established in 1884, the year after the Point Barrow expedition ended, Murdoch noted that Native whalers had already acquired breech-loading guns for hunting caribou and “plenty of the most improved modern whaling gear” through their contacts with the commercial fleet (1892:53). The new weapons were bomb-loaded harpoons (called “darting guns”) and shoulder guns that rapidly replaced traditional stone-tipped harpoons and lances. Local residents were also “now rich in iron, civilized tools, canvas, and wreck wood, and in this respect their condition is improved” (Murdoch, 1892:53). In other

ways, Murdoch observed, the community was in decline through the “unmitigated evil” of the alcohol trade, social disruption caused by the American sailors, and the effects of introduced diseases. Indigenous population losses from influenza and other epidemics were severe, and food shortages came about as caribou dwindled and whaling companies depleted whale and walrus herds. Iñupiaq willingness to sell or barter traditional items of material culture to collectors may have been related to these transformations in culture and living conditions (Fitzhugh, 1988).

Beginning in 1890, Presbyterian missionaries actively sought to suppress shamanism, whaling rituals, and hunting ceremonies, along with the spiritual concepts that underlay these practices (Figure 2). Iñupiaq *qargit*, or ceremonial houses, closed down under missionary pressure,



FIGURE 2. Men dancing in a *qargit* (ceremonial house) at Wales before the whale hunt, 1901. (Photograph by Suzanne R. Bernardi, Anchorage Museum archives B96.9.06)

ending the ceremonies that had taken place inside (Larson, 1995). The last Iñupiaq *qargi* at Point Hope became inactive in 1910, although social distinctions based on family membership in the former ceremonial houses continued to be important (Larson, 2003; VanStone, 1962; Burch, 1981). Iñupiaq whaling captains, or *umialgich*, retained their pivotal social and economic roles, as did their wives (Bodenhorn, 1990), but the once-extensive spiritual duties of these positions declined.

Despite the effects of Western contact, substantial continuities are evident between arctic whaling communities of the past and present (Anungazuk, 2003; Braund and Moorehead, 1995). The bowhead harvest is substantial, with a current allotment from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) of 56 landed whales per year, to be divided among the 10 Alaskan villages. The IWC quota is based on historic per capita averages of the subsistence harvest between 1910 and 1969 (Braund and Associates, 2007). Whaling captains and their kin-based crews and wives work throughout the year to prepare for whaling, carry out the hunt, process the catch, and distribute the meat and blubber. Whaling boats with hand-built wooden frames and skin covers are still employed in some of the villages, including Barrow. The Whale Festival or *Nalukataq* has survived and the Messenger Feast has been revived in modern form. Spiritual conceptions of whaling also persist. Ronald Brower Sr. said,

Whalers respect their prey very highly . . . Whaling is a *very* important part of our life. In many ways, it's part of our sacred beliefs. Everything that we're doing in a year is dealing with whaling—some form of preparation, celebration, rites and rituals of whaling.¹

Elders' commentaries in Washington provide insight into connections between modern and traditional whaling, including the deep-seated cultural view that whales are sentient beings that respond to human ritual and respect by giving themselves to feed the community.

THE ANNUAL CYCLE OF IÑUPIAQ WHALING: PAST AND PRESENT

Sources on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Iñupiaq whaling include primary observations (Murdoch, 1892; Nelson, 1899; Ostermann and Holtved, 1952; Ray, 1885; Simpson, 1875; Stefánson 1919; Thornton, 1931), later anthropological and ethnohistorical reconstructions (Curtis, 1930; Rainey, 1947; Spencer, 1959; VanStone,

1962), and retrospective oral history and life stories (Brewster, 2004; Pulu et al., 1980). Most available information pertains to Barrow, Point Hope, and Wales. A brief synopsis of this diverse material, with comparisons to contemporary practices, is offered here as a foundation for the Smithsonian discussions with elders.

PREPARATIONS FOR WHALING

In the traditional whaling pattern, Iñupiaq crewmen worked through the winter and early spring in the *qargit* (ceremonial houses) owned by their captains, preparing gear for the coming hunt. Everything—harpoons, lances, floats, whaleboat (*umiaq*) frames—had to be newly made or scraped clean in the belief that no whale would approach a crew with old or dirty gear (Curtis, 1930:138; Rainey, 1947:257–258; Spencer, 1959:332–336). The captain's wife supervised the sewing of a new bearded seal or walrus hide cover for the *umiaq*; the women assigned to this task worked in an ice-block house adjacent to the *qargi*. Women made new parkas and boots for the hunters. Ritual equipment was prepared for the whaling captain's wife, including a wooden bucket with ivory ornaments and chains (Figure 3). The *umialik* (whaling captain) consulted with shamans and advisors, seeking ritual advice and portents of the season. He cleared out his ice cellar, distributing any meat from the previous year, to make way for the “parkas” or flesh of new whales, which the whale spirits shed for human use (Rainey, 1947:259; Spencer, 1959:335–336).

White beluga whales are often the first to be seen in the open water leads of early spring; at Wales, these were considered to be the bowheads' scouts, sent ahead to see if the village was clean and ready (Curtis, 1930:152). The bowheads would soon follow, and it was time to clear a path for the boats across the sea ice to the water's edge. Boat captains retrieved whaling charms that they had hidden in secret caches and caves (Spencer, 1959:338–340). When charms were placed in the *umiaq*, it became a living being. At Wales, it was said that on the night before the hunt, the boats walked out to sea using the posts of their racks as legs (Curtis, 1930:152). Before the *umiaq* was launched, the captain's wife gave it a drink of water from her bucket (Rainey, 1947:257). She herself was identified with the whale, and at Point Hope the harpooner pretended to spear her before the crew set out (Rainey, 1947:259).

Women still sew new *umiaq* covers each season in the Iñupiaq whaling communities, although the activity has moved to alternative locations; at Barrow, it takes place



FIGURE 3. *Umialik* sitting beneath whaling charms, including women's pails with ivory chains, Wales, 1901. (Photograph by Suzanne R. Bernardi, Anchorage Museum archives B96.9.05)

inside the Iñupiat Heritage Center. Clean, new gear and clothing are considered to be just as essential now as they were in the past, to show respect for the whales (Brewster, 2004; Bodenhorn, 1990). Ivory whale charms are carried onboard some *umiat*; in others, the traditional image of a bowhead is carved on the underside of the boat steerer's seat (see discussions below). Ice cellars are cleaned each spring, to make a welcoming home for the whales' bodies.

THE HUNT

Traditionally, women could not sew during the hunt because the act of stitching or cutting might entangle or break the harpoon line. A whaling captain's wife sat quietly in her house to mimic a docile whale that would be easier to catch. She would not stoop or go into an underground meat cellar, acts that could influence a wounded bowhead to go under the ice where it would be lost (Rainey, 1947:259; Spencer, 1959:337–338).

As hunters approached a whale, the harpooner raised his weapon from an oarlock-shaped rest in the bow, thrusting it at close quarters into the animal's back. The whale dove with the harpoon head inside its body, dragging the attached line and sealskin floats. The harpooner refitted his weapon with a new head, prepared to strike again when the whale resurfaced. Other boats joined in the hunt. The whale eventually lay exhausted on the surface where it was killed with stone-tipped lances (Murdoch, 1892:275–276; Rainey, 1947:257–259)

The captain's wife greeted the whale at the edge of the ice. Singing and speaking a welcome, she poured fresh water on its snout from her ceremonial bucket (Curtis, 1930:141; Osterman and Holtved, 1952:26; Spencer, 1969:345; Stefánsson, 1919:389). Yupik and Siberian whaling cultures shared this practice of quenching a whale's assumed thirst for fresh water. Iñupiat traditionally gave all sea mammals they killed a drink of fresh water, and all land animals a taste of seal or whale blubber (which was rubbed on their noses), in the belief that the creatures of land and sea craved these substances that were not available to them in life (Brower, 1943:16; Rainey, 1947:267; Spencer, 1969:272; Stefánsson, 1919:389; Van Valin, 1941:199).

The contemporary spring whale hunt follows much the same course as in times past, with hunting crews camped at the ice edge by the beginning of May (Brewster, 2004:131–163). Most crews use skin-covered *umiat* (propelled by paddles rather than motors during the hunt itself) to approach whales because the traditional hulls are much quieter in the water than wood or metal skiffs. The harpooner with his darting gun and gunner with his shoulder gun ride in the bow, ready to strike with the aim of an immediate kill. Technological innovations go beyond the adoption of these now antique weapons. Whalers use snow machines and sleds to pull their boats and gear to camp, as well as modern communications equipment to enhance the logistics and safety of the hunt. They are aided by VHF radios, walkie-talkies, GPS units, satellite phones, and Internet forecasts of ice and weather conditions. At Barrow in 1997, when shorefast ice broke away and set 142 whalers adrift in heavy snow and fog, helicopters were guided to the rescue using GPS coordinates transmitted by radio from the men on the ice (George et al., 2004).

Some of the older hunting prescriptions and prohibitions are retained, while others have faded. Today, as in the past, quiet is maintained in the whale camps because of the animals' sensitive hearing. On the other hand, cooking food on the ice is common practice now but banned under traditional norms (Rainey, 1947:259; Spencer, 1959:337).

Captains' wives try to remain peaceful and quiet to influence the whale's decision to give itself (Bodenhorn, 1990). Although she may no longer provide the customary drink of water to the whale, the captain's wife and her husband act as "good hosts" to the animal by sharing its meat with others during the *Nalukataq* celebration and at Christmas and Thanksgiving.

CEREMONIES AND CELEBRATIONS

The principal Iñupiaq whaling ceremony, *Nalukataq*, represents an unbroken tradition that extends from pre-contact times to the present (Brower, 1943:61–63; Curtis, 1930:135–160; Larson, 2003; Murdoch, 1892:272–275; Spencer, 1969:332–353; Rainey, 1947:262). *Nalukataq* follows the whaling season and is celebrated outdoors, so it was minimally affected by the decline of the ceremonial houses. Each successful *umialik* provides a feast of whale meat and *maktak* (skin and blubber) to the entire village, an act that brings great prestige. Whaleboats tipped on their sides, with the flags of each crew flying, surround the outdoor space. Feasting is followed by dancing, singing, and competitive games, including the "blanket toss" that gives the festival its name. During *Nalukataq* everyone receives new boots and parka covers.

The *Apugauti* feast marks the last time a successful whaling captain brings his boat back to shore at the end of the whaling season. It is a celebration of the boat's return. The captain raises his flag and everyone is invited to eat *mikigaq* (fermented whale meat), whale tongue, and *maktak*. Wild goose soup is also served.

Kivgiq, the Messenger Feast, is a winter dance and gift-giving festival that was once widespread across north-west Alaska and in the Yup'ik regions of Norton Sound, the Yukon–Kuskokwim Delta, and Nunivak Island (Bodfish, 1991:23–24; Burch, 2005:172–180; Curtis, 1930:146–147, 168–177, 213–214; Kingston, 1999; Lantis, 1947: 67–73; Nelson, 1899:361–363; Oquilluk, 1973:149–150; Ostermann and Holtved, 1952:103–112; Spencer, 1957: 210–228). Iñupiaq Messenger Feasts ended in the early years of the twentieth century, but North Slope Borough Mayor George Ahmaogak Sr. helped to revive the event at Barrow in 1988. Barrow's biennial celebration in February now brings visitors and dance groups from across Alaska, Russia, Canada, and Greenland.

Before a traditional Messenger Feast, leading men of a village (usually the whaling captains) sent messengers to the leaders of another community to invite them and their relatives to five days of ceremonies. At Utqiagvik (Barrow), guests came to the *qargi* to view the great pile

of gifts that they would receive, including sealskins filled with oil, weapons, sleds, and kayaks. While not specifically a whaling ceremony, *Kivgiq* was an expression of the whaling-based coastal economy and of the social dominance of the *umialgich*.

Before the disappearance of the ceremonial houses, fall and winter were a time for other whaling and hunting ceremonies. At Barrow the whaling season was followed by a feast and dance in the *qargi*, when men wore several types of masks. Few details were recorded or remembered about these dances, at least at Barrow. Murdoch purchased a dozen masks that were used in the *qargi* ceremonies, but had no opportunity to learn about their use. At Point Hope, hunting ceremonies were held each winter in the ceremonial houses until 1910 and elders' descriptions of these ceremonies were recorded by Froelich Rainey in 1940 (Rainey, 1947). Figures of whales, seals, polar bears, caribou, walrus, and birds were carved, hung in the *qargi*, and fed as part of the ritual. A mask with inset ivory eyes was hung above the oil lamp and the whaling captains vied with each other to steal it unobserved. It would be hidden in the victor's cache and used in the spring as a whaling charm.

SELECTED OBJECT DISCUSSIONS

HARPOON REST (NAULIGAQAĠVIK)

Harpoon rests were fastened inside the bows of whaling boats, as a place for the harpooner to support his weapon (Murdoch, 1892:341–343; Nelson, 1899:226; Spencer, 1959:342–343). These implements are often decorated with whale imagery and were probably regarded as hunting charms. At Wales in 1927, a wooden harpoon rest was found in one *umialik*'s old cache of whaling talismans (Curtis, 1930:138).

A walrus ivory harpoon rest from the Murdoch–Ray collection (Figure 4) is etched with images of bowhead flukes and each prong depicts a whale's head and fore body (Murdoch, 1892: fig. 348). Ronald Brower Sr. noted that on each prong the whale's back is inset with a blue bead at the center of an inscribed "X." This, he explained, is the location of the whale's life force, and the place where the harpooner aimed. Brower added that when blue is present on a hunting implement it is "part of the weapon" and not just added for beauty.² Blue, he said,

gives us the relationship to our spiritual beliefs, to the power of *sixa*—meaning "sky"—who controls life. *Sixa* is something



FIGURE 4. Harpoon rest, Barrow, 1881–1883, Murdoch–Ray collection. NMNH E089418. 30 cm tall.

that’s both finite and infinite; you breathe it. When you look in the heavens you see blue. So blue became an important color that helped to bring a whale home.³

Another harpoon rest from the village of Wales (Figure 5), acquired by E. W. Nelson in 1881 (Nelson, 1899: Pl. LXXVIII–37), is made from two pieces of walrus ivory that are pinned together with ivory pegs. *Tinmiaqpat* (‘giant eagles’) in the act of catching whales are etched on the front and back, and animals with lifted paws—possibly polar

bears—are carved on each side. Stories about giant eagles (or “thunderbirds”) that preyed on whales, caribou, and people are found in the oral traditions of Iñupiaq, Yup’ik, Chukchi, Koryak, St. Lawrence Island Yupik, Unangan, and other North Pacific peoples (e.g. Bogoras, 1904–1909:328; Curtis, 1930:168–177; Ivanov, 1930:501–502; Jochelson, 1908:661; Nelson, 1899:445–446, 486–487). Despite their fearsome reputation, it was one of these birds, called the Eagle Mother, who is said to have taught Iñupiaq people the dances and songs of the Messenger Feast (Kingston, 1999).

Examining this harpoon rest, Jacob Ahwinona of White Mountain said,

According to my grandpa, these birds, they’re up in the big mountains back there, way up high. When they go from there, they go out to the sea and pick those whales up, just like these eagles in the rivers pick salmon up [with their talons]. That’s right here, see? That bird is picking up that whale there, and then they bring them back to those high mountains. That’s where they nest. And when they bring those back, those bugs that grow there eat some of the leftovers from the bird’s nest. Those bugs that crawl there, my grandma said they’re as big as young seals.⁴

Ahwinona reported that only a few years ago, when he was squirrel hunting at Penny River near Nome, a large shadow passed over the ground on a cloudless day, perhaps cast by one of the giant birds on its way out to the Bering Sea.



FIGURE 5. Harpoon rest, Wales, 1881, E. W. Nelson collection. NMNH E048169. 15 cm tall.

BOX FOR HARPOON BLADES
(IKOIĠVIK, "STORAGE BOX")

A wooden container to hold and protect spare blades for the whaling harpoon was carried in the *umiaq* during hunting. Whaling captains cached the box after the whaling season, along with other hunting charms, amulets, and ritual objects (Bockstoce, 1977:102; Curtis, 1930:138–139; Kaplan et al., 1984; Kaplan and Barsness, 1986:138; Murdoch, 1892:247–250; Nelson, 1899:163, 439). Blade storage boxes were believed by Iñupiaq whalers to influence hunting success (Nelson, 1899:439) although exact conceptions about them were not historically recorded. The boxes are usually shaped like whales, but some represent other animals such as polar bears and birds.

Elders examined this whale-shaped box, collected by G. T. Emmons in about 1900 (Figure 6), as well as similar examples in the Murdoch–Ray collection (Murdoch, 1892:246–248). Its belly holds four triangular slate blades, secured beneath a wooden lid. The animal's tail is shown with cut-off tips, an apparent reference to the traditional practice of cutting off the ends of the flukes or flippers and sending them to the captain's wife to announce a successful hunt (Curtis, 1930:140–141; Rainey, 1947:260; Spencer, 1959:344). Today, as elders commented, the tips of a whale's tail are still removed but for practical reasons, to reduce drag when towing the animal at sea.

Brower likened the box to the ammunition cases that captains now carry in their boats to hold whale bombs, saying,

From a spiritual sense, my observation is that many of our whalers still retain some of the old beliefs. But instead of a box like this, we now have a whale gun box, where we have our ammunition. This would be like an ammunition box in the old days. Now we have what we call the bomb box today, where we keep all of these same types of implements, used for the purpose of killing the whale.⁵

Referring to the blade box, Kenneth Toovak said, "They're so powerful, some of these charms."⁶ He remarked that they were probably owned by shamans and that Point Hope men possessed a powerful system of whaling "medicine" in which boxes like these were employed. Brower concluded,

This one is a box for the whales. The traditional beliefs deal with the spirit of the whale, and the spirit of the whale and the spirit of man are both intertwined. It is expected that whales gave themselves to the whalers. They not only are giving them-



FIGURE 6. Whale-shaped box for holding harpoon blades, location unknown, 1900, G. T. Emmons collection. NMNH E204778. 45 cm long.

selves to the whalers, but to the captain's wife, who has a ritual. Because that person maintained a clean household. Because the spirit of the whale is believed to be that of a girl.⁷

Brower refers here to the identification of the captain's wife with the female spirit of the whale, both evoked by the artistic imagery of the blade box. Moreover, the whale gives its life not to the whaler but to his wife, in recognition of her skills, generosity, and observance of ritual (Bodenhorn, 1990).

BOAT SEAT (*Aqutim Iksivautana*,
"BOAT STEERER'S SEAT")

At Point Hope, wooden plaques carved with whale images were wedged inside the bow of the *umiaq*, making a small deck just in front of the harpooner. The whale figure was on the bottom side, facing downward and thus invisible. Froelich Rainey reported in 1940 that the harpooner tapped the top of the platform while he sang a song that summoned hidden whales to the surface (Lowenstein, 1993:150).

Talking about this example from the village of Wales (Figure 7), Barrow elders stated that it could be placed either in the bow of the boat (as at Point Hope) or in the stern as a seat for the boat steerer. In both places, the whale image would be on the bottom side. When used as a bow platform, Toovak said, the plaque would hold the coiled *aktunaaq* (bearded sealskin line) that attaches to the whale harpoon.



FIGURE 7. Whale plaque/seat for *umiaq*, Wales, purchased 1958. NMAI 226908.000. 42.5 cm wide.

A carved whale seat/platform belongs to the *umialik*. Toovak said, “*Uvvakii aḡviqsiuqtinmakua umiaḡiratiṅ piqpagipiḡataḡuugait qutchiksuaḡisuugait. Tavra tainna umialguruam marra sugauttaṅi.*” (“And so it is whalers really do have respect for their boats and have high regard. These are a boat captain’s items.”) Brower said that the im-

age of the whale is present in the boat as part of the ritual of whaling, and that its use is part of Iñupiaq sacred beliefs.⁸ The practice continues, as he noted in an earlier discussion. “Some whale boats still have an ivory effigy of the whale, tied on to the boat. Or they have an effigy of the whale under the seat of the steersman in the rear of the boat.”⁹

IVORY WHALING CHARMS (QAAGLIŃIQ,
“CHARM,” OR AANGUAQ, “AMULET”)

Murdoch collected 21 whale figures made of walrus ivory, wood, and soapstone that he identified as possible whaling charms, to be carried on the *umiaq* (Murdoch, 1892:402–405). Among these are three small carvings (3–4” long) made of darkly stained walrus ivory (Figure 8). The two smaller whales are a matched male–female pair (the far left and far right figures, respectively) and the larger figure in the center is another female, as identified by depictions of the external sex organs. Brower called this type of figure a *qaagliñiq*,¹⁰ meaning a “charm” that could attract animals but not compel them; it has the “power of bringing.” This he contrasted with more potent figures called *tuunḡaq* (shaman’s helping spirit), which were employed by shamans to control the animal’s spirit and which have “the power of killing.”¹¹ He and other elders used the term *aanguaq* (amulet) more ambiguously, as a synonym for both of the above.



FIGURE 8. Ivory whaling charms, Barrow, 1881–1883, Murdoch–Ray collection. Left to right: NMNH E089324, E089325, E089323. Largest 15 cm long.

SOAPSTONE FIGURE OF WHALE (AANGUAQ, "AMULET,"
OR TUUNGAQ, "SHAMAN'S HELPING SPIRIT")

Another whale image, about 5" long, collected by Murdoch (Figure 9) appears to have been carved from the bottom of an old soapstone pot (Murdoch, 1892:404). In the discussion among elders, this figure was called both *aanguaq* (amulet) and *tuungaq* (shaman's helping spirit). Observing what appeared to be blood that had been rubbed on the image, Brower suggested that, "Something like this could probably be carried by the shaman, and he would add blood from the whale. And so he carries with him the life force of the whale." Comparing this object with the ivory whaling charms (above), he said, "One has more of a life force than the other. One has more strength, depending on the strength of the shaman. This one—it was used as an amulet and ensured that the whale would be caught."¹²

Returning later to the topic of shamanism, Brower said,

Kenneth [Toovak] and I were talking earlier. When I was describing those things that were used by shamans, we are reminded by our elders that that kind of life has passed. It is over. And it's something that we did not inherit, because the life has changed. The traditional lifestyle—before Christianity set in—is gone. And



FIGURE 9. Stone whaling amulet, Barrow, 1881–1883, Murdoch-Ray collection. NMNH E089557. 15 cm long.

so are the powers associated with that. Because today our people have accepted a new faith and live a different lifestyle, which does not require the old way of life in order to be successful.¹³

HEADBAND (NIAQUGUN)

A headband acquired at Barrow by H. Richmond Marsh in 1901 is made of bleached skin, animal teeth (caribou or Dall sheep incisors), red beads, and sinew thread (Figure 10). Murdoch reported that headbands made of Dall (mountain) sheepskin with dangling stone figures of whales were "the badge of a whaleman," worn by the *umialik* and harpooner for spring preparatory rites and during the hunt itself (Murdoch, 1892:142). Some of these headbands were also decorated with mountain sheep teeth. Also at Barrow, John Simpson observed that headbands made of caribou skin and hung with caribou teeth were worn "only when engaged in whaling" (Simpson, 1875:243).

Murdoch was not able to acquire an example during the Point Barrow expedition because these articles were highly prized and rarely offered for sale. Barrow elders were not familiar with this type of headband, which is no longer worn. They suggested that it might be a woman's ornament worn during a traditional ceremony to mark the autumn equinox "when two stars appear" (*aagruuk*)—also referred to as the Iñupiaq New Year—or else during the Messenger Feast.¹⁴

BUCKET FOR GIVING DRINK TO WHALE
(IMIQAĠVIK) AND BUCKET HANDLE (IPU)

Elders identified a wooden bucket from Wales (Figure 11) in the NMAI collection as one that may have been used by a whaling captain's wife to provide fresh water to a newly caught whale. Pails for this purpose were also made of baleen. Toovak and Brower identified the bucket's various attachments. The ivory carvings on the rim (each is a *qin̄iyunaqsaun*, "ornament") represent polar bear heads and a whale. Several "hunter's items" hang on a leather cord: a polar bear tooth, a walrus tooth, part of a harpoon head, ivory weights for a bolas to hunt birds, and an ivory plug for a sealskin float. Two more float plugs (*puvuixutañit*) are tied to the handle. Brower suggested that all of these ornaments are symbols of success in both hunting and political leadership. "Communities respect the headman. That is indicated by making him gifts of this nature (indicates bucket), especially if he's a very successful hunter."¹⁵



FIGURE 10. Headband with mountain sheep or caribou teeth, Barrow, 1901, H. Richmond Marsh. NMNH E209841. 25 cm across.



FIGURE 11. Woman's ceremonial bucket, Wales, purchased 1952. NMAI 218952.000. 23 cm tall.



FIGURE 12. Handle for ceremonial bucket, Sledge Island, 1881, E. W. Nelson collection. NMNH E044690. 30 cm long.

An ivory handle with whale figures from Sledge Island (Figure 12) is from the same type of bucket. The water giving ceremony, Brower said, was to help the whale “move from the ocean to the land.”¹⁶

Historically, these buckets served in other rituals. An *umialik*'s wife gave a drink to the whaleboat when it was launched, because the sealskin-covered *umiaq* was itself viewed as a kind of living sea mammal (Brower, 1943: 48; Rainey, 1947:257; Spencer, 1959:334; Thornton, 1931:166–167). At Point Hope, women raised their buckets to Alignuk, the Moon Man who controlled game. People said that if the water in the woman's pot was clear and clean, Alignuk would drop a whale into it, meaning that her husband would be successful in the spring hunt (Pulu

et al., 1980:15–16; Rainey, 1947:270–271; Osterman and Holtved, 1952:228). At Point Hope and Barrow, skilled craftsmen made new buckets each year for the whaling captains and their wives. These were bigger each time to show the *umialik*'s growing experience. Buckets were initiated with songs and ceremonies in the *qargi* (Rainey, 1947:245; Spencer, 1959:334).

MAN'S DANCE GLOVES (ARGAAK, “PAIR OF GLOVES”)

A pair of Point Hope dance gloves collected in 1881 by E. W. Nelson (Figure 13) is made of tanned caribou skin and decorated with strings of red, white, and blue beads and with alder-dyed fringes at the wrists (Nelson,



FIGURE 13. Man's dance gloves, Point Hope, 1881, E. W. Nelson collection. NMNH E064271. 30 cm long.

1899:38, Pl. XX-1). A keeper string to go around the neck is ornamented with copper cylinders and blue beads. According to Kenneth Toovak,

“Sometimes a man had a special Eskimo dance song, an original song . . . *Atuutiqaguurut taipkuagguuq atuguuramiñnik* (“they have short songs that they sang”) . . . And he had prepared gloves for the special song that he made.

He added that these dance songs were performed at the summer whaling festival (*Nalukataq*) and winter hunting ceremonies, usually by whalers; at Point Hope songs would strictly be the property of different clans. Gloves were worn only during the dance, and then removed, a custom that continues to be observed in modern performances.¹⁷

CHILD'S SUMMER BOOTS (*PIÑIĠAK*, “PAIR OF BOOTS”)

Toovak recognized a pair of short summer boots (Figure 14) as the type made for children to wear during *Nalukataq*. The thin soles are made from young bearded sealskin that has been chewed to soften and crimp the toes, sides, and heels. Jane Brower identified the uppers as bleached sealskin dyed with alder bark, while the upper trim and straps are of plain bleached skin. Ronald Brower said,

In the old days, all the men, women, and children dressed in their finest clothes after the feast, when they were beginning to do the celebrations and dances. Everybody, after they had eaten, put on their finest clothes, including little children.¹⁸



FIGURE 14. Child's short summer boots for *Nalukataq*, location unknown, 1931, donated by Victor J. Evans. NMNH E359020. 16 cm tall.

DISCUSSION

Ethnological recording and collecting was assigned a lower priority than other scientific work by the leadership of the Point Barrow Expedition of 1881–1883, and it was only possible to carry it out during brief periods when ongoing magnetic and meteorological observations could be set aside. Murdoch's *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition* (1892), for all of its gaps and flaws (especially with regard to social and ceremonial life), reflects an extraordinary effort to overcome the limitations of time and opportunity in the field (cf. Burch, 2009, this volume).

It is probably safe to say that the ultimate value of this effort was not anticipated at the time. Perhaps more evident to members of the expedition was that the Point Barrow Iñupiat were at a cultural turning point, buffeted by the growing social and economic impacts of commercial whaling. Although Murdoch felt that they were “essentially a conservative people” who remained independent and were not yet overwhelmed by change, he cataloged the new pressures on their society. In the decades after the expedition, these pressures increased with the advent of shore-based whaling stations, Presbyterian missions, food shortages, and epidemics.

What was certainly not foreseeable in 1883 was that more than a century later the northernmost Alaskan vil-

lages would still be whaling and that the practice would remain a vital center point of the culture and way of life. Due to this surprising stability, whaling objects from the late nineteenth century remain as culturally legible signposts within a continuing tradition. Some nineteenth-century types are still in current use, such as carved ivory hunting charms. Others are interpretable within a persistent conceptual frame—the reciprocal relationship between whales and people, with its obligations of ritual and respect.

Also impossible to imagine in 1883 would have been the new uses of museum collections, especially the current strong emphasis on making them accessible for Alaska Native interpretation, cultural education, and community-based exhibitions (Crowell, 2004; Clifford, 2004; Fienup-Riordan, 1996, 2005). The collaborative work presented here is only preliminary. Limited by time and resources, only a few Iñupiaq elders have so far been able to view the Smithsonian materials and only a small part of the total Murdoch–Ray collection has been surveyed. Iñupiaq consultants pointed out the necessity of involving elders from all of the whaling communities, so that each could comment on material from his or her village in greater depth. The opportunity for this will come as the objects discussed in this paper and more than 600 others from all of Alaska’s indigenous cultural regions are brought to Anchorage for exhibition in 2010. The Arctic Studies Center gallery in Anchorage will be designed not only for display but also as a research center where community members can remove every object from its case for study and discussion. The Smithsonian collections, including the large number gathered as part of the first International Polar Year, represent a scientific, cultural, and historical legacy that will continue to yield new meanings.

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NOTES

1. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 34A:096–112.
2. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 30A:413–430.
3. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 29A:158–172.
4. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 20B:412–434.
5. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 29A:052–059.
6. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 29A:135.
7. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 29A:152–170.
8. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 34A:031–116.
9. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 29A:063.
10. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 29A:378.
11. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 31A:166.
12. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 31A:166–220.
13. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 32A:148–159.
14. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 28A:221–311.
15. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 34A:241–334.
16. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 29A:217–259.
17. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 28A:003–037.
18. Alaska Collections/Sharing Knowledge Project, Tape 27A:398–436.

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