Toward an archaeology of late prehistoric Eskimo bands in coastal northwest Alaska

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ABSTRACT

The methodology of analogical explanation of prehistoric Eskimo remains in northwest Alaska is examined. The sociospatial organization of Wales or, Kingigan, settlement and the greater Kingikmiut territory is evaluated as an example based on ethnohistorical studies and archaeological excavations carried out at three sites in the locality since 1926, and relationships between the archaeological material and historic socio-spatial divisions of Kingigan are explored. The review reveals that only two historic family compound locations have been sampled archaeologically, and that several others have not yet been sampled. However, existing samples nevertheless represent the larger Agianamiut, Kiatanamiut and Kurigitavik districts in the settlement, ca. AD 1800–1850 and extending back to prehistoric times from ca. AD 1000. A nomenclature for socio-spatial units is proposed that includes compound families, local bands, tribal capitals and tribes based on examples of historic Eskimo territorial organization. Caution is suggested in applying the nomenclature to prehistoric cultures in cases where continuity of artifact forms, art styles and motifs with historic local cultures are not demonstrable. Application of historic Eskimo analogues to prehistoric entities such as Birnirk and Punuk cultural remains risk fallacious interpretations because continuity with historic examples are not demonstrable and alternative explanations cannot be eliminated.

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Introduction

Relationships between historic Eskimo socio-territorial organization and archaeological remains in Eskimo areas have been an important focus for the author in several research projects in Alaska (e.g., Harritt, 1988, 1994, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2010a). A key element in the studies has been the use of historic Eskimo socio-territorial organization in interpreting late prehistoric cultural remains. This approach was described 45 years ago by Chang (1967: 231) who suggested that, "... the most feasible and fruitful approach for the archaeologist in reconstructing the socio cultural (and socio-spatial) system is to isolate social groups and to characterize their activities. An archaeological sociocultural system can be construed as a model of a series of such groups of various kinds and at various levels, ordered hierarchically and contrastively and integrated with a series of activity classes." The preceding presumes that sites within a given area represent portions of societal systems (cf. Trigger, 1989: 274). The matter of determining the function of a given location with its assemblage of artifacts within an operating society can be determined deductively through analysis of artifact sets based on comparisons with a general model, an approach that was also advanced by Wobst (1974, 1978) and Binford (2003). This subject continues to be a major theme in current discussions of archaeological methodology (e.g., Ensor, 2011: 217–220; Parker, 2011; Stone, 2003).

The present review includes some of the basic historic tenets of the approach and also a general review of how the approach has been utilized in examples of recent studies. An evaluation of the late prehistoric Wales, Alaska, socio-territorial organization is them carried out. The evaluation is based on archaeological and oral history data collected at Wales over the course of nine field seasons that were carried out from 1996 to 2006, and various archival sources and published and unpublished reports. The discussion that follows is presented in four segments. First, a brief review of the major methodological considerations in the use of socio territorial analogues to provide a context for the discussion that follows of specific historic and late prehistoric Eskimo socio-political-spatial organization in the Wales, or Kingikmiut, territory. Then discussed are issues related to the relationships between the ethnohistorical socio-spatial organization of Kingigan and archaeological explanation. This is followed by of a proposed nomenclature for socio-spatial organization for historic cases, based on Kingigan examples.

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General methodological considerations

The ethnic identity of inhabitants a given study area is a crucial element in studies of historic socio territorial organization in Eskimo areas of northwest Alaska, and a fundamental consideration in establishing where the boundaries between traditional territories are located. Studies of living groups demonstrate that a number of variables embedded in fundamental cultural patterns and practices provide bases for ethnic distinctions among the membership (e.g., Barth, 1956, 1998a, 1998b; Bentley, 1987: 27–29). From a cross cultural perspective, variables may include distinctive cultural histories, adaptations to specific ecologies, and economic interests (e.g., Barth, 1956). In these types of social environments, anthropological evaluations of significance and organizational patterns are considerably enhanced through analyses of self ascribed ethnic identity by the members of a given group (e.g., Barth, 1998a; Bentley, 1987: 24–25). As stated by Bentley (1987: 34), "Ethnic identities involve attaching significance to perceived differences between people as well as to sensed affinities among them...Dimensions of differences (and similarity) never covary perfectly and may be quite independent of each other." Nevertheless, among the membership of the group, group affiliation is expressed and otherwise signaled to non-members through the use of markers such as unique styles of clothing or styles expressed in other types of physical objects, and through the use of symbols (Stone, 2003: 45).

In prehistoric cases, distinctions between artifact assemblages of socio-political groups and even different cultural groups may be blurred as a result of activities mentioned above as well as, population movements, and assimilation of groups into larger groups. These types of issues have been addressed extensively in past debates concerning the cultural history approach to archaeology versus a processual approach sometimes designated as the 'new archaeology' of the 1960s (Binford, 1983: 397–399; Jones, 2008: 325; Lyman and O'Brien, 2004: 376–382). An important theme in the discussions has been the concept of and 'normative culture' (e.g., Jones, 2008: 323–327; Lyman and O'Brien, 2004: 370–372). The history of the cultural 'norm' has been reviewed by Willey and Sabloff (1980: 173–176) and Jones (2008: 325), among others and will not be presented here, but the tenets of normative culture consist of:

> (1) human groups are bounded by behaviors, beliefs, ideational systems, and symbols that are widely shared within a group but that differ between groups; (2) shared traits are socially transmitted and maintained; (3) within-group similarities and between-group differences are "cultural"; (4) culture is normally replicated with great fidelity across generations; and, (5) fidelity of replication is effected by learning and enculturation (Lyman and O'Brien, 2004: 371).

It is worth noting that the preceding definition of normative culture is consistent with the concept of 'habitus' as defined by Bordieu (1977) with respect to functioning as a key concept in the theoretical underpinnings of ethnicity. In this regard, Bentley (1987: 29) likens habitus to learning a language: "Like the deep structures of generative grammars, the schemes and dispositions constituting the habitus produce an infinite variety of surface expressions, but all these expressions can be comprehended by those competent in the underlying code."

The linkage between a given example of normative cultural cognizance and its associated material culture is a key, fundamental presumption in achieving archaeological explanation of extinct prehistoric ethnic groups. Concerns about reliability of connections between prehistoric cultures and the material culture they produced were included in some of the earliest studies of culture areas in America. In an example from early 20th century American archaeology, Wissler (1914) suggests that tribal identity may not coincide with distinguishing attributes among the artifacts they produced due to a lack of correspondence with a given culture and language. Specific cases where the characteristic or distinctive physical culture of an ethnic group may be lost or fade include migrations from a home land to an area occupied by a different group; under these circumstances the distinguishing characteristics of the immigrant group are lost (Wissler, 1914: 468–469). A more recent but similar assessment suggests that an important aspect of group relations across boundaries is the sharing of elements of material culture as a result of interactions between groups, which may include among other activities, trade, economic partnerships of various types and bride exchanges (cf. Jones, 2008: 326–328). In this respect, boundaries between groups are complex and are dependent on active ongoing interactions among each membership to affirm and define differences between groups (Bentley, 1987; Stone, 2003: 32–34).

A broadly focused study of hunter-gatherer socio-territorial organization by Green and Perlman provides a conceptual approach to examining social relations between groups (Green and Perlman, 1985: 3–13). They note that "In archaeology...(the socio-spatial)...boundary problem involves definitions of types and patterns: artifact types and settlement patterns, for example, rest upon theoretical and empirical considerations concerning behavior, material culture, and their expression in the archaeological record (Green and Perlman, 1985: 4; also, Wobst, 1974: 149). "Green and Perlman suggest that archaeological cultures by their nature are closed conceptualizations of cultures, circumscribed by the attributes that define them; the processes of change, including introductions of new attributes and losses of old characteristics, do not fit neatly into such circumscribed entities (Green and Perlman, 1985: 6; also, Justeson and Hampson, 1985: 16). An approach advanced by Justeson and Hampson to analysis of social patterns and processes builds on the Green and Perlman concepts, but is based on general systems theory (Justeson and Hampson, 1985: 15–17). They agree with Green and Perlman that explicitly defined social systems are in effect 'closed' systems, however, they suggest that patterns and processes in a given system can be modeled most effectively by stability (patterns) that can be observed in zones with high levels of intereaction (e.g., the core area of a society), and change (processes) that can be observed in boundary zones (e.g., the boundaries of a societal territory (Justeson and Hampson, 1985: 16, 18).

In a later evaluation of linkages between material culture and ethnic groupings Stone points out the importance of employing multiple lines of evidence in interpreting prehistoric materials. She (Stone, 2003: 43) suggests the following.

> How we determine whether an aspect of material culture is used to signal ethnicity ... is complex, made all the more so by the situational nature of ethnic expression ... We cannot assume a one-to-one relationship between a list of cultural traits and identity as was assumed in the past ... the only important traits are those imbued with meaning by the actors themselves ... Also, because there is no one-to-one relationship, we cannot decipher social interaction by looking at only one artifact class ... Rather, multiple lines of evidence are crucial to understand the situational expression of ethnicity and whether or not ethnicity is even an important role among members of a community ... That being said, the choice of symbols and instances in which they are displayed is not random. *For the meaning of symbols used to be interpreted correctly by both the sender and the receiver, they must be mutually identifiable and interpretable* ... (emphasis added).