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Résumé de l'article

Il y a deux décennies, Asen Balikci (1989) et David Riches (1990) se demandaient si la recherche sur les Inuit, en dépit de la production d'une abondante littérature, avait contribué aux débats théoriques en anthropologie. Burch (1994) leur emboîte le pas en questionnant plus largement la pertinence des études sur les chasseurs-cueilleurs. La thèse centrale de cet article est que la recherche sur l'économie inuit a, en fait, largement contribué à redéfinir ce qu'est la subsistance. Autrefois décrite comme regroupant les activités économiques les plus élémentaires, la subsistance est aujourd'hui comprise comme une adaptation culturelle. Cela a aussi mis en lumière le fait que peu de sociétés peuvent être décrites telle qu'elles l'étaient dans *Man the Hunter* (Lee et DeVore 1968). Au contraire, aujourd'hui les chasseurs-cueilleurs de l'Arctique à l'Australie sont en contact quasi-constant avec les économies de marché et avec une réalité où l'argent joue un rôle crucial dans leurs modes de vie. C'est à cet égard que la recherche sur les Inuit, comme l'a noté Sahlins (1999), a contribué conceptuellement à la fois aux études sur les chasseurs-cueilleurs et à l'anthropologie.

Inuit and modern hunter-gatherer subsistence

George W. Wenzel*

Résumé: Les Inuit et la subsistance des chasseurs-cueilleurs à l'époque moderne

Il y a deux décennies, Asen Balikci (1989) et David Riches (1990) se demandaient si la recherche sur les Inuit, en dépit de la production d'une abondante littérature, avait contribué aux débats théoriques en anthropologie. Burch (1994) leur emboîte le pas en questionnant plus largement la pertinence des études sur les chasseurs-cueilleurs. La thèse centrale de cet article est que la recherche sur l'économie inuit a, en fait, largement contribué à redéfinir ce qu'est la subsistance. Autrefois décrite comme regroupant les activités économiques les plus élémentaires, la subsistance est aujourd'hui comprise comme une adaptation culturelle. Cela a aussi mis en lumière le fait que peu de sociétés peuvent être décrites telle qu'elles l'étaient dans *Man the Hunter* (Lee et DeVore 1968). Au contraire, aujourd'hui les chasseurs-cueilleurs de l'Arctique à l'Australie sont en contact quasi-constant avec les économies de marché et avec une réalité où l'argent joue un rôle crucial dans leurs modes de vie. C'est à cet égard que la recherche sur les Inuit, comme l'a noté Sahlins (1999), a contribué conceptuellement à la fois aux études sur les chasseurs-cueilleurs et à l'anthropologie.

Abstract: Inuit and modern hunter-gatherer subsistence

Some two decades ago, Asen Balikci (1989) and David Riches (1990) questioned whether research on Inuit, despite production of a voluminous literature, had made any contribution to theoretical issues in anthropology. On their heels, Burch (1994) asked very much the same about Hunter-Gatherer Studies. The thesis of the present paper is that research on Inuit economy has, in fact, contributed importantly to a rethinking of the shape and content of subsistence. Once described as encompassing the most basic economic activities, it is now understood as a cultural adaptation. This has import because few hunter-gatherer societies can be portrayed as they were at the time of the *Man the Hunter* symposium (Lee and DeVore 1968). Rather, today, hunter-gatherers, from the Arctic to Australia, experience near-constant contact with market economies and a reality in which money plays a critical part in their livelihoods. It is in this regard that research on Inuit, as noted by Sahlins (1999), has conceptually contributed both to Hunter-Gatherer Studies and to anthropology.

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Introduction

Slightly more than a century after Boas had published his ethnographic classic, *The Central Eskimo*, Asen Balikci (1989) and David Riches (1990) independently examined the state of Inuit anthropology. Their assessments, although following different paths, with Balikci focusing on individual works and Riches taking a distinctly more thematic approach, were remarkably coincident. For instance, each depicted Inuit Studies as having progressed in a cyclical and even “boom-bust” fashion.

The most striking element of these analyses, however, was their shared conclusion that Inuit Studies had found little, if any, theoretical import within anthropology, although Balikci excepted Mauss’s *Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés Eskimos* (1906). Essentially, the two respected “Eskimologists” were of the view that a century of intense study that had made Eskimos “one of the world’s best known [peoples]” (Riches 1990: 71) had otherwise done little more than reinforce in the minds of colleagues and the public that Inuit possessed “the most precarious human adaptation on earth” (Lee 1968: 40; Sahlins 1968: 85).

In a paper presented at the 9th Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS), I undertook (Wenzel 2002) to address their shared complaint about the virtual absence of any serious impact that research on Inuit has had on Hunter-Gatherer Studies generally or, in broader terms, on anthropology. The paper especially focused on the role that “Inuit Studies” (with “Inuit” meant as an inclusive term for Eskimo societies) has played in expanding our perspective on subsistence as a theoretical construct and on how this expanded perspective may help us understand modern hunter-gatherer adaptation beyond the Inuit experience. In essence, the thesis was that the Inuit experience with southern economic influences and other penetrations, far from being transformational, offered an example of the adaptability of subsistence societies to new and ostensibly disruptive technological, economic, and social inputs.

Since that CHAGS, I have had occasion to discuss this thesis with a number of respected colleagues (see Acknowledgments), although unfortunately not in any consistent fashion. This article is, therefore, an attempt to pick up that “dropped thread,” not least because a considerable proportion of recent (post-2000) Inuit-related research, as Riches and Balikci complained, has followed new thematic, and generally atheoretical, tracks. The most recent one, under the broad umbrella of the Human Dimensions of Climate Change program, has very much focused on Inuit adaptation to expected changes in the Arctic’s climate and biophysical systems.

Objective

The purpose of this article is not to rebut Balikci or Riches. Instead, its intent is to enlarge the discussion that they initiated about how research on Inuit has contributed or, in their estimate, not contributed to matters of broad theoretical importance or, to phrase it another way, to matters that are not specific to Inuit.

As such, the focus here will be on how research on Inuit subsistence has contributed to an expanded conceptualisation and enlarged understanding of what constitutes subsistence as an adaptation in terms of the experience of at least some hunter-gatherers over the last several decades. In doing so, the intent is to explore whether research on Inuit may be applied to the modern situations of other foraging societies. Additionally, a secondary intent is to offer some explanation, following from those offered by Balikci and Riches, for the apparent disconnect between the voluminous research on Inuit and the conceptual issues related to hunter-gatherers, if not to anthropology writ large.

This will require a brief discussion of the two approaches, adaptationist cultural ecology and acculturation/culture change, that have principally framed Inuit research (see Usher 1993: 103-109; also Wenzel 2001) for much of the time since the mid-1950s. This “backcasting” will be neither a comprehensive survey of the early classics of Inuit ethnography nor a critique of the “veritable explosion of monographs on Eskimos” (Riches 1990: 82) that Riches has termed the “Middle Years” (ca. 1955-1985) of research on Inuit. The most recent trends in Inuit-related research (contaminants, identity, food security, climate change) will not be touched, other than tangentially.

Why, then, has Inuit research, given its acknowledged volume, had much less impact than might otherwise be expected? This question will require a review of certain formative influential works mainly about Inuit during what I loosely consider to be the period of “deep” acculturation research, with the central question of how research on Inuit has conceptually contributed to hunter-gatherer anthropology. I will argue that certain elements of Inuit research have made more of a conceptual contribution than has generally been appreciated, with reference to a few specific but influential studies of Inuit subsistence culture that, I believe, also speak to the larger field of Hunter-Gatherer Studies.

Inuit research post-1955: Contesting perspectives

As Balikci and Riches make clear (see also Hughes 1984), two perspectives, adaptation and acculturation, have been the primary shapers of post-World War II Eskimo studies. Each has influenced, if in opposing ways, the paradigms for analysis of Inuit culture. While the acculturation viewpoint has virtually disappeared from Inuit Studies, at least as it was expressed through the 1960s, as a grounding perspective, the extent to which the Inuit can be considered traditional remains a point of contention. Indeed, much of the research encompassed within such new research foci as the Human Dimensions of Climate Change interestingly combines elements of both perspectives (e.g., Ford 2009).

The acculturation view

It is a tragic fact that [...] the clash between aboriginal and Euro-American cultures is the creation of a proletariat possessing [...] neither one nor the other [...] (Birket-Smith 1965: 55).

[...] the catalogues from American and Canadian department stores, overflowing parts of the Eskimo area in the last 15-20 years [...] may [...] have been even more “Rubicon-izing” than the presence of the missionaries in these areas [...] (Kleivan 1965: 62).

The “classic” literature on the Inuit by Boas, Jenness, Birket-Smith, and Rasmussen, while perhaps lacking in theory, provided deep ethnographic description. A strong element within these ethnographies was the essential dependence on, and generally successful, adaptation to the local environment by various Inuit societies. Whether completely accurate or not, the notion of a “balanced” Inuit-environment dynamic remained the dominant view in scholarly studies on the Inuit into the 1950s, whereupon the presentation of the Inuit as a culture in transition clearly became prominent.

While this shift almost certainly came about through a confluence of secular¹ and academic trends, Murphy and Steward’s (1956) depiction of acculturation as an inevitable transformational process seems to have been particularly influential. For instance, VanStone (1960: 174), writing about the “successful combination of subsistence and wage economies” at Point Hope, Alaska, cites Murphy and Steward to support the idea that increasing dependence by the Inupiat on wage employment was certain to tip the local economy away from subsistence (ibid.: 186-187).

Acculturation rapidly became the conceptual framework in Canada. Vallee (1962), in his major work on Inuit, starkly set out the essential theoretical opposition that tugged at research into the 1980s in his characterisation of Baker Lake Inuit as being either Nunamiut, oriented to hunting and trapping, or Kabloonamiut, experiencing cultural loss through the influence of non-Inuit institutions and sociality. Vallee’s Nunamiut-Kabloonamiut division was far from rhetorical. Indeed, the power of the acculturation perspective is evidenced by a decade of monographs (e.g., Graburn 1969; Honigmann and Honigmann 1965, 1970; Hughes 1960; Vallee 1962, 1967; VanStone 1960; Willmott 1961) and articles documenting change among Inuit (for a comprehensive overview of the literature of this period, see Hughes 1984).

Just how deeply the acculturative process had progressed is evidenced in Hughes’s (1965) near-monographic treatment, “Under Four Flags: Recent Culture Change Among the Eskimos.” Encompassing, both geographically and societally, Hughes detailed acculturation as pervading nearly every aspect of Inuit life. In it, a sociocultural and socioeconomic scenario is framed that, as he summarised in the article’s closing *Retrospectus* (ibid.: 47-54), was nothing if not depressing.

¹ Balikci (pers. comm.) sets the onset of what he has termed the “Government Era” as ca. 1955.

Even more depressingly, few of those who responded to Hughes's (1965) article much disagreed with, let alone contested, his primary thesis that the transformation of Inuit into Kabloonamiut was fast becoming inevitable. Even those who demurred (Chance 1965: 56-57; Honigmann 1965: 60-61) did so only with regard to certain elements of his analysis. A number of his dismal points were still being made into the 1980s (see Vallee et al. 1984; *cf.* Chance 1984).

Cultural ecology

If a snowmobile is perceived to have greater utility than a dog sled, then the ownership of a snowmobile will become one of the criteria defining the traditional Eskimo hunter (Kemp 1971: 115).

The above statement by Kemp clearly departs from the acculturationist view of change among the Inuit. In linking snowmobiles and traditional culture, he flatly contradicted the view that technological change "disrupted the previous balance between the technological, social, and cultural value spheres" (Chance 1965: 56). Rather than being a symptom, if not a signal, of the deep changes that Vallee and others perceived as demarcating Kabloonamiut from Nunamiut, he suggested that technology, even snowmobiles as a replacement for the signature Inuit dog-team, was only about appliances and spoke less to social and cultural values than to its actual purpose.

If Kemp's conclusions about Inuit adaptation were at variance with some 15 years of acculturation-dominated work, it was also dissonant with respect to Inuit cultural ecology research. By the 1960s, Julian Steward's (1955) cultural ecology was becoming a major influence in anthropology and by the mid-1960s was displacing the acculturation approach in Inuit Studies. As Balikci (1989: 105) noted, this approach was very much conducted within Steward's conceptual framework, focusing on "the processes of ecological adaptation [...] creative of specific cultural forms."

With respect to the Inuit, the cultural ecology of the 1960s emphasised the technological aspects of the culture core (Balikci 1968), the resource/subsistence system (Nelson 1969), and the band level of social organisation (Damas 1969a) as chief adaptive features. Given the understood "condition" of Inuit culture, *à la* Hughes, across much of the North American Arctic, early cultural ecology analyses essentially consisted of reconstructing traditional Inuit adaptation (e.g., Balikci et al. 1968: 83-85) with the Inuit being treated as a "marginal case" at the seminal *Man the Hunter* symposium of Lee and DeVore (1968). In no small sense, 1960s cultural ecology accepted that Inuit faced the cultural "Rubicon" that so concerned Kleivan (1965). The effects of guns and fur trading that were central to the Contact-Traditional Period (see Helm and Damas 1963) were thus compounded by centralised settlements, snowmobiles and, especially, the growing pervasiveness of money in the post-1950s "Government Era." This was so certain that Damas (1969b) was of the view that as Inuit wants for imported goods became needs, there would be an inevitable economic shift away from land activities and toward participation in market/wage relations.

Inuit subsistence (re-)conceptualised

[...] a subsistence economy is a highly specialized mode of production and distribution of not only goods and services, but of social forms [...] (Lonner 1980: 5).

Seemingly of minor importance at the time, Kemp's statement about why a snowmobile had greater utility than a dog-team—not only to facilitate the capture of traditional resources but also to maintain a particular set of socioeconomic relations—“socialised” the bias in Inuit cultural ecology research on the Inuit economy. It not only analysed a material continuity between Inuit and their environment, and so ran counter to acculturationists' predictions, but also showed that the Inuit environment included intra- and inter-societal relations, and how material changes like snowmobiles could possess culturally congruent adaptive benefits. Seen in these terms, subsistence was less about “hunting animals” and instead more about a total social phenomenon (Mauss 1925).

This is not to say that the cultural ecology-adaptation approach turned away from examining the material conditions of human-environment relations in and beyond the North. In fact, it made the conceptual disjunction between acculturation and adaptation perspectives even more stark and not least with respect to the Inuit. After all, the Inuit were no longer living “on the land.” By the late 1960s, most of them had relocated to centralised settlements where modern health, education, and social services were available (Damas 2002), while such cultural “markers” as dog-teams and winter seal harpoon hunting had been replaced by snowmobiles and rifles.

Contrarily, Inuit continued to derive a major portion of their sustenance from hunting (Kemp 1971; Smith 1991). Technologies that had been seen as transitional, if not outright transformational, increasingly were interpreted as adaptive (see Jorgensen 1990; Wenzel 1991) and critical to traditional food production. Further, following on Kemp's view about Inuit “traditionalness,” these adaptations were seen as important not just for their effect on the material circumstances of Inuit, but also for their sociocultural contribution. As I (Wenzel 1989, 1991) and others (Condon et al. 1995; Jorgensen 1990) noted, in addition to the changes in settlement patterning between the mid-1950s and the 1970s with their associated time and distance constraints, snowmobiles and motorboats facilitated kinship-based hunting and food-sharing networks that would have otherwise been at a minimum badly stressed by the social and ecological costs of traditional technologies.

That the direction of Inuit research was “resolved” toward the ecological perspective (see Matthiasson 1992) is of only modest historical interest. That this resolution involved a synthesis in which acculturation theory provided the context and cultural ecology the content of a re-conceptualised approach to Inuit subsistence under conditions of modernity is, however, relevant to Inuit Studies, and to contemporary hunter-gatherer research.

The mixed economy adaptation

Despite the pull of land claims, entailing as it did societies as ecologically different and geographically separated as Mackenzie Delta Inuvialuit and Quebec Nunavimmiut, toward regionalised land use mapping, TEK (traditional ecological knowledge), and harvest studies, the thread that consistently crosscut this trend toward regionalisation was research on subsistence. That subsistence, as an economic model, is an integral part of Inuit research is not at all surprising. After all, “economic arrangements” are the second element in Steward’s (1955: 38) original methodology, and early cultural ecology research on Inuit was nothing if not Stewardian in its orientation (see Balikci 1989: 105; Riches 1990: 84), focusing heavily on resource seasonality, extractive technology, and the like. As cultural ecology emerged as the dominant paradigm in Hunter-Gatherer Studies (Lee and DeVore 1968), the term “subsistence” underwent re-evaluation and ceased to mean resource scarcity and a marginal livelihood (Sharif 1986). It became synonymous with affluence (Sahlins 1968). In relation to this new formulation, the Inuit remained an outlier (Balikci et al. 1968; Pluciennik 2001).

Even as the cultural ecology paradigm began to supplant the acculturation perspective, research was mainly on how resources were acquired. Emphasis was on the techno-environmental aspects of Inuit adaptation (Balikci 1970; Nelson 1969), essentially about the how and what of Inuit hunting and very little about what happened once seals and caribou were in hand. To paraphrase Halperin (1989), an “acquisitional-appropriational” dichotomy was created in which the economics of harvesting was paramount and little attention given to the “social forms” that Lonner (1980) noted as being integral to ordering these activities as an economy. Social forms included the “economic arrangements” (Steward 1955: 37) that connect producers and consumers.

Several influences led to a rethinking of, first, Inuit subsistence as an adaptive concept and, second, the content of Inuit subsistence as an adaptation. The first, ironically given by Riches (1990), came out of the land claims process. From the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act to the Labrador Inuit Nunatsiavut Land Claim, the importance of “subsistence activities” as connecting not only people to the land but also to each other was made abundantly evident. Subsistence was both an extractive and social process for Inuit, Cree, and Dene. Anything but a simple metaphor, Berger’s (1977) “Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland” characterisation of northern peoples’ livelihoods put social substance into the content and context of northern subsistence.

The second element was, in its own way, no less ironic in resetting an understanding of Inuit subsistence. New tools, like bioenergetics and optimal foraging theory, had entered cultural ecology in order to better explicate what Inuit did, and they were now blurring the boundary between ecological and economic relations in both conceptual and actual terms, thus providing a means for interpreting money—the most “Rubiconising” of all Government Era intrusions into Inuit life—as a subsistence input.

The shift in perspective developed through work that, while at least partially rooted in Inuit subsistence as a political issue, also grappled with understanding economic

aspects: how Inuit were adapting new technologies; the time demands of a wage work environment; and, most especially, use of money to facilitate traditional resource activities (Langdon 1984; Lonner 1980; Usher 1981; Wolfe 1979). These formulations coalesced into what Wolfe and Walker (1987) termed the mixed economy adaptation, as research showed that the same normative institutions—kinship, co-residence, age relations—that structured traditional economic relations (food sharing) were accommodating these novel variables. The result was recognition that Inuit subsistence, as a socioeconomic system, far from collapsing in the face of insurmountable constraints, was as responsive to snowmobiles as it was to other environmental disturbances.

These mixed economy adjustments were certainly not easy, as reflected in the acculturation literature of the 1950s and 1960s, when the Inuit were portrayed as the first hunter-gatherer culture to succumb to what some expected to be a global phenomenon (Sahlins 1999). In point of fact, they exhibited adaptive resilience, substituting new artifacts for old and maintaining valued cultural norms and goals while integrating new inputs, even when faced with culturally deleterious extra-cultural factors (Wenzel 1991) and when seemingly more rational economic choices were available (Jorgensen 1990; Kruse 1991; Langdon 1991).

A social economy

As Inuit cultural ecology developed, various methods for valuing traditional resource activities, through shadow pricing, nutritional equivalence to imported foods or, more qualitatively, cultural preference, were employed to explicate the economics of harvesting, which was seen as central to Inuit subsistence. These approaches, along with providing econometrics useful for valuing what Inuit produced, also made it clear that the Inuit economy involved feedback loops that integrated the monetised and traditional resource sectors so that cash was “as fully a part of the resource environment as food and other natural raw materials” (Wenzel 1986: 22). Insight was gained into the content of subsistence, and it was substantially different from the insights of either acculturation or development-oriented analyses, but understanding lagged in how this integration was regulated.

In part, this lag may be related to the influence of Sahlins (1968, 1972) just at the time that Inuit research was moving toward ecological explanations. His characterisation of the hunter-gatherer economy as “sharing” and rooted in generalised reciprocity did nothing less than frame subsistence as an open-ended series of exchanges between individuals. Further, it suggested that the movement of resources was something that was innately ordered. Discussion ensued among hunter-gatherer specialists and economic anthropologists about whether this reciprocity was delayed, immediate, or balanced (see Hunt 2000), doing little to unpack the transactional realities of “sharing.” This situation was not helped by the simple fact that hunting, as a mode of production, formed such an essential and dominant, not to mention visible, aspect of Inuit livelihood and ecological adaptation. In a sense, this visibility drowned

out information about how seal or caribou meat went from the hand of an Inuk hunter into the pots of kindred and neighbours.

Finally, there was the obviously dominant role of money in Inuit ecological activities. To the extent that Inuit continued to apply this scarce resource for the harvesting of food, its effect was to call into question the “authenticity” of Inuit as hunter-gatherers, as its presumed impact was “known” to be nothing less than the transformation of Inuit culture *à la* Hughes and Vallee.

Both developments were extreme in their own ways, but also similar in one respect. Neither considered the Inuit economy, as opposed to economics, in its full sense. Both focused on change in aspects of Inuit means of production, technology, and engagement with the wage/transfer regime in the North, and neither considered the effect of Inuit social relations of production in moderating some of these impacts. As with any economy, the transfer and exchange of resources among Inuit were as “institutionally” regulated as in “developed” economies—except that the institutions were kinship and co-residence rather than banks and contract law.

This is where Inuit research has offered a real conceptual contribution to the larger field of Hunter-Gatherer Studies. While the mixed economy is generally glossed as an adaptation that combines money and imported technologies to facilitate the continuation of traditional resource production, the success of this mix is, as noted by Natcher (2009), that economic transfers are socially regulated. The essence of the mixed economy, as with the more conventionally understood composition of Inuit subsistence, is that the flow of its “goods and services” is ordered by the structural connections between participants, in the Eastern Arctic notably through kinship (see Damas 1972) but also via less formal relationships (see Van de Velde 1956 for the mutuality inherent in co-residence).

In structural terms, the contemporary mixed economy adaptation, as practised by Inuit, functions very similarly to the traditional system. It deviates from the latter solely with respect to the inclusion of money, and especially with respect to how money enters the system. Whereas several hunters would generally cooperate to acquire traditional resources, “capturing” money necessarily conforms to Euro-Canadian models of work with a person exchanging her or his labour for wages. In terms of supporting the monetised sector of the mixed economy, individualisation has increasingly become the case. The global politics of, first, anti-sealing boycotts and, more recently, climate environmentalism have all but closed opportunities for Inuit to derive monetary benefit from traditional activities (see Wenzel 1991, 2008).

Still, Inuit continued to hunt at greater monetary cost than ever. This cost—which required spending time in often menial wage work to buy and operate expensive equipment that rapidly became obsolete—made participation in the traditional subsistence sector appear to be rooted in economically irrational nostalgia. However, this is far from the totality of the Inuit mixed economy livelihood. Traditional resource data collected by the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board Harvest Survey (NWMB

2004) shows that this production across the 12 communities of the Qikiqtaaluk (formerly Baffin) Region amounted in 2001, the last year for which there is comprehensive information, to 1,087,392 kg or 320 grams per day for the Inuit residents of these communities (Wenzel et al. 2010). Even when this production is modestly priced at \$10.00 per kg, its shadow value is \$10,873,920.

Leaving aside the impressiveness of these numbers in their own right, they provide a bridge that joins the economic/material (content-cost) to the economic/conceptual (consistency-constancy) aspects of Inuit subsistence. The result is a portrait of Inuit subsistence as a system that is as much a sociocultural construct as it is a socioeconomic construct. Viewed from a systems perspective, subsistence is then a social process through which material production and the consumption of that production are ordered through social norms into an integrated whole. In the Eastern Canadian Arctic, this system is termed *ningiq* (Damas 1972), or *ningiqtuq* (Wenzel 1991), and encompasses neither a single activity nor its specific content, but rather a complex of economic activities that together comprise the Inuit social economy.

Inuit remain hunters more than a half-century after centralised settlement, snowmobiles, and money became significant elements of Inuit subsistence culture. Among these elements, none is now more dominant than money. In point of fact, in the mixed economy adaptation that has emerged over the last 60 years, money has become as much a part of the Inuit resource environment, and thus subsistence culture, as is traditional food. But it is also the case that money “is perceived as the means to accomplish and facilitate the harvest, and not as an end in itself” (Wenzel 1986: 314).

From Inuit to hunter-gatherer subsistence

In 1994, Burch suggested that Hunter-Gatherer Studies would soon be, if not already, confronted by a crisis having three dimensions: the practical, the methodological, and the conceptual. The first two, put most basically, relate to the disappearance of truly autonomous forager societies (Burch 1994: 442) and whether a general model of hunter-gatherers can be developed from research on contemporary foragers (ibid.: 446). Regarding the third dimension, he asked whether “a class of empirical referents for the concept hunter-gatherer society exist?”

Burch’s concerns were, and still are, trenchant. The position of most hunter-gatherer peoples appears even worse today in relation to national and, increasingly, international entities than when he wrote. And, if the literature on culture change among forager societies is correct, one of the chief indicators of loss of authenticity (see Peterson 1991a: 14), and, thus, negative change, is money. In no small way, money has taken the place of the negative influencers of the Hughes “Four Flags” era, and monetisation that of religious conversion.

In actuality, the dilemma confronting Inuit and, increasingly, all hunter-gatherer subsistence cultures is neither the penetration of money *per se* nor its increasing

necessity for traditional food gathering. Rather, it is that the production of money requires a very different pattern of labour allocation than many traditional resource activities—principally, its acquisition is through the sale of the individual’s labour rather than through collective action.

This is not an especially new theoretical problem. The conflict between “pure” subsistence and market-based influences was highlighted by Polanyi (1944) and has been the subject of various substantive analyses of “primitive/archaic” economies (Dalton 1962; Gemici 2008; Polanyi 1957; Pryor 1977). Following from Polanyi (1944: 251), Gemici (2008: 18) addresses the issue of integrative relations by contrasting “embedded” (i.e. reciprocity and redistribution) with “disembedded” (market) systems of economy, and notes that “what defines an institutional arrangement is not a type of individual behavior but the characteristics of the ‘structure.’” Further, what is critical is not whether these forms can coexist, but which “arrangement is the one that has a central role in achieving integration” (ibid.: 19). The mixed economy practised by Inuit today exemplifies the tension between the social economy governing traditional resources and the disembedded economic activities that are increasingly necessary to acquire money.

However, data from Alaska (Fienup-Riordan 1986; Jorgensen 1990; Langdon 1991; Wolfe and Walker 1989), Greenland (Dahl 2000), and Canada (Chabot 2003; Gombay 2010; Harder and Wenzel 2012; Wenzel 1989, 2000) provide ample evidence that money has not overwhelmed the social economy (or priced traditional food production out of sight). Nor has there been created a dual economic system in which the monetised and traditional sectors are separate both materially and ideologically. Rather, what has evolved among Inuit is an adaptation whose integrated nature is well described by Peterson in his discussion of Northern Territory Aborigines of Australia, despite colonisation and marginalisation, as authentic hunter-gatherers.

The continuing significance of kinship relations in the face of cash and commoditization is a measure of the extent to which supposed entailments of the market economy—secularization, technical rationality and individualism—have not been realized. Obligations to kin still appear to provide the context in which economic decisions are made and money used, and to take primacy over maximizing individual use and control of cash (Peterson 1991b: 82).

This is not to say that integrating money as a social economy/subsistence resource was or is a seamless process. As Ichikawa (1991) shows, the Mbuti of the Democratic Republic of the Congo have modified aspects of their traditional subsistence arrangements to accommodate the need for money. Likewise, Altman (1987) and Feit (1991) discuss the tension between the monetary and traditional sectors in the mixed economies of, respectively, the Aborigines of North Australia and the James Bay Cree of Canada. In all these cases, as with the Inuit, these tensions are at least moderated, if not completely mitigated, through core social relational mechanisms—for Inuit and Aborigines via kinship, and for Cree via co-residency and co-production partnerships.

As different as these societies are in terms of their respective environmental, sociopolitical, and economic situations, each maintains a functioning mixed economy adaptation. In doing so, they share at least two important congruencies. The first one is that money, *per se*, does not preclude or displace social relations as a key organiser of economic behaviour. Inuit still hunt because meat remains culturally significant and the produce of hunting is still the best source of high-quality food. To do this effectively today, however, requires money to obtain and operate non-traditional technologies that are used to fulfill traditional objectives (see Wenzel 1991). Money, usually after it has been transformed into a rifle, boat, or snowmobile, becomes incorporated into the social economy, or *ningiqtuq* system, and many of the same rules apply to these items as to traditional resources.

A second congruence is that new institutional arrangements may form to optimise the utility of money for achieving subsistence goals. This is exactly what Kishigami (2000) details in the case of Nunavik Inuit (see also Chabot 2003; Gombay 2010). There, specifically-designated hunter support funds are transferred from the regional government to local authorities for distribution to hunters. The communities then use these monies to hire and support short-term task groups to harvest species that, because of the high cost associated with their acquisition, might not otherwise be obtained in sufficient amounts to satisfy local need.

In my view, both of the above aspects of the mixed economy speak to the first stated objective of this article: how research on the ecological-economic dynamic of Inuit subsistence culture, by focusing on how material transfers and exchanges are socially ordered, has applicability in the context of other forager societies. At the same time, while not addressing Burch's questions in their entirety, what has been accomplished through research on the role and effect of money in the modern Inuit situation is at least obliquely relevant to whether hunter-gatherer societies can functionally persist in a monetised-commoditised resource environment.

In point of fact, money is almost a requirement if foragers, in the face of pernicious factors like alienation from Indigenous patterns of settlement if not from the actual land and its resources, are to maintain the traditional material component that is the essential currency of Inuit, Mbuti, and Aborigine social economies. As Sahlins (1999: xvii) put it succinctly, "one of the Big Surprises of 'late capitalism' is that 'traditional' cultures are not inevitably incompatible with it nor vulnerable to it."

Postscript: Subsistence, theory, and Inuit

Before closing, a few more words should be said about the fate of Inuit Studies relative to, if not anthropology as a whole, then to Hunter-Gatherer Studies. Balikci and Riches hypothesised a number of reasons—disciplinary fragmentation, declining funding, a fixation with micro-scale situations, the politicisation of Northern research—why Inuit research has had far less theoretical impact than might be expected from a century-plus of ethnography. There is truth in all of these stated reasons. Indeed, the

situation has at times appeared to be one in which the whole is no more than the sum of its parts. But hopefully there is enough space to add another part. Balikci and Riches both opined that the most recent chapter of Inuit research (roughly since 1980) lost theoretical coherence when research became increasingly affected by northern socio-politics, as “Eskimologists [...] subscribed to the political ideology of their informants” (Riches 1990: 86), becoming defenders of Inuit tradition (and traditionalness) at the expense of understanding “emerging global patterns in the North” (Balikci 1989: 108).

These reflections and Burch’s critical questions have considerable resonance. Despite important work on land use, traditional ecological knowledge, harvest studies, and ways of valuing wild resources, post-1980 research has almost always been in a land claims context. Similarly, the creation of Nunavut Territory sparked an interest in Inuit cultural identity. What each of these threads has in common is that it is particularised to a community or region, what Riches (1990: 85) called “niching,” with inter-community or inter-regional comparison being rare. Today, Riches might see a contemporary example in the trend toward work on climate change, this research being likewise highly particularised and community-driven.

It is clear that research on Inuit subsistence, not only on its hows and whats, but also on its sociocultural dimensions, is the conceptual-theoretical link to the wider field of Hunter-Gatherer Studies. There is no doubt that subsistence, as a particular socioeconomic formation and as a cultural form, is not to be relegated to retrospective study (Sahlins 1999). Rather, it is critically contemporary.

The Inuit have contributed, and will continue to contribute, to a broader understanding of subsistence if only because they will be, as they have since the onset of the Government Era, the object of social and economic policies, well-intentioned as they may be, that will present further cultural challenges. For this reason, Inuit subsistence, far from being either an abstraction or a cultural remnant, will likely continue to provide insight into the resilience of subsistence societies beyond the North. That this has been under-recognised is perhaps because anthropology above the tree line, like the growth rate of char in Arctic lakes, requires greater time to mature.

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