

A Tunnug view of Whaling in Utquaqvik

Becky Gay spent the better part of this spring in Barrow working at the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory researching a paper on the economic impact of whaling in Barrow. She was allowed to spend time with the whaling crew of Harry Bower as they hunted on the ice. The following is her account of the whaling in Barrow.

"What do you do in the spring in Barrow?"

"They wait for a new moon that leans to the right in the night sky. That is the whaler's moon." (Howard Rock, 1979).

"Agviqsiuguurugut ... we hunt whales."

Ask anyone in Barrow that question and you will more than likely get that answer. Somehow, after the sun returns in January, the demeanor of the whole community changes and talk of whaling fills the air. Forays are made out on the ice pack to scout the best routes to the

potential open leads. Ice cellars are cleaned. Excitement flutters as whaling gear begins to appear around the village. Skins flap in the wind, drying and bleaching in the cold sun. Whaling, the best time of the year for the Inupiat, is nigh. The Spring hunt after the long winter. The time of renewal for the Inupiat.

Whaling, as an adventure, is an ineffable experience. It is where the best of old and new, tradition and technology, combine in the Eskimo culture. Modern weapons, gas stoves and snowmachines make the hunt seem less than "Native" to some, but that view overlooks the whole essence of whaling.

The whaling crew, numbering from six to 12 men, spends up to two months on the ice, open water or not, just waiting. Waiting is actually what the whalers do most of the time. They wait and watch. Taking turns sleeping, cooking, and doing other chores such as

finding the "right" ice for drinking water, the watch is maintained constantly. When the lead is open, the vigil intensifies as the crew watches for whales in the water. If the lead closes, the vigil relaxes but the crews continue to watch the ice, which is subject to movement and change with the wind and weather.

The crew has to be prepared to move camp quickly, at any time of the day or twilight night.

Once the lead is open and the whales began to appear, the vigil takes on an anticipatory flavor. Sitting or standing in front of a small wind screen, the crew talks softly or not at all. They smoke or watch the water.

The whalers are waiting for the "right" whales to find them." (Harry Brower, 1980). There are not many "chasing scenes" in spring whaling. The skin boats are rowed and six men with oars are no match for the powerful bowhead un-

less they are very skillful. So, waiting for the "right" whale is evidence of a true skill and much of the beauty in the art of whaling — restraint.

Some whales are caught from the ice shelf. If the bowhead surfaces close to the ice, a quick and expert team can shoot and harpoon the whale without using the boat. Once a whale is caught — the Eskimos say caught, not killed — the crew may use the boat, with a motor now attached, to follow the whale and haul it to shore. Other crews nearby can help by combining boats to tow the behemoth to shore.

It is important to get the whale to shore immediately because the massive body heat spoils the meat and organs in a matter of hours. The weather and wind can change so rapidly in the Arctic that it is to everyone's benefit to pitch in and get the whale to shore and butchered before the weather makes it impossible. Wind alone can keep the boats out for hours when they are towing a 30-45 ton whale.

Once to the ice shelf, the crew takes a break, weather permitting. The whaling captain's flat is run up to the highest piece of ice ridge around to aid in locating the camp from town, as well as announcing the successful capture. Citizens Band radios crackle with the good news and help begins arriving almost immediately.

The first boiled Muktuk (skin with blubber) is cooked by the captain's wife and family and brought out to the crowd with hot steaming coffee and tea. Then everyone, the same everyone as before, crowds to the communal pot and dips in to grab a succulent share. Muktuk is delicious fresh and boiled. It tastes sweet and mildly of the sea.

Once fortified with some calories and the communal spirit, the next step is the herculean task of butchering a 30 to 45 ton whale. Special long-handled tools and supervision by the older captains, combined with sheer endurance and the community effort is what gets the job done. It is all done out on the ice, so the meat has to be hauled back into the town once it is divided.

Snowmachines have replaced dogsleds as transportation, but the sheer difficulty of getting a snowmachine and sled to the lead should not be underestimated. The trails were various lengths, from a mile up to fifteen miles from town.

Whaling is a true example of community effort. The women: wives, girlfriends, sisters, aunts, daughters and grandmothers have been sewing kamitka (boots), atigilut (parkas), and even putting new ugruk (bearded seal) skins on the umiak (skin boat) all spring. The women are entirely supportive of their whalers, both in traditional ways, as well as in the political arena.

At the AEWC convention in Barrow, February 1981, the women introduced five resolutions which were adopted by the

convention. The fourth resolution stated:

"WHEREAS, We Inupiat and St. Lawrence Yupik must whale to survive physically, culturally, and spiritually.

WHEREAS, We Women whalers walk wherever our captains and husbands walk.

BE IT KNOWN TO ALL PEOPLE THAT IF OUR WHALING CAPTAINS HAVE TO GO TO JAIL BECAUSE WE EAT MAKTAK—WE WOMEN WHALERS ARE ALSO PREPARED TO GO, AND FIGHT FOR OUR LIVES."

Subsistence means when the hunting is good, you hunt. Those who cannot hunt help in other ways. Everyone who helps gets to share in the harvest. Those who are too old, too sick, or too young to help get allowances anyway. Virtually everyone gets to eat their fill at the feasts that follow a successful hunt whether they have helped or not. Muktuk finds its way to friends, relatives, and Native hospitals from the Arctic coast all the way to Seattle.

Whaling serves as the most constant example of traditional Eskimo life in the rapidly changing village. Technology has intervened, but the spirit of the hunt is ageless and pervasive.

People who have never even seen a whale are still touched by the great presence of the beasts and are anxious to protect them. That is why scientists are observing them, counting them, listening to them with hydrophones; studying the elusive bowhead intently.

Eskimos have been studying them through the ages with different eyes — the eyes of a hunter. Inupiat whalers want to preserve the bowhead whale as fervently as anyone. They have shared their camps with scientists and exchanged knowledge with them. The scientists need the whalers' cooperation to collect the biological specimens for continued study of the bowhead. The Eskimos need the science to comprehensively set reasonable quotas for the hunts.

There is little doubt from any who have participated in whaling to any degree, that whaling is the single most important event to the Eskimo for many reasons. Whaling is the first community event that occurs after the long, isolating winter. Traditional hunting practices are taught to the young at this annual renewal of community ties. Nor could there be a successful Nullakaturuk (blanket toss) without a successful hunt.

Even Inupiat University made allowances for subsistence hunting: "The academic calendar in use by Inupiat University of the Arctic is flexible by design. It is contingent upon environmental factors which determine periods for subsistence of caribou (tuttu) ... and whale (agviq)."