

Trading at Nigliq on the North Slope of Alaska

Excerpts from Robert F. Spencer, *The North Alaskan Eskimo: A Study in Ecology and Society*, pp. 198-207 (Smithsonian Press: 1959/1969).

The people of Nuvuk and Utkeagvik traveled along the Arctic coast to the mouth of the Colville. Here they met the Tulugagmiut, the Kagmalligmuit, the Killigmiut, and the Kupigmiut, not, it must be understood, en masse, but rather representatives from these groups who had come for the trade. The place of the meeting was Nigliq, located on one of the western mouths of the Colville Delta (Stefansson, 1914 a, pp. 4-5). This was not a permanent center and was active only for the two or three weeks of the year during which the trading took place. A second emporium, somewhat further removed to the east, was Oliktuk Point, a less frequently attended center where partners from Barter and Herschel Islands were met.

The Kugmiut, those who live at the present village of Wainwright, did not go to Nigliq for the trading. They, like all other Tagiugmiut, went south to the Kobuk, traveling down the Utokak River, portaging over to the Noatak, and so down to Hotham Inlet to Kingaliq (modern Kotzebue). . . .

As may be seen, the Nunamiut who traded [at Nigliq] were chiefly from the central Brooks provinces; those to the west tended to go to Hotham Inlet. Similarly, Nigliq was a point at which trade goods of aboriginal manufacture, notably stone lamps, came in from the east. This is in contrast to Kingaliq [Kotzebue], where European goods entered long before actual contact with Europeans themselves. It is worth noting, however, that the Colville was the great avenue of trade for northern Alaska and that the Utkeavingmiut and Nuvungmiut got such items as knives and beads from Nigliq rather than from the coasts to the south. Such objects reached the Colville mouth after passing along the river itself. In short, the Nunamiut were the traditional intermediaries. . . .

The appearance of a trading center was everywhere the same. The people had come by prearrangement and would gather to await their partners, those from the opposite ecological setting. They unloaded their umiaks, set up their tents, the Nunamiut favoring the iccellik, and Tagiugmiut the conical skin-covered kalugvik. The tents were set up in rows, those from each community or grouping tending to congregate in one place. The umiaks were drawn up on the bank, turned over to dry, and the goods for trade cached under them or placed on racks which might be especially built. In a few cases, families built a paameraq as a summer dwelling at the trading center. This was not generally done, however, unless they remained for a longer period and fished nearby.

The numbers of those who came to the trading centers tended to vary from year to year. It is to be stressed that the majority of those who came were Nunamiut, since it is evident that these were more dependent on trading than were their neighbors from the coast. At Nigliq, in a peak year, it would apparently not be unusual to find as many as 600 people present, although 400-500 would perhaps be a more normal figure. As has been stated, a roughly similar number might be found at Utokak. . . .

The involvements of trade marked the high point of the summer's activity, and the expeditions were begun as soon as the period of intense economic productivity was over.

The Nunamiut, having completed their spring caribou drives, prepared the caribou meat for their own use and stored it, and having scraped the hides and dried them – they were not tanned – set out in their large umiaks as soon as the ice conditions permitted. They

were generally ready to move by early June, when the streams began to flow, although the trading did not actually take place until early August. Since the caribou drives were over before the coastal whaling, the inland groups had adequate time to arrive at the rendezvous.

The Tagiugmiut, too, as soon as the whaling celebrations (nalukataq) were over, began their trading journeys. Like their inland neighbors, they tended to make use of the fresh-water streams as avenues of travel. This was because, on the northern fringes at least, the ocean ice had not generally receded by late June, the time when their own trading expeditions began. The Point Barrow people, especially, were obliged to use the inland routes, although the sea route was generally possible in early summer from Point Hope southward. . . .

Travel was in family groups which consisted of one or two umiaks, the families breaking off from the main village or section. The way taken by each family was quite regularly the same each year, attempts being made to avoid any unfamiliar areas. . . .

The umiak and sled were the means of transportation. A general pattern was to load the umiak as full as possible with the goods to be traded, leaving small space for passengers, camping gear, such as tents and food, and the sled which rested on the cargo. Dogs regularly accompanied the party. A general practice was to pull the loaded umiak upstream rather than to paddle it, and the dogs were regularly used for this purpose. Indeed, if the load were heavy, the family tended to walk and to draw the umiak behind them. . . . Should the group encounter frozen areas, the sled could be brought down and the umiak mounted on it, the dogs again being used to draw the vehicle. . . . Since some of those who went to the trading centers chose to remain out of the home community until the fall freeze, the sled was necessary as a means of return. The method of travel, the alternation of sled and umiak, as circumstances demanded, was thus well worked out and wholly efficient.

The preparations for trading were elaborate and went on for the entire year. . . . Basically, the items which were traded between Nunamiut and Tagiugmiut were two – seal and whale oil and caribou hides. These were vital to the economy of each setting and, all things being equal, could not be obtained in sufficient quantity in the native setting. . . .

But the basic trade of caribou skins for oil pokes was in turn outweighed by the trade in items affording prestige and wealth. It was this which became significant in maintaining the trade and which culminated in such elaborate festivals of exchange which took place between communities.

The amount of goods which were traded must be regarded as considerable and it is true that each principal devoted much time throughout the year toward the accumulation of goods. The Nunamiut came with umiaks fully loaded with caribou hides. These were packed into bundles, about thirty hides to each, and loaded into the vessel carefully so as to provide proper ballast. It was not unusual for a single umiak to carry as many as twenty such bundles, the catch of a single hunter, and a load of from 500 to 600 hides. . . . Similarly, the peoples of the coasts loaded their umiaks with sealskin pokes filled with oil, a single umiak carrying as many as fifty such together with numerous other items.

But in addition to the basic items of caribou skins and oil, other goods were numerous. Omitting for the moment such objects of European manufacture which had begun to reach the area by the early 19th century – metal tools and containers, tobacco, beads, muskets (of the early Hudson Bay Company manufacture) – each setting was able to assemble a formidable array. . . .

Trade, as has been suggested, was structured around the formal partnership relationship. There were some discrepancies in the balance of trade between coast and interior in that goods from the sea did command a higher price. This was settled by an arrangement which permitted several Nunamiut to share one partner. Even in this case, however, there was the recognition of one chief partner and of several more distant ones. . . .

Even when a man had trading partners, however, he was not obliged to give all his trade to them. Having satisfied the amenities of the relationship, he could, if he had additional goods, trade them with others. . . . In trading, each man was independent. Men traded with men, women with women. Each person was free to make his own decisions and to trade the products of his labor as he saw fit. . . .

The trading ventures lasted for several days and no definite period was set aside for it. When the last of the traders had arrived and everyone had traded to his own satisfaction and had disposed of the property brought, the season was over. A general tendency was to hold games and dances after the trading. Every trading station devoted several days to recreational events. Nunamiut and Tagiugmiut did not mix in the dancing; it was rather that one group danced for the other. The ball game was played between the two and there were foot races, contests of strength, and singing. . . .