Speaking of Place: Contemporary Iñupiat Storytelling and Place-Making in the Time of Climate Change

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Abstract

Hope (Tikiġaq), Alaska, seeks to cope with an unpredictable future incurred by global warming. In Point Hope, the Iñupiat's sense of place and cultural identity have been experiencing a major transition since the 1976 relocation from their original settlement following continuous flooding and erosion. Climate change in the Arctic impacts Iñupiat's lifeways on a cultural level by threatening their link to their homeland, a sense of place, and respect for the bowhead whale—the foundation of their cultural identity. What I found during my ethnographic fieldwork (2005-6) was that environmental changes were culturally processed through the tradition of storytelling and storytelling served as a way to maintain a connectivity to a disappearing place. Examining how the villagers perceive the loss of their homeland, I argue that Iñupiaq storytelling both reveals and helps them adapt to a changing physical and spiritual landscapes.

Keywords: Point Hope, Alaska; Iñupiat; Storytelling; Climate Change; Sense of Place; Spirit-beings

This paper explicates the way in which the Iñupiat of Arctic Alaska have enhanced their ties with their homeland through contemporary development of storytelling since the late 1970s[1]. The 1970s is the period during which the impacts of climate change became

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particularly detrimental in influencing Iñupiat subsistence. To explore this process, this paper employs a humanistic perspective to reveal how erosion—as a consequence of global warming—affects the Iñupiat place-making, particularly their traditional associations with land as related through tales of spirit-beings or "ghosts." Arctic ghost stories have not been discussed extensively in the existing literature, much less their association with place-making. Spending nine months in Arctic Alaska between 2005 and 2006, I have learned the Iñupiat perceptions of the changing world and their relations with animals as well as non-human beings. Elucidating the recent changes in Iñupiat storytelling and environment, this paper examines how the people currently engage themselves with their homeland. Furthermore, by identifying how storytelling acts as an attempt to adapt to the changing world, this paper reveals the viability of Iñupiat cultural identity, cultivated upon their sense of place, to relate to environmental variability.

Point Hope – otherwise known as Tikiġaq – is one of the longest continually inhabited settlements in North America. The Iñupiat of Point Hope hold high levels of uncertainty toward environmental changes, and a variety of scientific literature supports the indigenous perspectives, as they share critical issues with other Arctic communities, such as unreliable sea ice conditions (George *et al*. 2004; Nichols, Berkes, Jolly, Snow & The Community of Sachs Harbour 2004), less predictable weather patterns (Krupnik & Jolly 2002; Kusugak 2002; Weller 2004), stronger and more frequent winds (Oozewa, Noongwook, Alowa, & Krupnik 2004), and changes in animal populations and irregular migration patterns (Huntington, 2002; Tynan & DeMaster 1997). The ice covering the Arctic Ocean has shrunk to its smallest size in a century in the summer of 2005, and the loss of Arctic homeland to the ocean has been accelerated in the past three decades (Revkin 2005). Indeed, the sea level is approximately six inches higher than it was a century ago (Weller 2004), primarily due to warmer sea water along with glacier melting, and the rate of rise is increasing (Chandler 2005; Meiser & Dyurgerov 2002). The extreme circumstances have caused 86 percent of Alaskan villages to lose their settlements (Chandler 2005). The Native populations of the North have been suffering from the severe effects of sea level rise, and with the loss of more than 70% of its original homeland, Point Hope is a prime example. During the process of my interviews in the village, above all, what stood out the most were community concerns and sentiments toward their drowning homeland exemplified by the continuous erosion of their settlement, clan-related ceremonial grounds, and the traditional whalebone houses that used to coordinate social institutions

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Ethnomusicology at Columbia University, Arctic Studies Center at the Smithsonian Institution, and the Department of Geography at the University of Oklahoma. I also thank the people of Point Hope and Barrow, Alaska, for their continuous encouragement and friendship throughout my fieldwork in 2005. Their valuable help and willingness to share the depth and breadth of their knowledge and experiences made my research possible, rewarding, and productive. In order to preserve confidentiality as well as in view of the possibly sensitive subject matter of this paper, my interviewees will not be cited by name.

and Iñupiat-whale relations. Also known as the People of the Whales, the Iñupiat centered their subsistence on human-whale relations represented by traditional whaling. One of their origin stories reveals that the Iñupiat homeland was once an enormous whale that was transformed into a peninsula by a raven (Lowenstein 1992, 1993). Thus, by intertwining the whale into the Iñupiat cosmology, the land serves as the foundation of the people's subsistence as well as cultural identity.

Places and humans are inseparable, and the Point Hopers are particularly known for their firm ties and kinship with their homeland. The Iñupiat relations with place have been experiencing a major transition since the 1976 relocation from the original Point Hope settlement following severe flooding and erosion. Due to this continuous disaster, today's village site was established two miles southeast of the original settlement, right above the prehistoric Ipiutak site (500 B.C. to 100 A.D.). "I didn't want to move," said one interviewee, who is in her 80s. To her, Old Town was where she was born, grew up, got married, gave birth to all her children, buried her ancestors, and where she believes that her people belong – the home. One of the villagers who still remains in his old family home in the original settlement said: "I hear the ocean getting closer day by day, but I don't have anywhere else to go…. This [place] is all I am, and this is my home, nothing else." The loss of homeland has been threatening the people's kinship with their land, which is the basis of the Iñupiat identity.

By the time of my fieldwork in 2005, most Point Hopers had physically detached from Old Town; spiritually, however, their sense of place and longing for their old home were firmly established with the telling of supernatural stories. Most villagers above 35 years old whom I interviewed still consider Old Town home, and I felt a strong sentiment of the community toward the original settlement. After the resettlement, the people began cultivating their ties with a new homeland, but they have never quite let go of the old. This geographic sensibility reveals a deep insecurity about the permanence of human places and cultural identity (BUNKŠE 2004), which for the Iñupiat are deeply entangled with their old home. Porteous and Smith (2001) called destructions of home "domicide," a concept which illustrates the strong affinity between the Iñupiat and their drowning home in the face of radical environmental changes and relocation policies. A related term, "memoricide," further indicates that the loss of memories is incurred by the loss of homeland (PORTEOUS & SMITH 2001). This great sadness toward Old Town has the people incorporating the traditional ancestral spirits and other spirit-beings into stories of their eroding home.

For the villagers, their drowning home is never empty – the spirit-beings have moved into Old Town since the living left. Unlike many peoples, Iñupiat do not particularly fear their ghosts. Some express apprehension, others pleasure. The phenomena are widely accepted as normal parts of life (Burch 1971; Lowenstein 1992, 1993). Recognition of supernatural phenomena consolidates human ties with the land, making one's home tangible, special, and unforgettable (Tuan 1979). Ingold (2000) claims that a ghost represents "the inner essence, or soul, [that] holds the attributes of sentience, volition, memory and speech" (p.92), and reflects the people's connectivity with their homeland. Although the Iñupiat homeland is eroding, the significant fact is that their home is told and retold to be remembered. In this context, the Iñupiat memory stays alive with their home, and the erosion and the disappearing homeland are to be remembered with spiritual encounters and associated stories. In the storytelling, therefore, the Iñupiat have the power to invest their homeland with resonant meanings, and this process makes the invisible visible by establishing firm bonds between humans and place. Thus, as spirit-being stories never fade from the Iñupiat worldview, so the homeland never fades.

Traditionally, storytelling was a vehicle to pass down knowledge and values through generations. The practice also served as a means to incorporate interactions of people, times, and places. Supernatural experiences and encounters are major components of this tradition to be shared among the villagers (Millman 1987). To this day, sharing stories remains a natural and dual process for the people to grow their kinship within the community as well as with their homeland. Ghosts and mysterious creatures have been constantly reported by the Iñupiat (Burch 1971; Lowenstein 1992, 1993; Millman 1987; Rasmussen 1927). Residents of Point Hope tell stories of both departed human souls and non-human spirits, as well as general supernatural creatures. Collecting "non-empirical" stories in Point Hope and other Iñupiat villages in northern Alaska in the late 1960s and early 1970s[2], Burch (1971) was intrigued with the perception of his informants "who were highly influenced by American ways, yet they still viewed reality in terms of much the same cognitive framework that had guided the activities of their ancestors" (p. 149). Particularly in northern Alaska, ghosts and spirituality are a major part of living tradition because dying in one's own home and maintaining the family graveyard remain common. Burch (1971) catalogued several supernatural entities traditionally perceived by the Iñupiat people, such as the Little People (*inuqullit*), wild baby (*iraaq/naaluŋiq*), troll (*iqsiniraq*), mermaid (or rather the beluga woman: *kunuŋnizaq/nuyakpalik*), shape-shifter (*iziraq*), dragon (*tiritsiq*), and the soul of a deceased person (*ilitqasiq*). The Iñupiat homeland has been filled with these entities as much as living humans and animals.

[2] In addition to Point Hope, Burch's (1971) data was collected during his field period (1969-1970) in a number of communities in northern and northwestern Alaska, including Anaktuvuk Pass, Barrow, Deering, Kivalina, Kotzebue, Noorvik, Selawik, and Shungnak.

Considering the timeline of Point Hope, the 1976 relocation of the settlement marks a major shift in the direction of supernatural tales. Having interviewed 48 individuals in the village, the types of spiritual encounters about which I was told in Point Hope were different from Burch's collection, particularly regarding the level of experiences, characteristics of encounter, and spatial distributions of supernatural appearances. In 2005, the reported areas of the supernatural encounters were concentrated in now sparsely populated Old Town. One individual told me that human-spirit-animal interactions now take place more frequently in the original settlement than any other locale, even including cross-species transformations. In comparison, Burch's 1971 account reveals that informants tended to point to non-residential areas such as the tundra as haunted. In other words, the place that was once haunted is now the people's home (New Town), and the people's old home is now haunted. This inversion was also confirmed by local hunters during my fieldwork; one of the hunters claimed: "[Spirit-beings] didn't really come to town with us when I was little, but last year, me and my brother saw them in Old Town. We went to clean the ice cellar there, and [we] were surprised [to see them]." Additionally, I feel that the "personal" qualities of supernatural encounters had increased in 2005 whereas the 1971 stories tend to exhibit traditional and generic features of Iñupiat supernatural encounters with "anonymous" spirits or unidentified entities. To rephrase, in 2005, the "ghosts" or spirit-beings became more identifiable (such as one's deceased parent, grandparent, or sibling), their characteristics became more distinctive, and they began to have specific linkages with the Old Town site or specific abandoned houses.

This shift coincides with the transformation of the nature of Point Hope storytelling itself. Lowenstein (1993) refers to the traditional storytelling as an "impersonal art," which displayed formal and public aspects of the community. However, in today's Point Hope, storytelling serves as more casual and personal means for the villagers to communicate individual feelings and to increase personal interactions with specific places. One of my interviewees said she had seen the spirit of her deceased mother in Old Town. Another told me that she had seen a dog transforming into a man in front of the house where she used to live. Another example revealing the change in storytelling is the shift in geographical and spatial distribution patterns of the Little People, the Iñupiat equivalent of leprechauns. Nowadays, the Little People frequently appear in the eroding old settlement, whereas they formerly were rarely seen on the coast (BURCH 1971). In 2005, several residents of Point Hope reported that these entities are now greatly mobile and are regularly witnessed in Old Town as well as in the current settlement. My interviewees indicated that witnessing the Little People in the locales with this frequency had never happened prior to the relocation. It seems like as much as the Arctic environment is getting more unpredictable, so are the distribution and behavior of the supernatural beings.

What causes these changes in distribution patterns, nature of supernatural

encounters, and the people's perceptions of spirit-beings? In this time when the Iñupiat geographic sensibilities are challenged, storytelling deepens the people's cultural landscape by establishing and maintaining enduring bonds between humans and their land. Talking about ghosts and supernatural beings associated with certain localities becomes part of place-making by reflecting strong affections to the places. Storytelling allows the people to cultivate bonds with their homeland, and endows them with two-way communications with the environment (INGOLD 2000). Thus, Iñupiat storytelling facilitates this process of being communicative with the land; more specifically, it facilitates coping with changes in the environment. The sentimental longing toward the disappearing Iñupiat old home strengthens their feelings to become communicative with the spirits who represent the identity and memories of the ancestral homeland.

In conclusion, in the twenty-first century Arctic at this time of radical environmental changes, storytelling is a way to reinforce the Iñupiat ties with their disappearing homeland. This heightened verve of feelings results in the changes in the tales associated with Old Town by giving the eroding land high visibility. Changes in association with spirit-beings reveals the heightened Iñupiat awareness regarding their kinship to the homeland, and repeated telling of the new stories further embodies their efforts to engage with place-making that eventually bridges both Old and New Town. From the examples discussed, what is apparent is the Iñupiat response to the rapid environmental changes by retaining bonds with their old settlement in addition to enhancing their cultural identity. This enduring sense of place is confirmed by the empowerment of storytelling, and I intend to keep learning this place-making process in Iñupiat words and expressions.

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