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Indigeneity and Ecology in Iñupiaq and Faroese Whaling

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Introduction
To witness the capture and slaughter of a large marine mammal can be a disturbing experience, visually and psychologically unnerving to many. The process involves shedding an enormous amount of blood, as the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet¹ noted: "the Whale, when wounded, ensanguines the ocean to a great distance; the blood that we have in drops, is lavished upon him in torrents." While this bloodshed can also be seen as an indicator of a quick death for the whale, the incongruous and unexpected sight of a reddened harbor, beach, ice floe, or seascape is often the photographic subject of advertisements calling for action against whaling nations.² "If only the blood was blue," the Faroese Minister of Fisheries, Bjørn Kalse, lamented when I interviewed him in 2005.

At the same time, for a community that practices whaling, the death of a whale signifies the beginning of a time of plenty. Some celebrate; others work to exhaustion; many lend a hand in labor and nearly all know that they will eat well. The blood, if it is considered at all, is seen as a necessary part of the act of food production, not as evidence of a crime against nature.

This chapter intervenes in this volume's consideration of charismatic megafauna as metonyms of the North by considering two whaling
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communities, the Inupiat and the Faroese, along with their traditions and the reactions they provoke. Both communities are based in the North and practice whaling as a means of food production. After introducing the communities and their whaling practices, I discuss the international regulation of whaling with a particular focus on what is termed “aboriginal subsistence whaling.” Following this, I look more closely at the concept of indigeneity, that is, the state of being indigenous. Indigeneity can be reckoned for a variety of reasons in many contexts but with regard to having one’s whaling practices accepted by those outside one’s own culture, indigeneity is essential.

Inupiaq Whaling

In their “Taxonomy of World Whaling,” Randall Reeves and Tim Smith place the origin of “arctic aboriginal” whaling at least two thousand years before the present. As Reeves and Smith acknowledge, arctic whaling has always been both geographically discontinuous and transnational. Within the broad context of arctic whaling, this essay focuses on the Inupiat of Alaska’s North Slope Borough. This group refers to itself as the “People of the Whales” and, as Chie Sakakibara has argued, derives much of its cultural identity from “the whaling cycle,” or the system of subsistence and cultural activities, within which whaling is central. The primary target of this hunt is the bowhead whale (Balaena mysticetus). Owing to the sheer size of the bowhead, the hunting, hauling ashore, butchering, and consumption of just one whale is necessarily a community event. The community nature of Inupiaq whaling has served to maintain its sustainability by ensuring that food products derived from the hunt are distributed, rather than hoarded, and by dis incentivizing the taking of excess whales.

Faroese Whaling

Inhabitants of the Faroe Islands, a Danish archipelago in the North Atlantic Ocean, hunt long-finned pilot whales (Globicephala melas), using a method known as drive-style whaling (called grindadráp in Faroese, often shortened to grind). This involves coordinated efforts to drive a pod of whales into
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fjord, where they will beach or become stranded in the shallow water. Once stranded, the whales are hauled ashore with hooks and ropes and are killed by shore-based whalers using small handheld knives. Hunts are ad hoc and unpredictable, occurring only when whales are sighted within range of the islands. The first recorded instance of this activity occurred in 1587 but most historians trace its introduction to the time of Norse settlement in the ninth century.5

Faroese law has codified several conservation strategies that have been in place for many centuries. The most visible and effective is the geographical limitation of whaling activities to certain approved whaling beaches. Having a roster of approved whaling beaches allows the authorities to allow or disallow any impending whale drive. Drives have been disallowed if weather or ocean conditions are unfavorable or if the food that would result is not needed.

Regulations, Exceptions, and Ambiguities
In 1946, fifteen whaling nations met to create the International Whaling Commission (IWC)—the first and only worldwide regulatory body for whaling.6 In 1972, nonwhaling nations began joining the IWC, “apparently for the specific purpose of changing the balance of votes and thus to institute a moratorium policy.”7 This apparent goal was met in 1982, when the IWC passed a resolution that would reduce the annual quota for commercial operations targeting all whale species to zero, beginning in 1986.

Great Whales vs. Small Cetaceans
In the establishment of the IWC moratorium, a de facto exception was made for the hunting of “small cetaceans,” which include any whale or dolphin besides the twelve species of baleen whales and the sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*). These thirteen species are collectively known as the “great whales” or “IWC whales.” The IWC’s competence for regulation is generally seen as only extending to these thirteen species.

This distinction is problematic to some because the categories of great whales (which are protected by the IWC) and small cetaceans (which are
not) are not determined on the basis of conservation status or, as Alexander Gillespie⁹ points out, even body size. Rather, the twelve species of baleen whale and the sperm whale are those that were hunted most extensively during the most recent period of commercial whaling.

Additionally, Arne Kalland has shown that, in terms used in antiwhaling literature, species and even higher-level taxonomic distinctions are intentionally blurred. Thus we have a more developed history of the “save the whales” movement than of specific efforts to protect certain threatened or endangered whale or dolphin species. This failure to recognize the different conservation needs of various cetacean species has led to the insistence that whales are endangered.⁹ Naturally it would follow that, if all whales are indeed endangered, it should be only under very special circumstances that humans be allowed to kill any whale. The most enduring, and the most widely accepted, of such special circumstances is aboriginal subsistence whaling. However, defining this type of whaling—indeed, defining any type of whaling—has historically been difficult and inexact.

Commercial vs. Subsistence
From its outset, the moratorium was focused on “commercial” whaling, as indicated by the text itself: “catch limits for the killing for commercial purposes of whales from all stocks . . . shall be zero.”¹⁰ Exceptions were made for scientific whaling and for “subsistence whaling by aborigines.”¹¹ These types of whaling are not subject to the moratorium, though the IWC can impose limits on the number of whales caught by specific groups. There are currently “aboriginal” groups in four countries that take whales legally under the IWC’s oversight: Denmark (specifically Greenland), Russia (specifically Siberia), St. Vincent and the Grenadines (specifically the island of Bequia), and the United States (specifically the states of Alaska and Washington). The diversity contained within this roster of whaling nations indicates the imprecision associated with the definition of “aboriginal” or “indigenous.”

In her essay on environmental justice and the regulation of whaling, Gail Osherenko provides a salient example of this imprecision through her use of an array of diverse descriptors for the various whaling operations she
discusses.13 Osberenko introduces Faroese whaling as “a nonnative harvest of pilot whales” in contrast with “native hunts” in Canada and “aboriginal hunting in Greenland.” She goes on to note that “the United States has supported the rights of aboriginal Inupiat and Makah whalers” while mounting pressure upon Japanese and other “traditional coastal whaling communities.”14 Elsewhere Osberenko refers to “aboriginal subsistence whaling,” “artisanal whaling,” “commercial whaling,” and “industrial whaling.” These quick shifts among these terms indicate the complicated nature of attempting to categorize whaling activities as being of one type or another.

Another criterion used is the economic purpose of whaling, whether for food or for profit. However, as several scholars have pointed out,15 there is significant overlap and mingling between the two. Indeed, the two locations in this study provide a salient example. Inupiat give, barter, and sell whale products within and among communities.16 In the Faroe Islands the sale of whale products is officially forbidden—although unofficial sales do take place.16

While terms such as *commercial* and *subsistence* may not offer much concrete substance to inform our discussion of indigeneity in whaling, it would seem more productive to ask whether or not those doing the whaling are, ethnically, indigenous peoples. However, as we shall see, the answer to this question is also difficult to pin down as it is laden with assumptions that bear marks of racist, classist, and colonial thought.

**Indigeneity and Whaling**

Indigenous people have been defined by Anaya as “the living descendants of preinvasion inhabitants of lands now dominated by others.”17 This definition—developed for purposes of international law—diverges from the implicit definition used by the IWC. For example, the Caribbean island of Bequia holds an aboriginal whaling permit from the IWC that allows the take of up to four humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) per year. Ethnically, Bequians descend primarily from African slaves and British colonialists. Few, if any, claim ancestral links to indigenous Caribbean groups such as the Arawaks and Caribs, who, incidentally, are not known to have hunted marine mammals.18 Bequian whaling history is traced to
the nineteenth-century "Yankee whalers" from the United States. As whale stocks diminished, it became less profitable for American whalers to make the long trip from their home ports in New England. The niche they left open was soon filled by local Bequians who had learned the skills of whaling aboard the American vessels. It was only during the early twentieth century that local whaling efforts became well established on Bequia and throughout the region.19

The Bequia example indicates that indigeneity, as defined by Anaya, is not essential in the acquisition of IWC permission for aboriginal subsistence whaling. However, as we have seen, IWC definitions (e.g., great whales vs. small cetaceans) do not always equate to public perceptions. The cultural histories of the Inupiat and the Faroese further complicate this lens of indigeneity.

**Inupiaq History**

The Inupiat trace their history to the Thule people, themselves the second major wave of immigrants who crossed the Bering Land Bridge and spread across the northern part of North America including present-day Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Whaling has been a major food-production strategy for the Thule and their cultural descendants, including the Inupiat, for centuries.20 Climate change and contact with Europeans brought further adaptation, including trade and the introduction of a cash economy and new foodstuffs to the Inupiaq diet. Guns and eventually snowmobiles were also acquired, both of which the Inupiat integrated into their hunting methods.

In 1867, when the United States purchased Alaska from Russia, and again in 1959, when Alaska gained statehood, land ownership among all Alaska Native groups was a contentious issue. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 addressed the issue by creating twelve regional corporations as landholders of traditional native lands.21 In the North Slope Borough, the Ukpeaġvik Inupiat Corporation, based in Barrow, is the major landholder under the act. Today the Inupiat are recognized by the U.S. government and are given limited self-government through the Inupiat
Community of the Arctic Slope. Their status within the United States arguably fits Anaya’s definition of indigenous people.

Faroese History
Modern Faroese descend from the Norse settlers who came to the islands in the late ninth century in what Carl Sauer called a “great Viking exodus.” Recently it has been shown that these Norse settlers were not the first inhabitants of the Faroe Islands. Research is currently under way to determine who, exactly, these pre-Norse inhabitants were, but evidence from place-names, literature, and folklore points to a colony of Irish monastics. Considering Anaya’s definition of indigenous peoples, could the Faroese be thought of as the “others” who currently dominate the land? Perhaps, though the “preinvasion inhabitants” have either long since moved on, been eradicated, or integrated into the Faroese population.

Since 1948, Denmark has allowed the Faroese government home rule but maintains sovereignty, specifically in the areas of defense and international relations. Would this relationship define the Faroes as “lands now dominated by others”? While few would define the Faroese–Danish relationship as being based on “domination,” the Faroese are still not fully autonomous. However, as Godfrey Baldacchino reminds us, the relationship between the Faroes and Denmark is “dissolvable by mutual consent.”

Multiple referenda have yet to succeed in dissolving the bond between the Faroe Islands and Denmark. These failed independence referenda indicate that the majority of Faroese people may not see themselves as being dominated. As for whaling, they are free to continue on their own terms. According to an adviser on Faroese matters at the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark defers all decisions on whaling policy to the Faroese Home Rule government.

Still, the case of Bequia calls out for attention. By whom are the Bequians “dominated”? Certainly the British once held the Grenadines as a colony but that structure dissolved in 1979. St. Vincent and the Grenadines is an independent country. If the Bequians, with their hundred-year history
of whaling, can qualify for an aboriginal subsistence permit from the IWC, could not the Faroese justify their own "thousand-year" take of small cetaceans before a court of public opinion?

Indigenous Need

Both the Inupiat and the Faroese have long histories of whaling in the places where they currently reside. Whaling has become entwined within the cultures of both groups and continues to provide food in both contexts. According to the IWC, one objective of allowing indigenous whaling is to "enable native people to hunt whales at levels appropriate to their cultural and nutritional requirements (also called 'need')." Thus we consider the question of need, along with the existence—and relevance—of other alternative methods of food production available to whaling communities.

Under "Position on Aboriginal Whaling," Sea Shepherd writes that it opposes all whaling by any people, anywhere for any reason. However, our activities are directed at illegal whaling operations. The hunting of endangered bowheads by Northern aboriginal people is legal according to the International Whaling Commission. Therefore, there has been no opposition to these practices by Sea Shepherd Conservation Society.

Sea Shepherd draws a firm distinction between whaling by "Northern aboriginal people" and Faroese whaling—to which it refers using the Faroese term grind—noting that the organization stands against the slaughter of Pilot Whales in the Danish Faeroe Islands. Sea Shepherd intends to intervene in the grind, when at all possible, to prevent the unnecessary loss of such precious marine wildlife that has no place in modern times.

Much of the opposition to Faeroese whaling, as recorded meticulously and critically by Kate Sanderson, points out the believed incongruity between a European society with a "modern" lifestyle and an ongoing
reliance upon whaling for food. Sanderson cites an opponent as saying, in reference to the Faroese, “if they want to kill whales in the traditional way, that’s fine by us, if nothing else about their way of life, significantly anyway, has changed.” Sanderson touches on issues of ethnicity and modernity with her discussion of the “ambiguity” of “the sight of fair-skinned men, fully clothed in woolen sweaters . . . entering the water with knives in their hands to kill whales.” She goes on to question the “simplistic urban view” held by opponents of Faroese whaling, who rely on a stereotype of what subsistence hunting should look like: “the hunter is at one with the unspoiled wilderness in which he hunts and must not therefore display any of the incongruous trappings or influences of ‘modern civilization.’” In the discourse of antiwhaling that Sanderson critiques, one must be either fully modern or fully engaged in subsistence activities. The reference to “fair-skinned men, fully clothed” reveals a barely subliminal ethnic divide along this overtly economic distinction as well. In this discourse, facets of Faroese culture such as the publicly viewable killing of marine mammals, the free distribution of the food products that the activity produces, and of course the harbor waters stained red with the blood of whales simply do not fit with the motorboats, automobiles, and Scandinavian standard of living enjoyed by these ethnically European islanders.

According to the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, a London-based animal welfare organization,

Pilot whales have been killed in the Faroe Islands for over 400 years and it can be appreciated that in the past they made an important contribution to the Islanders’ survival in the harsh conditions of these isolated islands. . . . Today, however, the Faroese people enjoy a standard of living at least as high as that of any other country in Scandinavia. The consumption of pilot whales is, therefore, thought to be no longer necessary for survival.

This puts to words an oft-unspoken assumption in the argument against whaling—that whales should be a food source of last resort. Paul Watson of Sea Shepherd speaks for many who oppose Faroese whaling when he calls it “unjustified” owing to it being “not necessary for subsistence” and goes on to say that “you cannot compare the materially wealthy communities in
the Faeroes with subsistence communities." Why, though, should whaling be conducted only by a people without other options? Could it truly be said that any people "need" any one particular foodstuff? Perhaps. Certain foods are enmeshed within their cultures to the point that one could hardly conceive of one without the other. However, these enmeshments are primarily, if not entirely, cultural. Contextually, the references to "need" by those opposed to whaling primarily indicate the consideration of nutritional, not cultural, need.

The Question of Conservation

We have seen that the effort to draw clear distinctions among whaling operations is beset by a host of assumptions, inconsistencies, and self-contradictions. In the social aspect, elements of colonialism and racism lie just beneath the surface. Biologically, the discourse sets no clear taxonomic line between great whales and small cetaceans. Economic terms like commercial, subsistence, and artisanal are used without precision. Even the term indigenous is applied inconsistently within the whaling debate, as the case of Bequia shows. To ask whether a group "needs" to whale is to invite a subjective answer that judges the availability and suitability of various alternative foodstuffs, attempts to decide for the local people which alternatives should suffice, and ordinarily ignores the "cultural...requirements" that the IWC ostensibly seeks to protect through its policy on aboriginal subsistence whaling. Perhaps another measure of indigeneity—a conservation-centered measure—would be fit to consider. To do so would be to shift the whaling regime toward an evidence-based exception process by which those groups that wish to have their whaling activities sanctioned by the IWC would show their conservation methods to be based upon long-standing cultural tradition. It would avoid the assumption of the "ecological Indian" described by Shepard Krech and expounded upon by Sarah Jaquette Ray, by which indigenous subsistence activities are deemed sustainable based simply on the ethnicity of the persons conducting them. Rather, it would remove ethnicity from the decision and instead focus on indigeneity—not of the whalers but of the conservation methods they employ.
The application of an indigenous-conservation criterion to the two cultures under consideration here reveals the existence of deeply ingrained conservation strategies such as the geographical limitation of whaling bays in the Faroe Islands and the community involvement in Inupiaq whaling. Such practices, enforced by the weight of tradition, are arguably more likely to endure and to maintain public adherence than conservation regimes that are based upon the rule of law alone.39

A conservation-centered approach to indigenous whaling would enact moratoria on any operation targeting whales of an endangered species. It would allow limited whaling to be conducted by groups who have effective conservation methods ingrained within their cultural traditions, with the understanding that the killing or saving of a animal need not always be mutually exclusive (Boyer, chapter 5). This approach would take into account the regimes of measured resource use that have evolved—whether consciously or not—to effect conservation of whale stocks. If managed through an organization like the IWC, it would build upon the statements of “cultural and nutritional requirements,” asking the group to put forth a statement explaining its own historical management strategies. It would seek to balance the needs of the human population with the stability of the whale population.

Conclusion

The suggestion above is but one possible way forward that would offer some clarity to the whaling debate. People who oppose whaling do so for a variety of reasons. Some, from an animal-rights perspective, are against all forms of hunting. Others feel that whales should be given special consideration, owing to their intelligence, size, or other attributes. However, the IWC was founded to conserve whale stocks. A conservation-centered approach to whaling would align more accurately with the organization’s mission than the current multifaceted parsing of whaling operations based upon the target species and the cultural and political history of the people involved. A conservation-centered management regime for whaling would question not the indigeneity of the whalers but rather the indigeneity of the methods of conservation in use.
Endnotes

14. For example, Brian Moeran, “The Cultural Construction of Value: Subsistence, Commercial, and Other Terms in the Debate about Whaling,” *Maritime Anthropological


26. Árni Olafsson, e-mail message to author, February 24, 2010.


32. Ibid., 198.

33. Ibid.

35. Paul Watson, e-mail message to author, October 25, 2005.


40. Ibid.

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