

ALLIANCE AND CONFLICT: THE WORLD SYSTEM OF THE IÑUPIAQ ESKIMOS. By ERNEST S. BURCH, Jr. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, the Arctic Institute of North America, and University of Nebraska Press, 2005. ISBN 1-55238-142-0. Northern Lights Series, No. 8. xv + 383 p., maps, b&w illus., notes, bib., appendices, index. Softbound. Cdn\$54.95.

This work by Ernest S. Burch Jr. is a detailed examination of intersocietal relations among the Iñupiaq Eskimo (pl. Iñupiat) of northwest Alaska during the period 1800–48. In addition to interactions among the ten geographically discrete Iñupiaq societies or “nations,” it also details relations with other Eskimo groups to the north and south, Athapaskans of the Alaska Interior, and the Eskimo- and Chukchi-speaking peoples of northeastern Siberia. The time period covered was selected because both the records of early Western explorations and the oral traditions of Iñupiaq informants provided reliable documentation for this period, and it was also a time when traditional cultural patterns remained intact.

The theoretical structure of the book is tied to “world system” theory—understanding how international relations operated and evolved through time. The author feels that an examination of a functioning group of hunter-gatherers such as the Iñupiaq could clarify the nature of international affairs for much of human history. Basic to his argument is that human societies almost always have neighboring groups with whom they must interact, and all societies develop regular, structured ways of dealing with such contacts.

Chapter 1, *Introduction*, defines terminology and gives a broad perspective to northwest Alaska, its geography, temporal setting, and the groups occupying it. The concept of boundaries is covered in some detail. National boundaries in the study area were very real, defined by coinciding features such as marriage, economic sharing, hostility, and dialect patterns. These boundaries were reinforced by the existence of means for the peaceful use of or passage through another group’s territory as needed for trade, social gatherings, or access to natural resources.

Direct Western contact in the study area was fortuitously quite late, relatively free of conflict or the transmittal of disease, and focused primarily on exploration and trade. In 1848, visits by British vessels in search of the lost Franklin expedition, and the arrival of American whaling and trading vessels in significant numbers, effectively ended the relative isolation and pre-contact cultural patterns of the Iñupiaq and their neighbors.

In Chapter 2, *Hostile Relations*, the author discusses in some depth the very hostile and aggressive nature of external relations toward strangers and enemy nations. Burch examines the possible causes of warfare and concludes that a cycle of reciprocal revenge was often a key factor. This section includes a comprehensive description of warfare tactics. Most settlements were relatively small and isolated and thus were vulnerable to well-planned

attacks. Many attacks were surprise raids at night, but open battles between assembled ranks were also fairly common. Raids often involved traveling fairly long distances, on foot or by boat, and where an attack on a fairly large community such as on Tikiġaq (Point Hope) was involved, often several nations would form alliances to increase their numbers.

Outside of the Iñupiaq area, warfare was also frequent. In addition, inhabitants of the Chukchi Peninsula conducted raids along the Alaskan coast. While major raids and battles were relatively infrequent, the results were often devastating. The picture Burch paints of the Iñupiaq Eskimo region as well as the adjacent Athapaskan, Eskimo, and Chukchi populations is one of constant and widespread hostility and fear, reflected in raids, battles, gathering of intelligence, and preparation for warfare. Yet coexisting with this tense atmosphere was a complex network of friendly relations that was at least as important and widespread. This is the focus of the second major section of the book, Chapter 3, *Friendly Relations*.

At their base, all friendly international relations were mediated through individuals. The most important of these relations was the trading partnership: two males, usually of different nations, agreed to exchange gifts on a regular basis and provide support and hospitality when needed. Another significant bond was that of kinship, often established through marriage into another group. Partners and relatives living in different nations often traveled long distances to meet. The two most common occasions for such meetings were messenger feasts and trade fairs. A messenger feast was based upon existing partnerships, and was often hosted by an *umialik* (a wealthy person). It was usually held in mid-winter, and invitations were relayed by messengers from the host community. In addition to special meals, a messenger feast involved ritual, dances, singing, gift exchanges, trade, and games. These were highly enjoyable occasions that served to strengthen existing ties between groups, as well as permitting some exchange of trade goods. Each nation, and its settlements, would have such connections with a number of other nations, so that the resulting network of bonds was quite complex.

Trade fairs were large, international, summer gatherings held annually at locations that provided easy access and could accommodate large numbers of people. The fair focused on trade and a wide variety of recreational activities, but there were also opportunities for strengthening existing bonds, with an emphasis on partnership exchanges. Tensions sometimes were high, since some of the groups participating were active enemies. Several fairs took place in and near the Iñupiaq area. The Sisualik fair, situated on the northeastern shore of Kotzebue Sound, was the largest of these, hosting as many as 1800 people from 15 different nations, including some from Siberia. A number of other fairs outside of the immediate Iñupiaq area provided links to the larger world. The overall system extended from the Mackenzie Delta and the Yukon River west to Siberia, and

from the Arctic Ocean south to the Bering Sea. Trade goods moved rather quickly throughout this area.

Burch addresses the question of how two such seemingly competing characteristics as hostile and friendly relations could have coexisted. He concludes that each nation had a combination of hostile, friendly, or neutral relations with a number of other nations. Two driving forces were behind this balancing act. The first was the need for safe havens as mediated through kinship ties and trading partnerships. The second was a general preoccupation with trade, via messenger feasts and trade fairs, both of which also involved partnerships. These activities were sufficiently important to require the cooperation of everyone in suspending international hostilities.

The author also deals with the question of the origin of this system of international relations and the degree to which it was a product of Western influence. While indirect contact with Russian traders dates to the late 18th century, archeological evidence of warfare (plate armor) goes back to perhaps AD 800. Similarly, small quantities of Eurasian metal implements appear very early, and a trade network involving both eastern Eurasia and the North American Arctic was in existence 2000 years ago. The system described here predates Western influence by 500 to 1000 years.

By the mid-19th century, this ancient system of international relations had begun to disappear. Warfare ended in mid-century. In part, this was because the Natives lacked firearms, but Burch feels the main cause was Iñupiaq preoccupation with trade. Westerners had trade goods, and the fur trade provided access to these goods. Warfare became an unnecessary luxury that interfered with trade.

In Chapter 4, *Conclusions*, the author takes the model he has developed for Northwest Alaska and applies this to the body of world system theory. This school of thought has generally ignored hunting-gathering societies as having made little contribution to the rise of more advanced societies. Burch argues that around 1800, there existed an "interaction sphere" (a well-defined region with a relatively high level of interaction) extending along the coast from northern California to the Bering Sea, and in the Asian mainland to at least Kamchatka, as well as extending to the Mackenzie delta and up the major rivers. Except for the reindeer herders in Siberia, all participants were hunter-gatherers. This system was intact and functioning until the early 19th century. The summer trade fairs were integrating factors in this interaction sphere. The basic premise is that alliance and conflict coexisted in a sort of dynamic balance, mediated more than anything else by a pervasive preoccupation with trade.

The author concludes by arguing that when the world was the exclusive domain of hunters and gatherers, the world system in force resembled that described for the Iñupiat. Interaction spheres were extensive and common. Events like international trade fairs and more limited gatherings such as messenger feasts or the Northwest Coast potlatch were probably important. These meetings

in turn required mechanisms for peaceful travel and assembly. Throughout this period, warfare and environmental and resource changes contributed to a relatively constant state of societal change. In essence, this system provided the basis for the eventual development of the next level of social organization, the rise of chiefdoms.

The book includes two useful appendices. The first is a history of raids and battles in northwestern Alaska compiled from a variety of sources. The second is a summary of the overland travel routes in the region, together with a series of maps.

A number of years ago, this reviewer had the opportunity to walk the visible beach ridges on the triangular peninsula at Point Hope (Tikiġaq), located in the book's study area. On one wind-scoured ridge, remote from any known historic or archeological burial sites, I found a human mandible and some long bone fragments. After reading this book, I suspect I now know their provenience.

This book is useful and enjoyable at several different levels. It is an historical view of Beringia as well as a treatise on world system theory, while also having many characteristics of an ethnography. In presenting in detail the intersecting systems of conflict and alliance, the author manages to convey a rather complete picture of the societies functioning here in the early 19th century. This is a well-written work, fully documented, nicely produced, edited, and printed, with excellent maps and illustrations. It is a complex book with something to offer to readers in a number of different fields. Burch's attempt to add to the dimensions of world system theory by presenting the Iñupiaq of Northwest Alaska and their neighbors as representative of the international relations of early mankind is a persuasive one. Even if the prospective reader is not theoretically inclined, the rich detail and analysis of the balancing of competing forces makes for fascinating reading. In both the Introduction and the Conclusion, the author defines his terminology and theoretical constructs in some detail, so that a reader unfamiliar with world system theory has a good basis for understanding the thesis he presents. I strongly recommend this work, especially for anthropologists, students of the history of Alaska, and those interested in world system theory or international relations. The careful reader will come away with a much richer understanding of the nature of these societies in the early 19th century.

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