

CHAPTER 6

BETWEEN ABUNDANCE AND SCARCITY: FOOD AND THE INSTITUTION OF SHARING AMONG THE INUIT OF THE CIRCUMPOLAR REGION DURING THE RECENT HISTORICAL PERIOD

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Abstract: This chapter outlines factors of change and continuity of food patterns among the Inuit of Northern Quebec. Arguments presented are based on a review of the literature on food acquisition, consumption, and distribution in the circumpolar Arctic over a hundred years. In this period, Inuit food dynamics have evolved along with other important aspects of their social and economic organization. Nutrition-related behaviours and practices have been modified or have disappeared altogether, new ones have been integrated, some with success, others creating new problems and constraints. The establishment of trading posts and settlements, and introduction of firearms, and manufactured food products profoundly altered Inuit economics and Inuit ways in this regard, but today's social and food networks are still largely based on a logic and criteria that were valid a hundred years ago. It is argued that in the Arctic, the basic trends and characteristics of the current Western formal economy are informed and supported in many ways by a continued Inuit rationality.

1. INTRODUCTION

The effort to acquire more in-depth knowledge on the phenomenon of 'diet' for populations of the circumpolar region has an important historical and social dimension, an initial outline of which is presented in this article. The ethnographic literature of the last 125 years has provided the documentary material required for this historical reconstruction exercise, the main objective of which is to characterize, in different time periods, the social dynamic surrounding food procurement, food circulation, and food consumption activities among the Inuit.¹

Today, it is well known that the products of hunting and fishing make up a significant portion of the diet of Inuit peoples (Dewailly *et al.* 1998, Freeman *et al.* 1992, Lévesque & Duhaime 1991). Moreover, Inuit of

all ages place an undeniable value on this source of food, which has become a key mark of their identity (Freeman 1996, Poirier & Brooke 1997). Indeed, one cannot dissociate the role of game from the search for identity that is common to many northern Aboriginal peoples, a search that is prompting a reassertion of the value of harvesting activities, and hence of the 'traditional' way of life. Modern treaties contain a variety of legal provisions that seek to protect both wildlife resources and harvesting practices (Peters 2000).

These hunting and fishing products occasionally go through commercial distribution networks, which, moreover, offer the population access to the full range of manufactured and processed food products. However, more often than not, game and fish still circulate through informal networks that people create and maintain throughout their lifetime. To understand the nature and role of these informal networks in contemporary life and to learn more about their composition and their social, economic, cultural or symbolic purposes, where these exist, a detour back in time is in order. We will thus be able to focus, among other things, on the components of the social and economic organization of Inuit groups during the last period of their nomadic life. The present-day situation is, of course, dependent on economic, social and legal

¹ This literature review was produced in the context of the project entitled *Sustainable development in the Arctic Conditions of food security* (SSHRC—Major Collaborative Research Initiatives). This project is headed by Professor Gérard Duhaime, Université Laval, Québec. An initial version of this document was prepared in 1999 under the title *Réseaux sociaux et alimentation chez les Inuit de la région circumpolaire pendant la période historique*. Montreal: INRS-Culture et Société, 40p.

regulatory mechanisms ensuing from the new sedentary living conditions of these peoples who were, in the past, nomadic. However, this situation is also the result of heritage and tradition that sometimes dates back several centuries, and of changes whose source may be found in history, at least the history spanning the last eight to ten generations. That is why it is important to define, within the limits of the available information, the context in which these changes have occurred.

This article takes into account the ethnographic literature on the entire circumpolar region from Greenland to Nunavik, and including Alaska, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut. The period covered by this first segment of the literature begins around 1875 and extends to World War II. The fur trade is already in place, but the intensity of contact between Whites and Inuit varies from region to region. Often this literature limits itself to describing the material culture and to listing cultural or social characteristics with no concern about integrating social, environmental and historical aspects. However, the fact remains that the relation to food, while not described and analyzed meticulously in accordance with the criteria of modern-day ethnological analysis, is ever-present; it permeates all aspects of the description and the stories.

A characterization of the corpus examined allows us to quickly define two main areas of interest. The first is that of the adventure story, where the writing is often sensationalistic and punctuated with, at times, juicy anecdotes. These documents were written by Europeans or Americans (with only one Métis writer—Rasmussen) who worked and lived for many years in the Arctic and who naturally turned to writing to convey their experiences in this unique and unknown natural and social environment. This literature offers a wealth of details for researchers who know how to 'read between the lines' and how to separate acceptable data from impressionistic statements. The second area of interest is that of scientific reports, which are drier and undoubtedly less rich in anecdotes, but more systematic and better ordered, as a whole.

Arctic societies have been described in turn as aberrations, cultural success stories, or perfect examples of environmental adaptation. The ingenuity of the technology, and the material and symbolic resources, as well as the practices and ways of interacting with the environment which these peoples developed have repeatedly been met with a combination of perplexity and admiration; at the time, the Western imagination generally perceived this environment as uninhabitable.

This amazement is especially visible in the first writings, a large number of which are devoted to a detailed description of hunting techniques.

One of the most representative, or most striking, cultural traits of the Inuit ethos brought to light by the historical literature is, without a doubt, the institution of sharing. Inuit hunter societies were often presented as embodying a form of 'primitive communism,' as this sharing refers not only to methods of distributing and redistributing food resources, but also to all of the behaviours observed and interpreted by the first ethnological theorists as representing an archaic stage of social development. Indeed, the fact of sharing was seen as a normative ethical response to extreme ecological constraints. Most of the authors consulted in the context of this historical reconstruction exercise tend to agree on this and note with a great deal of interest, and at times with curiosity and fascination, this recurrence of sharing in the social practices of the Inuit.

However, until the 1950s, when researchers would approach the subject of sociocultural change among the Inuit in terms of acculturation and loss of authenticity, sharing would be seen as a cultural trait doomed to extinction in the face of the destructive forces of contact (Desgoffe 1955). Contrary to expectations, the institution of sharing has survived; it has undergone significant transformations and is nowadays expressed in new ways, and yet it remains one of the organizing principles of Inuit societies of the circumpolar region: *Sharing is what has made our culture strong. Only through sharing have we survived as a people in this land* (Eileen Panigeo-Maclean cited by Chance 1990:139). Moreover, contemporary literature confirms the persistence in various forms of this key cultural trait: food still circulates today through networks established on the basis of ties between family, neighbours and friends. For the moment, however, it is the recent historical period that is of interest to us.²

1.1 A First Mode of Alternation: Dispersion and Gathering Together

One of the features of the portrait painted by the historical literature is contrast, reiterated in the descriptions, between signs of abundance on the one

² A second document more directly addressing the subject of food and social networks from the standpoint of social change is also available: Lévesque C., C. Lussier, D. de Juriew, and N. Trudeau (1999). *Changement social, culture et alimentation chez les Inuit de la région circumpolaire*. Montreal: INRS-Culture et Société, 45p.

hand and the extreme precariousness of the living conditions on the other. This twofold dynamic is clearly a constant in the writings, from one end of the circumpolar region to the other. One of the fundamental texts dealing with Inuit societies is unquestionably the famous *Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés eskimos* that French ethnographer Marcel Mauss published in 1908. While Mauss himself never traveled in the circumpolar region, he provided, on the basis of the literature available at that time, a remarkable, comprehensive portrait of these societies whose social and economic organization are based on this complementary alternation between two seasons: winter and summer.

However, in order for such a variation to occur, and above all to reoccur over the generations, thereby ensuring the survival and reproduction of these groups of hunters, the Eskimos, as Mauss calls them (as the other authors do), have a certain number of 'constant characteristics': they are coastal peoples, and the coast is a habitat for them and not a stopover point. To live in winter and spring they need ice-free water to hunt seal, or ground ice, whereas in summer they need a freshwater hunting and fishing territory. These conditions are found combined only in certain places in the Arctic and are such that one never encounters settlements on closed seas. Moreover, these conditions are borne out by the fact that available food resources and population numbers are closely related. The winter settlement has just enough persons to reproduce, based on available wildlife resources: that is, rarely more than approximately sixty persons.

[...] il y a une sorte de limite naturelle à l'étendue des groupes eskimos, limite qu'ils ne peuvent dépasser et qui est très étroite. La mort ou l'émigration, ou ces deux causes combinées, les empêchent d'excéder cette mesure. Il est dans la nature de l'établissement eskimo d'être de petites dimensions (Mauss 1908:409).

The maximum size of the settlement is thus dependent on the high mortality rate and, to a lesser extent, on migration. Today, one would say that the settlement's growth limit is determined by the conditions of production. The composition of the settlement is also characteristic: very few old people, very few children, and many widows; women have few children on average and celibacy is practically unknown, a detail which other authors, especially Malaurie ([1954] 1976) and Gessain (1969), also emphasize. During the summer, as resources are more abundant, the families

that make up the winter settlement disperse; it is not uncommon for a nuclear family of four or five persons to spend the summer isolated along the coast.

But this seasonal duality is not only seen in the approach of gathering together or dispersing across the territory. It affects all spheres of social activity, the whole network of relations and all social units. On the domestic level, a distinct structure may be observed for the summer family and the winter family, with each having its own norms concerning the circulation of food and relations between individuals. Commonly used objects, production tools and technology clearly differ in winter and in summer. On this subject, Mauss would express his surprise regarding the number and nature of the relations of interest among individuals. Indeed, the 'twofold social morphology' is paralleled by a twofold system of rights and obligations. A complement to the religious dimension, the Inuit legal system underlies, while giving it a special meaning, all the manifestations of this winter/summer duality. By reason of this fact, there is a winter law and a summer law, and domestic organization is entirely dependent on this twofold dynamic.

The survival of the summer family depends entirely on the presence of a provider, in this case an adult male, and his spouse. His authority is absolute, and cases of disobedience are extremely rare. He is in charge of setting the dates for leaving for the hunt and of distributing the game. The precariousness of the family structure is such that if one of the spouses disappears, the other must quickly re-marry. If the children cannot be adopted in another family unit, they are put to death. In winter, families gather together and occupy a different, more collective type of living area. Behaviours and relations are governed accordingly by a set of rules that vary considerably from those in effect during the summer season. Whereas the summer family is organized around a couple and acts in accordance with the father's decisions, the head of the winter domestic group is chosen for his skill and experience: he is a good hunter who is old, or the father of a good hunter, a shaman, or an affluent man, the owner of an *oumiak* (a boat that can accommodate some twenty persons).

1.2 A Second Mode of Alternation: Abundance and Shortage

When the subject of food is more directly addressed in the literature, the principle of alternation is discussed more in terms of abundance and shortage. In summer, the diversity and proximity of game ensure greater food security and regularity in the harvest, prompting families

to produce for themselves and to lay up stocks. In contrast, winter is often experienced as a time of shortage, which induces families to gather together, as we have just seen, in order to maximize their conditions of subsistence and, hence, their survival.

Abundance, in a first meaning of the term, refers to the possibility of going hunting daily and not returning home empty-handed. It gives the hunter the potential for an almost unlimited harvest and consequently ensures food security, but it also allows families to experience a certain form of independence and autonomy *vis-à-vis* the group. It is in this summer context that some authors observe a more flexible and less restrictive form of sharing. There is little or no sharing (except in the context of the extended family) since this is not really necessary; instead, families lay up some provisions for the winter.

Because the establishment of summer camps leads to the dispersion of families over the territory, it reduces the intensity of collective social activities, which then take on a more friendly and family-oriented character. The special conditions of the summer season combined with a context of abundance encourage a relaxing of the rules of sharing. The relatively formal rules of winter seem to give way to an almost daily conviviality through the preparation and holding of the meal, which becomes the main form of food redistribution and circulation.

Food shortage, or in other words the opposite of abundance, is a situation that is obviously related to harsh weather conditions and scarce resources. But it is also linked, according to Turner, an American who spent time in the Kuujjuaq region at the end of the 19th century, to the exhaustion of dried meat provisions:

Au début de l'hiver, les Esquimaux ont tôt fait d'épuiser leurs provisions de viande de caribou et subsistent grâce au lagopède en attendant que la glace soit assez solide pour aller chercher en traîneau la viande des animaux tués à l'automne (Turner [1884] 1979:58).

Another point of view is expressed by Malaurie ([1954] 1976:148), Rasmussen (1994:271) and Gessain (1969:52), who consider that shortage situations arise at the end of winter when all meat reserves have been exhausted. These three authors are surprised to find that the Inuit do not lay up a large supply of meat provisions in preparation for this difficult period. This choice, which does not appear to be very rational although it is in keeping with the belief system in effect, is based on the idea that too abundant a harvest risks severing the spiritual tie between animals and humans. Failure to

respect this harvesting ethic would encourage game to flee the community's hunting territories or, in other words, to no longer sacrifice themselves to the hunter.

In the same way that periods of abundance are governed not only by social rules but also by a set of symbolic rules that ensure protection against the wrath of the animal master-spirits, a certain number of rules of a similar nature are in effect when a period of shortage occurs. It is precisely this shortage that leads to a strict observance of the rules of sharing. Indeed, the establishment of winter villages, the gathering of families and difficult access to game force individuals to apply mechanisms that ensure the food security of all and help to regulate both the circulation of food and social relations. Moreover, these rules are reinforced by respecting specific food taboos, which ensure peace between humans and supernatural entities. The failure to respect these taboos during a time of shortage is very serious, for it is feared that overlooking these taboos will aggravate the situation. Penalties are occasionally provided for offenders; those who do not share may be put to death.

[...] Le partage communautaire correspondait à une situation bien particulière, du groupe, celle de pénurie. Il n'avait pas de raisons d'être en période d'abondance. Et pendant les famines l'instinct individuel de conservation l'emportait sur tous les liens de solidarité, même parentale; infanticide, senilicide et parfois même cannibalisme étant les mesures extrêmes que pouvaient alors adopter les Esquimaux pour assurer leur survie. Dans la mesure où les famines étaient occasionnelles et les périodes d'abondance rares, l'économie de pénurie telle que nous l'avons décrite prévalait chez les Kangirsujuaamiut. C'est pendant les périodes de pénurie que les produits alimentaires devenaient vraiment biens collectifs, en ce sens que la répartition se faisait simultanément pour le gibier pris collectivement et pour celui pris individuellement (Saladin d'Anglure 1967:113).

2. COOPERATION IN THE CONTEXT OF FOOD PROCUREMENT ACTIVITIES

These modes of alternation have a significant impact on food procurement practices and activities. The precariousness of living conditions required, first and foremost, free and continuous access to hunting territories; this opening up may be seen as the first sphere of expression of resource pooling. The absence

of individual property may indeed be understood as the implicit recognition, by all members of the group, of the need for each member to be able to hunt and fish freely in order to meet his needs and the needs of the family.

The Eskimo do not have any strict divisions of hunting territory, such as characterize their near Indian neighbors, the Micmacs and Montagnais. Most of the hunting is done on the sea, which is free to every one. The same condition applies to the vast interior, where the Eskimos hunt for deer in the autumn and spring. The idea of restricting the pursuit of game is repugnant to the Eskimo, who hold that food belongs to everyone. This does not preclude them from having intricate laws for the division of game, when hunting in parties (Hawkes 1916:25).

Generally, food procurement activities follow several schemes that range from community cooperation to family cooperation, and that rely on social networks likely to bring together relatives and friends and, more rarely, neighbours. In these networks, which change according to the season, kinship ties appear to be a stable element. They constitute the framework for establishing both the individual's place of residence and the nature of his/her participation in food procurement for nuclear and extended families and, by extension, for the group as a whole. There are numerous individual cooperation approaches, which may involve a father and son, two brothers, two brothers-in-law or the male-female couple. However, these forms of cooperation are not incidental; they result from a socialization.

What is more, cooperation lasts over time, since it continues after the death of the provider. When the father dies, the son becomes responsible for providing food for his mother and, sometimes, his sisters. It is important for a hunter to have children who will take care of him when he is no longer able to hunt (Mauss 1908, Rasmussen 1994). In 1888, Boas notes that children are treated well and are rarely reprimanded, so that when the time comes they will take care of their parents. The relationship between parents and children thus seems to reflect the recognition of mutual dependence. The phenomenon of adoption also seems to be related to the need to take care of the children of widows or parents in difficulty, to ensure that the children do not die of starvation. Moreover, adopted children serve as future contributors and producers for their foster families.

Food procurement activities within the family take the form of gathering, fishing, and hunting activities. Gathering, generally the work of women and children, follows the rhythm of the seasons and the tides. Individual fishing may be practiced by men or women, with the difference residing more in the technique used and the species harvested. Hunting for small game does not require a collective organization and can be practiced by children all year round. Adult hunters can hunt for caribou or seal alone. This individual hunting occupies a preponderant place in the Inuit economy according to Saladin d'Anglure, but is not sufficient to ensure the survival of families. It is undoubtedly the need to lay up provisions for winter that prompts hunters to organize collective hunting expeditions, which Saladin d'Anglure describes as 'high-yield' hunts. These hunting expeditions make it possible to lay up a few months' supply of meat stocks, allowing the group to make it through the time of shortage without experiencing famine (Saladin d'Anglure 1967).

The organization of collective hunting expeditions involves the cooperation of several families. This larger-scale cooperation depends on the seasonal migrations of certain species of game (brook trout, caribou) and the size of the animals hunted (beluga, walrus, right whale). The collective aspect of food procurement activities, while determined by the technical conditions of the hunt, is directly associated with forms of cooperation based on pre-established social ties. However, the authors who observed and reported the facts could not explain the precise nature of these ties. At most, one learns that decisions made in terms of selecting hunting sites often involve consultation by all men of the group, and that the choice of settlement sites depends on the choice of hunting sites. Boas ([1888] 1964:77) emphasizes, for instance, the hunting techniques and the constraints that require cooperation: at least two men are needed to hunt seal far away from the camp; a man who is alone must remain close to the camp to be able to bring back the harvested game.

3. DISTRIBUTION AND REDISTRIBUTION OF GAME

Like the cooperation practices that underlie food procurement, the distribution of game also occurs in several ways and involves numerous behaviours. Indeed, the methods of distribution depend on many variables, such as the volume of the harvest, the diversity and quality of the harvested species, the type of hunting, the social status of the individuals involved, the

circumstances, and the period of the year. Moreover, the very close ties that exist between persons and animals, as well as between the living and the dead, all find particular expressions, which often go beyond distribution to include offerings and food taboos.

In Nunavik, for example (Graburn 1969), the sharing and distribution of game are first and foremost the prerogative of the man who brings home the food. On some occasions, his spouse can take over for him and also distribute the food. For example, she can invite other persons to eat. However, other authors claim that it is the women who distribute the products of hunting. Among the Ahirmiut of Hudson Bay (west coast), the hunted caribou belong to those who strike them first. When game is rare, competition between hunters prevails over sharing, and conflicts are frequent. In the case of collective hunting expeditions, the animals are distributed informally among the persons present. However, the rule that seems to exist concerns the preponderance of family ties in sharing habits.

When caribou were taken cooperatively, the kill was divided equally among the hunters, although an individual who already had cached a great quantity of meat might give some of his share to a less successful man. After the meat had been taken to a settlement by the hunter or his wife, the wife took charge of its distribution. She considered first the needs of her household, next those of her parents or grandparents, then her siblings, and finally her husband's parents (Oswalt 1961:119 cited by Csonka 1995).

Moreover, the distribution takes on a moral character in many places. Stefansson (1908) mentions that during his journeys with the Inuit of Alaska, his meat caches were often emptied of their content. While he interpreted this action as a form of theft, this opinion was not shared by his Inuit associates who considered that in an environment as difficult as theirs, food belonged to everyone and, in particular, to the person who needed it, when he needed it.

While sharing seems obligatory to some, Rasmussen emphasizes that this can only be the case where a request for food is made to the hunters. The game is then distributed according to the demand. In a period of abundance, there is little demand. Moreover, it is according to this logic of obligation that a gift, whatever it may be, must always be followed by a counter-gift (Stefansson 1908). He who receives must give back 'one hundredfold.'

Practically everywhere in the circumpolar region, the distribution of food is associated with the social

position of individuals (Rasmussen 1994). Hunters are always the first served whereas women who are nursing or who have young children are served last. This hierarchical system is linked to the requirements of the precarious life of the Inuit: the hunter is at the top of the social hierarchy for he is essential to the others.

The distribution of food among humans and the logic of reciprocity operating under various circumstances also find their counterpart in spiritual life. Animals sacrifice themselves to men to facilitate their life on earth. It is important to not offend animals by exploiting their generosity. To make sure that one remains in the good graces of the game, it is necessary to maintain relations of reciprocity with the various species. The reticence on the part of certain groups to lay up major meat stocks is thought to be related to this desire to respect the game.

When surpluses are accumulated by a family, it must redistribute them in the group through several channels: rituals, exchanges of gifts, distribution among children or visitors. Similarly, a man who accumulates more food than he needs during the winter places himself in a position of debt *vis-à-vis* the group. He is expected to redistribute this food. Failure to obey this rule may make him responsible for a poor hunting harvest the following year. Hence, every distribution of this nature takes on a symbolic efficiency: it is required to guarantee a good hunt. Without generosity, the success of the hunt is seriously jeopardized (Mauss 1908). Consequently, this logic of generalized distribution is used to curb envy and the conflicts that may arise from situations where inequalities are flagrant. The notion of envy is mentioned by several authors as a powerful disincentive to accumulation.

Saladin d'Anglure notes that, generally, banquets are organized when a big-game animal (beluga, *ujjuk*, walrus) is killed during an individual hunt or when a hunter obtains a major meat surplus from a collective big-game hunting expedition. In principle, it is the person who kills the animal and his wife who do the inviting. Banquets are organized for the men on the one hand, with separate banquets organized for the women and children.

Les banquets n'avaient pas forcément lieu immédiatement après la prise d'un gros gibier, mais parfois lorsqu'un chasseur en rapportait un d'une de ses caches de viande. C'était la seule forme de distribution générale véritablement organisée au niveau de la consommation; elle répondait à l'exigence de partage du gros gibier tout en laissant à

l'acquéreur initiative et prestige du don (Saladin d'Anglure 1967:120-121).

The distribution of meat between men and women during these banquets also follows a precise logic. Women eat the heart raw, the snout and the *kujapik*, namely the meat attached to the thoracic vertebrae of large marine mammals. Men eat the *kussiniq* or the meat attached to the lumbar vertebrae. Young boys are consecrated as hunters and men through the ritual sharing of their first kills.

Lorsqu'un jeune chasseur réussissait sa première prise d'un animal, d'une espèce, le gibier était entièrement distribué dans le camp. La part du détenteur était offerte à l'accoucheuse (arnaquti du chasseur) (Saladin d'Anglure 1967:113).

Relations between humans and animals also centre on a certain number of taboos that individuals must respect if they do not want the game to flee and if they do not want to face food scarcity.

Under the old religion it used to be believed that sickness, famine, and death were caused by such trivial things as the breaking of a marrow bone with the wrong kind of hammer, or the wearing of deerskin clothing before enough days had elapsed from the killing of the last whale or walrus. To avoid breaking these taboos meant prosperity and good health, and the gaining of all the rewards (or rather the escape from all the penalties) provided for by that system of religion (Stefansson 1908:89).

For example, in some regions, marine animals cannot be mixed with land animals; hence, seal meat cannot be prepared at the same time and with the same utensils as caribou meat. Violation of this taboo will surely result in a bad hunt, which in turn is likely to lead to sickness and famine.

Animals must necessarily be shared among everyone. A person who violates this rule runs the risk of having something terrible happen to him. On this subject, Stefansson gives the example of the bearded seal. When the hunter has killed a bearded seal, he notifies the others so that they can come help him cut it up. The seal is then shared among the hunters. The best piece is given to the most influential person of the group, whereas the hunter only receives the last and often the smallest and least tasty piece, but he gains in prestige. Persons who do not share are punished, often 'supernaturally.' It is said that a man who had refused to share a bearded seal with the other hunters and who had

concealed his kill claiming that it was a harbour seal was stricken with blindness.

Finally, several proscriptions exist with respect to the persons who take part in the preparation of food and its consumption. Rasmussen notes in 1924 that, among the Inuit of Baffin Island, women with young children are not authorized to cook with the others, and that no one has the right to touch the food that they prepare. He also mentions other cases, in the Repulse Bay region, where mothers are excluded from the banquets organized following the capture of a whale. In contrast, among the Ahlarmiut of the inland, it is all women who are deprived of the right to take part in the caribou feasts:

Il n'est pas permis aux femmes d'approcher avant la fin du repas des hommes. Tout le monde se jette sur le repas comme des chiens affamés. Chacun tient à s'assurer les meilleurs morceaux et, quoique ayant souvent assisté à des festins barbares d'Esquimaux, jamais je n'ai constaté une semblable absence de procédés. [...] Outre les rennes, on fait cuire différentes têtes. On en donne une à chaque membre de l'expédition, en l'autorisant à l'emporter dans sa tente. Mais il nous faut promettre de ne pas donner les restes, ni à des femmes, ni à des chiens (Rasmussen 1994:91).

Food is not only a matter of the presence or absence of game. Some species are favoured over others and carry more prestige for the persons who catch and eat them. Generally, among all the Inuit groups that Rasmussen met from one end of the circumpolar Arctic to the other in the early 1920s, large mammals (seals, whales, caribou) are preferred over small game and fish. Even when the latter resources are abundant, the Inuit complain that they are hungry, in the absence of prestigious game. Gessain reports that the same phenomenon was operating in Greenland at the end of the 19th century.

Il s'agit là de la nourriture de base la plus appréciée (le mot nourriture se dit viande de phoque), celle dont le manque s'exprime en disant "nous avons faim", même si c'est la saison où il y a autant d'œufs qu'on peut en récolter dans les falaises, où les oiseaux emplissent les marmites. À part le phoque il y a bien d'autres ressources alimentaires, mais viande et graisse de phoque accompagnées d'algues sont le régime de chaque jour (Gessain 1969:39).

4. MANAGEMENT OF EXTREME SITUATIONS OR THE OTHER SIDE OF SHARING

While abundance and shortage represent the two sides of a common and widespread alternation model, in other words the model of everyday life, overabundance on the one hand and famine on the other show the precariousness of life. Indeed, it is as if this polarity was extended to the point of excess. Different logics apply under these circumstances, where the reference points and behaviours no longer have the same significance.

Rasmussen (1994), who crossed the circumpolar region from Greenland to Alaska from March 1923 to September 1924 to meet with various Inuit groups, describes the periods of great abundance as periods of prosperity and feasts. During his travels, he found that when food was abundant, feasts and invitations were numerous. However, he points out that this does not mean that the meals and feasts were free. He himself had to exchange goods (matches, various objects) to gain admission.

These feasts and 'food orgies' fascinate the first authors for whom the abundance on these occasions was just one more demonstration of the lack of rationality of these peoples. Participants ate to their fill without a care for tomorrow (Jenness 1991, Rasmussen 1994, Gessain 1969). In some cases, the organization of a feast depends on the harvest. The capture of a large marine mammal will often lead to the organization of a feast for the entire community (Rasmussen 1994:327). The event, followed by games or sports competitions, takes on a ceremonial character and promotes the strengthening of social ties.

The purpose of the songs and dances is to attract game. If the Inuit do not dance, the spirits that preside over the festivities will become angry, and the animals will go away. The festivities are also the opportunity to feed long-lost ancestors, who otherwise risk going hungry. The names of these ancestors would be forgotten if their namesakes were unable to sing their praises during the feasts.

The festivities and banquets are also an opportunity to enter into alliances and informal agreements with other groups and to ensure greater mobility over the territory for one's own group. These alliances may be entered into during large gatherings, resembling fairs, during which numerous goods are traded.

The early Moravian writers mention a festival, which the Labrador Eskimo used to hold when a dead whale was discovered in prime condition (according to Eskimo tastes). A period of festivity followed, "as an expression of gratitude to Torngak (Torngarsoak)" (Hawkes 1916:139).

According to the ethnographic reconstructions done by Arundale and Schneider for the years 1800 to 1849 in Alaska, the alliances concluded between families during the big intergroup gatherings allowed participants to travel to another region at the time of famines or other difficult situations.

Therefore people actively recruited partners from other societies to give themselves options for moving to another region in times of famine and potentially valuable allies in times of feuding or warfare (Arundale & Schneider 1987:42).

In the same way that abundance includes its own excess, shortage has an extreme state—famine—which can result in a violation of the strictest dietary taboos and even lead to the practice of cannibalism when all edible resources have been exhausted (dogs, leather clothes) (Boas [1888] 1964, Csonka 1995). Payne and Graham (1984) note that during times of famine people even try to avoid sharing, and catches are quickly hidden.

Parfois la faim s'installe [...]. On se résout à tuer les chiens. [...] Un homme est parti vers la maison voisine dire la grande faim et demander de la viande, de la graisse [...] il n'est pas revenu. L'épuisement commence, certains sont si faibles qu'ils ne pensent plus se lever. Ils meurent les premiers. Non sans crainte et après quelques gestes propitiatoires, le premier mort est mangé, puis le second et les suivants (Gessain 1969:52).

Dans une période de grande disette, un homme s'aperçut ainsi que pendant qu'il allait chasser, sa femme avait accumulé en cachette beaucoup de poisson et qu'elle en mangeait en son absence. Revenant chez lui sans être attendu, il la surprit en train de manger et tentant de dissimuler ce qui restait. Il sortit tranquillement de l'iglou et ferma l'entrée. Elle lui demanda pourquoi et il lui répondit de sortir pour le voir, d'un ton qui n'était pas du tout rassurant. Elle demeura à l'intérieur et y mourut de faim, sachant bien qu'elle serait tuée si elle sortait (Turner [1884] 1979:39).

Most authors in contact with the Inuit at the beginning of the century did not fail to report cases

of infanticide involving baby girls and orphans, as well as cases of geronticide as a means used to limit the size of the group.

Rasmussen, in talking about the *netsilik* that he met in the early 1920s, points out that these practices are related to the "the fierceness of the fight for life to which these populations are reduced" (1994:273). The choice of the persons sacrificed is associated with their role in production activities on the one hand and the ties that link them to the producers on the other:

L'expérience de nombreuses générations leur a appris que leur travail [celui des femmes] ne peut nourrir qu'un nombre limité d'individus. Dans un ménage, une fille est une charge tant qu'elle n'est pas en état de travailler. Or, une fois qu'elle est en âge de le faire, on la marie, et alors elle quitte sa famille. Voilà pourquoi on régleme les naissances au bénéfice des garçons. D'autre part, tout chasseur sait bien que ses forces ne résisteront pas longtemps à sa pénible tâche. [...] Si, en revanche, le chasseur a des fils, il peut compter sur leur aide pour le jour où ses forces commenceront à baisser. [...] Ils s'évitent ainsi la nécessité de se mettre prématurément la corde au cou. Car c'est la coutume ici que les vieillards se pendent quand ils ne sont plus capables de subvenir à leurs besoins (Rasmussen 1994:274).

For elders, life without offspring is impossible. Old men and women for whom no one wants to hunt are invariably condemned to famine. Persons who are nonproductive and without support sometimes have no other choice but to steal food. Consequently, other members can punish them by abandoning or killing them (Graburn 1969:69). Malaurie ([1954] 1976:85) also notes that infanticide and suicide by older persons in Greenland in the 1930s were only practiced when resources were scarce, at the end of winter mainly. He adds that it is in the interest of less productive persons (the elderly, children and women) to be linked by kinship or marital ties to a hunter if they wish to survive.

Les vieux et les infirmes sont traités durement et s'ils sont à charge pour leur nourriture, on s'en débarrasse en les étranglant ou on les laisse périr en les abandonnant au moment de changer de camp (Turner [1884] 1979:29).

Les personnes âgées dépourvues de parents qui puissent leur assurer la subsistance sont souvent condamnées à mourir sans émoi. Si, par exemple, une vieille femme devient à charge de la communauté, il n'est pas rare qu'on la néglige jusqu'à ce qu'affaiblie par la faim elle devienne incapable de

suivre les autres, brusquement pris d'envie de déménager (Turner [1884] 1979:39).

5. REGULATION OF SOCIAL LIFE THROUGH SHARING

Consultation of the documentary corpus compiled for this article indicates, as we have seen, a diversity of social situations and dynamics. Indeed, food distribution does not occur in an arbitrary fashion. It is dependent upon certain circumstances, values and conceptions of exchanges and gifts between individuals that govern both interpersonal and intergroup ties. The reason for giving food to one's mother is not the same as for offering meat to one's neighbour. Moreover, these acts have different consequences and repercussions, and generally are not 'disinterested.' A review of the information consulted shows at least six specific social regulatory formulas operating during the recent historical period.

5.1 Moral Obligation

The redistribution of game occasionally takes on an obligatory character. If meat is rare, the hunter is obligated to share the harvested game with all members of the village who are in need. His wife is often the person who makes the distribution. Among the Ammassalik, in the 17th century, the gathering together of Inuit nuclear families in a large dwelling made it difficult to conceal the resources acquired and made redistribution almost obligatory (Gullov 1982 cited by Robbe 1989:2).

In the case of the Eskimos of Kangirsujuaq, Saladin d'Anglure noted in 1967 that they never refused to give a share of food to whomever requested it and that all hunters respected this rule scrupulously. In general, the persons who made such requests had no or few relatives in the village and, consequently, received little shared meat. Hunters considered themselves responsible for the life and survival of these persons.

5.2 Reciprocity

In general, the hunter and his family benefit from the harvested game (Graburn 1969). However, there is a rule of reciprocity, whereby the game must be shared with all under certain circumstances: when the size of the animal permits, when the number of catches is sufficient, and when hunting is carried out in groups of a few families (in winter and spring). Rules of reciprocity also exist between a widow and a hunter who gives her food for making him certain articles of clothing.

However, this reciprocity is qualified by the giving of certain pieces (occasionally considered choice pieces) to men rather than to women, to the hunter who killed the animal rather than to his fellow hunters, and to relatives rather than to neighbours; this principle symbolically combines privileged social ties and statuses.

Graburn points out that some parts of the game are intended for specific persons in the group. Some pieces go to the hunter who killed the animal. In the case of a whale, for example, the woman receives the head, the eyes, the thoracic vertebrae and the heart, whereas the hunter receives the meat of the ribs and sternum. Men are entitled to the lumbar and cervical vertebrae. The skin is eaten by everyone, as are the sacral and caudal vertebrae.

5.3 Conditional Sharing

In this case, sharing of game is subject to specific distribution rules which basically depend on the hunter's participation in the capture: *In any sharing, one of the hunters benefited from privileges, which could be called those of the acquirer of the game. These privileges included control over the distribution as well as a special portion* (Saladin d'Anglure 1967:108).

A hunter becomes the acquirer of the game by the fact of owning equipment used for production, by the discovery of the animal, or by being the first to harpoon the prey or mortally wound it. The remainder of the game is shared among the hunters present. The degree of participation in the hunting and capture of the animal determines the order of distribution.

The products of individual hunting are also shared; however, this sharing is subject to other rules and norms, those of kinship and alliance. These rules foster indirect terms of cooperation between close relatives and allies. They are not founded on direct cooperation and immediate sharing but are based on exchanges of services and game over the long term, which does not necessarily require actual participation in the capture. A hunter shares his catches first with his close relatives, friends and neighbours (his close relatives may also be his neighbours). However, this sharing is not free and often involves cooperation between receivers and givers (who may be part of the same extended family). It thus involves a conditional exchange.

Souvent deux parents s'entendaient pour aller chasser chacun de leur côté et pour partager leurs prises ensuite. C'était des *nalirpuurutigiik*. Nous verrons plus loin qu'il y avait également à certaines périodes des accords de commensalité entre parents; enfin, sur le plan de la distribution, telles

parts, d'après nos informateurs, allaient régulièrement à tels parents : il y avait le morceau du père, du grand-père, de la mère, etc. Une part de gibier que l'on réservait pour un parent était appelé *Minaq*. Contrairement aux autres parts communautaires, elle pouvait se donner d'un camp à l'autre si les parents étaient dispersés ou occupaient intentionnellement des camps de chasse différents pour augmenter leurs chances d'obtenir du gibier. La part que l'on faisait envoyer à un parent était appelée *Tujuuti* (Saladin d'Anglure 1967:111).

5.4 Sharing and Ownership Rights

In Kangirsujuaq in 1967, ownership rights over natural resources and production equipment are taken into consideration in the organization of collective hunting expeditions and food distribution.

En pratique les familles étaient souvent attachées par tradition à des lieux précis, sites d'habitation ou zones de chasse, de même qu'à des circuits réguliers de migration, parce que les parents ou grands-parents avaient eux-mêmes vécu dans ces endroits. Plusieurs générations pouvaient ainsi se succéder dans le même camp. Lors des saisons de chasse aux grands mammifères, les étrangers qui chassaient à proximité d'un camp étaient tenus de partager leurs prises avec les habitants du camp, sans être payés de retour, ce qui aurait été la règle s'ils avaient eu leur tente plantée dans le camp (Saladin d'Anglure 1967:105).

Permanent facilities used for hunting or fishing belong to the individuals who built them or their descendants, and each hunter is the owner of his tools, weapons and means of transportation. In the case of the *oumiak*, the owner receives dividends in food for the collective use of this means of transportation for hunting. When game is shared, he may be favoured when it comes to the quantity and quality of the pieces received.

5.5 Sharing-Conciliation

In the symbolic universe of the Inuit, ancestors are reincarnated through the persons to whom their name has been given. One of the strategies for winning the ancestors' favour and maintaining good relations with them is to have these ancestors partake in the sharing by giving meat to the living bearing their name. Gessain cites examples of this practice involving an alliance between the dead and the living in Greenland.

In 1884 among the Ammassalik, the rules were such that sharing went beyond the immediate or

extended family circle (Gessain 1969:39). Some types of game, including seal, were subject to methodical cutting, where distribution of the portions "goes beyond the context of the biological or adoptive relatives of the home and extends to this other network of alliances created by reincarnated names." The sharing of meat with 'reincarnated names' respects the kinship relations that existed between the latter when they were still alive.

Cinq minutes plus tard, je suis attablé avec David, puis sa femme nous rejoint devant une assiette remplie d'un gros morceau de phoque [...] 'Uderep niniarti qujanara[...]': la viande est celle d'un grand phoque tué par Udere de Kumiut, 'merci pour le phoque d'Udere'. Mais pourquoi Udere leur-a-t-il donné cette viande? Parce que Udere, 38 ans, et une fille de David, Karena, 12 ans, réincarnent un précédent Udere et une précédente Karena, mari et femme à la génération passée; aujourd'hui, le 'mari' a donné cette viande à sa 'femme' (Gessain 1969:118).

While it was important to conciliate the spirits of ancestors, it was also necessary to conciliate the animal spirits, as we have already noted. Sharing meat with a large number of persons helped to maintain healthy relations with the animal master-spirits because it prevented the accumulation and wasting of meat.

5.6 Commensalism: Social Sharing

Visits are important. They represent an opportunity for a hunter to display his generosity and also his good manners as head of the household. Upon his return from a profitable hunting expedition, the hunter invites all those who wish to pay him a visit. Freuchen's description in this respect is instructive. He reports the speech of a hunter who downplays the qualities of his catch and his hunting skills. The compliments rain down on him, and modesty is in order. Before serving his guests a choice catch, the hunter expresses himself in the following way:

Alas, I have waited so long before inviting you because I was embarrassed on account of my bad house. I do not know how to build a house as big and handsome as yours. Moreover, I have nothing decent to offer you. The rest of you, you are used to catching young, fresh, and good-tasting animals; I must be content with half-dead carrions that are an insult to the palate. And finally I have only the miserable wife who sits here. She is unfit for any work, and she is particularly impossible at cooking meat, so this meal is going to be a terrible scandal for my house (Freuchen 1961:97).

Gessain (1969) also reports the important character that visits assumed among the Ammassalik of Greenland at the end of the last century. Visits are an opportunity to share food and are characterized by exuberance and a good mood. He adds that the rule of hospitality is a duty; families that have food reserves must use them to receive visitors.

On reçoit avec grande générosité, on offre ses provisions et on donne à ceux qui repartent de la nourriture pour leurs parents qui ne sont pas venus (Gessain 1969:41).

Graburn (1969) shows that the rules for visits and meals taken between men and women help to cement ties between individuals while circulating food. It seems important for an adult male to create exchange and alliance networks around him, but without overly displaying his wealth.

Extravagance is not reserved solely for members of the group. Numerous observers have related the way in which they were received by Inuit groups. Some of these observers seem overwhelmed by the scope of the giving and sharing. Freuchen in particular describes gargantuan feasts that can last a very long time. Participants sometimes go from house to house to extend the celebrations. Saladin d'Anglure identified three types of commensalisms, which synthesize the forms this veiled redistribution can take.

La commensalité fortuite: c'était d'une façon générale l'hospitalité offerte aux visiteurs; dans un camp de 4 à 5 familles les habitants se rendaient visite quotidiennement. C'était aussi les repas pris en commun lors des voyages ou expéditions de chasse (Saladin d'Anglure 1967:119).

La commensalité organisée: dans les petits camps saisonniers, lors des périodes de chasse intensive, il était fréquent que deux familles décident de coopérer dans le travail tant masculin que féminin et de partager leurs repas, ou encore que chaque repas se prenne collectivement, tous les habitants du camp se réunissant tantôt chez l'une tantôt chez l'autre des familles. On aimait, dans ce cas, mettre à cuire un phoque entier dans la marmite (Saladin d'Anglure 1967:119).

La commensalité familiale: la commensalité fortuite ou organisée était très pratiquée entre Esquimaux apparentés. D'abord parce que c'était habituellement des familles parentes entre elles qui corésidaient sous la même habitation ou qui voisinaient se visiter plus

que les non-parents. L'unité de consommation habituelle était le groupe domestique; lorsque celui-ci était cependant composé de plusieurs familles restreintes, chacune des femmes possédait ses ustensiles de cuisine et était en mesure de préparer les repas pour son mari et ses enfants (Low 1912:143 cited by Saladin d'Anglure 1967:120).

7. CONCLUSION

Inuit groups of the nomadic era maintain a fragile balance in a precarious socioeconomic context. Because the survival of the individual and the group depends on weather conditions and resource availability, any interruption in the food cycle upsets the balance and results in losses: losses of life, losses of solidarity (groups disperse or become smaller), loss of health, etc. Population control occurs almost spontaneously, sometimes helped along by a 'normative intervention.' In this context, geronticide and infanticide, practiced reluctantly (Freuchen 1961:103), are the price of the 'population pruning' required to guarantee the continuity of the group.

The institution of sharing in this context of alternation between abundance and scarcity appears to be a permanent feature in the culture of Inuit societies, one that has numerous variables and variations. It may be understood as a regulatory method that ensures the welfare of all by recognizing the individual, for the economy of giving operates at the material, social and symbolic levels. It thus seems to be at the crossroads between the natural world and the supernatural world. In order for humans to live and be able to share, animals must be willing to sacrifice themselves; and when they have sacrificed themselves, they must receive something in return.

It is through the circle of reciprocity that one avoids conflict between humans and supernatural entities on the one hand, and among humans on the other. To preserve internal cohesion and avoid conflicts, the group provides against individual excesses: excesses in the possession of property, excesses in prestige, and excesses in authority. Hence, the institution of sharing is more than an economic principle; it is the organizing principle of the spiritual life and social life of Inuit groups during the recent historical period.

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