

GEOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN NATIVE ALASKAN ETHNIC BOUNDARY MARKERS

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ABSTRACT

Considerable complexity is encountered in ethnic boundary identification of 19th-century Native Alaskan communities in various geographic contexts. Archaeological data from historic Native Alaskan sites in California, Alaska and the Kurile Islands are presented to illuminate the problems confronted when ascertaining cultural boundaries on a village scale. Material culture remains of a single ethnic group vary with each milieu, making standard material culture boundary definitions difficult if not impossible. Differences are attributed to village composition, environmental conditions, world system supply configurations, and multicultural interaction.

Introduction

As the title of this symposium suggests, this paper will be concerned with the construction of native group boundaries in northern California archaeology, although perhaps in a somewhat unconventional manner. The native group boundaries under consideration are not Native Californian per se, but the material culture boundaries of the Native Alaskan workers who resided at the Russian-American colony of Fort Ross in northern California. The Fort Ross assemblage will be compared with the material culture remains from two other Native Alaskan villages associated with 19th-century Russian-American Company colonies on Kodiak Island in Alaska and Urup Island in the Kuriles. Using these archaeological assemblages, the following question will be addressed: Can we construct material culture ethnic group boundaries on a village scale for the historically reported Native Alaskan settlement at Fort Ross?

Theoretical Orientation

In 1926, Kossina postulated: "Clearly defined, sharply distinctive, bounded archaeological provinces correspond unquestionably to the territories of particular peoples and tribes" (quoted in Veit 1989:39). However, most current approaches to boundary identification using material culture remains could be said to be the antithesis of Kossina's position. While the ability to observe crisp boundaries is in question, and even the very search may be seen as perhaps counter-productive by some (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995), material culture associations have been assumed to reflect distinct ethnic groups throughout the history of archaeology as a discipline (Ucko 1989:x). The relationship between material culture remains and ethnic groups is complex and subject to variation in time and space. Even temporal and spatial patterning concepts are problematic, because they suggest implicitly a closed, static view of culture (Green and Perlman 1985:6). Strict boundary conceptualizations likewise impose artificial limits on an otherwise fluid, open social process (Green and Perlman 1985:6-7; Whitecotton

1992:53), where material culture is an "active medium" in boundary delineations (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). In fact, measures of "cultural drift" use different rates of material culture change to index the "stability and permeability" of boundaries between groups over time (Yesner 1985:53). These issues are magnified in frontier and border locations, where the "expectations for the discovery of discrete spatial patterns of diagnostic material remains" are seldom met (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995).

Clear, well-defined material culture boundaries may not be evident in the archaeological record, but the search for "family resemblances" (Osborn 1989:144), "artifact patterns" (DeCorse 1989:138), and cultural parallels can still be productive. While assemblages may be internally heterogeneous, external comparisons with neighboring collections suggest identities which can be distinguished from others (Balint 1989:191). "Microscale" analysis on the village level may prove more useful in the definition of group boundaries, reflecting close individual interactions (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). Additionally, by reviewing the archaeological record in areas with available historical evidence, the ability to define and interpret material culture remains is enhanced (Rogers and Wilson 1993:225).

At Fort Ross, we have the opportunity to compare and contrast a 19th-century Russian-American Company associated Native Alaskan village deposit with other similar village deposits, geographically removed but temporally congruent. All three sites have been investigated archaeologically to varying degrees, and have some associated historic documentation. Each site, however, exhibits its own internal heterogeneity and multiculturalism: Kodiak in the Alaskan homeland, Urup in the Ainu homeland and Fort Ross in the Kashaya Pomo homeland. The questions become: Are they more like each other than different? Can the material culture assemblages be used to identify the boundaries of a Native Alaskan village associated with the Russian-American Company, regardless of geographic locale?

Native Alaskan Village Sites

The specific sites employed in the comparison of the Native Alaskan village at Fort Ross include the Kurilorossija site on Urup Island in the Kuriles and the Nunakakhnak site at Karluk on Kodiak Island in Alaska. Each of the sites in northern California, Kodiak Island and Urup Island represent Native Alaskan encampments associated with Russian mercantile activities in the 19th century.

While this analysis treats each village as an homogeneous Native Alaskan ethnic locale, it is recognized that the Native Alaskans in Russian employ themselves represented various ethnic backgrounds: Aleut, Koniag, Tana'ina, Chugach. In addition, in two of the three areas discussed, local aboriginals (Ainu and Kashaya Pomo) probably cohabitated with the Native Alaskans. On the other hand, the Kodiak location represents an ancestral homeland. An additional discontinuity to consider is the differing gender mix in each settlement. Consequently, any search for material culture similarities must be conducted with this internal heterogeneity in mind. The historical background and archaeological assemblages of each area will be reviewed, conclusions regarding the workability of material culture definitions for boundary identification will be presented, and suggestions for future research will be outlined.

Fort Ross, California

The Russian-American Company established Fort Ross in northern California in 1812, and operated it for almost 30 years as part of a network of outposts representing Russia's interest in the Pacific fur trade. Native Alaskan hunters, relocated to California by the Russians, resided in a village on the open terrace directly south of the Russian stockade. Native Californians were also recruited by the Russians as a local labor force. The Native Alaskan community consisted of Native Alaskan men, Native Alaskan couples and inter-ethnic households composed of Native Alaskan men and Native Californian women. Population estimates report from 75 to 125 native people residing in the village.

An archaeological investigation of the Native Alaskan community at Fort Ross has been ongoing since 1988, as a collaborative effort between the California Parks Department and the University of California at Berkeley (see Lightfoot, Wake and Schiff 1991). Preliminary analysis of the excavations suggests that the settlement layout is configured linearly, on the bluff, overlooking the water, with midden areas down slope in front of the structures. One architectural feature, perhaps a bathhouse with a rock bench, is found at the base of the terrace. Additionally, a complex array of architectural features—subterranean pits, posts and bone beds—are in evidence on the terrace.

The diverse material culture assemblage includes various faunal remains: terrestrial and sea mammal, inshore and deep water fish and shellfish. It appears that both bone and stone tools were manufactured at the village. Whale and other sea mammal bone cores and manufacturing debris are indicative of tool production, including harpoon points and fish hooks

(Wake 1994). Chert and obsidian bifaces, projectile points and flake tools are in evidence, along with associated debitage. A few slate rods and knives are present, as are whetstones and an incised slate writing tablet. Ground stone artifacts—manos, pestles, and millingstones—are present in the deposit, as well as battered rounded cobbles and fire cracked rock. Quartz crystals, abalone buttons and shell beads are in the assemblage, in addition to a diverse range of European/Russian materials: a Russian Orthodox cross, British and Chinese ceramic sherds, a Russian ceramic fragment, glass beads, a few of the white-lined Cornaline d'Aleppo beads ("white hearts") (Silliman 1995), glass container and window fragments, gunflints, a bullet mold, musket balls, lead shot, and metal artifacts, including nails and spikes.

At Fort Ross, the Native Alaskan village archaeological assemblage is suggestive of the unique multi-cultural mix present at this Russian-American Company outpost. Artifacts reflective of Russian, Native Alaskan and Native Californian cultures are in evidence in the deposit. The question arises: Is the Fort Ross deposit, even with the atypical California variants, similar enough to deposits from other 19th-century Russian-American Company associated Native Alaskan villages to contribute to the definition of an ethnic boundary? Can the historically reported Native Alaskan settlement at Fort Ross be identified in the archaeological deposit as containing distinctive Native Alaskan material culture elements?

Karluk, Kodiak Island

Old Karluk on Kodiak Island was first garrisoned by the Russians in 1786, and it served as a provisioning post which supplied hunting parties and settlements with fish during much of the Russian Period (Knecht and Jordan 1985:20). In 1840, the Russian-American Company began to consolidate villages on the island into seven settlements: Nunakakhnak (KAR-37), the focus of this analysis, was one such village resettled and occupied by the Koniags until abandonment sometime before the late 1880s (Knecht and Jordan 1985:21). The village was situated on a terrace above Karluk Lagoon, and in the early 1860s, the native population was estimated to be about 300 (Knecht and Jordan 1985:21).

Richard Knecht and Richard Jordan, in collaboration with the Kodiak Native Area Association, conducted extensive archaeological investigations at Karluk, encompassing survey work in 1983 and excavations in 1984. The semi-subterranean structures at the site are arranged linearly along the terrace edge, with midden deposits located in front of the houses (Knecht and Jordan 1985:21). From the 42 house pits mapped during survey at Nunakakhnak, a single dwelling, threatened by shoreline erosion, was selected for excavation (Knecht and Jordan 1985:17). The multi-room floor plan of the traditional Koniag semi-subterranean barabara, exposed by the excavations, is aligned with the cardinal directions of the magnetic compass, and provides independent archaeological data corroborating archival and ethnohistorical information on house construction and layout (Knecht and Jordan 1985:23). Hearths, earthen benches, floor middens, drainage trenches, plank fragments,

post molds, and roof sods are among the architectural features observed (Knecht and Jordan 1985:24). A sweatbath appears to be incorporated into the dwelling (Knecht and Jordan 1985:33).

Knecht and Jordan recovered a diverse array of material culture artifacts from the structure, with the size and variety of the central room assemblage exceeding side room deposits (Knecht and Jordan 1985:25). The small assemblage of animal bone is poorly preserved, but it appears that sea mammal and bird bones constitute the majority of the deposit (Knecht and Jordan 1985:29). Several fragments of worked whale tooth and an ivory figurine are present. Ground slate ulus and whaling lances are found in the deposit, as well as hammerstones, slate preforms, pumice abraders, limestone whetstones and other slate manufacturing debitage (Knecht and Jordan 1985:29). No artifacts or true flakes of cryptocrystalline rock are in evidence. Sixty unmodified, non-fire cracked, rounded stones, randomly distributed throughout the midden, are an additional lithic component. Groundstone oil lamps, stone gaming pieces, jet and amber beads, and a quartz crystal are present in the assemblage. In addition, a diverse range of European/Russian materials are found: a Russian Orthodox cross, a Russian half-kopek coin, British and Chinese ceramic sherds, a slate writing tablet fragment with incised Russian characters, glass container and flat fragments, gunflints, a limestone bullet mold, musket balls, lead shot, and metal artifacts, including nails, spikes, Russian axe heads and one iron harpoon head. Several thousand glass trade beads are recovered from the excavation, but the "white heart" beads, associated with late 19th-century sites on Kodiak, are noticeably absent. Organic artifacts are also present at Karluk, including birch bark, feathers, fur, hide and textiles, as well as concentrations of red ocher.

At Nunakakhnak, the Native Alaskan archaeological assemblage reflects both continuity of the ancestral Koniag culture as well as an influx of European and Russian material goods. Traditional architectural floor plans and slate technologies are combined with the presence of imported ceramics, metals and glass. Returning to the question: Can a Native Alaskan household be identified in the archaeological deposit as containing distinctive Native Alaskan village material culture elements? What elements from the Nunakakhnak archaeological assemblage can be used to help define Native Alaskan material culture boundaries in other geographic areas?

Kurilrosiia, Urup Island

The final area to be discussed in this paper is the Russian-American settlement in the Kurile Islands. Kurilrosiia in Aleutka Bay on Urup Island was operated as a "trading factory" of the Russian-American Company from 1828 to 1867 (Shubin 1990:429). As was the case at Fort Ross, the Russians brought Native Alaskans (Kodiak, Afognak and Unalaska Islanders) to Urup to hunt sea mammals. Forty-nine Native Alaskan men and women were lodged in "turf covered huts built of boards" (Shubin 1994:338), on the shore of Aleutka Bay, "protected not a bit from strong winds" (Shubin 1990:431). In 1831, an additional 24 Aleut came to live at Urup. Consistent with policies in California, the local Kurile

aboriginal peoples, the Ainu, were recruited by the Russians as laborers (Shubin 1990:426), and perhaps resided or even cohabitated at Kurilrosiia with the Native Alaskans.

Since 1978, the Sakhalin Regional Museum has been investigating the Russian settlements on the Kurile Islands and, beginning in the 1980s, Valerii Shubin, deputy Director of the Museum, has been conducting ongoing archaeological excavations of post-contact sites in the Kuriles. The excavations reveal five subrectangular, one- or two-chambered depressions, interpreted to be the remains of Native Alaskan dwellings. The house clusters are in groups of 2 and 3, with the exits of each group facing a single direction, toward what is interpreted to be a central hearth. Architectural features include post holes, stone paving, internal hearths, wooden flooring remains and a cast steel stove (Shubin 1990:434). Additionally, what is being interpreted as a steambath is found on the bank of a slough (Shubin 1990:432), although the time frame for use is unclear. On the outskirts of the settlement, a "processing platform" is found, covered with the remnants of hearths and "more than 10,000 bones of sea and land mammals, birds and fishes, mollusk shells, and quills and fragments of sea urchin" (Shubin 1990:435).

In addition to these faunal remains, the Sakhalin excavations recovered a diverse material culture assemblage. Although specific association with the Native Alaskan dwellings can not be concluded from the reports, this analysis will consider all artifact types found in the assemblage, since the majority of the settlement was Native Alaskan (Shubin [1994:338] reports only "13 Russian manufacturers"). Various types of bone harpoon heads and preformed blanks, bone harpoon sockets, and a bone figurine are recovered from the deposits. Shubin mentions "arrowheads and spearheads," but does not make reference to the raw materials used; "skin scrapers" of stone and stone oil lamps are listed, but no other lithic artifacts are discussed. Also absent is any reference to slate tools, tablets or whetstones. Metal artifacts, including axe heads, a lead labret, knives, bullets, meat hooks, lead stamps and shot, nails, plates, fishhooks, steel harpoon heads, and ship's rigging are well represented in the collection. In addition, a diverse range of other European/Russian materials are present: bullet molds, Russian Orthodox crosses, coins, buttons, seed beads, pipes, British and other ceramic sherds, glass, silver and gold beads, glass dish fragments, bullet molds, musket balls, and a plethora of miscellaneous European artifacts.

At Kurilrosiia, the Native Alaskan archaeological assemblage reflects a great diversity of Native Alaskan as well as Russian material goods. Shubin contends that "when traditional Koniag culture came under Russian and Ainu influence, it was transformed into a new ethnic community and a single Kurile culture" (1994:337). The evidence of traditional semisubterranean architecture suggests some continuity, but the absence of artifacts reflective of customary slate technologies, the spatial patterning of the households, and the presence of a great diversity of European/Russian goods imply culture change. Again, the question: Can the Native Alaskan settlement at Kurilrosiia be identified in the archaeological deposit as containing distinctive Native Alaskan village material cul-

ture elements? What elements from the Kurilorošii archaeological assemblage can be used to help define Native Alaskan material culture boundaries in other geographic areas?

Discussion

Having reviewed the archaeological assemblages from three Native Alaskan villages, the discussion will now turn to similarities and differences in the search for material culture patterns to use in boundary identification. As a preamble, I would like to mention that, while the data reviewed here does not lend itself to multivariate statistical analysis in its present forms, nor even, at least, to quantifying artifact densities for inter-assemblage comparisons, future research should certainly consider a more stringent approach to the problem. In this paper, my use of material culture for boundary identification, like the current state of the data, tends to be somewhat nebulous. However, being a child of the '60s and accustomed to "Purple Haze," it is with these caveats in mind that I return to the question at hand. A simple artifact "presence/absence" will be examined, in a search for preliminary pattern identification.

Material culture differences will be discussed first, and there are many. Fort Ross has little slate in general and no slate ulus, no Russian axe heads and many artifacts that appear to be Native Californian: projectile points, ground stone, cooking stones and shell beads. Nunakakhnak exhibits no large faunal assemblage and no bone tool technology. Kurilorošii evidences no slate, non-linear house patterning, and an overwhelmingly great diversity in imported materials.

These differences could be related to a number of factors, some previously discussed. The population size (less than 100 to about 300), the Russian component (from 3 to a full garrison) and the Native Alaskan gender/family mix of each village probably varied. Two of the villages were located in "foreign" lands, with new surroundings and neighbors, where Native Alaskans were possibly influenced by the local aboriginals: Kashaya Pomo and Ainu, respectively. The third village at Karluk had prehistoric cultural components combined with environmental, raw material and other resource continuity. Although each Russian enclave was in operation for about the same time (29 to 49 years), Russian-American world system supply configurations changed in 1839, with the new Hudson's Bay Agreement, which perhaps accounts for differential amounts of non-local goods in the village deposits. Economic activities of the village residents varied somewhat, with the use of wooden fish weirs in Karluk (Knecht and Jordan 1985: 21) being an addition to the sea mammal hunting technologies practiced by the Native Alaskans in California and the Kuriles.

The character of the archaeological investigations may also account for some of the perceived disparities in material culture, in that entire village assemblages are being compared with single household excavations. For example, the seemingly meager faunal remains and nonexistent bone tool assemblage at Karluk may be purely a product of one household ex-

cavation, as compared to the collections resulting from broader village investigations at Fort Ross and Kurilorošii. Additional extramural work at Karluk may result in the mitigation of some of the perceived material culture differences.

Similarities in the 19th-century Native Alaskan village material culture do exist, however, especially if one looks for like material culture occurrences in two, but not necessarily all three of the sites. Artifact parallels include: ground slate technology (including tools and whetstones), bone tool technology (including harpoon points and shafts), large and diverse faunal deposits, stone oil lamps, bone figurines, Russian orthodox crosses, diverse ceramic and glass deposits, glass trade beads (but few or no "white hearts"), quartz crystals, eclectic metal assemblages (including Russian axe heads), gunflints and bullet molds and incised slate tablets. In addition, traditional barabara floor plans spatially situated on open terrace locations with associated down slope middens in front of the houses perhaps also signify some cultural similarity. As discussed earlier, if the excavation unit at Karluk is broadened from household to village level, perhaps many of these artifact patterns would hold not only for two, but for all three locations.

Summary

In summary, this analysis suggests that we can not yet produce exact material culture definitions nor "simplistic ethnic signatures" for use in delimiting boundaries of a "typical" 19th-century Native Alaskan village associated with the Russian-American Company. Although no one artifact or clear cut set of artifacts defines Native Alaskan assemblages in Russian-American colonies, areas of likeness, parallels, resemblances and similarity do exist. These similarities define a bounded ethnic group that, although internally heterogeneous, may appear discrete when compared with different ethnic neighbors, i.e.: Russian, Kashaya Pomo, Ainu, and pre-Russian Koniag. Elements of the material culture assemblage can be indicative of Native Alaskan presence and influence in differing geographic contexts. At Fort Ross, the Native Alaskan village archaeological assemblage evidences these similarities, and does in fact appear discrete when compared to the neighboring Russian stockade collections and hinterland Kashaya Pomo collections.

This data would suggest that material culture remains can be used to provide some insights on ethnic community boundaries, even though the assemblages are heterogeneous when compared with similar ethnic enclaves in different frontier settings with different multi-cultural interactions. These heterogeneous material culture assemblages may reflect the creation of new cultural groups from the interaction of ethnic groups in frontier settings (Shubin 1994:337; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). As recently stated by Lightfoot and Martinez (1995): "It is precisely this ambiguity in material culture along frontiers that provides an ideal opportunity for archaeologists to study the process of 'creolization'...." I would agree that it is this "opportunity" that provides a focus for the future.

Notes

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