



**Ernest S. Burch, Jr.** *Alliance and Conflict: The World System of the Inupiat Eskimos*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xiii + 383 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-1346-3; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-6238-6.



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## International Politics in Early-Nineteenth-Century Native Alaska

In *Alliance and Conflict*, Ernest S. Burch Jr. aims to study the network of international relations between the Inupiat Eskimo nations of “Northwest Alaska” (the interior and coastal regions drained by the rivers finding the sea between Cape Thompson and Cape Espenberg) during the first half of the nineteenth century. In doing so, Burch has produced an engaging historical work detailing independent Indigenous political activity based on a conceptual framework that scholars have generally employed to describe the powerlessness of Native peoples when confronted with Western nation-states.

Burch sets out to integrate two largely separate literatures in a single historical study. Essentially, this book aims to study Indigenous peoples using the world system as its conceptual framework. Such an approach hardly appears novel. However, Burch’s decision to use the Indigenous peoples living in Northwest Alaska during the first half of the nineteenth century dares the reader to imagine a world system radically different than that traditionally portrayed in the anthropological and historical literature.[1] Rather than imagining such a system as being necessarily hierarchical (with historical Western pop-

ulations occupying the system’s core, while their Indigenous counterparts are relegated to the periphery), Burch presents a far more complex model in an attempt to envision international relations between hunter-gatherer societies. In essence, Burch argues that as long as different peoples have considered themselves to be distinct from their neighbors, world systems—that is, systems of international relations—have existed. Thus, the dominant role that the historiography has tended to ascribe to Western nations in relation to Indigenous peoples represents merely one permutation of a more fundamental historical process.

The world system that Burch describes functions in two conceptually distinct registers: one informed by hostile relations and the other by peaceful relations. This division also provides *Alliance and Conflict* with its argumentative structure—Burch divides the book, beyond the introduction and conclusion, into two long chapters that each treat one of these two forms of international relations. This structure largely serves to “accentuate the positive,” in that it first examines hostile relations before turning to the peaceful aspects of the Northwest Alaska

world system during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Burch's decision to study the first half of the nineteenth century (more precisely, 1800-48), springs from his assertion that the period "is the earliest for which both the documentary evidence produced by Westerners and the oral accounts of Iñupiaq historians can be reasonably applied" (p. 10). Although 1800 is clearly an arbitrarily chosen date, Burch asserts that the beginning date of his study is of relatively little importance as the period stretching from no later than 750 AD to at least 1800 exhibited a "high level of continuity" (p. 11). In contrast to this, Burch chose the end of his study, 1848, to coincide with the dramatically increasing Western presence in the region that began with the large-scale introduction of American whaling and trading ships to Northwest Alaska. Ultimately, Burch asserts that this intensified Western presence fundamentally altered the nature of the region's system of international relations, introducing precisely those hierarchical relations of power that world-system theory has traditionally studied and that Burch wishes to avoid.

For its historical material, *Alliance and Conflict* depends on a combination of written and oral sources. Burch collected the oral testimony at the heart of the study "between 1960 and 1990 through formal interviews with 120 people who lived in 14 different villages" (p. 48-49). These individuals included both those considered by their communities to be historians and those who possessed no such distinction. Burch uses this information irrespective of whether written records exist that support it, noting that in every instance where such independent evidence is available, it invariably corroborates the oral testimony that he has gathered. This use of oral history does present problems, which Burch candidly points out on several occasions throughout *Alliance and Conflict*. Burch's chief regret is his failure to have pursued specific information that would have been useful in the context of this study. Of course, given that Burch conducted the interviews providing the book's corpus of oral sources fifteen to forty-five years prior to its publication, such oversight is entirely understandable, however regrettable.

Unfortunately, Burch's discussion of his study's written sources does not approach his examination of the methodological issues involved in the use of oral sources, in either quality or length. The most damaging failure in this respect is Burch's refusal to present the written sources that he draws upon in any systematic manner. This causes the reader to be left with no feel for the over-

all state of the written material used in *Alliance and Conflict*—whether archival or published. In particular, given that Russia provided the majority of non-Indigenous activity in Northwest Alaska over the period, Burch's refusal to engage in any discussion of non-translated Russian sources is unfortunate because, although unstated by Burch himself, translation of primary sources is frequently a selective process. Ultimately, however, *Alliance and Conflict* appears to draw the majority of its historical data from Burch's interviews, making his lack of systematic treatment of written sources problematic but not fatal.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of *Alliance and Conflict* is its tendency to step beyond the bounds of its stated area of study, both temporally and geographically. In doing so, Burch feels justified that social systems rarely break radically with the social forms of their neighbors, predecessors and successors. In geographic terms, this leads Burch to consider data from surrounding regions such as the Arctic Slope to the north, the Mackenzie River delta to the east, the Seward Peninsula to the south, and Chukotka (in eastern Asia) to the west. Through this approach, Burch is able to study international relations between Northwest Alaska's Iñupiaq Eskimos and their neighbors of other ethnicities (for example the Athapaskans and the Chukchi). As a result, Burch manages to perceive influences originating beyond the borders of his primary region of study while maintaining a clear emphasis on events and practices in which the population of Northwest Alaska participated. Similarly, Burch frequently cites information originating or pertaining to periods beyond the temporal limits of *Alliance and Conflict*. By using such "out-of-bounds" information critically, Burch manages to create a composite image that most likely approximates Indigenous life in Northwest Alaska in a way that would simply be impossible by relying solely on data originating within and pertaining to his study's temporal and geographical limits.

Ultimately, Burch's decision to divide his study between peaceful and hostile relations leads him to repeat himself. For instance, Burch frequently notes that under certain special circumstances, such as major trade fairs, encounters that would have otherwise been almost certainly hostile, given the state of international relations between the peoples involved, were in fact surprisingly peaceful. While such an approach does not lend itself to economy of expression, it does serve to reinforce Burch's overriding point: international relations in hunter-gatherer societies defined an extremely complex world system. That the anthropological and histori-

cal literature has generally refused to seriously consider the system through which such societies interacted with one another without the presence of a technologically superior nation imposing its will on Indigenous peoples makes the goal of *Alliance and Conflict* laudable. That Burch succeeds in presenting a largely well-researched and creatively argued study makes *Alliance and Conflict* an important contribution to our understanding of Indigenous Alaska, hunter-gather societies and international relations in general.

Note

[1]. This literature is primarily based upon Immanuel

Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974). For more recent examples of the historiography's tendency to focus on inter-cultural relations of power with particular reference to North America's Indigenous peoples, see Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); and Denys DelÃ©ge, *Bitter Feast: Amerindians and Europeans in Northeastern North America, 1600-64* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993).

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