Chapter 1

The Evolution of Complex Hunter-Gatherers

1.1. INTRODUCTION

When Russians made contact with the natives of Kodiak (Kodiak Alutiiq or Koniag) in the second half of the 18th century, they encountered one of the most densely populated and militarily impenetrable societies in the North Pacific (Burch, 1988b). For two decades, unsuccessful trading ventures and military resistance forced Russian fur traders to bypass the Kodiak Archipelago in search of more profitable interactions elsewhere (Black, 1988). Kodiak's Alutiiq and their neighbors, the Eastern Aleutian (Fox) islanders as well as several Northwest Coast "tribes," such as the Tlingit, shared characteristics such as intertribal warfare, prestige economies including long distance trade in prestige valuables, institutionalized social inequality (social ranking), and slavery. Like these other neighboring groups, Kodiak's inhabitants subsisted on a mix of fish, sea mammals, shellfish, birds, and plant products. In the traditional terminology of anthropologists, they were hunter-gatherers, but not typical of hunter-gatherers as they have been best known to ethnographers of the 20th century. These were relatively complex hunter-gatherers.

This book is an exploration of the evolution of complex hunter-gatherers in the North Pacific, based on an archaeological study from the southeast region of the Kodiak Archipelago in the central Gulf of Alaska. Hunter-gatherers are groups mainly living by the capture and collection of wild foods. Complex hunter-gatherers are hunter-gatherers who are organized in relatively more complex ways than others. Sometimes this complexity is manifested in technological, economic, social, or political dimensions; but there is no necessary reason why complexity in one dimension will necessarily correspond to complexity in another dimension (Oswalt, 1987). Here the main focus is on the development of social and political complexities, which have been documented in the ethnohistoric and...
ethnographic literature of North Pacific societies. Specifically, this book examines the processes of change that led small-scale, mobile, egalitarian bands to become dense sedentary societies with political rank and hierarchy, endemic warfare, slavery, and competitive political economies while retaining a hunting and gathering mode of subsistence. To achieve this we will consider the development of increasingly complex social organization as well as the emergence of social inequality from egalitarianism. In considering these social and political dimensions, we will also track a number of other features such as technological, economic, and demographic change.

1.1.1. Social Complexity—A Definition

Complexity is defined here as a condition in which a system is composed of greater internal differentiation (of component parts) than another system to which it is being compared (Cohen, 1985; Price and Brown, 1985). In the case of social evolution, complexity can refer to greater structural differentiation in either or both horizontal and/or vertical dimensions (e.g., Johnson 1982). Horizontal differentiation involves the segmentation of society into structurally integrated sub-groupings (e.g., clans, moiety, domestic units, families, households, age grades, secret societies, etc.), while vertical differentiation refers to rank and hierarchical organization. One of the greatest challenges facing anthropologists is explaining cross-cultural variation in social complexity. Anthropological archaeologists have considered this challenge one of their key missions for more than fifty years (Childe, 1951, 1957).

1.1.2. Complex Hunter-Gatherers—A Definition

It is recently recognized that hunter-gatherers occasionally live in ranked and stratified societies with high population densities, sedentism, warfare, and slavery. This recognition qualifies long-standing arguments about the importance of food production economies in social evolution (compare Childe, 1951 with Arnold, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Feinman, 1995; Price and Brown, 1985; Price and Feinman, 1995; Ruyle, 1973). More investigators now think that social differentiation and organizational complexity among food-producing societies have often (although not necessarily: see Arnold 1996c:84) evolved out of non-egalitarian, complex hunter-gatherer social formations (Price and Feinman, 1995). If this is the case, understanding the processes that promote and obstruct emergent complexity among hunter-gatherers should help illuminate the dynamics that underlie the evolution of even more complex societies, such as states and empires.

But what are “complex hunter-gatherers?” As defined in the last section, complexity is a relative measure of structural differentiation. To be useful, this definition requires us to consider any particular organization in relationship to