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A PACIFIC ESKIMO INVENTION IN WHALE
HUNTING IN HISTORIC TIMES

By ROBERT F. HEIZER

WHILE recently engaged in a world-wide study of aboriginal whale hunting, I was struck by the many similarities in techniques between this form of sea hunting and certain forms of land animal hunting. This plainly indicated that there had been transfers in technique from one to the other, though the direction of flow was not always clearly ascertainable. The technique of "gallying" or confusing the whale with loud noises is reminiscent of the land hunting method of driving game with noise. In this case the preponderant use of noise as a device of land hunters indicates pretty clearly its secondary adoption by whale hunters. There are numerous other examples—use of property marks on weapon points, employment of poisoned weapons, division of the animal carcass, ceremonial preparations by the hunters, ceremonial treatment of the body of the slain animal, etc., all of which are shared by certain sea and land hunters. Aside from possible substratum hunting traits shared by most hunting groups, it seems probable that many hunting methods are ascribable to adaptive diffusion, where a group learns the method and reapplies it in terms of hunting a different animal. I propose to show here the Aleutian Eskimos invented, by a simple transfer process, a new and different method of whale hunting patterned after the technique of hunting sea otter.

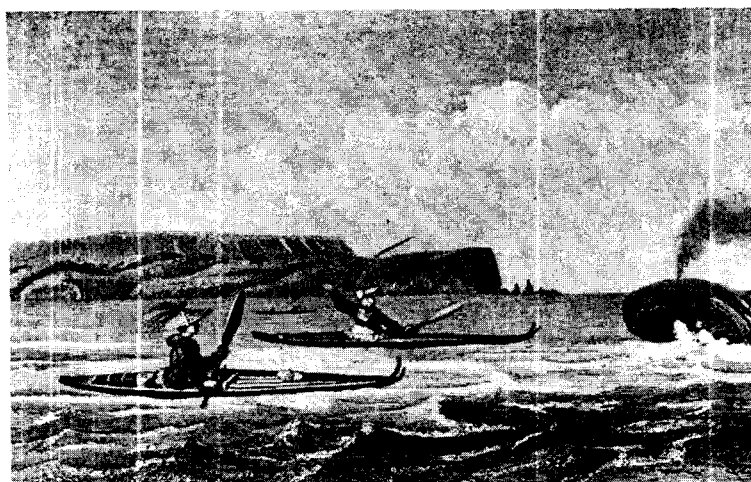
As is well known, the Russians brought to the California coast, in the first half of the nineteenth century, great numbers of Aleut and Koniag hunters who were skilled in the technique of securing the valuable sea otter.¹ This hunt was performed by men in a number of baidarkas (two-hatch skin boats) surrounding a single otter. The hunters then cast, with spearthrowers, short bone-pointed darts each of which had a line to which was attached at the end an inflated bladder buoy or float.²

The standard Aleutian whale hunt was quite differently conducted. Either one man in a kayak, or two men in a baidarka (the man in the rear hatch was the oarsman, the man in the front hatch was the hunter who was entitled to cast the lance) went out to meet the whale in the open bay (Pl. 1A).³ Silently approaching the surfaced whale, the hunter cast his lance which was tipped with a detachable, barbed, poisoned, ground slate point. The lance penetrated past the thick blubber layer and the point imbedded itself in the flesh of the

¹ *The Russians in California* (Special Publication No. 7, California Historical Society, 1937), pp. 29-51.

² In default of a better illustration, I reproduce a sea otter hunt as depicted by an Aleut artist on a hunting hat (Pl. 1B). This comes from L. Choris, *Voyage Pittoresque Autour du Monde* (Paris, 1822), Pl. V, pp. 21-22. For descriptions of Aleutian sea-otter hunting methods in California during the Russian period see *The Russians in California* (*op. cit.*), p. 30 and fn. 3.

³ Usually a second boat accompanied the first to rescue the hunter and his assistant if, after the lance throwing, the wounded whale struck and damaged the other boat.



A



B



C

11.

Plate 1. A. Standard Aleutian whale hunt showing use of two kayaks and throwing lance (after de Mofras). B. Aleut artist's delineation of a sea-otter hunt by surround technique (after Choris). C. Whale hunt by surround method from an Aleut hunting hat made in post-Russian times (after Ivanov).

whale. Feeling the lance enter, the startled whale sounded and in his thrashing the lance shaft withdrew and floated to the surface. Collecting the floating shaft, the hunter returned home where he waited for the dead whale to wash ashore.⁴ Now the whole point about this type of whale hunt lay in the fact that the hunters constituted an exclusive minority who hunted because they were entitled to do so by hereditary privilege and because they knew the necessary ritual (initiation of novices, ceremonial preparation for the hunt, etc.) which included the secret knowledge of the preparation of the lance poison from the roots of aconite plants.⁵ Even the existence of this deadly aconite poison was masked by the select whaling group which concealed this fact by the neat dodge of advertising it openly that the lance was poisoned with a grease or fat rendered from the corpses of great whalers, hunters, or chiefs. This smokescreen (the idea of an innocuous "ceremonial" weapon poison) was sufficient to discourage any attempt by an individual to set himself up as a whale hunter, for fear of dead bodies was a prominent feature of Pacific Eskimo culture.⁶ It thus becomes clear that when this system was operating under aboriginal, pre-contact conditions it served to establish and maintain a closed group of whale hunters who, as Lisiansky said in 1805, were "... regarded as the purveyors of their country," for the whales they secured were given away to the people of the village for food.

But when the Russians entered the New World through Alaska they disrupted with incredible expedition and thoroughness the native patterns of Pacific Eskimo life. The old religion fell into decline, populations were decimated, and great numbers of native hunters were transported to far off sea otter grounds along the northwest coast of America, among these the California coast. Many early observers note the presence and activities of the Aleuts on the California coast, among these Duhaut-Cilly (1827-28) in whose account we read of the whale hunt by sea otter hunters. He says:

But it is in these little skin boats [kayaks and baidarkas] that the natives of the Aleutian Islands face the high seas, hunting the saricovian otter, and struggling with the most monstrous whales whose flesh and oil are their favorite food and drink.

Besides in this dangerous fishery, they use more skill than strength. When they have agreed to attack a whale, they gather together as many as several hundred of baidarkas to pursue the monster. They act in such a way as always to keep near it, and every time it is obliged to appear above the water to breathe, they hurl at it all at once a plentiful rain of small harpoons to which bladders are attached. This attack continues until the whale, bristling with harpoons, can no longer overcome the resist-

⁴ I have cited abundant references in my *Aconite Poison Whaling in Asia and America* (Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 133). In press.

⁵ For the extraction and use of this poison, see my *Aconite Arrow Poison in the Old and New World* (Journal of the Washington Academy of Science, Vol. 28, 1938), pp. 358-364.

⁶ I have discussed this aspect of Pacific Eskimo whale hunting at length in my *Aconite Poison Whaling in Asia and America*.

ance of all these bladders together. It remains struggling upon the surface of the water, without power to dive, and they finish it then with longer and stronger darts [lances]. They make use of these harpoons also for the otter; but a single one is sufficient to arrest the animal.⁷

This communal hunt is noteworthy, since it is nowhere else attested for whale hunting, but is obviously patterned directly after the method of capturing sea otter.⁸ There is no suspicion in Duhaut-Cilly's account of the use of poison, and the weapon is not the expectable slate-headed lance, but the simple sea otter dart with line and float. The inference that the California coast whale hunt is attributable to historic origin through transference of the sea otter hunting pattern is further supported by the unique features of: (1) surround technique using many boats; (2) use of bladder-dart otherwise employed in otter hunting; and (3) absence of poison, prerogatives for whale hunters, absence of ceremonial features, etc. The last point is significant, for it seems unlikely that under the old (i.e., pre-Russian) native pattern of life in their insular homeland could the Aleuts have instituted a new type of whale hunting of this sort. The objection would have come, of course, from the hereditary whaler "caste" whose prerogatives were strictly private property. But with the increasing influence of Caucasians, and the consequent breakdown of old native cultural forms, there would be presented an opening for innovations. Such an opportunity for the overthrow of precedent would be offered to groups of hunters far from their old homes, as we have seen the Aleuts were in California.⁹ The explanation of technological reapplication (actually an invention) here must be referred to social processes.

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⁷ A. Duhaut-Cilly. *Duhaut-Cilly's Account of California in the Years 1827-28* (California Historical Society Quarterly, Vol. 8, pp. 130-166, 214-250, 306-336, 1929), pp. 324-325.

⁸ I make one exception to this statement on inferential grounds. S. V. Ivanov, *Aleut Hunting Headgear and its Ornamentation* (Proceedings, International Congress of Americanists, XXIII, Sess., New York, 1928), pl. 9, fig. 11, p. 500—reproduces a whaling scene painted on a hunting hat, made in post-Russian times. It is reproduced in Pl. 1C of this paper, and shows a whale-bone whale (Humpback?) surrounded by five skin boats. The whale is losing blood from the mouth and spouthole, and drags behind it in the water three lines, each of which has one large sealskin float at the end and a smaller bladder (?) buoy near the end. This communal whale hunt may depict the modified whale hunt in the form described by Duhaut-Cilly.

⁹ In the Aleutian Islands a definite attempt to introduce among the natives European techniques and implements for hunting whales was made as early as 1832 by the Russian-American company, a fact attested by F. Von Wrangell (*Statistische und Ethnographische Nachrichten über die Russischen Besitzungen an der Nordwestküste von Amerika* (Beiträge zur Kenntniss des Russischen Reiches, Vol. 1, 1839), pp. 53, 55. Apparently this was not wholly successful, since in Tebenkof's administration (1845-1850) it was proposed to engage a number of American harpooners and steersmen to train the Aleuts in the European techniques. (L. Petroff, *Report on the Population, Industries and Resources of Alaska* (Dept. Interior Census Office, 1884), p. 117.)