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Title	Bird-Lovers in the Boreal Forest : Taking and Saving the Lives of Animals in Interior Alaska
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Citation	早稲田大学文学学術院文化人類学年報, 14, 37-47
Issue Date	2019
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/78364
Type	journal article
File Information	Bird-Lovers in the Boreal Forest.pdf



Bird-Lovers in the Boreal Forest: Taking and Saving the Lives of Animals in Interior Alaska

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北方樹林の愛鳥家 —内陸アラスカにおける動物を殺すこと／生かすこと—

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要 旨

本稿は、以前『文化人類学』で発表した研究ノートの英訳版である。本稿は、内陸アラスカ先住民が住むニコライ村において、なぜ古老たちが渡り鳥の残留個体の世話をしていたのかという理由を明らかにしようとする試みである。野鳥の飼育は、アラスカのアサバスカン集団においてすでに報告されているが、先行研究は渡り鳥の残留個体を世話をすることをめぐる一見矛盾した信念と実践の謎を解いていない。アサバスカン文化では、野生生物をペットとして扱うのは非人間に対する行動規則に反する可能性があるため、望ましくない行為と見なされる場合がある。他方で、アラスカのアサバスカン集団では何らかの利益を求めたり、ただ野鳥を助けたりするために野鳥を飼育してきた。本稿では、以下の点について検討した。(1) なぜ、ユキヒメドリのような夏鳥を保護・飼育することは許されている一方、誤って冬眠から早くさめてしまったクロクマの子どもは殺されたのか、(2) なぜ、夏鳥を飼うのはそれが南に渡っているはずの時期のみとされているのだろうか、(3) 狩猟の補助をしたり、子どもに良い影響をもたらしたりするフクロウ科、カラス科、カモ科の鳥と異なり、ホオジロ科の小鳥を飼うことによる利点は報告されていないが、それではなぜ、彼らはそうした小鳥を保護するのか。

Introduction

This paper is aimed at investigating the issue of “taking and saving the lives of animals” in Northern Athabaskan societies¹⁾ through the case-study of rescuing wild birds in Nikolai, Alaska, U.S.A. The village of Nikolai is located in the upper part of the Kuskokwim River, which flow from the interior region to the northwestern coastal region of the state. The population is 94 with 37 households [U.S. Census, 2010]. The area belongs to the subarctic climate region with the flora including white spruce, black spruce, balsam poplar and paper birch. During the summer, between June and August, the temperature may hit around 30 degrees Celsius, but it could go down minus 40 degrees Celsius during the winter. It is thought that the Upper Kuskokwim Athabascans had lived a semi-nomadic life approximately until the 1960s. The period of open river water was spent in fishing and hunting camps, while people went back to and spent the winter at the village after the freeze-up. Nowadays, people became increasingly sedentary and began to spend more time in the village. Contemporary villagers hunt moose and black bear, catch salmon and whitefish, and trap fur-bearing animals to obtain daily necessities, while they also earn cash through wage labor as forest fire-fighters during the summer and employment at the public sector (Village Council and school). This paper is based on the fieldwork of about 5 months in total (July – August 2012, March, June – September 2014).

According to elders and older residents in Nikolai, they sometimes observed individual summer birds which failed to leave in the autumn when they were supposed to have moved to the South. Elders in the village used to keep these “leftover” birds inside the house during the winter and let them go in the spring. They explained that the reason for this practice is because they did not want to see the “leftover” birds freeze to death.²⁾ According to the interviews so far, the targeted species are the

small birds including Dark-eyed Junco (Scientific Name: *Junco hyemalis*; Local Name: *dichadatl'its'a*) and White-crowned Sparrow (Scientific Name: *Zonotrichia leucophrys*; Local Name: *midzish miz'a*). There are two ways known to be used for catching them: (1) catching the birds which cannot flee due to cold weather and (2) put a stick with a string on it to hold up a small basket or bath tub, wait for the bird to go under the basket and then pull out the string to catch it.

The birds allowed to be caught were the ones which obviously missed the opportunity to migrate after the first fall of snow. According to a local middle-aged woman, when she was a small child, his brother caught a small bird in a basket trap during the summer. Then, his parents told him to let it go, saying that people are supposed to catch animals only when they eat them. At that time, the bird did not need to be taken care of by humans. This is probably why his parents told him so.

The example of keeping wild birds may be puzzling to many researchers of the North because the taboo to keep trapped wild animals alive is widely known among the Northern Athabascans. For example, the idea of catch and release is considered to be disgusting since it involves playing with fish [Nelson 1983: 23, 210; Cruikshank 2000: 57; Yamaguchi 2012: 405]. Also, according to Richard Nelson, the Koyukon of the Interior Alaska killed a starved bear cub and a mother bear which were accidentally awakened from the hibernation due to underground water. People took pity on the two which could not find food and suffered. They even butchered the skinny carcasses which were not in a useful condition and put a cover over them. He [ibid: 24] explains that the Koyukon³⁾, who would think of not using the killed animals as a disrespectful behavior toward them, were trying to appease the dead bears' spirits by pretending to have used the carcasses. What kinds of relationships are there between the example of keeping wild birds in Nikolai ("saving the lives of the animals") and the beliefs on taking the lives of the animals, which have been numerous reported in the Northern Athabaskan societies? First of all, we will make things clear by looking at the neighboring societies.

1. Keeping and Taking Care of Wild Birds in Interior Alaska

People who keep wild birds are not limited to those in Nikolai. The Koyukon, another Northern Athabaskan group, did keep birds. It was said that keeping Canada Goose, Greater White-Fronted Goose, and Northern Hawk Owl close by children would transmit the birds' good quality (geese which can become friends with everybody, owls as good hunters) to them [ibid: 92, 107]. At one time, a villager started keeping Dark-eyed Junco. Nelson asked if it was tabooed. The answer was: it would be no problem to keep it because an elder in the neighboring village who kept one for six month did not experience a bad luck [ibid 1983: 118].

The Dena'ina kept birds at Lime Village, about 200 kilometers south from Nikolai. There is a report that the Dena'ina trained White-fronted Goose, Raven, and Magpie for hunting aids and kept Northern Hawk Owl and Great-horned Owl as pets [Russel and West 2003: 36–40, 99–102, 143–144]. Even though the specific name is not mentioned, people took care of the individual birds which stayed in Alaska inside their house when the same species of birds are supposed to be moving back to south before the winter [ibid 2003: 37]. It is expected that, like in Nikolai, Dark-eyed Junco and White-crowned Sparrow would probably be included.

The following questions emerge after considering examples of keeping and taking care of birds in Northern Athabaskan societies of Interior Alaska. (1) Why were summer birds, like Dark-eyed Junco, that were left behind allowed to be kept, while those black bear cubs unexpectedly awaken from hibernation were killed? (2) Why was the practice of keeping summer birds allowed only during the fall and winter? (3) The keeping of birds from the Strigidae, Corvidae, or Anatidae families was believed to bring benefits to the keepers (working as hunting aids or bringing good effects to children), while such an idea does not seem to apply to birds from the Emberizidae family. If so, why do they keep those small songbirds, knowing that they do not bring any benefits? The prior studies report intriguing examples, but they do not necessarily tackle such questions. In this paper, based on the examples from Nikolai, I would like to deepen our understanding of "taking/saving the lives of the animals" in Northern Athabaskan societies through the process of answering above-mentioned questions.

This paper proceeds in steps as follows. First of all, I will introduce to the reader how people in Nikolai kill animals and how they talk about it in order to elucidate what we could call their principles of killing animals. Next, we will examine what kind of relationships people have with animals which are not the target of killing. Then, we will turn our eyes from animals to humans. We will think about “sharing foods with humans” and “helping those in trouble.” In concluding chapter, we will summarize how the relationships take shapes in the cases of game animals, non-game animals and humans and once again come back to analyze the practice of keeping “leftover birds.”

2. Human-Game Relationships

The relationship between people in Nikolai and game animals can be considered as a cycle of “spotting → killing → using → disposing → spotting ...” “I will introduce to the reader people’s stories on and the observations of hunting for moose (Scientific Name: *Alces alces gigas*; Local Name: *Dineje*), which are the most important food source in the study community at the time. Moose hunting in Nikolai is done through spotting one when driving a boat or through ambushing at the lakes where moose come to feed. Moose are a large animal that can reach to an estimated weight of 700 kg. This means that transporting the meat after successful hunts is a tough work. Thus, nowadays, many hunts are conducted close to the river which make it easier to transport.

Spotting animals is an important skill for hunters. During moose hunting, hunters can estimate how often the game is utilizing the area by looking at the tracks, excrements, feed, and the impression made by rubbing the antler with branches. Moose make a special call during mating season, step on to the branches on the ground and/or make a splashing sound when walking in the lake, so attentive listening is also important during hunting. When people are camping close to the lakes frequented by moose, people avoid making a loud noise not to scare them away. People in Nikolai not only just wait for the moose to show up but also attempt to call them by imitating the mating calls. As in many northern hunting societies, people in Nikolai believe that spotted animals are supposed to be killed. That is, in principle, “spotting” spontaneously means “killing.”⁴⁾ This way of thinking is mentioned in actual hunting trips by experienced hunters to teach young people not to hesitate to pull the trigger.

In Nikolai, the usable parts of the moose include the meat of the entire body (head, neck, spine, right and left ribs, shoulder, right and left forelegs, right and left hindlegs, and bottom part), the hide, organs (hearts, kidney, and intestines like stomach), bone marrows and the brain. After butchering, the moose meat would be loaded to the boat or the snowmobile and hanged at the meat rack as soon as possible. People then would start drying and smoking the meat. Many older villagers are familiar with the injunction against killing for just the sake of killing and the norm that they should use the killed animal as much as possible.⁵⁾ Also, in the Upper Kuskokwim Athabascan language, the same verb can be used to express “kill (animals, birds and fish),” “catch” and “harvest” (e.g. *izisdlanh* for the past first person singular form). This is an evidence that people in Nikolai conceive of “killing” and “using” animals as part of the continuum.

After butchering, it is preferred to keep the moose carcass in one place. Also, even though it is not practiced any more, people used to gather branches in one place when they cut down trees. This is because not only game animals but also trees are thought to be beings which possess a “spirit / power” (Local Name: *ch’iyeja*’) and need to be disposed in a proper manner.⁶⁾ Likewise, animal bones are not supposed to be disposed in the garbage dump. Some elders think that they should dispose the bones of water-dwelling animals in river and those of forest-dwelling ones among the trees.⁷⁾ There is a folk belief that the success of next hunting trips can be obtained through putting the moose skull on top of a tree in the forest. Proper “disposing” would bring a new cycle of “spotting – killing – using.”

In contrast, improper “disposing” would harm this cycle. There are some taboos in the life of hunting camps. For example, killing a spider or shaving off the velvet of moose antlers is said to bring a “bad luck.” Both are thought to bring rain. Rain showers are not favorable to hunters. This is because moose would be more wary when the sound of rain make them unable to hear the approach of predators. Also, hunters would experience hard time in hunting in rainy days because listening to the

game's steps becomes more difficult and because the rain drops on a rifle's scope makes it difficult to aim. Thus, "disposing" the game improperly or killing the organism that is not supposed to be "killed" would bring rain, which then would make it difficult to "spot" and "kill" the game next time.

When butchering moose, one elder cut off its dewlap (a part that hangs from the throat of a bull moose) and hangs it on a nearby tree. The part is called "its (Moose's) knife sheath" (Local Name: *misraye zis*). In the time immemorial when Moose was a human, it had a hunting knife.⁸⁾ In Northern Athabascan societies, people wore their hunting knife by hanging it around the neck. This is the same for the Moose "person." Elders in Nikolai sometimes tell the "Distant Time stories" (Local Name: *hwzosh*), which are about the time when the animals were humans. For example, woodpeckers started to peck on the trees because Mosquito tells Woodpecker a lie that he got some blood from the trees. According to another story, Spider tried to steal Loon's coat. Loon got angry and threw flat stones to Spider. As a result, Spider was chopped up and started to look like the way we see now.⁹⁾

3. Human – Non-Game Animal Relationship

In order to understand the relationships between humans and non-game animals, it is important to note that there is a possibility of forging reciprocal relationships between the two as in those between game animals and humans, which I discussed in the last chapter. Non-game animals would somehow help people who treated them in a good way. In fact, I have observed an adult mentioning this idea to discourage a child from killing a surf scoter (Scientific Name: *Melanitta perspicillata*, Local Name: *dotsotsila*) when he spotted it in a lake and insisted on shooting it with a pistol. As for the moose, which I discussed in the last chapter, spotted game are killed and used as much as the situations would allow them to. Then, a proper disposal would bring more game. On the other hand, saltwater ducks are called "fish ducks" in Nikolai and thought to have a fishy taste. They are not usually eaten. Thus, a surf scoter, a species of saltwater ducks, is treated differently from moose.

Then, what kinds of actions are considered good toward animals? How would animals help humans? In Nikolai, hearing a northern shrike (Scientific Name: *Lanius excubitor*, Local Name: *jezramoya*) in the morning before going hunting would be an omen for successful hunts. Based on this folk-belief, a hunter told me that a northern shrike taught him the location of a moose. According to the hunter, a northern shrike landed just in front of him in the woods and made a loud noise. The hunter took it as a sign and headed toward the direction the shrike went. Soon, he found a bull moose. After butchering, the hunter left a small amount of moose fat on the branch so that the northern shrike can eat.¹⁰⁾ In this example, the hunter interpreted the bird's behavior as a sign and had a successful hunt. Thus, he pays back the bird for its help.

It is thought that, if one feeds a raven (Scientific Name: *Corvus corax*, Local Name: *dotron*'), it remembers the feeder's smell and notifies him/her when a dangerous animal is approaching in the forest. An elderly woman who told me about this belief regularly feeds ravens after she learned it from her elderly friend. In fact, she recommends one of her friends to feed them because she had a personal experience where a raven notified her of an approach of a big bear while berry-picking.¹¹⁾ Hunters in Nikolai say that they are feeding ravens when they dump the organs of beavers and/or salmon on the sandbar.

Animals receive a gift of food from humans and then reciprocate them by preventing the killing of the humans by other animals. On the other hand, animals may receive a return gift of food by humans when they help them to locate a game. Thus, humans and non-game animals have considerations for each other's survival. It is important to note that the gift of food mediates the two. Non-game animals forge a reciprocal relationship with men by helping them obtain meat just as hunting partners (usually men) should do. Animals that received the gift of food from humans can pay them back by protecting women from the dangers associated with the bush just like a man is expected to do. Gender differences in the reciprocal relationship between humans and animals need to be taken into account. In this sense, animals act toward humans as "men" = hunters. This seems to be not unrelated to the tendency in the "Distant Time Stories" where many animals are portrayed as men (Mosquito as

a “guy”).

4. Human-Human Relationship

When Edward Hosley [1966] describes people in Nikolai (especially men) during the 1960s, he lists “generosity” and “individualism” as important items. These two characteristics apply well to contemporary people in Nikolai. For example, an elder invited me for a dinner and told me that I can always come to eat when I don’t have food. After I started to live with one of his grandsons, the elder showed me some “Whiteman food” such as oatmeal and encouraged me to come and eat even when he is not present. On one hand, wildlife meats are considered as “traditional food” and shared widely. On the other hand, people usually do not eat somebody else’s unopened “Whiteman food” without the owner’s permission except for family members. The elder probably thought that my roommate and I, who are young people living together, might have a hard time finding food and thus gave me such offer.

I am not the only one who was helped by the generosity of the Upper Kuskokwim people. In the summer of 1899, Lt. Joseph Herron in the 8th Cavalry of the U.S. Army began the exploration from Cook Inlet of Southern Alaska with five other soldiers and two Dena’ina guides to search for a route to the Upper Yukon River region through Alaska Range. Their goal is to find a way to the Upper Yukon River region without going into Canadian territory so that they can protect national interests in the region, heavily struck by Gold Rush boom, from possible Canadian interventions. However, the two Native guides disappeared one night; the party lost their horses and groceries on the way. By the middle of September, the party was almost perished in the Upper Kuskokwim River region [Schneider 1986: 2–3].

Then, Chief Sesui of Telida¹²⁾ came into the scene. The Herron Party had built a makeshift cache and kept some of their groceries adjacent to Telida. A bear destroyed the cache, ate some bacon in it, and was killed by Chief Sesui. He found undigested bacon in its stomach and located the Herron Party by following the tracks of the horse used by the explorers. Chief Sesui took them to Telida, fed them for two months and provided them the equipment such as gloves, moccasins and snowshoes. On November 25, the Herron Party was guided by four Telida villagers and left for Tanana in the Yukon River region [ibid 1986: 7–9]. There were only seventeen people in Telida at the time [Collins 2004: 48]. Starvation was not uncommon during the winter and early spring in the Upper Kuskokwim River region [Herron 1901: 70]. If we take these into account, we can see how generous Chief Sesui was.¹³⁾

While generosity is considered as a virtue, stinginess is subject to a strong criticism. In Nikolai, people talk about somebody (or some families) “does not give me (us) the meat” as a way to express the negative feeling between them. Moose is a large animal and, once the hunt is successful, provides a large amount of meat. Usually, the meat will be shared to the hunter’s grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts and uncles. Friends and neighbors, who may not be related to the hunter, sometimes receive some meat. Being excluded from such network of sharing is a clear sign that the relationship between them is in jeopardy and that they cannot maintain casual socializing relationships. In other words, foods function as a medium of social relationships in Nikolai.

Another characteristics Hosley lists is “individualism.” However, “individualism” in this case is different from what we call egoism. If people in Nikolai were egoists, it is unlikely that Chief Sesui would have taken care of the Herron Party for two months. “Individualism” also can be an antonym of “totalitarianism” by nation states, but this usage aims to express the attitudes regarding how one relates with various “persons” rather than aiming to describe political contexts. “Individualism” in this context is close to the “ethical principles of individual responsibility over one’s and other’s life” described by Jean-Guy Goulet, who worked with Dene Tha. According to Goulet [1998: 37], a right to one’s own autonomy and a duty to respect others’ autonomy need to be taken as two sides of the same coin in order to understand this point.

During my fieldwork in Nikolai, there was a project to re-establish an old trail. Let me discuss the above-mentioned point by introducing some observations from the trail breaking work. On the second day of the trail breaking work, we were lost.

The deeper we penetrated into the forest, the narrower the trail got and the more difficult it became to find the trail marks made around 40 years ago. After a while, we encountered two game trails. Two hunters insisted on taking different trails. The older hunter laughed and said that the trail the younger hunter wanted to take was not correct. The younger hunter did not give in. The party decided to split and temporarily go different ways. It is thought that the older hunter knew the right trail through his longtime experience, but he let the younger hunter take the trail he wanted to take because he did not want to threaten the younger hunter's autonomy. In Northern Athabascan societies, knowledge based on personal experiences is understood as the most reliable source [Hara 1989: 329–332]. One of the reasons why the elders are respected in these societies is because they have learned a lot from personal experiences while they have survived a nomadic life for a long time.

Characteristics of Northern Athabascan societies such as “ethical principles of individual responsibility over one's and other's life” or emphasis on personal experiences are not unrelated to the “will toward survival” needed to live through in a harsh natural environment. During the trail breaking work, the two split parties became one again after an hour. However, we could not reach the creek that was the destination for the second day. We started walking since 2 PM. Even in midnight, we were still roaming around the coniferous forests and grassy swamps. Midnight sun allowed us to keep walking even in midnight, but the temperature dropped around 1 AM so that our breath turned white.

We were worried about the fact that we could not communicate with a different party waiting for us at the destination. One time, an elder who came with us talked about what elders used to say long time ago. According to such saying, not everyone can survive the hardship. However, the end will come sometime; some will be able to survive. If we keep working, the elder said, we would be able to overcome the hardship. Then, the elder preached to the rest of the party that what elders used to say long time ago is the same as the descriptions found in the Bible. The elder who mentioned the Bible probably had in his mind Jew's diaspora described in the Exodus. After passing through numerous swamps, we came to the place where we can communicate with the other party. Listening to the sound of the rifle shot by the other party, we found the way and reached to the creek in the afternoon.

Conclusion

So far, I have discussed the examples of human-game, human – non-game and human-human relationships in Nikolai. In this chapter, I wrap up the argument by comparing and synthesizing each chapter's analyses and give answers to the three questions raised previously. First of all, both game and non-game animals engage in reciprocal relationship with humans. As for game animals, humans avoid breaking the taboos associated with hunting and butchering and thus pay respect to the game. This, in turn, brings success in next hunting trips. This is how the cycle of killing animals works. As for non-game animals, humans usually avoid killing them or making them suffer.¹⁴⁾ Sometimes, non-game animals help humans obtain game or protect them from dangerous animals. There are cases of humans giving gifts of animal and fish meats to such non-game animals. As for human-human relationship, sharing and gift-giving of meat also function as something necessary to keep and establish social relationships.

We should not forget here that human – non-game animal relationships converge toward the ultimate goal of survival. Northern shrike received some fat because it helped a human to obtain the meat of game animal, while raven protected humans from dangers in order to pay the debt of meat. It is not just that humans avoid killing non-game animals. What these examples suggest is that both humans and animals give an active “care for survival” toward each other. On one hand, elders in Nikolai tell the interactions among the animal “persons” described in the stories of the time when “all things are humans” (cf. Mosquito, a stingy “guy,” who told a lie to Woodpecker and did not tell him the location of food, is still disliked by people). On the other hand, they think of the hardship of the time when people lived a nomadic life to look for game. These two stories resonate in a way that both express the shared concern and thus possibilities for mutual understanding between humans and animals, who can only sustain themselves through finding food from the bush.

Taking into account such a deep concern for survival, which bridge between humans and animals, we can understand some of the feeling people in Nikolai experienced when they used to save dying “leftover birds.” There are analogies between an Euro-American exploration party that is on the verge of perish and small birds that missed the opportunity for migration in that both are powerless beings and do not know how to survive the winter of Interior Alaska. In contrast, Athabascan hunters and their “grandfathers,” ravens (year-round bird), look more resourceful. However, there is no guarantee that even the good hunters are always successful. The likelihood of successful hunting increases by listening to the sound of birds, keeping a good watch of the surroundings with other hunters, and giving gifts to “Hill People” (a kind of small people who give hunters the game in return for dried fish or cigarettes). However, starvation was not uncommon in the time when people could not really rely upon the food transported from the outside.¹⁵⁾ Hunters probably could not stop but to empathize the travelers/birds who are shivering and facing the approaching death.

Let us here tackle the first question: Why were summer birds like Dark-eyed Junco that were left behind allowed to be kept, while those black bear cubs unexpectedly awaken from hibernation were killed? Dark-eyed Juncos that missed the migration period, Euro-American explorers who got lost, and a Black Bear cub that was unexpectedly awaken from hibernation are beings which would face death if left alone. Black bears are usually considered as a game animal and thus need to be treated following the cycle of “spotting – killing – using – disposing – spotting ...” Deviation from such cycle may threaten the survival of the hunter in that it brings a bad luck in hunting. Thus, the hunter not only “killed” the bears but also pretended to “use” them as an attempt to avoid the bad luck derived from the improper “disposal.” Unlike moose or black bears, Dark-eyed Juncos and Euro-American explorers are not treated based on the cycle of killing animals. Moreover, helping for their survival potentially results in receiving a return gift.

The examples of the Herron Party and “leftover birds” that I have discussed so far suggest the importance of a context-dependent analysis. Residents of the Upper Kuskokwim River region at that time did not necessarily gave away the food and items to the non-Native visitors for free. During the 1842-44 exploration by L. A. Zagoskin from Russia, bartering trades took place in different camps that he passed through in Interior Alaska. The participants of such trades included those who were called “Goltsan” at that time, a group of people ancestral to the contemporary residents in Nikolai [Michael 1967: 269]. The 1898 exploration party led by J. E. Spurr of the U.S. Geological Survey also engaged in barter with the Upper Kuskokwim people they met on the way [Collins 2004: 41]. If the explorers were not obviously in trouble like the Herron party that lacked sufficient amount of food, proper winter gears, and Native guides, Russians and Americans were also considered as participants of trade just like local neighboring groups.

This gives a key to answer the second question: Why was the practice of keeping summer birds allowed only during the fall and winter? Let me remind that it is considered rude to force one’s own ideas to others in ordinary human-human relationships. Chief Sesui persuaded the Herron party and brought them to his village because he thought they were in trouble. Similarly, summer birds that missed the migrating period would be a target of rescue because they are in a difficult situation, but it is considered inappropriate to keep and confine them inside during the summer time when they can survive on their own.

Following Tim Ingold’s arguments, Paul Nadasdy [2007: 30–31], who worked with Kluane people in Yukon Territory, Canada, criticized what we can call “anthropocentrism” of anthropology in that we tend to draw a rigid theoretical boundary between humans and animals. Especially, Nadasdy criticize the prior studies that argue human-animal relationships are modeled after human-human relationships. As a support for this refutation, he mentions his fieldwork-based observations that ideal human-human relationships in the Kluane society are imagined as “generalized reciprocity,” while human-animal relationships can be thought of as “balanced reciprocity” [ibid 2007: 31].

I value Nadasdy’s discussion highly as an attempt to re-interpret theories on “reciprocity” in northern hunting societies via Sahlins’ typologies. In this paper, I followed his lead and emphasized the distinction between “game animals” and “non-game animals” (e.g. Dark-eyed Junco and black bears) [cf. Yamaguchi 2014: 276–77; See also Note 14 of this paper]. However, my concern is that Nadasdy’s argument can be considered as somewhat static one because typological arguments occupy the center

of the critique of prior studies. Based on the examples of the Inuit, Keiichi Omura [2012: 117] correctly points out that critics of the Nature-Society binary should just not only call for a monistic theory because such binaries do not apply to their field. However, they should also uncover the interactions and processes between “persons” which gave rise to such categories.

Keiichiro Matsumura [2007: 153], who studied the possession and distribution of wealth in Ethiopian farming villages, found that those who give things to others frequently do not necessarily expect return gifts. Matsumura [ibid: 159] points out that Sahlins’ typologies of reciprocity do not apply to his field sites and argue that “the principle of reciprocity itself, which gives rise to debt relations and power relations, is being negotiated at the background of people’s ambivalent feelings toward the possession and distribution of wealth.” Unlike Ethiopian beggars who demand the share of agricultural products, birds of Interior Alaska do not ask for the share of food already available. Birds such as Big-horned Owl, loons, ravens, cranes and Northern Shrike tell the hunters the locations of game and approach of dangerous animals or of somebody’s death. In Interior Alaska, various principles are negotiated in the midst of dilemmas which would burden the hunters who encountered foreigners/migrating birds in need.

In other words, if we were to take into account the context-dependent nature of inter-“personal” relationships, the rescue of the Herron party and “leftover birds” exemplifies the situations where “persons,” who should be equal partners in trade or hunting under normal circumstances, experienced unusual dilemma in emergency situations and struggled in trial and error. This point would lead us to answer the third question: “The keeping of birds from the Strigidae, Corvidae, or Anatidae families was believed to bring benefits to the keepers (working as hunting aids or bringing good effects to children), while such an idea does not seem to apply to birds from the Emberizidae family. If so, why do they keep those small songbirds, knowing that they do not bring any benefits?”

Chief Sesui, who rescued the Herron party, provided winter clothing and food for six people over two months with other sixteen villagers. Those who have personal knowledge of this event stressed the fact that people of Telida helped out the Herron party without any compensation [Schneider 1986: 182].¹⁶⁾ They weighed the virtue of generosity over the concern for starvation and decided to invite the Herron party to their village. As for the examples of summer birds, people maintain reluctance over animal domestication, which is characteristic to Northern Athabascan societies, but they also have some empathy toward animals as colleagues who survive and thrive together in the harsh natural environment. This is why temporary rescues of summer birds take place, while such practices do not result in permanent domestication.

What, then, made Athabascan hunters decide to rescue foreigners/migrating birds in the midst of such dilemma? My thought is that, even though they were worried about threatening their own survival and autonomy of others, they could not help but to take up the call from what Emanuel Levinus calls the “face”.

The face in its straightforwardness is threatened by death “at a zero point.” What could be told as demands in the face surely means the call for giving and serving. But, more than and including this, it means an order that one cannot leave others alone even when doing that would put them in difficult situations. This is the basis of sociality and the basis of love without Eros. [Levinus 2010: 152–53; my English translation of the Japanese version] [Stress by the author of the original].

Chief Sesui probably did not rescue the Herron party out of the expectation of compensation. If he did, his expectation was a miss by far. Likewise, I wonder if those who rescued summer birds ever expected compensation from the beginning. In this sense, there is something in common between Athabascan virtue of “generosity” and “love without compensation” taught in the Bible.

Levinus [ibid: 21] mentions that the Bible has given him strong religious experiences in that it evokes “the sense of pain where one is directly related to the fate of Jews’ diaspora all over the world.” This phrase reminded me of an elder who saw an analogy between a description in the Bible and the nomadic life of Athabascan people. Elders in Nikolai do not feel conflicted to be a devoted Russian Orthodox Christian and follow the Athabascan “traditions.” People in Nikolai are not just bird-lovers.

The Jewish philosopher constructed his version of ethics through his personal experience during the war and reading of the Bible. Likewise, they learned from their elders and the Bible and have built relationships with various “persons” through trial and error. “The fact that limitless demands converge toward a point in the universe. Morality is given birth through serving the poor, foreigners, widows and orphans. Only by doing so, *I* and *others* emerge in the universe through morality” [Levinus 2006: 152]. There is a pressing need to discuss clinical ethics, not as belief systems or collections of statements, but as ways to continue interactions with “persons” through ad hoc practices in the midst of dilemma.

Notes

- 1) Northern Athabascans refers to groups in Alaska and Western Canada who speak the Northern Athabaskan languages, Na-Dene Language Family. Pioneering researchers have noted since early times that setting names for each lingua-cultural group is a difficult task [Osgood 1936: 3]. Researchers have agreed that people of the Upper Kuskokwim River region (villages of Nikolai, Telida and [a part of] McGrath) are Northern Athabascans and possess cultural and linguistic uniqueness that set them apart from other Athabaskan groups. Yet, there have been some confusion over their ethnonym. Recently, ethnographers and linguists tend to use “(Athabaskan) people of the Upper Kuskokwim” (cultural grouping) or “the Upper Kuskokwim Athabascans” (linguistic grouping) in a tentative manner. So far, researchers have proposed such names as “McGrath Ingalik,” “Kolchan” or “Dichinane’ hwt’ana” [Hosley 1966: xii; 1968; Collins 2004: 8–9]. However, the first two names come from the ones used by the neighboring groups and are not considered adequate by people in Nikolai. The third name is a self-designation in the local language and can be translated as “people of the north fork of the Upper Kuskokwim River.” But, influential researcher institutes such as Alaska Native Language Center have not used the term as the lingua-cultural group name. Considering these contexts, I would not apply any specific ethnonym to people in Nikolai, which is the main research site. It is common for contemporary villagers in Nikolai to consider themselves “Athabascans.”
- 2) Steven Nikolai Sr., August 14, 2012 in Nikolai. In this paper, names of main informants, the date of observation/interview and place will be mentioned. Recent studies on Native Alaskans and Canadian First Nations tend to provide the names of their informants in the main text or reference page [Fienup-Riordan 2000; Youatt 2012]. This trend grows from the influence of researchers and Native Rights activists, who propose to see the Native elders as “researchers” or “teachers,” and can be understood as attempts by ethnographers to take into account such ways of thinking in their works.
- 3) In this paper, the examples from the Dena’ina, Kluane people, the Kaska, Dene Tha, and the Koyukon will be mentioned. All groups mentioned are Northern Athabascans (i.e. Alaskan and Western Canadian groups which are the speakers of Northern Athabaskan Languages, Na-Dene Language Family).
- 4) This is just an explanation of the underlying assumption. Not all spotted individuals would be the target of the hunter. Nowadays, State hunting regulations prohibited the hunters to kill moose cow and calf.
- 5) Betty Petruska, August 23, 2013, in Nikolai.
- 6) Betty Petruska, August 23, 2013, in Nikolai.
- 7) Philip Esai, July 5, 2013, in Nikolai.
- 8) Nick Alexia Sr., September 11, 2013 at the hunting camp in the north fork.
- 9) Philip Esai, June 9, 2013 at Salmon River trail.
- 10) Joshua Nikolai, July 31, 2012 in Nikolai.
- 11) Gracy Holmberg, July 19 2012 in McGrath. This elder is known in Nikolai as one who has deep understanding of the “tradition” and was invited to Culture Camp (a workshop aimed to teach youths the skills associated with subsistence activities). Her elder friend was born and grew up in the Upper Kuskokwim River region.
- 12) Telida, Alaska is seasonally occupied by former permanent residents. Many of them had moved to Nikolai. Joshua Nikolai and Steven Nikolai Sr., who are mentioned in the endnotes are originally from Telida.
- 13) Herron [1901: 42] explains in his report that the exploration party hired Chief Sesui, but their communication between them was limited to gestures except for “Yes,” “No,” and “Good.” Thus, it is doubtful that Chief Sesui thought of himself as being hired by the party. Also, it is important to note that Herron’s report was written for the Army. Herron might have mentioned the interactions with Chief Sesui and Telida villagers as employment, not as emergency rescue because he had concerns about the party’s reputations. In this paper, I follow William Schneider [1986]’s work, which consults oral history accounts from Telida villagers and historical documents other than the official report, and describe the event as rescue of the exploration party by the Native people.
- 14) Mikako Yamaguchi [2014: 276–77] argues that distinction between “animals that eat other animals” and “animals that do not eat other animals” is important in the Kaska’s categorizations. Like people in Nikolai, the Kaska eat herbivores, while they make it a taboo to eat carnivores. This is likely because carnivores as “hunters” are in a position to be human hunters’ “partner” and cooperate with them to

look for game animals.

- 15) Currently, there are scheduled flights from Anchorage three times a week to bring passengers and groceries to Nikolai. This means there is not pressing danger of starvation. However, elders in Nikolai expressed their concerns about the young people today being less knowledgeable and skilled in hunting and fishing. In 2013, Nikolai Edzeno' Village Council had a series of activities that were aimed at teaching youths the skills associated with hunting and fishing. When asked why such activities were held, an elder voiced the risks of being dependent on outside food sources (Nick Alexia Sr., July 6, 2013). Another elder mentioned his concerns that there may be future days when food from the outside stop coming into the village. Then, he jokingly told me that only elders could survive in such time (Philip Esai, June 9, 2013, Salmon River trail).
- 16) Charlene LeFebvre's interview with Carl Sesui (July 7, 1949). See also Note 13 of this paper.

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Acknowledgement

This research is partly funded by JSPS Kakenhi-Basic Research (A) (Academic -Overseas) Project “Comparative Ethnography of Killing Animals” (Grant Number: 24251019). I thank my friends and teachers in Nikolai Edzeno’ Village Council and Telida Village Council as well as my colleagues at the Kaken project. My gratitude also goes to two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments toward the revision of earlier drafts.

This paper is an English translation of Shiaki Kondo (近藤祉秋)’s paper “Hoppo jurin no aichoka: Nairiku arasuka ni okeru dobutsu wo korosu / ikasu koto” 「北方樹林の愛鳥家: 内陸アラスカにおける動物を殺すこと／生かすこと」 published in 2014 at “Bunka Jinrui Gaku” Vol. 79 Issue.1. 『文化人類学』79巻1号. pp. 48–60. Minimum modification was done for the publication of English version.