Iñupiaq Smoking and Siberian Reindeer

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Abstract
This semester, my students in Museum Anthropology conducted close examinations of objects from Arctic locales in the collections of the Penn Museum. During our object analysis of this walrus tusk ivory Iñupiaq pipe (item# 39-10-1) in the Collections Study Room, I was intrigued by the idea that it was used for smoking opium, given the absurdly small hole in the bowl. After further research, a very different story emerged. The pipe's shape was, indeed, inspired by Chinese opium pipes, but a survey of Arctic scholarship revealed cultural exchanges from Siberia. Iñupiaq pipes like this—with a curved tusk shape, wide bowl, and very narrow bore—closely resemble the chukchi pipe used by the Indigenous Sami of northern Asia.

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Iñupiaq Smoking and Siberian Reindeer

By: Margaret Bruchac


This semester, my students in Museum Anthropology conducted close examinations of objects from Arctic locales in the collections of the Penn Museum. During our object analysis of this walrus tusk ivory Iñupiaq pipe (item# 39-10-1) in the Collections Study Room, I was intrigued by the idea that it was used for smoking opium, given the absurdly small hole in the bowl. After further research, a very different story emerged. The pipe’s shape was, indeed, inspired by Chinese opium pipes, but a survey of Arctic scholarship revealed cultural exchanges from Siberia. Iñupiaq pipes like this—with a curved tusk shape, wide bowl, and very narrow bore—closely resemble the chukchi pipe used by the Indigenous Sami of northern Asia.

“Siberian Eskimo Pipe” sold at Cowan’s (http://www.cowanauctions.com/auctions/item.aspx?id=11249) 2004 American Indian Art Auction. Formerly in the collections of the First People’s Museum of the American Indian and Eskimo. Photo from Cowan’s Art Auctions.

First-hand accounts indicate that this pipe style, sometimes called a “Siberian Eskimo” pipe, was particularly prevalent at Point Barrow, Alaska, where Captain David Henry Jarvis acquired it. There, it was called a kuiyna or kuryne (an apparent loan word from the Siberian koy’nin).[1] Its use was described as follows:

“A little wad of hair (reindeer hair, at Point Barrow)...is first pushed down to the bottom of the bowl to prevent the tobacco from being drawn into the stem. The narrow bore is then filled with tobacco cut up very fine...lighted with a bit of tinder and smoked entirely out with two or three deep inspirations. The smoke is deeply inhaled and allowed to pass out slowly through the mouth and nostrils...a sort of temporary intoxication [is] produced by this method of smoking...
found the Eskimos at Point Barrow passionately attached to it, preferring their own pipes to those of the civilized pattern even when there was no question of economy of tobacco.” [2]

This pipe style is widely distributed in museums and private collections. The Penn Museum has at least a dozen, collected by George Byron Gordon, William Van Valin, and Edward McIhenny. A similarly decorated ivory pipe (https://www.peabody.harvard.edu/node/2061) is housed at the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. [3] An 1894 portrait of an Inupiat, Su-Ku-Uk, shows him holding just such a pipe carved from wood, with a metal bowl and mouthpiece. [4]

It is important to note that David Henry Jarvis (1862-1911), the man who brought this pipe back from Alaska, was not an ethnographic collector. He was a First Lieutenant in the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, patrolling the coast of Alaska along the Bering Sea, and he was said to be fully fluent in Inupiaq (the language of the northernmost Inuit people, the Inupiat). He photographed families, ceremonies, hunters, and herders, but this pipe is the only Indigenous object attributed to him that I have been able to find, in any museum. It was donated to the Penn Museum in 1939, long after his death, by his sister, Mary E. Jarvis. [5]


During his time in the Arctic, Jarvis was keen to ensure the survival of both Inupiat and whalers along the Alaskan coast. He was serving aboard the cutter ship Bear in 1891, when the first domesticated reindeer were delivered to Unalaska, as part of a strategy to provide the Inupiat with herds that could offset the decline in indigenous game. A few years later, in 1897, Jarvis was in charge of an overland relief expedition sent to rescue 265 distressed whalers aboard eight frozen-in ships.[6] Before setting out, he negotiated with Charlie Artisarlook and his wife, Mary Makrikoff, and other herders to barter for 435 reindeer; some were harnessed, some were shipped, and others were driven across the ice to provide a source of fresh meat on the hoof for the stranded crews.

In his official report, Jarvis described the generosity of his Inupiaq friends: “He and his wife, Mary, held a long and solemn consultation… They were sorry for the white men at Point Barrow, and they were glad to be able to help them; they would let me have their deer, which represented their all, on my promise of return, if I would be directly responsible for them.”

Jarvis hired Artisarlook and other Inupiat men as guides and herders, traveling over “…what at times seemed impassable obstacle, through frozen seas, and over snow-clad mountains.” [7] When the relief expedition finally found each of the stranded ships and crews (spread across 100 miles of coast), Jarvis oversaw the building of shelters and distribution of medical aid and food, and even organized baseball games on the ice to recover morale. He documented the men, dogs, sleds, reindeer, and ships in hauntingly evocative albumen photographs (http://www.whalingmuseum.org/explore/collections/database/search-photographs). [8]

Jarvis also fulfilled his promise to the Artisarlook family, returning nearly twice as many reindeer as he had taken. Charlie passed away in the 1900 measles epidemic,
but his wife Mary eventually increased their reindeer herd to such a degree that she came to be known as the "Reindeer Queen."[9]

David Henry Jarvis became a celebrity, celebrated as an American hero, but the records of his exploits make no mention of this pipe. It may have been a keepsake or a touristic acquisition, but it seems like more than that. This object, made by an unknown Iñupiaq artisan, is wrought with elaborate imagery—dancing shaman figures, depictions of animals and arrows in flight, people jumping onto and falling off of sleds—that allude to hunting activities, while also evoking relationships among peoples, creatures, and other forces in the Arctic world. The pipe may have been designed as a talismanic object, to provide supernatural assistance during the ordeal of hunting. It appears to record transformative events; the shamanic figures move between human and animal forms. The documented practice of using reindeer hair (rather than indigenous caribou hair) to stoke this style of pipe suggests that the pipe and reindeer may be related.

Tobacco was a prized substance in the Arctic, and it was often used for pay or gifts to the Iñupiat. While preparing for his overland expedition, Jarvis's initial supply of provisions included 40 pounds of tobacco, plus another 10 pounds "for me personally."[10] Did he barter some of that precious tobacco for this unusual pipe? In the end, regardless of how it came into his hands, it is intriguing to consider that perhaps this pipe was a gift to Jarvis from one of his Iñupiaq friends, ensuring his success in the grueling overland trek, and offering him some intoxicating refreshment to thank him for his efforts on their behalf.

**Footnotes:**


[5] Mary E. Jarvis, David's sister, was a member of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. The Penn Museum accession card lists her address as 4216 Baltimore Avenue, Philadelphia, but no correspondence about the pipe can be found in the Museum Archives.


