Food Sharing Networks and Subsistence in Uklukhaktok, NT, Canada

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Abstract

This paper is a discussion of food sharing networks with a small sample of young hunters in Ulukhaktok (Ulukhaktuuq, formerly Holman), Northwest Territories, Canada. Evidence from sharing patterns in the community suggests that (a) younger hunters were largely networked with their nuclear families of orientation, and (b) dense connections between younger, low level hunters and their older siblings and parents suggest that these men face little pressure to be productive hunters.

Keywords: Subsistence, Food Sharing, Ulukhaktok, Canada

Introduction

This paper has a dual purpose. As the title suggests, the paper presents data on food exchange networks and subsistence in Ulukhaktok (Ulukhaktuuq), a small community of Inuit in the Northwest Territories, Canada, officially called Holman until April, 2006. On this level, the paper examines the networks of a small sample of young hunters and suggests that younger hunters in the community, while not producing very much food are not facing any significant pressure to produce, largely because of access to food provided by parents and older siblings. Furthermore, sharing patterns suggest that sharing networks are focused around nuclear family households. That is, households in the sample were sharing food principally with their families of orientation (one's parents and siblings), at the expense of collateral and more distant relatives.

On another level, this paper is a rumination on the difficulty of collecting data across the multi-household networks that constitute the important subsistence units in Inuit communities. Numerous research has documented the importance of money in the

contemporary subsistence economy (see, for example COLLINGS *et al*. 1998; CONDON *et al.* 1995; DAHL 1989, 2000; LANGDON 1991; SMITH 1991; WENZEL 2000; WOLFE & WALKER 1987), but the fact remains that documenting where money goes, and how it is used within a multi-household network, is a very difficult task. This paper suggests that one of the central problems facing anthropologists trying to understand how money articulates with the contemporary subsistence economy is that money, while viewed as increasingly necessary by Inuit themselves, has very low cultural salience to Inuit.

What follows below is a brief background of the community of Ulukhaktok and an outline of the methods used to collect the data pertinent to this study. This background section will be followed by a lengthier discussion of the problem of measuring money and income in Inuit communities, which is in turn followed by presentation of some data on food sharing in Ulukhaktok.

Research Methods and Community Background

Ulukhaktok (formerly Holman) is a small community (population 400) on the western shores of Victoria Island, in the Northwest Territories, Canada. At 325 miles north of the Arctic Circle, the settlement is one of the northernmost in the Canadian Archipelago.

The village owes its location largely to the Roman Catholic Church Missionaries and the Hudson's Bay Company, both of which consolidated their regional operations and constructed new posts at the current site in 1939 (CONDON 1994). In the ensuing two decades, the Inuit of the region, known as Copper Eskimos, began trading at the site, which steadily attracted a number of seasonal, semi-permanent, and permanent residents. By the late 1950s, the Canadian government began actively encouraging Inuit to permanently settle at Holman. A few years later, the government began providing housing and other social services to Inuit residents.

Settlement during the late 1950s and early 1960s marks the beginning of a series of secular changes to Inuit life that have been extensively catalogued and discussed elsewhere, and will not be repeated here (see COLLIGNON 1993; COLLINGS 2000; CONDON 1987, 1990a, 1990b; USHER 1965). For the purposes of this paper, this background will be limited to a discussion of contemporary subsistence practices, especially as they have affected the members of the study sample.

Ulukhaktomiut place a high value on subsistence hunting, and visitors to the community invariably (and sometimes derisively) comment on how Ulukhaktomiut men seem comparatively fixated on weather and traveling conditions. Despite the value placed on hunting, however, the community itself is not a very good base from which to attempt it. The Hudson's Bay Company and the Roman Catholic Church set up their operations at Holman because of the presence of a deepwater harbor, which allowed their supply ships to winter over, frozen in the ice, in reasonable safety. Although Inuit did visit the site because it was a source for stone used to make knives, the two bands, Kangiryuarmiut and *Kangiryuartiarmiut* (spelled *Kangiryuatjaqmiut* by Diamond Jenness and later Richard

Condon) that eventually moved into Holman concentrated their own foraging rounds much further away (CONDON 1996). Currently, the best places to hunt caribou are over 100 miles away. The best places to set nets for autumn char are fifty miles or more away. Muskoxen, legally hunted only for the past 25 years, are widely available locally and have become a critical food source over the past decade. Seals are also available near the settlement, but they are a minimal part of the diet, used mostly for feeding dog teams. At the time this data was collected, many young men in the sample expressed a dislike for ringed seals.

Consequently, foraging from the settlement requires mechanized transport, a prospect that itself requires significant amounts of money. Generally, Inuit perceive that the complete transportation toolkit includes the snowmobile, the all terrain vehicle (ATV), and the boat and motor. The snowmobile is viewed as the most critical, since it potentially sees use for nine months of the year. ATVs are increasingly important for hunters, especially since recent years have seen late snowfalls in autumn and early break-ups in spring. The purchase of all three items can cost over CDN $30,000 if purchased brand new – more than most families' annual earnings. Because of the high costs associated with mechanized foraging, many observers have tended to focus on the role that money plays in encouraging or discouraging particular hunting activities.

Data used in this paper were collected as part of a research project conducted during 1992-1993, under the direction of the late Richard Condon. The research focused specifically on the cohort of Inuit born between 1957-1972. Members of this cohort were the baby boom in Ulukhaktok (CONDON 1990a, 1990b). They were the first to be raised primarily in the context of the permanent settlement. Unlike their parents' generation, these Inuit have received a basic formal education, and most men have received additional vocational training. By almost any measure, members of this Settlement Cohort hunt with much less frequency, and in a much different style, than do their parents.

Although the collapse of the sealing economy, and its subsequent impact on subsistence patterns in Inuit communities, has received the most attention (WENZEL 1991), more recent changes in the local environment have altered the ways in which Ulukhaktomiut exploit their environment. Beginning in the late 1980s, Inuit hunters began seeing a decline in the caribou populations on which Ulukhaktomiut hunters preyed. Although wildlife managers attributed this decline to excess hunting, local hunters have universally noted that caribou began migrating much further to the west, nearly out of range for these hunters (see COLLINGS 1997). Many hunters attributed the caribou decline to an increase in muskoxen and a concomitant increase in wolves. Nevertheless, as a result of this decline, by the early 1990s, caribou hunting was an expedition requiring significant supply costs, in addition to a reliable snow machine – which many of these younger hunters did not have.

At the time of the study, young adults generally viewed other available resources, particularly muskoxen and seals, as unpalatable. Acquisition of alternative foods – particularly fish – was best accomplished locally, ideal conditions for aging hunters whose

mobility was more limited than that of more energetic, younger hunters. Consequently, many of the younger men in the community continued to rely on access to food through their parents' production, and had no reason to begin to produce actively. As will be discussed below, these hunters had plenty of access to desired country foods, both by helping themselves to food from their parent's food boxes, from *payuqtuq* sharing from their older relatives, and, perhaps most importantly, from eating meals with others.

Sample Selection and Data Collection

At the beginning of the study, a total of 44 men were eligible for participation in the research project. Eligibility simply involved being between the ages of 20 and 35 at the outset of the study and having been raised in the community. Of these, 23 were approached for initial interviews. Three participants dropped from the study within the first three months. Data collected from the remaining 20 members are considered here.

Initial Interviews were conducted at the outset of the research to establish baseline economic information about each hunter's household and economic situation (a full description of the interview protocols can be found in (CONDON *et al*. 1995). The data used in this paper come from a twice-monthly hunting interview, during which each informant was asked about the previous period's hunting activities, including trips taken, species taken, and the distribution of food to and from other households. Other questions in this protocol collected data on exchanges of money and sharing meals with others.

The data considered here are largely recall in nature, what informants reported to have caught or exchanged since the time of the last interview. No attempt was made to systematically weigh the catches of individual hunters. Part of the problem in weighing each catch is that very often animals, especially large catches, are distributed shortly after the hunter arrives in the settlement. The other problem is that following 20 hunters and weighing their catches required more manpower, and political capital, than most lone anthropologists possess. However, Condon and I were both satisfied with the accuracy of the self-reports. These hunters were not hunting very much; when the less active hunters did catch something, they definitely made a point of notifying us of their exploits. Additionally, a hunter's activities could often be confirmed by monitoring the community gossip network and through actual observations of hunters coming and going. A glance at the food box on the porch on the way into the house also provided prompts for questioning the hunter.

Conversion of individual catches into a currency comparable across hunters was problematic in the absence of systematically collected weights. Conversion of individual animals was made using Usher's (USHER 2000) conversion estimates for species commonly taken in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region. Although the edible weights are estimates, and thus total meat production for each hunter is an estimate, this method is a useful means of establishing a rank order of hunters. The amount of meat produced during the year to generate a ranking of hunters correlates very well ($p<0.01$) with sample member's rankings

of each other's activity.

For the purposes of this paper, hunters have been categorized as either High or Low level hunters, based on food production over the course of the year. The break between High and Low into two groups of ten hunters each is fortuitous, as there is also a clear break in the amount of food produced between the individuals in these two groups.

Data on food exchanges was treated somewhat differently than was the data on production, largely because food is not always exchanged in whole packets of animals. Although it is possible to estimate the edible weights of foods captured by hunters, collecting data on weights of food moving between households was not possible. When Condon and I asked about transactions between households, we were given reports of the kind of food (caribou, musk ox, char, ducks), and an estimate of how much of a particular food was exchanged. These reports, however, were difficult if not impossible to quantify. It is unclear, for example, what was meant by "half a bum of caribou", or "a bag of cut-up fish", either in terms of gross weights, or how individuals variably defined what a "half a bum" encompassed. These were the clear cases of food being carried to or taken from another household. Many of these hunters, especially when giving food, were only aware that "some musk ox" was taken from their food box by a sibling, but they were otherwise unaware of how much was actually taken.

An additional problem with this kind of self-reporting was that individuals tended to overestimate amounts given away, and underestimated amounts they received. Inuit themselves were well aware of this tendency, and several participants mentioned these tendencies specifically during interviews. During data collection, this phenomenon was best on display when one hunter reported taking four caribou on a recent hunting trip and confidently accounted for the disposition of 17 legs to other households.

However, despite this significant problem with self-reporting amounts of food exchanges, Condon and I both felt confident that study participants were accurately reporting that a transaction had occurred. It certainly helped that we often knew about transactions before going to conduct an interview and could verify the presence of a link between households. So, a problem with the data is that the presence of a transaction was likely to be accurate, but the amount of a particular transaction was effectively unknown. Based on impressions from the data, however, it does appear that there were some general trends. High hunters tended to give larger amounts of food in each transaction, and to give away more valuable foods, such as caribou, musk ox, or fish. Low hunters, by contrast, were more likely to give smaller amounts of food, and to give away less desirable foods, such as hare or ptarmigans. Part of the reason for these distinctions likely has to do with hunting strategies and styles. High hunters were more likely to engage in expedition hunts, especially for highly-prized caribou, and to take larger game in general (musk ox were an increasingly popular target species during the study year). Low level hunters were more likely to forage closer to the settlement (often reported as "just driving around") and to take game, especially small game, opportunistically.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Notes on Country Food and Food Sharing

This paper is principally an exploration of country food exchange networks. Before discussing these networks, however, it is important to address a few issues related to country food and sharing.

The most important consideration is simply that although Inuit in the sample are exchanging food with others, the fact remains that someone has gone out to catch it. Some Inuit were clearly better at catching food than others. I will not elaborate on the issue here, as it is the subject of another paper (COLLINGS in press). For the purposes of this discussion, it is worth noting that, in this sample, hunting success is best explained by birth order and age. That is, the most productive hunters in the sample tended to be early born in their sibling set, and they tended to be older relative to other sample members.

A related issue here is that household income, as reported by sample members, has virtually no relationship with hunting production. This simply begs for an explanation, especially given that Inuit themselves almost constantly fret about the high costs of foraging, and frequently cite these costs as a reason why they do not hunt more than they do. However, these data suggest that complaints about high costs should be taken with a grain of salt. Even though start-up and maintenance costs for subsistence equipment are expensive, it appears that a determined hunter can make a go of it on a low income. The following section will discuss some potential methodological and conceptual problems associated with how income was measured in this study and how money is perceived and used in the local community.

Income, the Measurement of Money, and Subsistence

As part of baseline data collection for this study, informants were asked to report household incomes for the previous year, based on tax returns when they were available. Neither Condon nor I had a reason to doubt these self-reports. For employed Inuit it was relatively easy to confirm self-reports. Wage rates for various positions in the Hamlet, for example, were largely common knowledge and easy to uncover. Despite our satisfaction with these self-reports, however, it was clear that one potential problem with relying on self-reports of “income” is that income was a static variable. That is, these reports did not provide a sense of how much money the household has at its disposal at any particular time. In one sense, this fact should be obvious. Many Inuit families see regular jumps in their income over the course of a year. Land claims settlement cheques arrive once a year. There also exist GST rebates, child tax credits, and, for Hamlet employees, annual Vacation-Travel allowances, among other windfall transfer payments. These are all typically large sums of money that can be used for large purchases.

In another sense, though, the fluidity of individual access to money depends also on network connections. How much money do close relatives have at their disposal at any given time, and how accessible is that money to the household? In other words, individual income is better thought of as a structural, rather than an individual, variable.

Cultural expectations about supporting family and sharing wealth mean that a high-earning individual is very likely funneling at least some of their income to siblings or to parents, either by directly giving cash in small amounts, by purchasing groceries, or by paying bills for other relatives. Consequently, a high-earning household may have less money at its disposal because of these other demands on their income (and these demands are in addition to their own costs of living, which tend to be higher for high earners). At the opposite end, a low-earning household may not be too badly off if members have access to food or money through the sharing network. Indeed, a common mechanism by which money is transferred between family members occurs through the acquisition of equipment. An Inuk who needs or wants a new snow machine, for example, might be well short of the amount of money required by the Northern or Co-op as a down payment (in local parlance, this is the amount required to "get it out of the store"). An individual might broadcast their need, and parents and siblings with money usually comply by assisting with the down payment. Sometimes the amount borrowed will be repaid to the lender. At other times, the lender either forgets the loan or reasons that the loan will be repaid in kind at some point in the future.

Thus, individual income may not be the best way of measuring how much money an individual has to devote to hunting activities. A better strategy would involve measuring the incomes, and the movement of money, between all of all households within the multi-household network.

The problem with this approach is that money exchanges simply do not appear to be culturally salient events in Ulukhaktok. Inuit conceive of money quite differently than do Canadians or Americans. Whereas Southerners idealize money as the ultimate capital resource, Inuit seem to value it as but another tool. Just as one shares tools, so one shares money. When one needs money, just as when one needs a ski-doo part, one goes out and finds some. And, just as Inuit men are never quite sure where all of their tools are, so, too, are Inuit never quite sure where their money has gone. Most Inuit simply do not pay attention.

This approach to money was made clearest from the data Condon and I collected. As part of the twice-monthly interviews, we specifically asked if money had been given or received during the previous two weeks. We very rarely received an affirmative answer to this question. Initially, it seemed that there might have been some hesitation in reporting this information to the anthropologists. When it comes to large gifts of money, such as helping a parent to get a machine out of the store, Inuit are reluctant to divulge this information, it seems, to anybody. One risks becoming a target for requests from more distant relatives. However, in the case of smaller exchanges of money, they clearly do not register as worth remembering. This lack of salience is perhaps best exemplified by an

interviewee who, in my presence, gave money to his younger brother. Five minutes later, during an interview, he needed to be reminded that he had, indeed, given some money to another person since the last interview.

Despite the measurement problems associated with money, it is clear that while individual income may not explain production for the reasons outlined above, it does seem to explain differing styles in how hunters engage as subsistence producers. High earning individuals tend to have more money at their disposal, and this is clearly reflected in the state of their equipment. The highest earning men in the sample tended to pursue a strategy that involved the regular replacement of equipment, the purchase of new parts from the store (or via mail order) to repair that equipment, and, perhaps, a more restricted sharing network, one that focuses on immediate family and less on broader ties across the community. Hunters with lower incomes tended to pursue a much different strategy. Lack of access to money meant that new equipment was often out of the question, and, indeed, these hunters tended to purchase used equipment from the hunters who had money. Furthermore, when this second-hand equipment broke down, as it invariably did, they were less likely to purchase new parts. These lower-income hunters were continually scouring the community, engaged in a non-cash trading network of parts trading, scavenging old machines for parts, and crafting temporary fixes that would make most trained mechanics cringe.

Together, the lesson inspired by the data on income and hunting seems to be that, while individual income may not matter in gross terms – namely, that one can hunt if one is determined enough, differential access to money may dictate differences in how one goes about it. The questions, then, perhaps should properly focus on whether individuals with broader networks are better placed for success, especially if they lack steady or adequate incomes.

Payuqtuq and Nirriyaktuqtuq Sharing

Two kinds of food exchange are considered here, termed locally as *payuqtuq* and *nirriyaktuqtuq* sharing. (More complete discussions of these systems of sharing can be found in DAMAS 1972 and COLLINGS *et al*. 1998). For our purpose here, they refer to two different mechanisms. Inuit in the age cohort of the sample generally agree that *payuqtuq* has a close literal meaning to “carrying”. Locally, however, it refers both to “taking food to another’s house” and, by extension “sharing food in general”. The former usage seems to be specifically reserved for less common foods, especially caribou, which tend to be produced by an expedition hunt and result in multiple animals being distributed throughout the settlement. Locally, Inuit refer to this in English as “payuqtuqing around” the food in question, usually to more distantly related households, and often directed by an elder or parent. The latter usage seems today to encompass all food sharing in general, including an Inuk helping herself to meat from her parents’ food box or freezer (“free access”) and notifying others that they should come and get food from the household (“invitation sharing”).

A second mechanism of food sharing, and perhaps the most important for country foods, is through *Nirriyaktuqtuq*. Informants in the sample indicate that *nirriyaktuqtuq* has multiple meanings but literally is an invitation to come and eat cooked meat. As part of the interview battery, Condon and I asked informants to recall the previous two meals (really "dinners", meals taken in the evening), denoting the location of the meal, those present, and the "main course" – meaning the meat or meats consumed. We also asked, in a second set of questions, for general recall of meals eaten at other households, or meals taken in their household, as a general measure of who eats with whom.

The first set of questions produced useable data, the second quickly devolved into a useless exercise. It was apparent that many of our informants were eating quite often at other houses, particularly their parents and in-laws, to the point that it was not possible for a reliable recall over a two-week period. After several interviews with these informants, their responses (and our expectations) were that they would answer "I usually eat at my parents, just about every other day" or some variation on that theme.

Furthermore, the usable data we recorded effectively inquired about dinners only, the meal taken at the end of the work day. And while this data showed a large number of meals were being taken elsewhere, equally important was the noon meal. Many informants reported, and this continues as a common practice, that the noon meal was more often the primarily shared communal meal, with the adult children invited, and expected, to come and eat at their parents' home. These meals are less organized and are less likely to involve cooked country food. Such meals are typically a combination of leftover cooked country food (from the previous evening's meal), store food (such as canned fish or soup), dried fish (*piffi*) and dried meat (*mipku*), frozen fish or meat (*quaq*), bannock, and tea. Many Inuit today report that lunch is the primary time they interact with their siblings.

Thus, my conclusion on eating is that the data provide some useful and significant information about eating patterns; however, because of contextual issues that were not captured in the interviews, the connections outlined here are likely stronger than the data indicate.

Food Sharing And Hunting Production

Table One displays the frequency of *payuqtuq* and *nirriyaktuqtuq* sharing during the research period.

Table One: Food Sharing Transactions, Ulukhaktok 1992-1993

	Payuqtuq To		*Payuqtuq* From		Host *Nirriyaktuqtuq*		*Nirriyaktuqtuq* At	
	Parents*	Siblings**	Parents	Siblings	Parents	Siblings	Parents***	Siblings
High Hunters (10)	70	61	77	23	7	32	48	19
Low Hunters (10)	12	21	98	37	12	44	82	20

One way ANOVA results:

*Gifts to parents: F = 12.429; sig. = 0.002

**Gifts to siblings: F = 7.7508, sig. = 0.013

***Eating at parents: F = 4.88, sig. = 0.040

Before continuing, some discussion of the categories is in order. “Parents” in this table refers to incidents of sharing or meals with either the husband’s (who was interviewed) or the wife’s parents. Siblings likewise refers to either husband’s or wife’s siblings. Within this sample, sharing within these categories constituted the bulk of exchanges. 51% of High Hunter food transactions were with the husband’s or wife’s family of orientation. A full 73% of Low Hunter gifts were within these boundaries.

Be that as it may, Table One shows one-way Anova results for food movement. From this perspective, it is clear that high hunters are giving significantly more to their parents and siblings. Conversely, the low hunters are eating with greater frequency at their parents’. These results should make intuitive sense. High level hunters, because they are producing more food, have more opportunities to give food than do the low hunters, so it should follow that they are sharing more. Likewise, households that are producing little food should be expected to be eating more meals with their parents.

A second way of looking at these data is shown in Table Two.

Table Two: Food Sharing Transactions, Ulukhaktok 1992-1993

	% *Payuqtuq* To:		% *Payuqtuq* From		% Hosted *Nirriyaktuqtuq*:		% *Nirriyaktuqtuq* At:	
	Parents	Siblings	Parents	Siblings	Parents	Siblings	Parents	Siblings
High Hunters (10)	27.3	23.8	48.1	14.4	6.9	31.6	44.4	17.5
Low Hunters (10)	26.7	46.7	47.4	21.6	13.4	49.4	72.5	17.6

Again, the categories are the same as in Table One; however, the data are reported here as frequencies. That is, rather than raw numbers, the cells report the percentage of transactions to a particular target. Thus, 27.3% of a high hunters' food gifts to other households were to "parents", with a further 23.8% of transactions going to "siblings".

What is most interesting here is the pattern that emerges from looking at these exchange frequencies. Although the low hunters are giving far less in terms of numbers of transactions, when they do have food, they are giving to their parents at roughly the same rate as the high level hunters. They are, however, giving with far greater frequency (46.7% to 23.8% of their gifts) to their siblings. They are also hosting meals for their siblings with greater frequency (49.4% to 31.6%). Finally, when low hunters are eating elsewhere, 72.5% of the time it is at their parents' house, compared to 44.4% for the high hunters.

What is to be made of these differences? If we remember that the low hunters also tended to be younger, these patterns start to make a little more sense. Low hunters produced very little, and were thus largely dependent upon others for access to country foods. For most of these households, their primary food sources were their parents and their older siblings. That the low hunters seemed to go out of their way to give food directly to their (older) siblings was perhaps an attempt to even out exchanges over time, or to "keep up" with their more productive siblings. Another possibility is that the low hunters were attempting to demonstrate their usefulness to their relatives.

The frequency with which these low hunters ate with their parents likewise suggests that they were there not because of limitations placed on them by economic conditions (such as a lack of access to money) but by little pressure to provide food. Condon *et al*. (1995), for example, reported that low hunters (labeled "occasional" hunters in that article) ate nearly as much country food as did the high hunters. Together, this kind of access to food suggests that perhaps low hunters were not very productive because there was no need to be productive.

Conclusions

The data from food exchanges in Ulukhaktok reveal a cultural pattern in the contemporary community. Young hunters, regardless of their activity levels, receive the bulk of their country food (as measured in transactions) from their parents and parents-in-law and from their siblings. Together, about 75% of food received from others are through these family connections. On the other hand, only slightly less that 25% of *payuqtuq* giving is to the parents. The reason for this discrepancy is likely that the parents were still actively producing for themselves at the time, and so did not have a need for food provisioning from their adult children. This is further borne out by the fact that the parents of members of the sample were the nexus of family relations, best exemplified by the frequency with which members of the sample were eating meals with their parents.

That these patterns emerge in the data is curious given the statements made by many Inuit during the study period, namely, that Inuit share with everybody, and that people are always "helping other people". Ideals seemingly contradict the reality that only one Inuk in the study sample verbalized during one of numerous interviews with him. "It used to be everyone helped each other, but now it seems that we only look after our own." There may be multiple reasons for this change, but the most likely explanations is that, given the relative abundance of country food in the community, there is simply no perceived need to share widely. And, indeed, the one food, caribou, that was scarce yet highly valued, was shared broadly when hunters were successful in taking them.

Acknowledgements

Research in Ulukhaktok (Holman) has been supported by research grants from the National Science Foundation's Office of Polar Programs, The Canadian Embassy in the United States, the Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Florida. Support over the years is greatly appreciated. Additionally, the support and encouragement of the residents of Ulukhaktok is equally appreciated; this research would not be possible without the grace and patience Inuit have shown in putting up with me and my questions. Additional thanks go to Russ Bernard, David Daegling, and Pat Draper for advice on data management, and to George Wenzel for lengthy discussions about Inuit and sharing.

To cite this publication:
COLLINGS, Peter. "Food Sharing Networks and Subsistence in Uklukhaktok, NT, Canada." *In* Collignon B. & Therrien M. (eds). 2009. *Orality in the 21st century: Inuit discourse and practices. Proceedings of the 15th Inuit Studies Conference*. Paris: INALCO.
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