Contents

1

Introduction

The Siilaviŋmiut are a Northwest Alaskan Iñupiaq group who once lived in small settlements scattered along the waterways of the Selawik River and inter-lake region east of Selawik Lake. Their name is derived from the Iñupiaq words for place of the sheefish (*sii* = shee; *vik* or *vin* = place). The sheefish (*Stenodus leucichthys*) is the largest member of the whitefish subfamily of Coregoninae, also called *inconnu* (unknown fish) by early explorers.

Prior to the founding of the town of Selawik, the Siilaviŋmiut were comprised of two major population clusters that occupied the Selawik River Valley, sometimes referred to as Siilviim Kangianiġmiut (people of the upper river area) and the Kiitaaġmiut (people of the lower-river and inter-lake area). For at least the last century, the people have had close contacts with their relatives along the Kobuk River to the north and the Buckland River to the southwest. They also maintained close contact with relatives along the coast around Kotzebue Sound, where they traveled annually to hunt seals, fish for salmon, and conduct trade. Some individuals also maintained contact with Koyukon Indians by way of river valleys flowing into the Selawik River from the south.

Lying roughly between 156°30' and 160°20' west longitude and 66°00' and 67°00' north latitude, the Selawik River drainage system straddles the latitude of the Arctic Circle as the river flows westward into Kotzebue Sound. It is flanked on the north by the Waring Mountains and Hockley Hills that separate it from the lower Kobuk River Valley, on the southwest by the Selawik Hills that separate it from the

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Koyukuk River system, and on the east by the Lockwood Hills that separate it from the upper Kobuk and Koyukuk Rivers.

The upper reaches of the Selawik River valley include the Kugarak (Kuugruaq) and Tagraġvik, the two major tributaries. Here, the Selawik and much of the Kuugruaq and Tagraġvik Rivers flow through thick reworked deposits of recent and fossil-bearing glacial age riverine silts. For much of the area, the drainage pattern is comprised of short, slow-moving streams that drain myriad lakes. Where they enter the main river, the streams have cut small channels that appear to a traveler along the river as nicks in a monotonously featureless riverbank. In addition to the sheefish that inhabit the main river and tributaries, several species of smaller whitefish migrate between the lakes and the river along these small connecting streams. It is here that many Siilaviŋmiut families used to situate their summer and winter settlements. The remains of former campsites and dwellings are so common at these spots that an archaeologist can expect to find a site wherever one of these nicks in the riverbank occurs.

The lower Selawik region includes Kuugruaq (Kugarak in the map) and Tagraġvik and myriad small streams and lakes that lie between (figure 1.2). The lakes teem with whitefish and pike, and in summers they provide major nesting areas for waterfowl. In this region the preferred settlement localities were at the outlets of streams entering the many tiny lakes; few settlements were located directly along the shores of the two large lakes.

THE PROTO-HISTORY OF SELAWIK

At present we have no direct information about the earliest prehistoric residents of the Selawik River drainage system. Circumstantial evidence from adjoining areas suggests that people had already inhabited the region by the end of the last Ice Age. The best indications come from Onion Portage on the Kobuk River (D. Anderson 1988; Giddings 1967) and Trail Creek Caves on Seward Peninsula (Larsen 1968), where the earliest archaeological remains are known to be at least 10,000 years old. The only comparable archaeological remains in the Selawik drainage itself are a few undated flake stone scatters and implements from the Rabbit Mountain area of the Kuugruaq River (Anderson and Anderson 1977).

The term *proto-history* here refers to the period prior to European contact and the arrival of the Western material culture. As recorded in written history and discussed in the next chapter, the first white person to set foot in the Selawik River was John Simpson. The first European material culture discovered archaeologically so far was a part of a shotgun, excavated at Fox River in lower Selawik by Douglas Anderson's archaeological field school in 1976.

Initial proto-historical archaeological research of the area began with the search for and documentation of abandoned settlements and subsistence use areas. Accompanied by local residents who were able to pinpoint the sites on the survey, Douglas recorded seventy-three former habitation sites: fifty-two winter settlements, twenty-two summer fish camps, four fall fish camps, and nine spring muskrat camps (Anderson and Anderson 1977). Most of these sites were occupied before the founding of Selawik village. Doug identified use areas away from the settlements by focusing on names that Selawik residents have attached to various locations. Most points of interest, locations of subsistence resources, places connected to historic events, or places with unusual topographic features were named by their meanings related to the resource or subsistence activity carried out around the area (Anderson and Anderson 1970). Many of the elder residents could relate stories and discussions that they had had with their parents about these locations. These recollections, rich in detail about the camps, seasonal subsistence rounds, and Iñupiaq place names, serve as the oral history database for Douglas's reconstruction of the pre-village period.

Prior to the founding of Selawik village, area residents lived in small semipermanent communities scattered along the main course of the river, its two major tributaries (the Kuugruaq and Tagraġvik), and the inter-lake region between Selawik Lake and Inland Lake. Each group of residents was named after the area in which the groups located their winter settlements, such as Kuugaramiut (people of the Kuugruaq River), Katyaaġmiut (people of the forks of the confluence of the Tagraġvik and Selawik Rivers), and Kuutchiaġmiut (people of the Kuutchiaq River). According to the 1880 census, approximately 100 individuals lived in the region. A more accurate count in the 1900 US census placed the population at 367.

UPPER RIVER SETTLEMENTS

During the pre-village period, settlements were aggregates of family groupings that fostered interdependence among those related by kin ties living close to each other. Their main living settlements were the winter settlements, where they spent the long, severe winter months. Selection of locations for winter settlements involved two major considerations: proximity to prime fishing grounds and, at least prior to the caribou decline of the late nineteenth century (Skoog 1968), access to known caribou crossings and winter caribou feeding grounds.

Referred to as the "Kaniataaġmiut" by Arthur Skin, whose ancestors were upriver people, these people living at the mouths of small streams draining the lakes were able to procure fish coming out of the lakes. In many cases, the settlements also served as summer camps, making them essentially their year-round settlements. Once the

winter quarters were set up and after freeze-up, upriver people would erect fish weirs across the slough-draining lakes to impound whitefish trying to swim downstream. The fish weirs provided them with their major winter fish supply. To harvest the fish, they would open the ice at the back of the weir and scoop up the fish by the dip net (*qalu*). The fish, heaped in mounds on the ice, would quickly freeze and become naturally preserved for the whole winter. Snowfalls after this time assisted the storage process, covering and insulating the fish piles against a too-solid freeze. Fish harvesting continued as long as the fishermen could break the ice around the weir. Where the stream was swift, fishing could continue until December. Whitefish, pike, and burbot played major roles in the diet of the upriver families.

Many upriver families set up their spring camps at or near outlets of small streams entering any of the myriad lakes in the region. The preferred campsites, located upstream from their winter houses, were to facilitate convenient rafting of the harvests back home. Where possible, they selected the camp grounds on the higher banks of a stream or a slough where the snow melted early and the grass formed a good dry mat for their tent floors. As oral history informed, to maintain easy communication between camps, another favored spring camp location was near the primary winter trail linking the Tagraġvik and lower Kuugruaq to the main channel of the Selawik River.

Some families were said to congregate at Kuutchauruk, a major summer fishing ground near the confluence of the Kuugruaq and Selawik Rivers, while others preferred locations along the upper Kuugruaq as their logistical locations for hunting muskrats while waiting for break-up.

In late March, when the river, lakes, and streams were still frozen, families would load their kayaks and camping gear onto the family sled and travel into the lake country away from the main channel to hunt muskrats. Their primary weapon at the time was the bow and arrow with blunt arrowheads.

The period of break-up between late May and early June signaled the beginning of summer activities. Starting earlier in the upper reaches of the Selawik River than in the lower reaches, by early June families in the upriver area were usually able to set up fish traps (*taluyat*) at the mouths of small streams draining lakes. Several families converged at locations where large fish traps could be built to set up joint fish camps. Other families, however, moved overland to the lakes south of the middle part of the Selawik River to establish smaller fish camps at the narrow exit streams of lakes. After setting up camps for their wives and mothers, the men frequently trekked to the upper Noatak to hunt the migrating caribou. Caribou hunting was exceptionally important since it afforded them the chance to obtain not only meat but summer hides and sinew thread for clothing and antler for a variety of manufactured items. People also engaged in trapping foxes, lynx, mink, and otter.

LOWER RIVER SETTLEMENTS

To our knowledge, the "Kiitaaġmiut," the lower river families, did not congregate in joint family camps as did the upriver families. Their winter settlements were generally established around locations where natural conditions created fast-flowing water that kept the ice cover thin, enabling them to continue fishing for a longer part of the winter. The best known of these locations were on the Fox River, along a short channel between Inland and Toklomarak Lakes, and on the Fish River, a swift-flowing clear-water stream at the northern edge of the lower Selawik River basin. Peninsulas, which often form along tidal currents around the inlets or outlets of larger lakes, were also favorite winter sites. In the early part of winter, women would set their nets under the ice away from shore, especially where currents eddied or where the water from several currents merged.

Lower river people set up spring camps on or around Selawik Lake, where they could hook for sheefish and pike. Many set up tents on the frozen lake itself near large ice ridges. Other families set up camps on the shores of the lake adjacent to stream outlets, such as at Mukuksok Point (Makkaksraq). The areas along willow- and alder-covered rivers like Fish River likewise provided good camping grounds because the alders could be cut for firewood and willows for construction materials, to be rafted back to the winter settlement. By mid-April, ducks and geese arriving from the south became their hunting targets.

Most summer sites were situated where the river edge bottom was flat and approximately four to eight feet deep near shore so that gill nets could be used. Some of the major summer settlements were located where open-water fish fences could be set up and used all summer. Later in the summer, between June and July, people could collect rhubarb, celery, and sourdock (*Rumex arcticus*), which grew profusely downriver. Also harvested were salmonberries, nagoon berries (*Rubis arcticus*, locally called strawberries), blueberries, and cranberries. The men remained in the vicinity of the camps to concentrate on hunting molting waterfowl near the mouth of Selawik River and hooking or spearing sheefish. For hooking, the major implement was the ivory or antler fish-lure hook (see figure 7.10), and for spearing a gill spear tipped with a *qemituk*, a pointed fish-shaped device thrust into the mouth of a shee and through its gills, was used.

Families with muskrat skins to trade would load their *umiat* onto sleds in order to continue to the coast following the ice-fishing season. At the coast, they camped at a traditional location northwest of Sisualik on Kotzebue Sound. From there, they engaged in salmon fishing, beluga hunting, and seal hunting with Buckland people. While there, the group also had the opportunity to participate in the annual trade fair with other Iñupiaq groups from the Noatak and Kobuk Rivers. The families boated back to their Selawik winter settlements by late August or early September.

To summarize, the annual subsistence round in the Selawik River system during the proto-historic period differed from settlement to settlement, depending on which resources were locally available. Generally speaking, upriver families were able to harvest a greater number and variety of terrestrial fur-bearing animals than their downriver relatives. The lower river families, on the other hand, had a better habitat for spring ice fishing at Selawik Lake and more ready access to trading with other Iñupiaq groups at the coast.