Subsistence and Culture of the Aleuts as Island Dwellers: Ethnographical Viewpoint

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0. GENERAL INFORMATION ON THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

The Aleut people are now living in the Commander Islands in Russia, the Pribilof Islands, the Western part of the Alaska Peninsula as well as in the Aleutian Islands in the United States. Aleuts were forced to leave the Aleutian Islands and move to the Pribilof Islands after the discovery of the Pribilof Islands by Russians in 1780 (JOCHELSON 1868:43), to the Commander Islands from Atka and Attu in 1826 and to the Kuril Islands since 1828, including 30 people from Attu in 1872, then to the Commander Islands in 1888 to hunt sea otters for the Russian-American Company (JOCHELSON 1968:42-43). Excluding such dislocations, the Aleut original homeland is the Aleutian Islands and the Alaska Peninsula.

The Aleutian Islands are located north of 52 degrees north latitude stretching West to East in 30 degrees wide in longitude, dividing the Bering Sea from the north Pacific. Though geographically and in cultural areas the Aleutian Islands are classified as Arctic, there exists no tundra (that is, free from permafrost) and no ocean ice except in the Cold Bay area on the Alaska Peninsula. The Islands may be thought to have an exceptional non-Arctic warmer environment in the Arctic cultural area because the cold water and winds of the relatively shallow Bering Sea meet the warm water and air of the Japan Current as it crosses the north Pacific above the extremely deep Aleutian Trench, both air turbulence and fog are formed in all seasons, and it is often called the 'birthplace of fog and wind.' The tide moving through narrow straits between some of the steep and sharp-edged islands becomes mountainous riptides (LANTIS 1984:161) especially on the Pacific side.

Native people living in the Aleutian Islands have been wholly dependent on local coastal and marine resources such as sea mammals, fish, sea birds, invertebrates and driftwood, and there are no trees growing in the islands. By using local resources through many generations, the Aleutian Islanders have elaborated special adaptation strategies, producing the Aleut culture from a general Eskimo base.

1. DOES ISLAND ENVIRONMENT ADAPTATION SIMPLY MEAN A MARITIME ADAPTATION?

After the two previous International Abashiri symposiums held in 1993 and 1994 where the taiga and tundra environments have been taken up as themes for discussion, island environment is the third topic in a serial environment in the North. The first time I was informed of the theme for this symposium, I naturally remember the 1986 1st International Symposium held in Sapporo and Abashiri, the theme of which was the "Maritime adaptations in the North Pacific" where MCCARTNEY and OSHIMA read their papers on

Aleut Maritime Adaptations from ethno-archaeological and ethnolinguistic viewpoints respectively.

In those papers much emphasis was placed solely on a maritime environment without referring to the features of an island environment. This sort of attitude may come from the prerequisite that an island environment entails a maritime environment. For example, one of the important conclusions concerning Aleut adaptations given in McCartney's paper is that among the four biogeographical subregions in southern Alaska: (1) the Bristle Bay subregion, (2) the Aleutian Island subregion, (3) the southern Alaska Peninsula-Shelikof Strait-Cook Inlet subregion and (4) the eastern Kenai Peninsula-Prince William Sound subregion, the Aleutian subregion is uniquely classified as a Maritime type with full dependence on maritime resources significantly different from a Modified Maritime type as seen in (3) the southern Alaska Peninsula-Shelikof Strait area and in (4) the eastern Kenai Peninsula-Prince William Sound area (McCartney 1986:33).

What biogeographical feature is responsible for this areal peculiarity of Aleut culture? McCartney (cf. Table 1, McCartney 1986:26-27) gives only one obvious feature, that is, a lack of large terrestrial mammals, and this feature is clearly of an island environment which is contrastive to other similar geographical areas, such as peninsula and continental coastal environments.

Likewise Oshima (Oshima 1986b) proposes linguistic evidence of sea-oriented characteristics of Aleut culture as the results of a study of vocabulary, that is, 1) A sharp distinction between land and sea mammals and its corresponding distinction between food from land and sea, 2) A distinction between sea water and fresh water, 3) Different names of salmon in the sea and in the river, 4) A distinction between reefs connected to the land and offshore reefs, 5) Onomastic inclination to the coastline and reefs (for example, 'octopus-gaffing place names on the submarine reef'), on the other hand, a rare naming of rivers and inland landmarks (cf. Maps 9-11, Bergsland 1994:610-612), 6) A distinction of verbs signifying the movement inland and those of land to beach and to sea, 7) A prohibition of carrying in a kayak (skin boat) things from land such as grass and woman's hair while going in the sea, 8) "Sea" is subjected to a word taboo, for example, the replacement of 'always moving' by "a lot of the needed or whales", 9) "Sea water" as a symbol of a source of power as well as the sun, 10) Fear of devils in the mountains.

The list of features above, though they are only suggestive of the features of an island culture, are not systematic, so that because this sort of linguistic approach shows only the reflection of cultural traits through symbolical meanings, it should be supported by other aspects of the culture.

2. WHAT FEATURES OF MARITIME ADAPTATION ARE OF ISLAND ADAPTATION?

We understand that island adaptation is deeply embedded into maritime adaptation from the previous section so that it is often difficult to separate island adaptations from maritime ones. The next question is whether we can enumerate the island adaptation features from within elements of maritime adaptation strategies or not.

McCartney answers negatively to this question in another place in his paper, saying that there seems to be no features of island cultures in procurement systems (McCartney 1986:30-31). It means that we have to search for other aspects of Aleut culture to explain the highest density of population in the southern Alaska area which is achieved by the Aleut's full dependency on maritime resources (McCartney 1984:33).

For the discussion of this symposium, I have reread several major ethnographies such as of Veniaminov, Jochelson, Lantis, Laughlin and so on, to examine if we can enumerate island adaptation features in the Aleut procurement systems and also to find out the possible cultural traits other than in these procurement systems.

I will tentatively propose six features as follows. The list includes environmental factors on the left

and their correlating adaptation strategies on the right. I use the expression "tentatively" to mean we have to apply these features to the other areas like the Kuril Islands and to compare between the islands, peninsula and continental coastal cultures in terms of these features enumerated solely from the Aleut culture in this symposium.

Environmental features	Adaptation Strategies
1) Only sea transportation	skin boat
2) Great number of islands	fishing camp
3) Rich maritime resource	refinement of hunting skills
4) Unstable weather condition	navigation techniques using wind and tide
5) Poor vegetation	driftwood culture
6) Complex coastline	beach economy

3. KAYAKS (SKIN BOATS) AS THE ONLY MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION

Since it was not everywhere possible to go on foot from village to village in the Aleutians, beaches and kayaks were essential for peaceful or martial travel as well as for hunting (LANTIS 1984:166). One feature found in the Aleut culture, when compared in terms of Eskimo traditions, is the absence of dog traction because of mountainous terrain (LANTIS 1984:169). The sea is the only way of communication with the outside world. The permanent village sites were chosen in favor of easy access to the dwelling places from the sea by boat, the sea-ice-free Bering Sea side with lower waves being preferred to the Pacific side.

In the mid 19th century, a Russian Orthodox priest, Father Veniaminov, who had lived among Aleuts for several decades, said this "when an Aleut is in his one-hatch baidarka (or kayak), dressed in his national costume, he is an entirely different man from the one ashore. As such times, it appears as if he has been created for the baidarka or that the baidarka was invented to display him to the best advantage." (VENIAMINOV 1984:160)

As Veniaminov said, the skin boats were indispensable for their local life, and the Aleut people physically adapted themselves to their kayaks. Just the simple act of sitting in a kayak requires special training. According to Veniaminov, Russians couldn't sit like Aleuts did (VENIAMINOV 1984:160). Aleuts sit in a kayak through a hole on top, stretching out their legs forward (JOCHELSON 1968:11) and keep the same posture during the long hunting travel, leaning forward and back while paddling and shooting harpoons (according to the information from Simeon Pletnikoff born in 1911 and having lived on Umnak island).

Bill TCHERIPANOFF (from Akutan, born in 1902) was one of the last generation who traveled in a kayak and it seemed to be difficult for him to squat down, and so he sat on his hips with his legs stretched out in his home as well as eating wild celery as if in a skin boat. He explained the reason for it, saying that he trained himself, as his father had used to do, to sit as long as possible with his legs stretched out in his home and to practice spear-throwing in front of his house. Adaptation to sitting long in a kayak is responsible for a bad-looking posture of any Aleut walking on the ground (VENIAMINOV 1984:160).

Kayaks are an indispensable way of traveling in the Aleutians. Bill Tcheripanoff reported that in Aleut tradition a man has to own a kayak before marriage. Owning a house is not a prerequisite to marriage. He made a trip to Belkofski on the Alaska Peninsula from Akutan to receive his wife-to-be, ANNIE (born in 1910). He traveled in a one-hatch kayak to reach ANNIE's house. After working for his father-in-law, trapping foxes and bears and fishing for several months on the Peninsula, he made a return trip with Annie lying inside a kayak all the way to Akutan.

How did the Aleut people regard their only means of transportation, a kayak? Sergie Sovoroff from Umnak born in 1902 explained that a kayak had been designed as if it were a sea otter (cf. LANGHLIN 1980:34). Its split bow represents the two front paws of a sea otter lying on its back in the sea. We have linguistic reflections of their idea: for example, a keel *(chuniX)* means a 'spine' and the verb 'to turn a

boat upside down' *(saakuusix)* also means 'to lie on the belly'.

A kayak is thought to be a very private possession. Each man built his kayak to his own body measurements like arms, hands and fingers (LANTIS 1984:173), so that it couldn't be given to others. Other hunting gear like harpoons and throwing boards were also regarded as extremely private properties (OSHIMA 1984a:70). Hunting and fishing gear, a kayak and tools belonged to the husband, while the house and all that it contained belonged to the wife (LANTIS 1984:177). Hunting and war weapons, various clothes and domestic utensils used to be buried with the deceased in a grave and the bottom of every article was broken out (VENIAMINOV 1984:196-197).

Bill TCHERIPANOFF from Akutan, while talking about the bets in traditional gambling, said that a man needs nothing other than his harpoons and throwers, so that he can bet everything, even a house and a wife (OSHIMA 1984a:70-71).

An Aleut used to be proud of traveling and hunting alone in a one-hatch kayak. Traditional two-hatch kayaks were only necessary for old men and young hunters-to-be. A young man training on the job went in a two-hatch kayak with his mentor, usually his maternal uncle, to get trained in paddling and shooting. After the introduction of firearms, even expert hunters had to use two-hatch kayaks because a rear paddler had to steady their kayak in order to shoot their guns (JOCHELSON 1968:55).

4. LAND DEVELOPED AS DWELLING AND FISHING CAMPS

One of the Aleut subsistence activities near their village is fishing; that is, offshore deep sea fishing and river fishing. Fishing methods and techniques vary. In earlier ethnographic records we can find those various traditional fishing methods, the same as reported in 20th century ethnographies.

As for the deep sea fishing of halibut and cod, bone hooks were tied to lines made of seaweed in Kanaga of the Andreanof Islands in 1761 (JOCHELSON 1968:5,11). Deep sea fishing of halibut and cod gave the Aleuts a relatively static supply of food, compared with sea mammal hunting, usually caught in the bay in summer and caught out of the bay even in the coldest time of winter in the Andreanof Islands in 1774 (JOCHELSON 1968:8) if the weather permitted. Other fish caught in the sea were salmon, flounder, herring and sculpin (LANTIS 1984:175).

As for river fishing, small bags made of whale sinew and tied together like drag nets were used to fish in the rivulets in the Andreanov Islands around 1764 (JOCHELSON 1968:11) and fish dams were made of rock fence downriver and wooden fence upriver, where fish jumped over the rock fence and were locked between rock and wood fences and were caught by scoop nets (JOCHELSON 1968:52). But seines are probably adopted from the Russians (JOCHELSON 1968:51). A wooden box trap was added later to the fish dams. This box trap was used during the thin salmon run (Simeon PLETNIKOFF from Umnak), set in the evening and opened every morning (JOCHELSON 1968:52).

Red salmon ran from June to August, and from February to March, and during the busiest March and July, 50 to 100 red salmon a day were caught. Hunchback (humpback, humpy or pink salmon) ran in July and kisutch (silver salmon) ran from September to the beginning of December, and during the busiest season, from the end of September to the beginning of October, each family catching 5 to 6 a day (JOCHELSON 1968:52).

All parts of the river are not fully used in the Aleutians. Many rivers in the chains are very short, shallow and steep, so that as well as the fact that one cannot use them for transportation, river fishing is done only at the river mouths, and upriver is not used for fishing or other activities. Furthermore, river fishing did not seem to be an indispensable environment for Aleut dwelling places especially in the western Aleutian chains. We find in the records that there were no rivers and that 200 men and women were living on Kanaga in 1774 (JOCHELSON 1968:7), there were no rivers on Chetkin (nowadays Sitkin) and 400 families (sic) (JOCHELSON 1968:7) and there were no rivers, no fish and no edible roots and 400 families

(sic) living on Tagadak in 1774 (JOCHELSON 1968:7).

It seems to be doubtful if people were to live without salmon seasonally coming up the rivers in great numbers which give them plenty of food. One possible answer we can get from modern ethnographical information is that if people on those three islands could have had fishing camps outside of their islands, they could live a prosperous life. They could have traveled in kayaks to them to get sufficient fish there like modern Akutan people.

Akutan people had fishing camps, composed of semi-earthen houses sufficient enough for sedentary dwelling, on the other side of the island and on Akun island east of Akutan (Bill TCHERIPANOFF). Nikolski people on Umnak island still use fishing camps on the Pacific side, where several semi-earthen houses are constructed for camps (Simeon PLETNIKOFF).

Akutan people who have no rivers available near the village in which salmon can run up, went to their camps close to the river 3 m wide and 1 m deep near the lake on Akun every year from June to August. Staying in the semi-earthen houses and fishing, they brought back dried salmon to their home land. The village chief divided the whole catch among villagers equally and each family received 600 to 900 salmon (Larry MENSOFF born in 1915).

5. RICH MARINE RESOURCES

The use of abundant marine resources has already been discussed in many ethnological studies. All local whale species except the sperm whale and killer whale (MCCARTNEY 1975:294) were hunted and eaten or used for materials. Sea lions, fur seals, harbor (hair) seals, sea otters, and occasionally walruses were hunted and used (LANTIS 1984:174-175).

A hunt at which Aleuts were experts, especially good at sea otter hunting, was a major reason for their conquest by the Russians (LANTIS 1984:175). This means that Aleut hunting technology was well refined at the time of their first contact with them.

Aleuts utilized almost every body part of a sea mammal (OSHIMA 1984b:64-65). Among the uses of sea mammals, sea mammal oil seemed to take the most important role in Aleut life. Sea mammal oil lamps used to be the only source of heating in the house. Seal oil was an essential condiment, which is common to all Bering Sea Eskimos. Without seal oil, no matter how many fresh or dried fish they had they thought they might starve or become ill (LANTIS 1984:175). Dried roots and shellfish were always eaten dipped in seal oil (LANTIS 1984:175). Sea mammal meat or oily food were their most favorite food, therefore, it was understandable that relatives should not eat them during mourning periods in order to give respect to the deceased (LANTIS 1984:180).

Of the sea animal hunting activities, whaling is the most risky and unstable hunt so that whale hunters were the most prestigious and respected hunters. Aleuts used a one-hatch kayak even for whale hunting, which is largely different from Bering Sea Eskimos who were using an umiak (open deck skin boat). Aleuts speared and left whales to drift ashore (LANTIS 1984:175).

Unstable hunting of whales needed, in addition to aconite to secure their hunt, a lot of magical powers such as the feathers of a rosy finch, as a hunter's amulet, attached to points not far from the place of attack to attract whales to the shore (JOCHELSON 1968:77).

After shooting a poisoned spear, a whale hunter lay on the right side of the body in a kayak for two or three days in hope for hunted whale to come ashore close to their hunting place (Luke SHELIKOFF born in 1908 based on his father's story).

6. UNSTABLE WEATHER CONDITIONS AND NAVIGATION TECHNIQUES

Aleut people are said to navigate by currents, observing wind direction and tide because they often

couldn't depend on astronomical observation in a foggy climate. In an emergency they could travel at night, seeing almost nothing but feeling the direction of the water beneath them and the wind above them (LANTIS 1984:173) and also they use the sounds of waves breaking against rocks in the sea. Father Veniaminov pointed out the Aleut's excellent talents using their eyesight (VENIAMINOV 1984:163), geographical knowledge (VENIAMINOV 1984:164), and navigation technology by currents with deep knowledge of wind and tide (VENIAMINOV 1984:274-275).

They had to depend much on the wind and tide so that they naturally regarded it as a sin to speak of the wind, for it was believed that a storm might thus be incurred. In their proverbs *SlaX tunusaaGaanaXtxin* "Don't speak about winds" and *slaX chiGanaX ulux, txin atxiiGan saGanaX* "A wind is not a river, some time or other it will stop" (JOCHELSON 1968:86).

Akutan people used to have 'a tide man' and 'a wind man.' They were ranked as subordinate to the village chief. Both of them had to report their observation to the chief every morning. And then the chief planned their hunting or fishing trip for the day (Bill TCHERIPANOFF).

7. POOR VEGETATION ON LAND

There are no trees growing in the islands. Instead of living trees, they have to depend on driftwood the Japan Current and the currents in the Bering Sea carry to them. The Aleutian islanders have made the most use of wood as a gift drifted from far away lands.

Driftwood was used for a frame of semi-earthen houses and many pieces of furniture such as a notched-log ladder, benches (LANTIS 1984:167) and household utensils such as wooden buckets and bowls (LANTIS 1984:169) in addition to a fine grass mat on the ground and as a partition (LANTIS 1984:167).

The driftwood was also used for much hunting gear such as spear throwers, paddles, hunting implement shafts, fish spears, arrows, composite fishhooks (changed bone to wood) (LANTIS 1984:171), wooden tubes as bail (LANTIS 1984:172) and flat wood seats in the kayaks (LANTIS 1984:172).

Among the uses of driftwood, the Aleut bentwood technology was artificially elaborated as represented typically in light but durable kayak frames and wooden visors as hunting hats.

Though except for various kinds of grass for materials of well-known Aleut baskets, the vegetation is very poor in the Aleutians, the island people made almost exhaustive use of plants, leaves and roots as well as berries. There are cow parsnip, cranberry, crowberry, black lily bulb, cowslip, anemone greens, roots of anemone and lupine (LANTIS 1984:176). Berries were eaten with seal oil and stored for festivals in winter, and the dried roots stored for winter were regarded as emergency food when famine hit upon them.

8. COMPLEX COASTLINES AND COASTAL ECONOMY

The height of land doesn't matter, but the depth of sea does matter for people whose lives were spent at sea level (LANTIS 1984:161). Many islands have very complex coastlines composed of cliffs, lagoons, sandy beeches, reefs, rookeries, caves, submarine caves and so on. Aleut people have fully exploited and made the most use of the resources they can get from these complex coasts.

Plenty of sea birds like puffins and cormorants lay eggs in nests on cliffs and can be seen through out the year. Aleuts gather sea bird eggs on the cliffs, lowering a boy or making a young man climb up, and preserving them in oil (LANTIS 1984:175). Cormorants and puffins were caught on the sea-coast by a noose made of whalebone and their skins were made into women's bird-skin parks (JOCHELSON 1968:8,10).

Other migratory and resident birds like ducks, geese, ptarmigan could be hunted or snared by a noose, deadlock or string shot throughout the year. Birds are relatively stable food resources for Aleut people. Even sea gulls were eaten when food was lacking (JOCHELSON 1968:53).

Another important coastal zone is beaches and reefs. Octopus, sea urchins and shellfish such as clams, limpets, mussels give people a food supply all year round (McCARTNEY 1986:32). Even in the coldest time of winter you can find some food while walking on the beach.

Even today old people say that *alaGum achidaa nuXtalix anaGiX angaasada* "when you reach the beach, bring back something." This proverb means, if you catch no fish, bring back shellfish or seaweed or at least small pieces of driftwood. And we have an expression like *aGuXkitiguun stuuluX txin atxaX-tikuX* "There comes an ebb tide, the table is set." (Simeon PLETNIKOFF from Umnak) He is also an expert at gaffing octopus on a reef. His proverbs tell us that reefs are very important as a food reservoir and is their mainstay.

This attitude toward the coasts is rooted deep into the Aleut tradition. We can find in the historical records about the Andreanof Islands in 1774, that when the weather becomes stormy and continues so for several days, it is not possible to set out to sea and famine strikes them and their wives and children. In order to prevent starvation they go to the sea-coast, gather sea-weed and different shells, bring them home and eat them raw. They look particularly for stranded dead sea-mammals. When God rewards them, they eat the sea-mammals raw (JOCHELSON 1968:8).

When hunting was unsuccessful, especially when the sea was too rough, people dug edible roots (Lantis 1984:175). In winter when the digging of roots was impossible and the stormy sea prevented hunting and supplies were wanting, they were threatened by famine, then they went with their wives and children to the shore, gathered seaweed and every kind of edible shells and were glad when they found a stranded whale or some other sea-mammal (JOCHELSON 1968:11).

Judging from the above information and other sources, the Aleuts seem to have had a food preference such as seal oil > sea animal meat > fish > bird meat and eggs > edible roots > invertebrates & seaweed.

On the basis that we can find any category of food lower than fish on the food preference scale, we can safely say that the use of the ocean edge as a resource reservoir (McCARTNEY 1986:22) was developed as the last mainstay for the community. This zone is also important for the daily activities of the aged, the young, and the women remaining in the sedentary residence where they can easily get food (OSHIMA 1986a:45). Grasses for basketry and matting such as dune grass, a locally called wild rye or wild barley are mainly found on hilly sandy bars (JOCHELSON 1968:55) and can be included in this coastal subsistence activities.

The economic importance of coastal zones are good examples of Aleut resourcefulness and island adaptation. On one hand, men such as hunters and fishers have developed kayaks of high mobility and hunting and fishing technology. On the other hand, old men, women and young men have developed a coastal economy such as bird egg gathering, bird hunting and beach combing.

On the base of relatively stable food resources from the coastal zones, the Aleut hunter-fishermen could concentrate their energy on sea hunting and fishing.

9. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude the points discussed in previous sections I will sum up the interrelation of the six features proposed in the first section.

One important environmental feature in the Aleutian Islands is the isolation and localization of dwelling places but the Aleut people exploited their adjacent islands as fishing camps and hunting grounds beyond the limit of their homeland. Of course, this expansion of their activities was made possible by kayaks of the highest quality and their navigation techniques and knowledge. Building kayaks were made possible by driftwood and bentwood technology, and by large sea mammal hunting to supply enough skins.

Another feature of the island environment is their coastal zone complex enough but resourceful for a

great of variety of "minor" activities, which made it possible to supply emergency food for people in the famines caused by their harsh climate which is the third feature of an island environment.

ACKNOLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Prof. Brian Christopher PERRY from Otaru University of Commerse.

[NOTES]

1) This work was in part financially supported by grant-in-aid from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture: No.07301039 titled 'A Comparative Study of Cultures in Circumpolar Region: Language, Ecology and Cosmology' directed by Takashi Irimoto of Hokkaido Univrrsity and No.0741013 titled 'Urgeut Linguistic Fieldwork of the North Pacific Rim', directed by Osahito MIYAOKA of Kyoto University.

2) In 1876 the Kuril Islands were transferred to Japan in exchange of Sakhalin.

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1986b「環境と言語:アリュート語に表れた環境観(陸と海)」『北方民族文化シンポジウム:北太平洋における海への適応』北方民族シンポジウム実行委員会、105-108. 網走市
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〈邦文要約〉

北太平洋からベーリング海を分かち、経度にしてほぼ30度にわたる範囲に横たわって東西に走るアリューシャン列島は、北緯50度以北に位置し、「極北地域」に分類されるものの、極北という地域特性としてしばしばあげられるツンドラ（永久凍土）もなく海氷も来ないという「恵まれた」環境にある。

しかし、浅いベーリング海を南下する寒流と北太平洋を北上する暖流の日本海流とがこの列島で出会うため、年中「霧と風の生まれ出るところ」と呼ばれるにふさわしい厳しい気象条件下にある。急峻な火山島が多く狭い平地で、狭い海峡で加速された高い波に洗われる海岸という悪条件のもとで人々は生活しなければならない。村々を結ぶ道はなく、海路のみが外界との通路であるから、波の高い北太平洋側は意識的に避けられ、舟で上陸に便利なベーリング海側に恒久的な集落の多くが作られる。海岸近くの飲料水が確保できる小川の近くで、敵の襲来を監視する小山を背後にひかえた場所に村落を作り、風と寒さを避けるために半地下式の土を盛った住居が建てられた。

前浜は、漁場でありかつ猟場であり、厳しい冬の最中に食料が不足すれば地続きとなる干潟が利用できる。さらに大型海獣を求めて、あるいは流木を集めに外海へと乗り出す彼らの生活に、舟は必需品である。

19世紀中葉にアリュートとともに生活した宣教師ヴェニアミノフに、「伝統の猟衣を着て皮舟に乗るアリュートの姿は、陸にいるアリュートとはまったくの別人である。まるでアリュートは皮舟に乗るために創造されたのか、もしくは、アリュートをその最良の姿で見せるために皮舟が創造されたのかのどちらかであるかのようだ。」（VENIAMINOFF 1840:160）と言わしめるほど、アリュートと皮舟は切っても切り離せない関係なのだ。

列島に大型陸生哺乳類がいないため、アリュートの生業活動は、海獣、魚、海鳥、海生無脊椎動物などの海洋資源に集中する。さらに樹木が生育しない環境で彼らは流木を材料や燃料として利用してきた。これら海洋資源のより有効な捕獲・採集技術をアリュートは開発してきたといえる。舟の築造法・航海技術を洗練させ、猟漁具と獲物の貯蔵方法を発案することで、厳しい地形と気候を克服したアリュートは、比較的大きな人口（ロシア人との接触当時12,000-15,000人と推定）を支え、狩猟採集社会にはまれな階層化社会を作り出したといわれる。

もちろん、陸生植物などの利用があるので生業の陸への依存度は皆無とはいえないが、他に類を見ないほどに生業活動の大半が海へと向けられているといえる。

また、このような海への志向は、生業以外の他の側面にも観察される。その一つの例に、言語表現がある。アリュート語では、「島」も「陸」も「地」も *tanaX* という一語で表される。あまりにも素っ気ない言語化である。地名を調べても内陸の山や丘に名前がなく、日常的に漁をする川にも名前がないことが多い。これとは対照的に、岬、半島、海中の小島、干潟など海岸線には地名が豊富である。干潟のタコ捕りをする場所（ウムナク島の例）にまでも名前がつけられている。

ヴェニアミノフ以降の代表的な民族誌に記載されたアリュートの生業活動を中心に、それに関わる言語表現や精神文化にも触れながら、高度に海洋に適応したといわれるアリュートの狩猟採集文化の特徴を、島嶼環境への人間の働きかけという視点からとらえなおした結果、つぎのような島嶼の自然環境特徴とそれに対応する適応戦略を提案した。

1) 交通手段が海路に限定	皮舟
2) 島が多い	フィッシング・キャンプ地の開発
3) 豊富な海洋資源	狩猟具・狩猟技術の高度化
4) 不安定な気象条件	風向きと潮流観察による航海術

5) 貧弱な植生　　流木文化

6) 複雑な海岸線　　海浜採集経済

これらの6つの環境適応戦略の相互関係はつぎのように示される。

アリューシャン列島の一つの重要な環境特性として、住居地の孤立化と地方化があるが、アリュートは近隣の島々を漁労キャンプ地あるいは狩猟場所として開発することで、この住居地の限定性に打ち勝つことができた。もちろんこの活動の広がりを支えたのは高品質の皮舟と航海技術・知識である。そして皮舟製造には流木を素材とする曲げ物工芸技術と皮を供給する大型海獣狩猟が必要不可欠である。

島嶼環境のもう一つの重要な特性は、複雑なしかし豊富な資源のある海岸部である。海浜での採集経済は、主に老人・女性・子供によって担われ、男性狩猟・漁労者の海洋での活動を補完し、過酷な気象条件によって引き起こされる飢饉の時の緊急食料を供給する重要な役目も果たしたのである。