Seasons and Seasonality in the (Alaskan) Arctic:

Human and More-than-human Cycles of Engagement

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Abstract. – While one could argue that life is always and everywhere seasonal and characterized by rhythms that change over the course of a year, the Arctic provides a very vivid illustration of that statement. Unlike tropical and moderate zones of the globe, the High North (like uninhabited Antarctica) oscillates between polar day and night, thereby providing extreme living conditions for plants, animals and humans. Climate change research has added to that narrative by documenting significant shifts in Arctic ecosystem seasonality in recent years. The question remains, however, whether human individuals and societies mirror these shifts or not. In other words, what is the relationship between social and environmental seasonal cycles in the Arctic? The article will provide insights from the author's fieldwork of the last 30+ years and from a literature review (with a focus on Alaska) going back to Marcel Mauss' "Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo." [*Seasonality, Arctic, Alaska, Marcel Mauss, ethnography*]

Introduction

The spring 1992 was the first time I ever experienced the wonders of Arctic seasonal changes. After a long and dark winter in Fairbanks (Alaska, USA), the increasing length of day became noticeable in February/March, while the night temperatures remained low. Most dramatic in that respect was the month of May: while the first half of the month came with the last significant amount of snowfall of the season, the last week of the month brought high temperatures of 20 degrees Celsius and more every day. At that point, the length of day had increased to more than 20 hours, while early March had only about 10 hours of sunlight per day to offer.

Having grown up in a mid-latitude location in Austria, the sensation of radical and abrupt seasonal changes in Fairbanks became less surprising as I went on to live there for the next 20 years. Still, the temperature amplitude of 80 degrees Celsius between winter low (about -50 degrees Celsius)

and summer high temperatures (up to +30 degrees Celsius) and the rapid transitions between long winters and short summers in this subarctic place (it is surrounded by boreal forest and is located approx. 250 km south of the Arctic Circle) remained extraordinary throughout the years.

All organisms in the Arctic have to adjust to the extreme differences in daylight and temperature, and the drastic variations in the availability of food sources, in the course of a year. While some mammals (such as brown bears, black bears, arctic ground squirrels, and Alaska marmots) hibernate, migratory birds just leave. Other species, including humans, need to make it somehow through the lean winter months without the adaptive strategies used by the animals mentioned above.

The remaining parts of this short article will address "traditional" anthropological topics connected to the theme of seasonality – such as seasonal subsistence rounds and Marcel Mauss' treatment of Inuit fluctuating social morphology – before progressing to the more contemporary topics of climate change impacts on seasonality and possible correlations between seasons and rhythms. I will conclude with some remarks about the possibility of connecting "traditional" and contemporary topics, that is by contemplating whether recent "more-than-human" approaches within and beyond anthropology help us in overcoming this somewhat counterproductive dichotomy of old vs. new.

Seasonal Rounds

While human activity everywhere shows a certain amount of seasonal fluctuation and variability, the greater the distance to the equator the more pronounced the seasonal environmental changes all living beings have to deal with. Although industrial food production and distribution in the Global North sometimes tries to pretend that everything is available all the time, preindustrial agricultural societies in all latitudes had to be highly cognizant of seasonality if they wanted to survive.

Livelihoods in the Arctic and Subarctic until recently were more or less exclusively based on hunting-and-gathering modes of subsistence, as "agriculture" was limited to hay making and similar auxiliary activities among groups with domesticated animals. The dog has been ubiquitous throughout the North for a long time, while domesticated reindeer were initially limited to northern Eurasia, and horses and cows were more or

limited to the settlement areas of the Sakha people (and some neighboring groups) in eastern Siberia.

Hunting, the dominant way of procuring animal meat in pre-agricultural societies, is dependent on the seasonal migratory behavior of the animal species pursued; the physical state changes of water add another layer of complexity. For example, the freezing of rivers, creeks and lakes makes the organisms under the ice less accessible for humans – if nor for ice fishing – but enables the use of these water bodies as transportation arteries in the pursuit of other animals. Another example is the spring whale hunt on the North Slope of Alaska, which not only requires the bowhead whales' annual return to the Arctic but also a certain amount of shore-fast sea ice, which allows the hunters to intercept the animals at the "edge of the ice."

While the naturalist seemingly can easily operate with the notion of four distinct seasons as known from temperate zones (Pielou 1994: 17), the caveat is, "but in the Arctic, winter is long and summer short, and the seasons between them could more aptly be described as 'warm-up' and 'freeze-up' than as spring and fall" (ibid.: 17f.). Thus, let us turn to what anthropologists and ethnologists had to say over the years. Unsurprisingly, almost every classical ethnography of the circumpolar North contains a discussion of subsistence activities conducted during different parts of the year, thereby at least indirectly discussing "seasonality." At the same time, it is rather rare in these very same ethnographies to encounter explicit discussions of the topic. That is, there are few ethnographic monographs of the circumpolar North that engage with emic concepts of seasons and seasonality, devote entire sections of their work to the "seasonal round" of the people or group in question, or contain an index entry on "season(s)," "yearly cycle" or similar.

One possible explanation for that is that many late 19th century/early 20th century classics of Arctic anthropology are focused on material culture (see, e.g., Murdoch 1892 and Nelson 1899 as examples from Alaska), thereby privileging the (seasonal) use of specific implements over a holistic treatment of northern life as experienced by its residents. While there is an impressive genealogy of early anthropological fieldwork interested in more than material culture (see Rosa and Vermeulen 2022 for a good overview), more self-consciously phenomenological and immersive ethnographies become common from the 1970s onwards. For example, Alaskan anthropologist Richard Nelson, who had conducted detailed ethnographic work in different parts of Alaska since the 1960s, moved to much more experiential writing trying to capture emic perspectives in his later works. In "Make

Prayers to the Raven" (Nelson 1983), he addresses seasonality repeatedly. Apart from providing Koyukon names for seasons (10 of them) and Koyukon equivalents of western system of months (Nelson 1983: 264f.), Nelson pays close attention to what seasons and seasonality mean for the communities he lived in and worked with. He addresses the emotional effects of different seasons (Nelson 1983: 40), the seasonality of food supply (240), as well as ritual/narrative means of shortening the dark winter season (Nelson 1983: 18). William Simeone, on the other hand, working with the Athapaskan people from Tanacross in interior Alaska, limited himself to the general statement, "life in Tanacross follows a seasonal pattern" (Simeone 1995: 9).

Ernest Burch, Jr., also didn't adopt the phenomenological perspective of Richard Nelson but rather the position of the meticulously crosschecking oral historian in his work on Northwest Alaska. His opus magnum "The Inupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska" (Burch 1998) is rich in references to the "yearly cycle." He discusses seasonal rounds for every notion of Northwest Alaska. The focus, however, is clearly on subsistence activities during particular times of the year and not seasons themselves (e.g., there is no indigenous nomenclature for seasons in the book), nor seasonality. A radically different understanding of "season" underlies Margaret Blackman's book "Upside Down" (2004). Here the "season" is the fieldwork season, reminding us that anthropological work in the North, with the exception of PhD research, is most often conducted in the summer, when universities are not in session. This is even more so among Arctic archaeologists, who would face serious issues if digging the frozen ground in other parts of the year than the summer.

Switching our attention to Siberia for a moment, John Ziker reminds us that the Nganasan in northern Siberia distinguish two "years" – "a summer year with four months and a winter year with eight months" (Ziker 2002: 29). Ziker, based on earlier work by Soviet ethnographers, also provides names of month-like parts of those years, with many of the names pointing to seasonal changes in the availability of certain animal species and/or subsistence activities (ibid.: 30). Susan Crate, working with the livestock-holding Sakha of Northeast Siberia, highlights the ecological constraints of the region, that is long winters and a short growing season (Crate 2006: 97). She also communicates the mythical and affective dimensions of seasonality. For example, the challenging season of winter is personified as a white bull with frosty breath, while summer is both cherished and

complained about, the latter because of all the work that needs to be done in a short period of time (ibid.).

Finally, the importance of seasons for the subsistence activities of the residents of the Canadian Arctic has been known since the days of Franz Boas (Boas 1888). More recently, Hugh Brody, a writer, anthropologist and filmmaker, remarked that "each northern culture has its seasonal round, its pattern of movement from camp to camp, hunting area to hunting area …" (Brody 1987: 89). Brody also made the important point of connecting seasonality with "the readiness to move", something typically misunderstood by colonists from largely sedentary societies (ibid.: 95–97). Thus, seasonality among Arctic hunters is less akin to Central Europeans booking summer vacations half a year in advance, no matter what the actual conditions in July or August will be, but fine-tuned responses to seasonal environmental changes and less predictable animal movements.

Franz Krause has distinguished between two rather distinct anthropological approaches to seasons, "one seeing them as discrete temporal blocks, the other as interlocking rhythmical phenomena" (Krause 2013: 25). One characteristic of the first approach is a focus on the classificatory dimension, e.g., by investigating names and durations of seasons. The second approach is, according to Krause, defined more by an emphasis on "seasonality," that is on the changing lived human-environmental entanglements in the course of a year. Ignoring the rhythmical aspects for now, we can say our Arctic examples provided above speak to both approaches, some more to the first, others more to the second. Building on Krause's useful distinction, I suggest, however, to discern three distinct – but not mutually exclusive – positions in the brief overview presented above. One rather common position is not to write about seasons and seasonality, or to just state that life in x is seasonal, that is to take seasons and seasonality for granted. The two other positions are more closely aligned with what Krause had noted; thus, I use the terms he had used initially. One can be labeled "seasons" and focuses on descriptions of what people do at a particular time of the year, in addition to how people call this period. The other one can be labeled "seasonality" and focuses more on what seasons mean for people as agents of an ecosystem. Thus, our typology has four logical spots: 1) one where neither seasons nor seasonality are being discussed; 2) one where only seasons are at the center of attention; 3) one where only seasonality is at the center of attention; 4) one that treats seasons and seasonality. As we have seen, position 1 has been common, especially in the early years of Arctic anthropology, and might become more common

as scholars move their attention away from our topic to issues of resource extraction, postcolonial governance and reconciliation. While we have seen examples of 2 and 3, position 4 is rare but would obviously be some kind of ideal for the writer of these lines.

Marcel Mauss' Seasonal Variations

One obvious omission in the overview of Arctic anthropological treatments of seasons and seasonality is Marcel Mauss' "Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo" (1979[1950]). There are multiple reasons for doing so. Generally, the work is exceptional and distinct on many levels. It was published very early within the framework of Arctic anthropology (originally published in French as Mauss 1906), carries the word "seasonal" in its title unlike anything else published at the time or later, focuses on "social morphology" instead of environmental relations or subsistence activities, and is not based on fieldwork by the main author himself.[1]

While Marcel Mauss is a celebrated figure within the history of anthropology, "Seasonal Variations" has been a less than clear-cut success. While it could be said that Mauss' essay is one of the few instances in which Arctic or Inuit ethnography contributed to general theoretical developments within the discipline, Arctic anthropologists themselves quickly forgot about this piece of armchair anthropology. As Saladin d'Anglure (2004: 125) has pointed out, the authoritative volume "Arctic" of the Handbook of North American Indians did not even mention Mauss' essay. As Inuit studies based on fieldwork became the norm after World War I (and even more so after World War II), Mauss' well-researched but abstract treatise fell out of fashion and was largely forgotten. When the first English translation appeared in 1979, a few book reviews were published (e.g., Davis 1981) but only one from an Arctic anthropologist (Guemple 1981). While Guemple's review was largely favorable, "Seasonal Variations" did not make an impact at a time when Inuit Studies was pre-occupied with land claims and de-colonization. It has been much more recently that Mauss' essay has been quoted more extensively again (see, e.g., Bravo 2006; Dawson 2006; Friesen 2022; Liebst 2016; Saladin d'Anglure 2004).

1 Henri Beuchat, who is credited as a kind of co-author of the work ("Marcel Mauss in collaboration with Henri Beuchat") made it to the Arctic as part of the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913. Unfortunately, he perished during the expedition in the process of reaching the Siberian mainland after the ship *Karluk* had sunk (Fox 1979: 15).

"Seasonal Variations" is the only essay by Mauss devoted to a single people or ethnic group. Still, his intention was to arrive at more generally applicable conclusions (Mauss 1979: 20). The theoretical motivation was to produce a counter model to Friedrich Ratzel a*nthropogeography*, which was extremely popular at the time (see Bravo 2006 for an elaboration on this theoretical battle). The Danish Eskimologist H. P. Steensby, a disciple of Ratzel, became Mauss' sparring partner in things Inuit. Many of the substantive chapters of the essay speak to a remarkable and detailed knowledge base of Inuit societies Mauss had developed through library studies. At times, however, Durkheimian assumptions, not really backed up by the material presented, appear. For example, his statement that "… we can see that the limitation on Eskimo settlements depends on the way in which the environment acts, not on the individual, but on the group as a whole" (Mauss 1979: 35) does not seem to follow from the evidence presented in the pages before. When he talks about the causes of seasonal variations, a remarkable sentence appears: "it is by means of this technology [that is, their material culture – PS], a social phenomenon, that Eskimo social life becomes a veritable phenomenon of symbiosis that forces the group to live like the animals they hunt" (ibid.: 55). While the tone of the statement reflects the 19th century, some of its content seems much closer to our times. Neglecting the interesting suggestion of seeing technology as a social phenomenon for now, the notion of "symbiosis" between the human and "more-than-human" points to Mauss' attempts to go beyond Durkheim's socio-centric models. Still, on the following page, he returns to orthodoxy by stating, "although biological and technological factors may have an important influence, they are insufficient to account for the total phenomenon" (ibid.: 56).

Mauss goes on to talk about the effects of seasonal variations, arguing strongly that summer and winter life – as the two seasonal forms of social morphology – produce radically different legal systems (this part of his argument might be most problematic from today's perspective). In his conclusions, he attempts to generalize his findings. On the one hand, he argues that other societies have a twofold morphology as well. Mauss even refers to the annual summer vacation dispersion in France as one example (ibid.: 78). Interestingly, he switches terminology in the conclusions and speaks of "rhythm" now ("social life among the Eskimo goes through a kind of regular rhythm" – ibid.: 77). He clearly does that in order to capture more than seasonal changes, or "lesser rhythms" as he calls them (ibid.: 79). The Inuit case study leads him to the general conclusion that "social life

does not continue at the same level throughout the year" (ibid.: 78), a "law" he considers applicable universally. In the end, Mauss' essay, written almost 120 years ago, remains a remarkable document even today. Among other things, it introduces three dimensions, which I want to further elaborate in the final section: ecology, rhythm and symbiosis.

Concluding Remarks: Climate Change, Rhythms, and Humans in the World

In recent years, there has been a growing number of interdisciplinary studies focusing on the impacts of climate change on seasonality. Focusing on Alaska again, the article "Anatomy of a Closing Window" by McNeeley and Shulski (2011) is an early example of a study of how climate change trends do and will affect the seasonal availability of resources critical for subsistence activities. One of their examples is that the seasonal availability of moose in the fall might be delayed. This points to non-ecological problem, as moose hunting season is regulated to end on September 25 in Alaska. Thus, while human hunters can adjust to seasonal changes in the availability of animals, the regulatory framework might prohibit that.

Likewise, Herman-Mercer's et al. (2019) study points to the cumulative impacts of climate change and socio-cultural change. Seasonal shifts in resource availability create vulnerabilities here (in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta) as well. Shifting from the land to the sea, another study has detailed the impacts of seasonal changes in Arctic waters, leading to increased periods of open water in the Bering Sea during winter (Erickson and Mustonen 2022). As climate change proceeds, the problem will no longer be shifting seasonal patterns only but the mounting danger of unpredictability as to what and when.

One danger of current climate change debates is the separation between natural and human history, seeing human agents primarily as destroyers of "nature." It seems, however, that we should follow the lead of Bathsheba Demuth, who in her recently published wonderful "Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait" (Demuth 2019), asks the question, "what is the nature of history when nature is part of what *makes* history?" (ibid.: 3).

Franz Krause (2013; see also Krause, this issue) has made a convincing argument for viewing seasons as rhythms. Inspired, primarily, by Tim Ingold's writings on "taskscapes," his argument against a focus on seasons is intended to bring in a multitude of temporal and repeated changes. Henri

Lefebvre's writings, which also influenced Krause, point to one important characteristic of "rhythm", namely "repetition" – "no rhythm without repetition in time and space …" (Lefebvre 2016: 16). While Mauss' notion of rhythms was different from Krause – Mauss seemed to reserve it for fluctuations in human aggregations – his work can still serve as an argument for replacing the somewhat climate-centered "seasons" with "rhythms."

Finally, throughout all anthropological and social science writings on seasons and seasonality runs a somewhat unresolved ambiguity and dichotomy between nature and culture. Mauss provides a vivid example of that, acknowledging the importance of environmental factors for "seasonal variations," while insisting on the irreducible power of the social. While Krause's contribution is an explicit attempt to address the problem – by moving away from "'social' adaptations to 'natural' phenomena" (Krause 2013), we still seem to be left struggling terminologically, as can be seen in the awkward "more-than-human" phrase often used in anthropology today. Is there a way forward capturing the changing rhythms of the multitude of agents and actants inhabiting our planet within a single conceptual framework?

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