

AN ADDITION TO ESKIMO MATERIAL CULTURE?¹

by

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The material culture of the Eskimo is undoubtedly one of the most exhaustively studied of any aboriginal people. Therefore, I was somewhat surprised when a Noatak Eskimo informant described a *kavhwuk*, an apparently unreported item of hunting equipment. The conversation in which the *kavhwuk* was first mentioned took place in April 1965 in Noatak Village, northern Alaska. The reference to hunting equipment was unsolicited in the sense that I had not specifically asked about hunting practices during previous discussions.

The informant was Paul Monroe, one of the oldest men still living at Noatak. Paul traveled over much of northwest Alaska during his youth and he was describing some of these journeys. My field notes run as follows (in the words of Martha Burns, of Noatak, who translated):

Before he knew anything [when Paul was a baby] his parents stayed up the Noatak River. When caribou were hard to get the people started starving. His eldest brother took them to Kobuk way to hunt rabbits. When they went there he can remember little things. He remembers some people, a man named Kotalarok and his family. Paul was born on the Konyainik River, close to the Utukok River. He was born in April and is now 73 or 74. His father died when Paul was small. When they went over Kobuk way, his eldest brother and his elder sister and Kotalarok's son and daughter always hunted rabbits. When they saw the rabbits, the rabbits were snowblind because of the spring sun. They [the hunters] had a thin, circular board of wood with charcoal all over it. The

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Figure 4. A *Kavhwuk* made for the author by his informant.

board was about 8 inches across and was called a *kavhwuk*. They threw it over a rabbit. The rabbit thought it was a goshawk and would go into his hole. Then they would run over, dig the rabbit out, kill it and put it on their backs. Those four always came home with full packs. That's how they were saved.

At my request Paul returned a few days later with a *kavhwuk* (Figure 4). The example illustrated measures approximately 17.8 cm. across and is 1.7 cm. through at its thickest point. It was made by sawing twice through a spruce log to form a thin disk. After the edges were smoothed over, the disk was blackened by holding it above a fire. Paul remarked that "oldtime" *kavhwuks* were slightly larger and completely blackened over all surfaces.

I have no proof that the *kavhwuk* was efficient in rabbit hunting. However, in the spring of 1965 I hunted rabbits with some of the Noatak men. During bright sunny days rabbits were frequently found crouched in the shadow of willows. Often, their reactions to the oncoming hunters seemed to indicate some snowblindness or dimming of sight. Also, during the winter of 1965, I several times saw goshawks diving toward the ground from the top of a spruce tree and twice afterward found ptarmigan feathers at the spot the goshawk reached the ground. Goshawks also take rabbits (*Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959: 253*). This suggests that the *kavhwuk* is a *feasible* weapon.

A brief perusal of the classical literature on the Eskimo, from the Chugach to the Ammasalik, discloses no reference to anything resembling the *kavhwuk*. Cantwell (1889) and Giddings (1952, 1961), the two main investigators of the Kobuk peoples, do not mention capturing rabbits in this fashion, nor does Larsen's (*Larsen and Rainey 1948*) account of the Utukok peoples. Finally, an even briefer look at the literature on interior Athapaskan groups also proved negative.

There are at least three possible reasons why the *kavhwuk* could have been overlooked by past ethnographers: (1) it may have been a "tool of the moment" created by Paul's brother when he noticed the reaction of a rabbit to the presence of a goshawk. However, Edna Hunnicutt, the oldest living woman in Noatak, said she saw the *kavhwuk* being used when she was young. (2) Rabbits were always a minor item in the Eskimo diet and observers of hunting techniques and weapons have tended to concentrate on methods of capturing caribou and other

large mammals. Still, Nelson (1899), Murdoch (1892) and others describe in detail the capture of smaller game. (3) The *kavhwuk* may not be Eskimo in origin. Paul was five or six when the incident described above occurred; it probably happened in 1892 or 1893. This was 40 or more years after the culture of the north Alaskan Eskimo had been effectively altered, in many ways, by White contact (*cf. Foote 1961*). Thus, the *kavhwuk* may have been introduced to the Kobuk or Utukok peoples, but I am unaware of a similar rabbit-hunting device from another culture.

Though the *kavhwuk* was, according to Paul, quite effective, it could not have been an important hunting implement in terms of the totality of the Eskimo food quest. Rabbits were never a really important food item except, as Paul indicated, when larger game animals were scarce. Even then, snaring or drives were the most common hunting stratagems. However, the *kavhwuk* is a still further example of the ingenious technology created by the Eskimo in his struggle against a relatively intractable environment.

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