Ivory versus Antler: A Reassessment of Binary Structuralism in the Study of Prehistoric Eskimo Cultures

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Abstract

This article reexamines the binary structural approach proposed by McGhee (1977) in his studies of Thule culture. First, using data generated from the Okvik, Kukulik, and Nukleeit assemblages in Alaska, which cover Okvik, Old Bering Sea, Punuk, and Thule cultures over 1,900 years, the paper examines whether the binary structures were encoded in the technology and materials of the Northern Maritime tradition. Second, McGhee’s (1977) archaeological and ethnographic data are reassessed, which does not support the existence of gendered oppositions but rather may relate to spiritual and symbolic relationships between human and nonhuman.