

NORTHERN LIGHTS

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Chapter XII

The Art of Kayaking

In winter there are many ways of hunting seals. You can shoot them in the open water or in leads among the ice, or you can set nets for them, or harpoon them at their breathing holes. When the spring sun warms the air, the seals enlarge their breathing holes and crawl out on to the ice to bask in the sun then you can stalk them, hiding behind a white screen or, if you follow Stefansson's method, by pretending you are a seal yourself and emulating all its movements. But in the summer, when seals are more plentiful, there is only one way of hunting them, and that is from a kayak. And as the seal is more essential to the Eskimos than manna was to the Israelites in the wilderness, they have reached a high level of efficiency not only in the handling of the kayak but in the design of the craft itself and all its equipment.

The kayak is used everywhere in the Arctic from East Greenland to Siberia, but in a variety of forms. In places where the sea is completely frozen all the year, except for a few months in the summer, the Eskimos may be very skilful dog drivers but are naturally not very accomplished kayakers. This applies to the Polar Eskimos from Cape York in the north west of Greenland, who use a ponderous sort of kayak chiefly for walrus hunting. At the opposite extreme are our Angmagssalik Eskimos, who can use a kayak in almost every month of the year and are probably the most accomplished kayakers in the world. Perhaps the Eskimos from south west Greenland, where there is little pack ice and consequently rougher sea, were more skilful at handling a kayak forty or fifty years ago, but now the West Coast is comparatively civilized and the motor boat has largely taken the place of the kayak. At any rate, those of us who visited Holstensborg, Julianehaab and Ivigtut found that the standard was very much lower there than in Sermilik Fjord.

The kayak of the Angmagssalik Eskimo is not only a wonder of efficiency, but a veritable artistic triumph. It is the perfect canoe. Each detail has evolved till it has reached perfection. The kayak, like a race horse, is a thing of infinite beauty. When the Quest first reached Greenland, we saw the natives in their kayaks throwing their harpoons with consummate grace; and later we saw them, dressed in waterproof coats, rolling the kayak right over in the water. They fell over on one side, and with a dexterous movement of the paddle appeared again on the other. We appreciated then the skill of this, as a trick, but it was not till we had had personal experience that we realized the importance, indeed the necessity, of being able to perform this strange evolution.

Watkins realized that it would be impossible for us to hunt seals in the summer unless we

learned to use a kayak. Furthermore, should we succeed in this, we would be able to support ourselves on journeys along the coast, instead of having to carry a vast amount of food and impedimenta. Europeans had learned to go in a kayak before; in fact Nansen and Johansen had depended on them in that memorable journey to Franz Josef Land after the Fram had been frozen into the North Polar Ocean. But it was generally thought impossible that a European could learn to hunt seals from a kayak, or to roll it in the Eskimo fashion.

In the summer and autumn of the year we arrived we were too busy to think much about kayaking, but as soon as we were assembled again for the winter months we set about getting kayaks made. Unfortunately there was no communication with Angmagssalik by now, and we could not get enough wood. In some parts of the Arctic whalebone is used for the framework of the kayak, but at Angmagssalik there is always plenty of driftwood. Pine trees get swept down the great rivers of Siberia, and following the Arctic drift, possibly within a few miles of the North Pole itself, are eventually seen by the watchful Eskimo floating about among the pack, great white tree trunks 10 or 15 yards long.

We found it quite impossible to get into the natives' kayaks. The Eskimo has small, rather undeveloped legs which bend backward in the most phenomenal way. Most of the young men could not only touch their toes with their whole palm, but walk along on all fours without bending the knee. Indeed, they could get into kayaks which were only 5 or 6 inches deep.

Watkins and Lemon got their kayaks made during the winter, but there was then little time to use them, and although Watkins learned to paddle his along, he waited till spring to learn how to hunt. And by then most of the rest of us had had kayaks made. The natives, working outside their tents in the sunshine, did not take long to build them once they had got the necessary wood and skins. The framework is about 18 feet long and consists of five laths of wood longitudinally, and fifteen or sixteen transverse ribs, making the kayak less than 2 feet wide in the middle. These are most carefully cut out (with a pocket knife, of course) and are steamed over the cooking pots and then bent to the required shape. The various parts are cunningly spliced together, and held in place by wooden pegs. The extremities, where the keel and two side pieces meet, are a work of art. Skins of the large bearded seal are preferred, but only one or two of the most skilful hunters had their kayaks covered with these. Most of them had to use skins of bladder nosed seals or even of the Greenland seal. Kayaks covered with these have to be re skinned each year, but the bearded seal skin will last two or three.

The skins are allowed to putrefy till the hair and grain of the skin can be easily scraped off. The smell of the skin is then most nauseating, yet the natives eagerly gobble up any of the trimmings. Two skins are usually enough, and they are put on wet and pulled as tight as possible before sewing, so that when dry the skins are as tight as a drum. Sinew is used for the stitching, which is done in two rows about half an inch apart, so that the finished kayak is completely waterproof after it has been treated with boiled seal oil. Coat after coat of

this is rubbed in till the skin will absorb no more, and the last layer forms a coat of shiny, sticky varnish. A wooden ring, which will just fit over the hips, is fixed to the frame and supports the seal skin on a row of small bone pegs on its inner side. During the construction a few loops of stout seal skin have been built in to hold the various hunting instruments. The most important of these are three parallel thongs, joined together by four ivory ornaments just in front of the hole. These are to hold the paddle while one is getting in, thus giving the kayak a certain stability, on the principle of an outrigger. At first most of us found it quite impossible to get into the kayaks: we would get our feet in and then heave as hard as we could on the seal skin thongs; but our knee caps always seemed too large.

To begin with, we got in on land, which was hard enough, and were then lifted into the water while our instructors still held on to the stern. At first it felt most unsafe, very like trying to ride a bicycle for the first time. You wobbled one way, and then went too far over the other way trying to correct your balance, and finally lost it completely. The paddle laid flat on the water steadied you a little, but it was all most precarious, and purely a matter of balance. After a bit we could gingerly paddle along, being very careful round corners, and staring fixedly straight in front, for the least turn of the head started a wobble.

The native kayak deck was almost flush with the water, but ours, unfortunately, which were so much higher, had several inches of freeboard. This made them even more unsteady. After learning the first stages the next thing to do was to gain confidence, and to do this we went for quite long trips with the natives, while they looked after us most carefully, never letting us go far from them, and helping us to get in and out. When hunting or traveling in the fjords a small circular apron is worn which comes up almost to the armpits and fits tightly over the kayak ring, so that in a rough or choppy sea small waves can wash over the deck without wetting the man or getting inside the kayak.

The kayak has to be light and stream lined so that it can travel fast and easily, yet it often has to be carried over land from one fjord to another if the ice is impassable round the intervening point. It has to be flat bottomed because one often has to run out in it on to new ice, and wriggle across still in the kayak, taking to the water on the far side. When you are in a kayak you have perpetually to balance it. If you relax you capsize at once. With experience, of course, you learn to balance it unconsciously.

Often during the vicissitudes of seal hunting the craft is upset. One kind of seal, the larger bladder nosed seal, has the nasty habit, when wounded, of attacking the kayak under the water and biting lumps out of it. Then when the kayak has turned turtle and the hunter hangs helpless underneath, the bladder nose has him at its mercy. It is easy, too, for some part of the hunting gear to get caught up as the harpooned seal makes its last convulsive rush for freedom. In the rough seas of winter the kayak is always liable to capsize when caught in a sudden gale, whereas in summer the icebergs, eroded by the warm surface layer of the sea, are continually breaking up or rolling over, and many an experienced hunter has been overturned by the waves thus produced.

When the kayak turns upside down its occupant would drown, if the Eskimo had not evolved a special method by which he can go over on one side of his kayak, remain for a moment completely upside down, and then with a dexterous movement of his paddle come up again on the other side. To do this he wears a waterproof coat made of seal skin with the hair removed, and specially prepared. This coat fits tightly on the beveled wooden ring round the kayak hole, by an adjustable seal skin thong which is sewn into a loop on the coat. A similar thong is tied tightly round the face and wrists, so that when the kayak is upside down the only part that gets wet is the front of the face. Not a drop of water can penetrate the skilful double sinew stitching of the kayak coat. Double thumbled gloves are worn so that when the palm gets sodden the glove can be turned round on the hand.

We had seen the Eskimos "rolling" of course, and like most skillfully performed acrobatic feats it looked easy, though we knew it would take some time to learn. The leader thought that if the natives could do it, we should be able to imitate them after a certain amount of practice. Watkins actually learned to do it several weeks before the rest of us, but though he could usually perform it, he was not exactly certain what the movement was.

I remember very well when I started my first lessons. Three days after I first got into a kayak I went in a single day about 10 miles down Sermilik Fjord on the way to Angmagssalik, and being rather pleased with myself, thought I was ready to learn to roll. When we got to Angmagssalik the local schoolmaster and the wireless operator's assistant, who were about the best kayakers, came out to "pick up", while all the inhabitants lined the shore to watch the fun. Putting on the waterproof coat was an uncomfortable beginning. The natives have well covered cheekbones, but with our bony faces the thong has to be pulled so tight to keep the water out that it is almost preferable to get wet. I got into my kayak and felt even more uncertain than usual. Watkins performed first. He rolled several times, but often he only just came up: he was making some slight mistake. An Eskimo then gave a demonstration. He lay on the surface of the water supporting himself there as long as he liked by paddling to and fro, then got up again by pressing downwards with the paddle. Later he went right over, stopped on the surface as he came up again, and then got right up. After that he rolled his kayak without using the paddle, but with the harpoon throw stick, a flat piece of wood 18 inches long and narrower than the paddle. Watkins tried this, but failed. When he stuck upside down two natives paddled up close on each side and Watkins pulled himself up by holding on to the other kayaks.

Then it was my turn. I had rehearsed the movement carefully on land. If I rolled by falling over towards the left, I must keep my left hand (holding the extreme end of the paddle) right down, almost touching the kayak deck. With my right arm held well down the paddle, I was to make a big sweep over my left shoulder and above my head. If I cut the stroke, or if I raised my left hand, I would fail to come up.

I got into the right position for starting, and feeling quite petrified let myself slip over into the icy water. Once underneath, it all seemed so odd that I made a dash at the stroke, cut

my swing, lifted my left hand and was quite surprised when nothing happened. I dropped the paddle, put a frantic hand up on each side of my kayak, and watched the slim bows of the other kayaks coming slowly alongside. I grasped them and soon breathed the air again. I tried this several times, but though I once got my head above water I slipped back again. Then, as we were all rather cold, the session was closed.

Later, when the water got a bit warmer, we practiced this among ourselves for hour after hour at the Base. Watkins became very skilful. Although it is essential that a hunter should learn to roll a kayak if he wants to feel safe when hunting alone, it is typical of the improvident, happy go lucky outlook of the Eskimo that, only about one in four of the hunters do so. In spite of the fact that about a quarter of their deaths occur while hunting, they just do not bother to learn. Of course it is quite possible in an encounter with a seal for the hunter to lose his paddle, so a few of the natives about half a dozen in the whole Angmagssalik district have learned to roll the kayak with the hand alone. This looked quite impossible at first, but after several weeks of practice, Watkins actually learned to do this too. When the natives were practicing rolling with a throw stick, and with the hand alone, they used to hold the paddle in the other hand in readiness. Often you would see a native try with his hand, get half way up, then slip back: there would be a few seconds pause, then he would try with the throw stick, only to fail again. Eventually he would come up, beaming with joy, using the paddle, having been underneath for the best part of a minute. We would practice going along at full speed and then capsizing. It was often difficult to get the paddle into the correct position, and this was very good practice for the real thing, when one would have no chance to think about it before capsizing. As well as the ordinary method, the more skilful natives had a great many "trick" rolls. A few could roll the kayak keeping the paddle behind the neck all the time, while one or two held the paddle right against the bottom of the kayak during the roll. Once you are quite certain that you can always come up using the standard method, you can, of course, go on practicing "stunts" for hours on end. But very few of us got this feeling of absolute confidence. Once in a while something would go wrong and for some reason we would fail to come up, and have to be rescued. Eleven of us had kayaks built, and seven learned how to roll, but Watkins was the only one who learned to do it with the throw stick or the hand alone.

Towards the end of the expedition, Cozens got D'Aeth to take a cinema picture of a concerted roll for the film he was making. Six of us joined up in diamond formation: Watkins, Cozens and Hampton in front; Rymill, Lemon and myself in the rear. The first time Cozens said "One-Two-Three, go," and we all came up successfully. He thought, this was too good to be true, so we tried again. Next time I wasn't quite ready, and went over without having got my paddle in the right position. I came two thirds of the way up, but fell back again. I changed the position of my hands on the paddle and made another attempt. Again I came two thirds of the way up and slipped back. I dropped my paddle and frantically waved my hands. It is rather difficult to paddle directly sideways and the man next to me was still trying to reach me when a native who had been watching at the front came at full speed zigzagging through the other kayaks, and pulled me out.

Having learned the most essential part of kayaking, and having got a lot of fun out of it, we set to work on the more serious work of hunting seals. The most important instrument for seal hunting is the harpoon. Forty years ago, before the rifle was introduced at Angmagssalik, all seals were secured with this weapon. The wooden shaft terminates in a square piece of ivory to which a tapered ivory rod 6 or 7 inches long is cleverly hinged with a bit of seal skin line. An arrow shaped metal point riveted into a barbed ivory head fits over the thin end of the ivory rod and is attached to a long seal skin thong about 40 feet long.

When the harpoon hits the seal, the barbed head turns side ways in the animal, the ivory rod "breaks" to take up the shock of the impact, and then together with the main shaft floats clear, leaving the seal attached to the line. Normally the line, which is most carefully cut in spirals from a bearded seal skin, is coiled up on a wooden tray on the kayak deck. The other end of this line goes to a float behind the hunter's back. This float is the complete skin of a seal, with the hair removed and all the orifices carefully bound up. The harpoon is thrown with a short piece of wood the throw stick which merely acts as a lever and remains in the hand after the harpoon has been launched. The harpoon lies on the right hand side of the kayak, with the throw stick uppermost ready to be grasped. The latter is grooved each side to fit the thumb and fingers, and often ornamented in relief with carved ivory figures of seals and imaginary animals. When the hunter throws the harpoon he lifts it by the throw stick, which is held to the shaft with two ivory pegs, and slowly draws it backwards so that his right hand is just behind his head, then he hurls it forward. The Eskimos' aim is amazingly accurate, and to keep it so they are continually practicing. If a man goes out in his kayak to catch cod or collect seaweed, he will throw his harpoon every few minutes as he paddles along. When practicing, of course, the harpoon is not loaded. The metal barb is put on the tray with the rest of the line.

The rifle is kept in a waterproof cover which is attached to the bows. The butt is ready to hand underneath the tray for the line. In front of the hunter, or near the bows of the kayak, is a white cloth screen so that when he hides behind it the seal merely sees what he thinks is a lump of ice. Parallel to the rifle on the left side of the kayak is the bird spear with a barbed metal point. This is used for catching Eider Ducks or Guillemots, especially in winter when they are loath to fly. Half way down the shaft are three large bear bone prongs barbed on the inner side, the idea being that if the central spear misses the bird, its head may get caught between the shaft and one of the prongs. An Eskimo told me that one cold winter he got fifty Black Guillemots in a single morning when they were huddled together in an open pool among the ice. On the back of the kayak a lance and bladder dart are sometimes carried. The lance has a metal unbarbed head, and is used for killing bears, and for finishing off seals if they have only been wounded with the harpoon. When it comes up to breathe, being unable to go far dragging the float, the hunter approaches and throws the lance, which falls out easily and can be picked up and thrown again.

The bladder dart has a small float (made of the gullet of a large gull) attached to the shaft, and a metal point with a large barb. It is used for catching small fjord seals. As well as all

this a rifle rest is usually carried on the back of the kayak.

I went out hunting for the first time at the end of June when seals were fairly plentiful. There was a heavy swell on the sea, and the icebergs were swaying up and down in a most disturbing way. Each kind of seal seems to behave differently at every season of the year, and very great experience is needed before the right tactics are invariably followed. On this occasion, after an hour of touring about and waiting for a seal, we suddenly saw a black head and body appear far in front. The native said it was a young Greenland seal going a journey, and would appear next time well to the left of our course. While the seal is up the natives remain motionless, but the moment it dives they start to paddle furiously : in the direction where they expect it to reappear. When going at full speed the natives take long powerful strokes, each time sliding the paddle along in their hands to get the maximum power. They, go so fast that the back of the kayak is almost forced under water. When the Eskimo got what he judged to be the right distance, he stopped and waited. Suddenly the seal appeared only 20 or 30 yards ahead. It saw us at once, so the native got out his rifle and shot, hitting the seal in the head. Had the seal not seen us the hunter would have crouched low behind his screen and tried to get within harpooning distance, without using the rifle at all. As it was, he pushed his rifle back into the case, and with a few quick strokes reached the seal before it started to sink. Had the seal shown signs of sinking at once, or had it been only wounded, he would have harpooned it too. The next thing he did was to take some sharp bone pegs from his kayak deck and plug the wound so that no blood would escape. Then, as it was a small seal, he steadied his kayak against mine which was alongside and lifted the carcass out of the water and put it on the back of his kayak just behind the float.

Soon after this we saw a huge black head appear out of the water. It was a Bladder Nosed seal, the "devourer," as the Eskimos call it. The natives approached it, but just before we got within range it dived, showing all its body as it curled over, and none of us saw where it came up again. The small Fjord seal dives for about five minutes, but the big Bladder Nose usually stays under for twenty minutes.

As well as the four or five different kinds of seals the Narwhal and Walrus are also hunted from the kayak. The Narwhal is a small grey, round snouted whale about 15 feet long, which has a single spiral tusk of ivory in front that may be as much as half the length of the animal. The walrus is rare so far down the East Coast and is exceptionally fierce when wounded. Both the animals are particularly prized for their ivory, which is invaluable to the Eskimo as it is used for all artistic purposes as well as in most cases where we would use metal. The soft skin and blubber of the Narwhal is also a very great delicacy, and as only about a dozen are obtained each year, it is a great event when a hunter is lucky enough to catch one.

At the end of July I was staying at a settlement called Ikatek at the mouth of Sermilik Fjord. One day I went out hunting with four of the natives and instead of taking my harpoon and

line, I took with me a 16 mm cinematograph camera. We left the settlement and made for the open sea. As there was not very much ice about just then there was a long heavy swell, but it was a hot cloudless day. We went out about 6 miles from the land, chasing several seals on the way, but each time they reappeared out of range and eluded us. There was not much other life about: a few small Arctic Terns flew past us, and once a Long tailed Skua flapped along further out to sea. Suddenly there was a disturbance in the water, and a large grey brown body broke the still surface of the sea, arched over in the water and disappeared. I could see as the Eskimos swung their kayaks round that it was something unusual, and,) when they excitedly whispered "kreyadewar" (Narwhal) I was so thrilled that I nearly capsized. We went all out towards land, straining every sinew. Soon the Narwhal appeared to one side, came up three times and disappeared again. We changed our course, and paddled as if possessed, taking great long strokes that hurled the light kayaks through the water. He came up again, this time swinging round as if to cross Sermilik, and we altered our course accordingly. This went on for more than an hour.

Luckily I was almost 20 yards behind and at each turn could gain a little by cutting the corners, otherwise I should have been left far behind. At last the leading hunter was just behind the Narwhal when he came up. The native maneuvered to get in such a position that the Narwhal was about 10 feet from him and thirty degrees out to the right. Next time it appeared the hunter hurled his harpoon and hastily threw the float overboard. The beast disappeared, dragging the float down after him. Both were below for several minutes. At last the float bobbed up, and the hunters, who had spread out waiting for it, rushed to the place. Soon the Narwhal appeared beside the float. Another harpoon was hurled and this time two floats were dragged down, but not for long. After a few seconds the great animal appeared and thrashed crimson on the surface. The harpoon point had found its mark.

The natives were all so excited that they started to shout and sing, with joy as they crowded round to examine the blunt grey carcass with its two fins sticking out on each side like tiny wings, and its shapely tail which lay horizontal to its body, proving it to be a, true whale. Normally the Narwhal would start to sink soon after death, and it would be almost impossible for a kayak to tow it home. Two kayaks were therefore brought alongside with the dead Narwhal between. A paddle was put across the kayaks, making them both stable. Then one man took out a knife and cut a small hole in the Narwhal's back. Next, working with a wooden peg, he made a space between the blubber and flesh of the Narwhal. With his hand on the paddle he then leaned down and put his lips to the hole which he had cut, blew the Narwhal up as one does a balloon, and hastily inserted a wooden peg before the air could escape. After that the four hunters harnessed themselves to the dead Narwhal and started to paddle homewards.

I have never seen men so genuinely happy, all the way home they sang old songs and waved their harpoons for sheer joy. It was not a very large Narwhal, and when we got near a small island they decided to land and cut it up. A small piece on the back of each kayak, it would be easier to carry homewards. But the swell was so great that we were quite unable

to land. Out at sea it had not troubled us, but here the breakers were rolling up the rocks with showers of spray and foam.

The ice floes, on the other hand, rise and fall with the swell, and on them at any rate one could land. We did this, and hauled the Narwhal up on to the ice. Then it appeared, rather to my disappointment, that it was really quite a small one, being only about 8 feet long. Had it been much larger the natives said we would never have been able to catch it; as it was, we had had to give chase for more than an hour before a harpoon could be thrown. The big Narwhals are only killed when they are caught sleeping near the surface, and even after the first harpoon has been thrown they may still drag the float for several miles. After blowing up the Narwhal once more the Eskimos got into their kayaks on the floe and dived in them back into the water.

As we approached the settlement they all shouted out at the top of their voices that one Cardi had killed a "kreydewar." All the natives swarmed out of their tents and soon the animal was divided up. Every hunter who is present at a kill is entitled to his share of the spoil. The skin and blubber of the Narwhal have a sweet nutty flavor which is most delicious, and the meat is much like venison. Like seal meat, it has no flavor of fish whatsoever.

For smaller seals the Eskimos often used 16 bore shot guns with large shot. This stuns the animals and they can then be harpooned before they recover enough to escape. The seal often sinks almost the moment he is shot, and from a kayak a seal's head is a small mark for a rifle, even though the barrel is rested on the top of the screen.

The natives sometimes find it more convenient to wait for the seals to come to them rather than to go and look for the seals. That is to say, at certain times of the year they go out beyond the fjords and find some suitable ice floe, on to which several of them climb from their kayaks to wait, with their rifles on stands, till a seal appears, Then from the stability of the floe they shoot it and, leaping into their kayaks, recover it before it sinks. The seals are often attracted nearer out of curiosity when they see the strange objects out on the ice.

It is possible also to shoot birds from a kayak, but, as with seals, only if they are straight ahead of it; otherwise one would capsize at once. Eider Ducks and Black Guillemots are often hunted in this way.

When we were at Angmagssalik in the middle of June they were fishing for cod from their kayaks. Rymill and I went out one day to the head of Tasiussac Fjord just as it became navigable after the spring thaw. We followed the shore after having to get out and carry our kayaks. At the head of the fjord the ice was spongy and full of holes. Fishing through these with a hook and a piece of scarlet rag for bait we each got twenty or thirty large cod in an hour. The trouble was taking them home. With so large a deck cargo the kayak was more than usually top heavy, and several times we were nearly over.

It is an interesting fact that up till 1923 no cod were caught at Angmagssalik, whereas now they are very common indeed.

As well as cod there are halibut, but I never saw the natives catch them. They sometimes got a scarlet fish, not unlike a roach, whose eyes used to pop out when it was taken out of the deep water. Once at a settlement in Sermilik I was given a wonderful meal of sea perch. These had just been taken out of the stomach of a bladder nosed seal.