



Picture of primitive-style Eskimo carving of mother and child by Celina of Repulse Bay, N.W.T. The artist has recreated in this carving her image of the natural and ideal mother-child relation. The positioning of the child's head midway between the mother's shoulders serves to emphasize its central role in her life, and the complete devotion of herself to it, until such time as another child takes its place — usually after 3-4 years.

Eskimo Personality and Society — Yesterday and Today¹

OTTO SCHAEFER²

The following account arises out of discussions on the changing personal and social world of the Inuit, which were begun some ten years ago on Holman Island in the western central Arctic some 200 miles (320 km) north of Coppermine, N.W.T., between the present writer, who was doing a health and nutrition survey, and the late Father Metayer, whose many years of painstaking research into the traditions and mythology of the Inuit of the central Arctic have recently culminated in the publication of a major work in three volumes (Metayer 1973). Father Metayer's genealogical and kinship studies — very likely the most extensive ones on the Copper Eskimos ever to be undertaken — were still in progress when his untimely death occurred in December 1974.

Dr. Brett and Professor Milan have given an account of the changing pattern of health in the Arctic and the frightening prevalence of violence in recent years in which accidents, poisoning, homicide and suicide are identified as the principal causes of death among most native groups in the Northwest Territories, the Yukon and Alaska.*

Jean Briggs, who lived for almost two years among the Inuit at Chantrey Inlet, N.W.T., has emphasized the pre-eminent role played by education in controlling anger and reducing violent behaviour in traditional Eskimo society.* Her research into conscious and subconscious influences on infants and children against such expressions of anger and violence is well known from her book "Never in Anger" (1970).

Dr. Brody has described the breakdown of the traditional family structure* and, with it, of traditional education in modern Eskimo communities, a breakdown which no doubt helps to explain the frightening increase in violent behaviour over the last few years. Drs. Lynge and Sjølling from Greenland have drawn attention to the role of alcohol in this connection,* and Dr. Kraus has examined in more detail the related suicide problem of native Alaskans.*

It has been said that no people in the world developed as fierce an individualism as the Eskimo. This is only partly true. Certainly Eskimos did not, for the obvious reasons of a hostile environment and limited food resources, develop much of a tribal culture or any stratified social structures, and therefore the family as a unit was very much on its own. Within that family group however the individual was more totally responsive in all his or her actions — even in matters involving life and death, such as priority of eating in times of famine — to the interests of the

¹Adapted from an address given at the Third International Symposium on Circumpolar Health, Yellowknife, N.W.T., 8-11 July 1974 (Proceedings in press).

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*References to other contributions to the Symposium.

family as a group than is the case in Western society, or for that matter in all more complex civilizations.

Western man has moved far away from any such total identification of the individual with the interest and welfare of the family. In modern society the process by which either individual or state interests impinge upon, and eventually dislodge, the family as the prime social unit has reached a very advanced stage. When, therefore, people such as the Eskimo, who have remained geared and accustomed to the protective pluralism of the extended family, are suddenly subjected to such a process, the individual is left insecure, lonely, directionless and meaningless. Eskimos retained in their traditional society in the hostile central Arctic a primordial social organization based on the extended family: e.g., two brothers with their wives and children and perhaps one or two of their parents. There were no tribal chiefs; the wisest men were listened to and followed, but without compulsion.

TABLEAU A. Members of the nuclear Eskimo family

IN THE PAST	NOW
<p><i>Father:</i> HIGHLY RESPECTED <i>The provider of food</i>, on whose hunting skill the life of every member of the family depended. To be known as a good provider of food for his own family, the elderly and neighbours in need was a source of the greatest pride and satisfaction to him.</p>	<p><i>Father:</i> FEELS USELESS AND WORTHLESS Has lost the independence of the traditional hunter. Often works for, and under, non-Eskimo agent, doing menial, despised and degrading jobs, or — even worse — has shameful status of welfare recipient. Finds in drinking transient emotional relief from feelings of frustration, idleness, dependence and hurt pride. Alcohol unleashes pent-up feelings of hostility, expressed in violence. Hangover and remorse result in suicidal behaviour.</p>
<p><i>Mother:</i> LOVED AND NEEDED <i>Preparer of shelter, food and clothing, and indispensable centre of family</i>, always busy making and repairing fur clothing, tents and utensils, tending seal-oil lamps day and night, and nursing, training and playing with children. Gave and received stimulation and satisfaction in intense interaction with child carried skin-to-skin on her back or breast for three years.</p>	<p><i>Mother:</i> FEELS DISPENSABLE AND IDLE Has lost central role in family. Buys clothing and food in store. Bottle-feeds infants and deposits them with siblings or grandparents, or leaves them unattended in corner of bed. Whiles away time idly at movies, dances and bars. Become impatient and punitive with less-well-understood and less-well-trained children.</p>
<p><i>Children:</i> LOVED AND CARED FOR, FEELING SECURE AND SATISFIED WITH IDEAL IMAGE OF PARENTS TO LIVE UP TO Grew up on mother's back during first three years in intimate contact with her, receiving the satisfaction of response to every urge, motion and demand in sheltered and secure position. Participated in mother's and family's activities, progressing from playful imitation to useful performance of them.</p>	<p><i>Children:</i> FEEL LOSS OF INTIMATE INFANT-MOTHER INTERACTION AND UNDERSTANDING Have less secure shelter, and inferior nourishment. Feel emotional and sensory deprivation when left to stare listlessly at an empty ceiling or scream frustrated in soggy diapers. <i>Later on</i>, deprived of ideal image of their parents, do not respect them. Having lost any functional role in the Eskimo world without being able to realize the dreams produced from school and movies, feel useless, and become confused, frustrated and rebellious.</p>
<p><i>Interaction in family:</i> VERY CLOSE Complete and unquestioned interdependence, but extreme personal tolerance.</p>	<p><i>Interaction in family:</i> DRIFTING APART Not so much interdependence. Expressions of anger and intolerance: wife and child beatings, and children rebelling against parents.</p>

TABLEAU B. Social values, attitudes and practices

IN THE PAST	NOW
<p><i>Personal qualities and aspirations</i> Possessions were less important than personal qualities. Skill, endurance and deftness marked the man as a likely good provider of food. Cloth-making ability ranked highest among the attributes of Eskimo women.</p>	<p>Imitation of materialistic values of modern world. Large salary, big house, big motorboat and big motorsled are aspired to, and regarded as measures of social success, by young Eskimo men. Well-paid positions, allowing them to buy — not make — fine clothes, are aspired to by Eskimo girls.</p>
<p><i>The concept of sharing</i> Observed in all Eskimo groups, but most generously in the Central Arctic where sharing more than storing ensured survival of a maximum number of people in the face of lack of predictability of routes of migrating game. As long as he could reach a luckier neighbour, the unlucky hunter did not starve. (The Inuit, like other hunting and food-gathering societies, did not develop a material hoarding culture — in contrast to agricultural peoples, who learned to store food as an insurance against poor harvests.)</p>	<p>Native meat and fish are still, in the Eskimo's mind, to be shared; but money derived from trapping, wage employment or social benefits, and amenities bought with this money, have never been the subject of the sharing concept (being regarded as "white man's" money or tools). The desire to enjoy more of the imagined materialistic success of the white man tends however to pervert, and even to destroy, the vestiges of the sharing concept: native meat and fish is often surreptitiously sold to white people as a means of circumventing the compulsion to share them with Eskimos. "Everybody for himself" is becoming the new attitude.</p>
<p><i>Education</i> Was continuous from infancy, without any sharp break, and consisted in imitating and working with parents. Use of persuasion to help willingly. No overt coercion. Emphasis on restraint of anger and violent behaviour.</p>	<p>School has taken the place of parents, who are less respected and have less authority. Emphasis is on impersonal conformity rather than respect for personality. Movies encourage expressions of anger and violence and discourage self-restraint.</p>

An attempt is made in Tableaux A and B to contrast social structure, prevailing values, attitudes and practices, and the personal roles and functions of family members, in traditional and modern Eskimo society. This form of tabulation is naturally far too generalized and simplified, compressing as it does a living continuum of great dynamic complexity, and with great local variations, into an exaggerated and polarized still-picture. It may nevertheless allow one to see more clearly some of the most important cultural and sociological trends which have had such an impact on the physical, mental and social health of today's Eskimo society.

Perhaps it should be remarked here that the trends thus tabulated are certainly not a unique phenomenon restricted to Eskimo society. One is easily reminded of the results of observations made on various American Indian societies and other cultural minorities such as have been subjected to acculturation — even ones within Western civilization. Perhaps the picture is more impressive in the case of the Eskimos, as the impact of their acculturation has been more recent and more sudden, and has involved greater cultural and sociological changes. In that sense then the tabulation may serve to contribute something to the understanding of the problems of sociological and personal identity existing within our own modern civilization.

From the foregoing commentary and tableaux it will be seen that the basic

elements of the traditional Eskimo society — a tightly-knit family structure and the personal values, attitudes and practices which were shaped by, and allowed, a successful life in a harsh environment — are in a state of disintegration, and the older generation feels numbed, bewildered and saddened, while the younger is idle, frustrated and rebellious.

Men, deprived of their traditional role of meat-provider, feel emasculated and powerless. They seek relief from feelings of worthlessness and frustration in the temporary illusion of power induced by alcohol, which in its turn unleashes pent-up feelings of hostility, aggression and violence. The ensuing hangovers and remorse often lead to suicidal behaviour.

Women have lost what was their indispensable central role in the family — their intimate and intense relationship with children. They suffer even more from idleness than the men.

Children are deprived nutritionally and emotionally from infancy on, lose the ideal image of their parents, and do not learn any more to become useful by imitating the actions of their parents. They often therefore feel misunderstood and useless, and become rebellious.

The only social institution of major importance in Eskimo life — the family — is falling apart, and nothing has yet appeared to take its place. The individual is left lonely, frightened, without direction and full of anxiety.

One must wonder how much the general human tendency to remember the past as “the good old days”, to feel troubled by the pressures and turbulence of the present, and to dread an uncertain future, may have contributed to a too-rosy and idealistic picture of the past, and a too-gloomy characterization of today’s Eskimo society in the tableaux. No doubt life *is* more complex and multifaceted, and there are more shades to it than the simplified black-and-white sketching will allow. For support of the main characterizations given of yesterday’s Eskimo personality and society, however, one needs only to refer to the numerous accounts of explorers and anthropologists, and to the vivid scenes from the Netsilik Eskimo film series made in 1964-65 at hunting and fishing camps near Pelly Bay, N.W.T. In the films, which were not acted according to a fixed film script as are some popular commercial Eskimo films, but simply observed and recorded the traditional everyday life in and around hunting and fishing camps, one notices the close and constant interplay of adults and children, the closely-knit family unit, and the central role of the mother in sheltering, clothing and feeding the entire family. In particular, one notices her youngest child, who grows up in constant physical contact with her for the first three years, with all physical and emotional needs instantly understood and satisfied, who playfully imitates its elders’ actions and thus, without sudden strains and breaks, progresses to become a useful member of a traditional society.

Changes in Eskimo personality and society today and their effects, as emphasized in our tableaux, are vividly described in papers mentioned at the beginning of this account, and fill most of the reports received from medical and social workers in the North in recent years. These changes are only too obvious to former residents returning nowadays to the larger, and increasingly even the smaller, settlements in the Arctic.

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