

FOR HARVARD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN
ETHNIC GROUPS

Arthur E. Hippler
September 13, 1977

The Alaska Eskimos

Location, Context, Brief History

The 35,000 Eskimos of Alaska are an indigenous group related linguistically and culturally to populations all along the North American Arctic littoral and as far East as Greenland as well as to Siberian Eskimo populations. Probably deriving from North Central Asian migrants, they have inhabited the new world for at least 4000 years.

There are a number of linguistic divisions, but essentially Alaska Eskimos are either Inupiaq speakers (in an arc ranging from Unalakleet on the coast of Norton Sound around to the Canadian border) or Yupik speakers (from south of Unalakleet around to Prince William Sound in the Gulf of Alaska). Siberian Yupik speakers inhabit St. Lawrence Island off the coast of West Alaska.

Alaska Eskimo settlement was primarily determined by subsistence techniques. The Tareamiut (sea mammal hunters) tended to live in larger permanent communities, the Nunamiut or inland caribou hunters tended to live in small camps moving seasonally for fishing or hunting. Farther to the south this distinction tended to blur but was still generally true.

The physical appearance of Eskimos varies greatly. Some individuals having sharp facial features and rather linear dimensions, some having very round smooth features and much more stocky body builds. Eskimos share in general the high cheekbones, skin and hair coloring of Amerindians, and to some extent epicanthial eye folds reminiscent of Mongolian populations.

The earliest Euro-American contacts with Eskimos occurred around the 1770s through sporadic exploration of Spanish, Russian, English and later, American sailors. Earliest explorers reported unpredictable Eskimo responses ranging from friendly to violent. Eskimos were originally unaware of the existence of any other people, except for sporadic violent or sometimes trading contact with the sub-Arctic Athabascans.

Early explorers were unanimous in one observation. Eskimos possessed an extremely efficient "tool kit" for the exploitation of their environment and were unusually efficient in both gathering and using food.

In passing we might note that the famous "igloo" made of ice blocks was never a major dwelling form for Alaska Eskimos. Caught in winter storms away from shelter, Eskimos would make use of quickly cut snow blocks to form temporary shelters. Permanent dwellings however were semi-subterranean dugouts or in summer animal skin tents.

Alaska Eskimos, with the exception of sporadic violence offered by early Russian explorer-colonists were never engaged in warfare with Euro-Americans, not conquered by force of U.S. arms, and not subjected, for the most part, to the kind of antagonism and violence which many other Amerindians received from white immigrants into their lands.

In 1867 Alaska was purchased from Russia by the U.S. and during the subsequent period Alaska's Eskimos have experienced at first slow and more recently rapid exposure to contemporary western society. In 1971 the U.S. Congress extinguished Alaska Native land claims with a settlement of over 40,000,000 acres of land and nearly \$1,000,000,000. This settlement, in part provided a series of village and regional profit and non-profit Native run corporations, village, regional and individual land entitlements and individual head payments. This settlement is being allocated over a 20 year period of time to ensure that Eskimos have adequate time to prepare for and digest this massive settlement and to maintain control over proceeds from it securely in Eskimo hands.

Contemporary Situation:

Presently Alaska Eskimos live in some hundred small villages varying in size from 100-600, and averaging 300 people; and in four small towns averaging 2500-3000. A sizeable number also live in the two major Alaska cities, Fairbanks (300) and Anchorage (3500).

Most Alaska Eskimo villages now have or are rapidly acquiring electricity and hence freezers (useful to save food gathered in plentiful seasons), household appliances and lighting; all villages are accessible by air and have regularly scheduled mail and passenger flights. All the small towns, Barrow, Bethel, Kotzebue and Nome, have Public Health Service medical facilities and a plethora of government agencies and projects. Ongoing and increasing access to education and abundance of work following on the Land Claims Settlement has meant that instead of nearly no cash work, there is now often a labor shortage in larger communities.

All of this has come about within so short a time and change dynamics are so rapid that physically it is nearly impossible to recognize any community from pictures taken 10 years earlier.

However, socialization of the young, worldview and other non-material cultural attributes necessarily change more slowly. Presently Eskimo life is a reflection of this vast discontinuity in both its positive and negative aspects.

Economic Life:

The present economic base of Eskimo villages ranges from substantial reliance on hunting and fishing all the way to total commercial cash economies. Modern technologies (rifles, snow machines, outboard engines, citizen band radios) make such activities, however, far less dangerous and immensely more productive

than in the past. Even hunting villages, however, experience a substantial cash economy. Commercial fishing, fur selling, carving, tourism, local retail establishments, state and local government positions, government transfer payments, Native corporation construction and commerce, firefighting in the summer all add up to a direct and substantial involvement in the larger economy. Only a few of the most isolated communities are not fully embedded in contemporary economic system and even these are undergoing rapid change.

In addition to the emerging "corporation elite," who presently administer Native corporations, some very small number of Eskimos have received professional training, though as yet no full-blooded Eskimo physicians or attorneys have emerged. Much larger numbers of Eskimos are training as para-professionals or working in service and construction industries. These groups have already had an impact on Alaska politics (see below).

Social Structure and Social Organization:

Aboriginally a classless society, Eskimo social organization was dependent upon the nuclear family and personal kin and friendship ties. Highly individualistic and devoid of formal social control mechanisms beyond village gossip, Eskimos were constrained in their behavior only by the limits of what an individual felt he could get away with. Since feuds and interpersonal violence were ubiquitous, Eskimos developed avoidance patterns, circumlocutions

in speech, a smiling mask, and a tendency to recharacterize even the most anti-social behavior in neutral terms to avoid confrontations which inevitably lead to violence.

Cooperative behavior on the other hand was necessary for hunting large land and sea mammals, and complex arrangements, again often organized very indirectly, characterized these associations. This indirection, distrust of formal leadership and continuous effort to avoid intrusion are central to present day Eskimo life. For example a typical conversation might be the following: The most respected older hunter in the community says to other hunters:

"One hears that seals have been seen." The others nod. He continues, "One wonders if it is time to hunt them." The others agree. The old man continues, "Perhaps someone will hunt them tomorrow."

No further conversation ensues. Translated the message is, "I know there are seals, I'm going hunting. Those who customarily come with me may do so if they please, they know where my boat is and when I will leave." No one has been put into the position of having to say yes or no, no one is confronted, no one even has to admit that a communication has been made.

Nonetheless, aboriginally and still today, strongly opposed village factions existed and exist. Patterns of leadership in village councils (a post contact development) in corporation board membership and leadership and in all areas of corporate existence

are fragile. Leadership rapidly changes hands, alliances shift dramatically and rapidly. Hence leadership is unstable, its only core tie being that of close blood relationship. Very few Eskimos have mastered organizational and administrative skills and goals of any corporate unit are unclear and subject to nearly whimsical fluctuation.

Where emerging more capable leaders exist they are nearly always part Caucasian, usually having been more exposed as children to contemporary western ideas, and having been raised with greater concern for achievement. Traditionally the early whaling captains and entrepreneurs who around the turn of the 20th century made wives of Eskimo women, were strong minded ambitious and capable men. The first generation of their descendants was overwhelmingly capable and constitutes the largest proportion of the older Eskimo leadership. There is little question that such children received both informal and formal educational "push" far beyond their contemporaries. The older pattern where leadership was vague and indirect, and vested in older, physically skilled men, with a sizeable kin group support has given way to a pattern of younger, better educated, slightly more aggressive if somewhat defensive men and women.

Behavior and Personal Individual Characteristics:

Literacy, at least at minimal levels, is nearly total for Eskimos under 15. The rate declines gradually till by age 50

perhaps 1/2 to 2/3 of Eskimos are literate. Of the Eskimos over 65 only a small percentage are literate. Educational achievement levels in 1965 showed a 30% dropout rate in grade-school, 50-80% dropout rate in high school of the cohort which entered, 97% dropout rate in college of the few who attended. Since then the rates have changed to negligible grade school dropout, 25% high school dropout and around 50% college dropout. This change is so recent and so dramatic that its full implications are impossible to predict.

Mental health problems are substantial. Difficulties in reporting and variable statistics make exact figures questionable, but probably the rate of psychotic difficulties is about twice that of the non-Native population. Child socialization, initially lenient, tends to become neglectful and sporadic and occasionally abandoning after the child can walk. The prevalence of confusion about causation and poor support in the home or community for cognitive achievement beyond the concrete level tends to produce less than fully prepared school children and hence adults.

Alcohol abuse is without question the single most serious overt social problem. Eskimo difficulties in controlling impulses and in communicating emotions lead to high levels of violence, murder, child abuse and property destruction. In one of the larger communities murder is the leading cause of death, and in nearly all communities trauma of all kinds is the leading cause of death. This latter less reflects actual physical dangers than the

high levels of death by drowning while drunk or of freezing (often while drunk), risk taking and suicide. In turn this probably reflects higher levels of personal emotional problems as well. Many children are "given away" by their parents (and no child ever likes it) or receive little attention on the ubiquitous birth of a new sibling (infant mortality rates have been dramatically reduced), depression and anger are underlying feelings in very many Eskimos. Suicide is correspondingly very high.

We might note here that these forms of pathology are not completely tied to culture change. Suicide often out of anger at loved ones, murder, infanticide, child abandonment and giving away, and difficulties with expressing emotion were all aboriginal traits. Obviously the availability of alcohol, and the fact that more children live today and hence receive even more dilute adult attention are factors, as are stresses induced by change. However, there is substantial cultural continuity in many of these negative events.

Culture:

Perhaps 50 percent or more of the Yupiaq speakers retain the aboriginal language. The percentage is lower among the Inupiaq speakers. Nearly all adults are also fluent in English, and for many it is the dominant language. Sporadic attempts have been made to create a written Eskimo language. Early orthographies were idiosyncratic and hence of limited use. Presently University of Alaska linguists have succeeded in creating a viable and useful written Eskimo format.

Since no written Eskimo literature exists, and since the primary present use of Eskimo language is 1) in the home, 2) to a lesser extent in public meetings and 3) in a small number of places for Eskimo "dancing" (non ceremonial recreational activity), the probable maintenance of the language is questionable except as an individual idiosyncrasy or to provide a useful basis for developing first language literacy for its positive "transfer effect" into English, though there is some local political pressure to maintain the language.

Aboriginally concrete artistic expression primarily consisted of carvings of masks, labrets (plugs for holes made in the cheeks, face and lips), and fans for the hands to be used in dancing. The lively arts were represented by dances which expressed mythological, hunting and day to day interests and routines attended by communal choral singing in the "men's house," also used as a sauna. The primary musical instrument was the flat one sided drum made of walrus intestine or other thin animal material stretched over a wooden frame and beaten with a wand.

To a large extent, the ceremonies within which these forms were used are presently rare or exist only in attenuated form. Shamanism has been replaced by contemporary medicine and Christianity; marriages are no longer arranged, but some trading, i.e., skins for seal oil, etc., still occurs.

Presently several of the larger villages have local newspapers which cater primarily to local needs, and publications

of varying regularity are issued by regional and village corporations. Some poetry by Eskimos is published through the University of Alaska and occasional private and public or service agencies. Neither the demand nor the output is presently substantial enough to support a full time artistic expression written media.

Other folk traditions exist only in attenuated form, but a major exception is the organized Eskimo whale hunting of Pt. Barrow. Whale hunting (as indeed any form of hunting) appears to have not only a useful subsistence value (which is rapidly declining in importance) but a more important function of personal and cultural validation and recreation. Interestingly it seems most adequately carried out by those who are also competent in the cash economy, and its continuation is a local political issue.

Religion:

Aboriginal religion was essential animistic, using sympathetic and homeopathic magic to coerce game, or drive away evil spirits possessing persons. Eskimo cosmology, while vague, stressed a general magical interrelationship of things. When a whale was killed, it had to be offered a drink of fresh water when it was beached so that it would not be offended and magically drive away all other whales. As in many such cosmologies all babies were felt to be reincarnations of some recently deceased ancestor. Supernatural and natural domains were not clearly distinguished. The afterlife was seen as vague and disquieting.

Ghosts of departed humans and partly human partly monster creatures felt to inhabit the tundra were equally feared though tactics for handling such anxiety were not well developed.

Eskimos rapidly abandoned aboriginal religions. Offered the opportunity to abandon many taboos in favor of a few (going to church, not eating meat on Friday, etc.), and offered freedom from the ambivalent powers of the shaman, and also offered a positive achievable afterlife, Eskimos accepted Christianity with alacrity. This Christianity contained much aboriginal content such as beliefs in spirits and monsters, but also offered an ordering perspective stressing social control and peacefulness which was probably on balance positive. Suppression of Eskimo dancing by missionaries was probably the most substantial negative aspect of this change.

Christian missionaries divided up Alaska into a number of domains, i.e., Presbyterians the North Coast, Catholics the Yukon River area, Moravians the Bethel region, etc. Nonetheless present religious expressions seem fairly similar regardless of sect. Positive aspects of these religious changes seem to be communal support for friendliness and peacefulness. Less positive results have been uncertainty as to proper sexual behavior (puritanism versus aboriginal sexual license) and some rigidity of behavior. Dogma and theology are apparently completely irrelevant.

Religious participation is highest in middle age, lowest among the young and elderly. In very religious villages religion acts to

prohibit or strongly control alcohol abuse, a crucial issue. Presently fundamentalist Christian sects are making numerous converts in putative "high church" communities probably because of their stress upon emotional release in religious expression.

Previously nearly all education was religiously based and with substantial religious content. This is no longer so. Recent court decisions have extended state supported high school service even to very small communities.

Politics:

Eskimos can be said to have entered local and statewide political life only truly after World War II. There is no national representation as yet. The strong impetus for political involvement began in the 1960s with the election of Eskimos to the state legislature in seats previously held by Caucasians, and more dramatically from the period of land claims action around the late 1960s and early 1970s.

By now (1977) no large or small Eskimo community can be said to be politically controlled by non-Eskimos. Technical jobs may still in some cases be held by non-Eskimos, but political and elective office is clearly in Eskimo hands in areas where Eskimos are the majority. Local and even regional coalitions however are evanescent.

Coalitions on the statewide level are also tenuous; in the legislature they reflect a concern with "bush" (village) in-

terests vis-a-vis urban interests. Political organizations as such, with real statewide political power do not yet exist. In reality, however, increasing economic power, through the regional corporations, has offered an alternative base of substantial power.

Participation in political-economic corporation activity is dominated by the better educated and part white Eskimos. Local electorates are poorly informed and participate on the basis of kin ties, friendship, leader suggestions, etc. Ideological issues of a narrow sort have begun recently to dominate rhetoric in some of the larger villages.

Feelings of insecurity in dealing with non-Eskimos, and feelings of inadequate capacity to handle contemporary society have combined with a lack of achievement ethos, and recent acquisition of vast wealth and power to produce an expectable and possibly temporary ideology. The extremist aspects of this ideology seem to reflect a xenophobic, quasi separatist and defensive antagonism to non-Eskimos. The rationale for the ideology is that non-Eskimos have "oppressed and ripped off" Eskimos. One aspect of anti-white feeling stems from demands made by teachers (prior to bilingual education in the 1960s) upon students to abandon Eskimo in favor of English.

Since no military conquest was ever made of the area, substantial services offered, and less racial prejudice overt or covert directed to Eskimos in Alaska than to any Amerindian

group extant, the ideology seems hyperbolic, and might be seen in the general pan Amerindian context where issues of self determination are of striking import.

Intergroup Relations:

Most Eskimos live in areas so remote that intense contact except for a few health, social service, police, government and entrepreneurial representatives has been minimal.

This has changed markedly recently. In Nome for example where there is long standing substantial non-Eskimo population, and where contact is three generations old there had been substantial anti-Eskimo prejudice. Alaska law however, made such practices illegal, and Alaska attitudes supported positive relations with Eskimos substantially before the U.S. 1960s Civil Rights movement created such changes for blacks.

Presently, large numbers of Eskimos reside in Anchorage and Fairbanks, increasing affluence has made travel from villages to urban regions possible for many. This increasing contact, in the context of substantial public opinion against prejudice, and the somewhat romanticized views many Caucasians have of Eskimos, has greatly reduced the previously already limited prejudice.

On the other hand, since alcohol abuse is an important and visible fact among urban Eskimos both transient and permanent,

and since capacities to perform tasks in western society is still limited among most Eskimos and since certain services such as free P.H.S. medical service and numerous Bureau of Indian Affairs and other governmental services are provided Eskimos and refused non-Eskimos, a residuum of feelings of white superiority, and some nascent prejudice and annoyance still exists.

The present period of inter group relationships then is in substantial flux. A sizeable minority of Eskimos appear to have opted for movement into the dominant group. A much smaller, but highly vocal group seems to express generalized antagonism. For the bulk of Eskimos relationships with non-Eskimos tend to be situational. For the most part, both groups express substantial tolerance, if not love. Provided opportunities to acquire both the material and social offerings of western society, Eskimos do so, but within the limits not only of their capacities, but desires to alter village life styles.

Since institutional and attitudinal barriers against entry into Alaska society are few, the probable future is that entry into the dominant culture while retaining certain idiosyncratic lifestyles and expressive modes will be the natural result of increased access to that society for most Eskimos.

Group maintenance:

Group maintenance, in terms of a self conscious determination to remain distinctive does not exist in any formal sense.

The relative openness of Alaska tends to reduce the need for such activities. Since many marriages of Eskimos to whites occur, and since Eskimo society was never a rigid, hierarchical or overwhelming set of cultural realities, and since pragmatism is a strong Eskimo trait, interaction of urban and village Eskimos with non-Eskimos is far more routine and benign than such interracial interactions are elsewhere in the U.S.

Some degree of lip service to "Eskimo culture" is given by many if not most Eskimos. But since the content of such "culture" does not consist of much more than personal familial ties, foods such as fish, caribou, etc., and the isolation of remoteness, it does not provide a substantial pragmatic core for separate identity.

In essence, the older the Eskimo, the more likely that he or she will use skin clothing, eat mostly native foods, speak Eskimo and believe in spirits and ghosts. The younger the Eskimo the more likely he or she will be concerned with contemporary issues and involvement in contemporary society.

Bibliography

- Chance, Norman
1966 The Eskimo of North Alaska
- Gubser, Nicholas
1965 The Nunamiut Eskimos: Hunters of Caribou
- Hughes, Charles Campbell
1960 An Eskimo Village in the Modern World.
- Oswalt, Wendell H.
1970 Napaskiak, An Alaskan Eskimo Community
- Spencer, Robert F.
1959 The North Alaskan Eskimo
- VanStone, James W.
1962 Point Hope: An Eskimo Village in Transition