Formation of Mackenzie Delta Frontier Culture

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Frontier Culture

A visitor to Inuvik driving or walking through the West End where 1,100 people live, including the overwhelming proportion of the native population, will see few familiar symbols of Indian or Eskimo life, nor will the Metis be conspicuous. The reason is that many cultural uniformities link the East End of Inuvik, where about 1,300 overwhelmingly non-native civil servants and their families live, with the predominantly native West End. For example, English is the town's nearly universal language; families use many of the same foods, buying them at the store and cooking them in the same way. Homes are furnished according to the same familiar pattern. Yet on closer acquaintance the town reveals two contrasting ways of life. The civil servants in their East End apartments or private houses fully exemplify middle-class, or mainstream, North American culture. The ease with which they have transplanted that culture practically intact above the Arctic Circle owes much to the modern fully serviced housing and accompanying amenities which the government provides and subsidizes for their use. Meanwhile another style of life bearing different emphases is practised by the people of native background.

During more than 150 years of fairly intense acculturation and heavy migration in the Western Arctic a local subculture came into existence or filtered into the Mackenzie Delta. Highly serviceable for adaptation during the era of fur trapping, this culture also contained recreative and expressive elements which had little to do with surviving in the bush. When the Western Arctic native people moved into Inuvik and took jobs there, they shed mainly the economic patterns of their previous culture while retaining other components that have acquired new life and meaning in the context of town life. Following Cornelius Osgood and A.M. Ervin I use the term "frontier culture" to designate the

way of life that emerged during the fur-trade era and that continues to be followed in Inuvik by most of the Indians, Eskimos, and Metis.[1] As I use the term, it deliberately discounts many of the cultural uniformities linking the East and West ends and concentrates on those which give native culture its distinctive configuration.

Frontier culture is practised in two ways. The first consists of an assortment of outdoor activities and appurtenances — trapping, fishing, bush living, casual type clothing, guns — which are put to fairly common use and some of which are so highly valued that they easily get in the way of such obligations as jobs, schooling for children, and church. Secondly, frontier culture breaks with certain norms and conventions of mainstream life. Frontier people rely on informal rather than formal organization to get things done. Being individualistically inclined, they tend to give little thought to group enterprise and voluntary associations. Frontier people tend to feel that mainstream cultural values pertaining to gambling, the police, and the use of alcohol are not wholly appropriate in the North. Hence there is a readiness to ignore or "neutralize" particular norms of the mainstream culture, in effect making the frontier way of life a contraculture.[2] One must, however, see Inuvik's contraculture in proper perspective and not mistake it for an utterly lawless way of life. Hence I hasten to add that the conventions neutralized or overridden are mostly minor ones, and the people themselves are frequently ambivalent about such non-normative behaviour as heavy drinking and consensual marriage.

The two aspects of frontier culture are found elsewhere in the North, but they have a measure of independence from one another. Hence, while the orientation toward outdoor life is common all across the North, the contracultural aspect is less common. It is especially strongly evident in the Mackenzie drainage area, where I first encountered it in 1944 among the Kaska Indians and white trappers of Lower Post, British Columbia, but is much less apparent in northern James Bay or Baffin Island.

Frontier culture is the northern peoples' creation, but its creation was greatly aided through historic contact with representatives of the larger society. In tracing this contact in north-

western Canada, I shall divide the stream of social history into two periods: first, a Formative Period in which a new way of life germinated; and, second, a Florescent Period during which the new culture flowered and gave rise to a highly satisfactory, economically rewarding new basis of existence. The period of florescence came to an end following World War II.

Formative Period

It is unnecessary for my purpose to report in detail the early contacts of the northwestern Indians with Alexander Mackenzie, John Franklin, and the early fur-traders, or to describe how the Western Arctic Eskimo first secured Russian manufactures and then met the whalers who hunted and wintered in Beaufort Sea. It will suffice to say that during the Formative Period — which ended about 1865 for the Indians and 1890 for the Canadian and North Alaskan Eskimo — the native people exchanged an economically independent life for a symbiotic relationship with the larger society. Their survival came to depend on another social system with which they linked themselves economically producing fur, meat, and fish. Nevertheless, they mostly continued to exploit the land, sea, and rivers, though not always with the same weapons and techniques they had followed aboriginally. For native peoples' products the white men paid in the form of tobacco and hardware, especially guns that vitally increased the peoples' degree of control over the material environment. The Indians during this time, due to the efforts of the missionaries, also began to absorb new religious values, but the Eskimo remained much more resistant to Christianity. They, however, due to the influence of the whalers became much more familiar with the use of alcoholic beverages and with knowledge of how to make them. Alcohol came to be in great demand and drunkenness contributed to the persistent difficulties that the Catholic and Anglican missionaries experienced in converting the Sigliarq or Mackenzie River Eskimo.

The economic orientation that native people in the Delta maintained toward the land until the coming of Inuvik took form during the Formative Period, but I doubt that the contracultural aspects that appeared in Delta frontier culture are directly

connected to that period. The excesses of the whaling crews affected the Eskimo, but the influence did not continue unbroken because in Florescent times Anglican missionary influence supplanted that of the whalers. For a time religion retained the firm commitment of both Eskimo and Indians until the native people began to observe new role models who reached the Delta, by whom the contracultural tendencies in their culture appear to have been considerably influenced.

Florescent Period

The Florescent Period opened about 1865 among the Indians and 1890 among the Eskimo and lasted until the Second World War. From about 1900, the flow of manufactured goods into the area increased tremendously as the value of fur climbed, the result being a period of economic prosperity and intense cultural assimilation, especially in the realms of material culture and language. Residential schools in the Mackenzie valley contributed to the incoming tide of cultural diffusion, and the determined Anglican missionaries at last succeeded in converting the Eskimo. However, the devotion and scrupulous religiosity they managed to inspire in those people was largely short-lived, lasting perhaps a generation, before strong secular influences invading the lower Mackenzie valley overwhelmed the force of Christianity among both Eskimo and Indians. The contracultural elements which became conspicuous in frontier culture are also rooted in those secular influences, the like of which did not overwhelm the Eastern Arctic.

I believe that contracultural elements like great value set on alcohol, spree drinking, drunken aggression, consensual marriage, and in more general terms, readiness to neutralize inconvenient norms of the larger society have their origin in the inflow of men from Canada and the United States who were attracted to the North first by gold in the Yukon and then by the rich fur resources and unrestricted trapping rights of the Delta. These were both men and Metis from the upper Mackenzie drainage basin.

When these movements from the south started, however, there was a major local shift of Eskimo from North Alaska and

Herschel Island into the Delta. Coming around the turn of the century, the influx started after the collapse of whaling and after epidemics had decimated the Mackenzie Eskimo on the Arctic Coast of Canada. The Herschel Islanders who moved to the mainland had been heavily recruited by the whalers from North Alaska, and they probably included a good proportion of inland Eskimo who could easily adapt to the wooded setting of the Delta where they began to trap.

More important in influencing the growth of frontier culture were the Klondikers who passed through Fort McPherson en route to the Yukon, some of whom remained in the Northwest to live by trapping. The verse of Robert Service idealizes the frontier culture of these men with their spruce-bough beds laid around blazing camp fires; their moccasins, mukluks, and spruce tea; their recreation taken with alcohol, poker, and square dancing; their plain speech with bad grammar; their unconventionality; their attraction to the land and to native women, whom however they rarely idealize; and their scorn of the urbane, tenderfoot representatives of the outside society who sometimes appear among them wearing the policeman's uniform.[3] Reports of the RCMP and memoirs by contemporary witnesses testify to the miners' gambling, drinking, and preying on native women.[4]

After the miners came the upriver Metis, white trappers, and ambitious white storekeepers who settled along the Mackenzie or its tributaries and the Arctic Coast. Among them were many sober and principled men, but there were others looking for a chance to shed conventions and to live individualistic, spontaneous lives while working hard in the winter and spring to gather a rich haul of fur. Sometimes they violated the game and liquor laws; they stayed drunk for days at a time when the boat brought their "medicinal" liquor or when a brew was ready to drink. Some took delight in raising hell and plaguing the police.[5] Just as the Hudson Bay traders and servants had taken native wives, so these men legally and consensually lived with Eskimo, Indian, and locally-born Metis women, thus starting name groups that still flourish in the area. My contention is that they, like the prospectors, set behavioural examples for the Eskimo, Indians, and local Metis, whose growing prosperity easily allowed them

time for play and money for brewing and heavy gambling. In this way the contracultural aspects of frontier culture were set by about 1940.

The contracultural aspect, however, should be seen in the total context of frontier culture, the details of which we glean from biographies and the reports of travelers and anthropologists who visited the lower Mackenzie drainage area when the Florescent Period was already ending.[6] The frequency of such visits, especially by anthropologists, increased around 1940, by which time the Florescent Period was already coming to an end. From such accounts we learn that trappers lived in chinked, sod-roofed log cabins which despite their comfortable and well-furnished interiors retained a rough appearance and for heat depended solely on wood cut in the surrounding area. Recreation consisted of card playing, square dancing, jigging, and playing phonograph records of music like "Wabash Cannonball." Dances were always more lively when lubricated by a properly fermented "home brew" or by something stronger locally distilled. We learn, too, that in large settlements, like Aklavik, the white people serving as surrogates of the larger society did not remain wholly unaffected by the frontier ambience. They learned to snowshoe, sometimes raised dogs, ate game, and occasionally dressed in mukluks and other frontier clothing. New religious observances like "Rat Sunday" were created. Art took advantage of the frontier setting; for example, the altar mural of the Aklavik cathedral which dates from this period depicts a fur-clad Madonna and Child receiving gifts of northern provenance, and locally written verse celebrated the frontier quality of northern life.

Frontier Culture in Inuvik

Although the economic collapse of trapping and moving to Inuvik have greatly affected the lives of native people, those events did not eradicate the frontier culture or its contracultural elements. In fact, for many people town life has endowed frontier culture with new life and meaning.

At first glance, it seems simple to unlock the paradox of frontier culture flourishing in a comparatively urban milieu; Inuvik is not all that urban, and the waterways and game of the Delta

continue to lure many people to holidays on the land. But that merely explains perpetuation of the outdoor aspects of frontier culture and not persistence of the total complex, including its contracultural elements.

The perpetuation of frontier culture is favoured by the several conditions in Inuvik that have drawn native people more closely together, promoted a sense of native identity, and increased the visibility and symbolic value of a relatively distinctive way of life. These conditions include the growth of southern control over northern life. Inuvik has brought about an intensification of social pressure in terms of sanctions like criticism, fines, jailing, and lost jobs. Intensified social pressure, in turn, has bred resentment among natives over their lost "freedom" and over what one person called the "southern invasion into northern life." Such resentment contributes to closer native solidarity. At the same time the demographic and physical properties of the town constitute conditions favouring the persistence and reinterpretation of frontier culture. The arrival of about twelve hundred non-natives from southern Canada in the Delta following completion of Inuvik, and the division of the town into two separate neighbourhoods with unequal housing and town services have spotlighted and made unmistakeably clear the sharp contrast between the mainline and frontier ways of life. The physical separation of the two neighbourhoods, the diverse cultural backgrounds of the East and West end populations, and the different roles that each population plays in town so that very limited social interaction occurs between them constitute highly favourable conditions for arresting assimilation and perpetuating a relatively distinctive way of life. The new meaning acquired by frontier culture, especially by its contracultural elements, lies in the way it symbolically marks off the identity of the native community from the civil servants and their families.

Those townspeople who endorse frontier culture symbolically cut themselves off from the middle-class culture represented by the East End and repudiate strong commitment to that culture's norms and certain of its values.[7] The process of cultural assimilation begun in the Formative Period and continued in prosperous Florescent times has slowed down and become much more highly selective. To be sure, not everyone in the native community

equally repudiates identification with the mainstream culture. Some families containing persons of natives background — especially those which also include a non-native spouse — show strong aspirations to achieve middle-class values, and they often manage to do so. But many more people, including young native people, cling to the frontier style of life, including its contracultural aspect, and thereby dodge a potential social identity in town that they do not want.

Notes

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1. Cornelius Osgood, *Contributions to the Ethnography of the Kutchin,* Yale University Publications in Anthropology, no. 14 (New Haven, 1936), p. 170; Alexander M. Ervin, "New Northern Townsmen in Inuvik," Mackenzie Delta Research Project, Report no. 5 (Dept. of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Northern Science Research Group, Ottawa, 1968).

2. J. Milton Yinger, "Contraculture and Subculture," *American Sociological Review* 25:625-635 (1960).

3. Robert Service, *Ploughman of the Moon* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1945).

4. Angus Graham, *The Golden Grindstone: the Adventures of George M. Mitchell* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1935).

5. Llewelyn Phillips, Unpublished ms.

6. Important sources include: Charles Camsell, *Son of the North* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1954); Lewis R. Freeman, *The Nearing North* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1928); Graham, *Golden Grindstone;* John J. Honigmann, *Ethnography and Acculturation of the Fort Nelson Slave,* Yale Publications in Anthropology, no. 33 (Newhaven, 1946), pp. 97-150; *idem, Culture and Ethos of Kaska Society,* Yale University Publications in Anthropology, no. 40 (New Haven, 1949); Osgood, *Ethnography of the Kutchin,* pp. 170-174; Harwood Steele, *Policing the Arctic* (London: Jarrolds, 1936); Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *My Life With the Eskimo* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1913); Fullerton Waldo, *Down the Mackenzie Through the Great Lone Land* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1923).

7. What happened in the Delta parallels closely what occurred in northern Saskatchewan (Philip Spaulding, "The Social Integration of a Northern Community: White Mythology and Metis Reality," in *A Northern Dilemma: Reference Papers,* 2 vols [Bellingham: Western Washington State College, 1966], p. 111). There when Metis found their autonomy suddenly restricted as a result of newly introduced administrative pressures and puritanical middle-class values, they withdrew, becoming socially marginal. Withdrawal did not shield them from the white people's claim of superiority, a claim to which the Metis acquiesced. They responded to their invidious, assigned status by integrating themselves as a cultural group on the basis of opposition in "traditional" behaviour that symbolized their disdain for middle-class values like industry, sobriety, and sexual chastity.