Two Attempts at Community Organization among the Eastern Hudson Bay Eskimos

BY ASEN BALIKCI

The decrease of the useful fauna in many parts of the Arctic has created new problems in the acculturative process of the Canadian Eskimos. In areas where Euro-Canadian establishments were developed, inter-ethnic tensions and various disfunctional processes have appeared. Almost everywhere the dependence of the natives on the local trading posts has increased. Many solutions to the "Eskimo problem" have been suggested. One hears about relocating south the native populations of the Canadian Arctic, or concentrating them around a few mining centres, or rapidly developing various cottage industries. More conservative observers feel that the Eskimos, with the help of some Euro-Canadian agencies, may develop new forms of ecological adaptations and establish satisfactory symbiotic relations with the Euro-Canadians. It appears, however, that these objectives can be realized only if new and superior forms of social organization are established among the Eskimos. This paper attempts a description of such efforts in two Arctic locales, Great Whale River and Povungnituk (Eastern Hudson Bay.) The data presented here have been collected during two summer trips to these regions, in 1957 and 1958 respectively.

Great Whale River

Three major acculturative phases can be established for the Eskimos living in the area between Cape Jones and Richmond

Gulf. (For a detailed history of the region, see Honigmann, 1952, and Balikci, 1957).

1) The first and middle part of the 19th Century were characterized by contacts of varying intensity with the whalers and the Hudson's Bay Company outpost at Little Whale River, leading to the gradual increase of trapping, the introduction of metal tools and firearms with some important changes in the sealing, fowling and caribou hunting techniques.

2) During the last quarter of the past century until the 1950's, the Hudson Bay Company's activities in the area grew in importance aiming mainly at the stabilization of the fur trading system. While whaling for commercial purposes came to a stop, trapping was steadily developed. The large caribou herds were soon exterminated with the help of the newly-acquired firearms. This brought to an end the seasonal inland migrations of Eskimo hunting groups. The Eskimos came to rely increasingly on the various commodities imported by the Hudson's Bay Company, such as foodstuffs, clothing, tent material, tools, etc. The role of the local trader was important; he controlled the debt system, encouraged trapping and provided occasional employment. Conversion of the Eskimo to the Anglican faith meant a quick rejection of the traditional beliefs and curing, and adoption of the Eskimo syllabary.

3) During the 1950's, extensive changes took place in the ways and the organization of Eskimo groups. Several new agencies entered the area and paramount among these were a construction enterprise and officers of the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources. In the following paragraphs, a picture of the relations between the Eskimos and the various Euro-Canadian agencies during the summer of 1957 will be presented. This description is essentially limited to the symbiotic relations of the two ethnic groups. Contrary to Keesing's cultural definition of a symbiotic situation which refers to borrowing of traits where two cultural systems maintain contact (Keesing, p. 388), the term is used there to denote all social interactions not motivated simply by the desire of sociability.

Prior to the development of an important construction program at Great Whale River, the Eskimos traditionally inhabiting the coast between Cape Jones and Richmond Gulf lived in small isolated groups usually at the mouths of the larger rivers. Most, if not all the members of such a group, were bound by kinship ties, and in several communities a headman, usually an older and successful hunter, enjoyed considerable prestige. He directed the seasonal movements of the camp and had the last word in the use of the boats. Among some groups, however, no hunter with outstanding prestige was to be found. In winter the trading post was visited regularly for supplies and for a few weeks in summer all the groups concentrated at Great Whale River. Trading was conducted individually by each hunter and never trough the headman. In the camps important patterns of collaboration existed during some collective hunts and in sharing food. While members of different groups visited occasionally, no significant intergroup collaboration existed, except during starvation periods when food gifts were made.

During the summer of 1955, numerous employment opportunities were made available to the Eskimos at Great Whale River. This led to the concentration of all regional Eskimo groups near the trading post. A large number of natives were hired individually as laborers. Soon after, for various reasons, many of the laborers abandoned their jobs and returned to hunting. Thus the large Eskimo community was split into two occupational groups: laborers and hunters. The marked differences in income produced some mild tensions between the two occupational groups. Hunting decreased rapidly and fresh meat became scarce. Certain prostitution practices and some epidemics allegedly brought by the Euro-Canadians were instrumental in creating a feeling of hostility directed against the white workers. Soon a Northern Service Officer was appointed to cope with the many administrative problems originating in this complex acculturative situation. He acted as an employment agent and an accountant for the natives, distributed relief and family allowances, and was kept informed about the activities of the hunters. He was faced mostly with individual cases, and when dealing with collective problems, addressed an assembly of most, if not all adult, male, Eskimos. The R.C.M. Police

constable looked after the actual distribution of the relief, kept the vital statistics, and also acted as an adviser to the natives on many occasions. The male nurse regularly visited the Eskimo tents tending the sick and encouraging individual or family sanitation practices. The Anglican missionary conducted services in the local church supposedly for the whole Eskimo community. He also practised small group and individual preaching, while trained catechists conducted group prayers in the tents.

The increased monetary income of the native laborers stimulated the sales for cash at the counter of the trading post. Trading became increasingly anonymous and was conducted generally between the Eskimo women and the store's clerks. The contacts between the trader and the Eskimo men became less intense, the debt system was partially abandoned, and the status of the trader was considerably diminished.

To sum up, these interactions reveal that the Euro-Canadians considered Eskimos either as individuals or as family heads, but very rarely as representatives of a larger grouping. Two examples may suffice. The headman of a group of hunters tried to obtain some ammunition on relief on behalf of his people only to be accused by the latter of not sharing the supply equitably. Another headman voiced an opinion regarding the activities of the prostitutes, considering himself as spokesman for the whole community. A further investigation revealed that he was representing only himself together with a small circle of relatives. Cases like these led the administrators to call all the adult Eskimos when problems of collective interest were to be discussed. The headmen, however, continued to exercise their traditional and limited authority over their groups in regard to the use of the boats and the seasonal migrations in the case of the hunters.

Different factors led the Northern Service Officer to encourage the creation of an elected Eskimo Community Advisory Council. Principal among these factors was the necessity to institutionalize a system of communication between the Administration and the Eskimos. While the former could easily call on individual natives, the discussion of collective problems was a

difficult matter and it was hoped that a Community Advisory Council could more easily sound the natives and bring already prepared answers to the Administrator. Furthermore such a Council was to evolve gradually into a sort of self-government, able to take decisions concerning all the Eskimo groups at Great Whale River. Thus a superior level of socio-political integration was to be achived in the native society through the democratic process. For some time, however, the functions of the Council were to remain only advisory and consultative. The administrator retained all executive authority.

Summoned by the Administrator, the Eskimos cheerfully elected six individuals, (three headmen, one interpreter, and two natives of some prestige.) Of the six only two had any authority over their groups. One group was represented by two councillors while several others had no representative at all.

After its constitution the Council had been apparently consulted on various subjects such as control of dogs, choice of foods to be served in the mess hall, over-time pay, and income tax (Bond, VIII). The main test took place in a few weeks, on a problem of dog food distribution. The Council was asked by the Administration to organize the equitable distribution among all the Eskimo families of the considerable kitchen refuse thrown out daily by the Euro-Canadian mess. The refuse was used as dog food. The mess managers have been throwing the refuse in the community dump where it was individually colleted by the Eskimos according to their needs. The managers felt that it was preferable to have the refuse removed directly from the kitchens at regular hours. The Council decided that P., a representative of a large group, should be in charge of the removal and distribution of the refuse. P. immediately chose two of his relatives for the execution of the task. Soon after, the Eskimos noticed that, instead of sharing the dog food among all the tents, the two men stored it in the camp of P. Objections followed and the Council modified its decision. Two groups were to perform the task alternately. For a few days the program operated smoothly. Two boys of each group regularly removed the refuse. Soon, however, one of the boys went hunting and did not arrange for replacement. His com-

panion was unable to proceed alone and the whole operation was first temporarily, and later, completely dropped. The Community Advisory Council never met again. What were the factors instrumental in the failure of the Council?

a) The Council was created first in a shallow frame, without any specific function or a long range program of activities. Only a quick explanation by the Administrator preceded the election of the councillors, and a year later the few Eskimos who still knew about the Council were unable to give any information about its objectives. These informants perceived the Council as an artificial creation of the Administrator who called the sessions at will and only whenever he had a problem to discuss.

b) The problems the councillors had to deal with were either not understood or of little interest to them and the solutions were obviously to the advantage of the Euro-Canadians.

c) The Administration was apparently ignorant of the absence of any symbiotic inter-group relations among the natives. The Great Whale River Eskimos show essentially a family level of integration with some important forms of collaboration at the group level such as sharing food and the use of imported boats. Division of labor, except along sex and age lines was unimportant and, whenever present, due to Euro-Canadian influences. The dog-food distribution program called for a certain amount of economic specialization and inter-group collaboration. It was naive to believe that this could occur within the Eskimo community without the supervision of an Euro-Canadian agency. The program might have succeeded if certain remuneration of the dog-food collectors was envisaged. No such measures aiming at the development of some organic solidarity among the Eskimos were considered.

d) The loose character of the headman-group and the headman-headman relations were equally misunderstood by the Administration. Traditionally the headman derived his prestige from his superior hunting and trapping skills and his knowledge of the ecological conditions of the country. In a wage economy he found himself to be just another laborer, and sometimes not

the best one. In the acculturative situation prestige became attached to income and possessions and the already loose authority of the headman suffered. As one informant described a headman, "P. speaks only for himself." The recent unequal distribution of wealth produced new jealousies and tensions between individuals, headmen, and different occupational groups. This reduced the possibility of inter-individual and inter-group collaboration in the Council and in the community.

e) The representation of the groups in the Council was unequal. This stimulated arrangements benefiting one group, led to the objections of the other groups, and discouraged planned collaboration.

Povungnituk

The history of the Eskimo-European relations in the Povungnituk area falls into four interactional periods.

1) The first period, roughly similar to the corresponding phase at Great Whale River, lasted a quarter of a century longer. The influence of commercial whaling on the ways of the Povernitormiut remains uncertain. The trading post at Little Whale River was visited only once a year, in spring, and trapping did not seem to have been intensively practised. Fire-arms largely replaced the bow and arrow and the long spring harpoon late in the 19th century. The conversion to Christianity of all the Eastern Hudson Bay Eskimos took place almost simultaneously around the 1880's.

2) The second or adaptive period covers the end of the last and the first three decades of this century. A trading post was established in the area, trapping was intensified, the decrease of the caribou herds produced some important changes in the seasonal migrations and increased the dependance of the natives on the trading post. The role of the trader became very important. He interfered in the migrations, encouraged trapping, acted as petty justice officer, gave medical treatment, helped during starvation periods, procured some wage employment, and through the individual debt system, controlled the prestige structure of the community.

3) The third period was one of crisis and ended with the beginning of the present decade. The almost complete disappearance of the caribou together with the decrease of the other useful species reduced considerably the supply of fresh meat. Trapping was not sufficiently productive, it failed to increase the cash income and stimulate consumption of larger quantities of imported foodstuffs. Periods of hunger became more frequent. Messianic beliefs appeared, reflecting an atmosphere of crisis due to the decrease of the caribou and the seals.

4) This last period of social reorganization extends to the present time. It is characterized mainly by the concentration of almost all Eskimo groups around Povungnituk Bay, the development of soapstone carving for commercial purposes, the increase of government relief under various forms, the creation of group accounts, and the arrival of a Roman Catholic missionary. In the following paragraphs, a more detailed picture of the symbiotic interactional system at Povungnituk will be presented, drawing from data collected by the author during the summer of 1958.

The natives remembered vividly the difficult pre-war and post-war years when people died of starvation in the northern and central camps. Trapping provided them with a very irregular income, pelts worth only $3,222 were sold to the trader in 1951-52, while two years later their total income from trapping amounted to $39,361. An Euro-Canadian informant remembered that as late as 1955, the natives were beging for food and seemed intensely preoccupied with the possibility of starvation. In recent years, family allowances and relief to the needy families and individuals distributed by the Federal Government through the local trader, made available to the natives larger amounts of ammunition, clothing and imported foodstuffs. The economic conditions of the community, however, were radically changed by the development of carving for commercial purposes. Stimulated by the trader, the Eskimos increasingly devoted themselves to the carving of small animal or human figurines of soapstone representing mostly traditional subjects. All carvings were priced and purchased by the trader. Soon carving became the dominant activity in the area, the

total sales of carvings increased from $740 in 1952-53, to $38,000 in 1955-56. Povungnituk came to be known as a "carving community." The Eskimos were freed from the necessity of intensive hunting. They did not have to remain any longer near their traditional hunting and trapping grounds and settled around the post. Most of the groups had headmen and formed compact clusters of tents. As at Great Whale River, the group collaboration patterns inherited from the traditional and the fur-trading periods, continued to function (food sharing and common use of boats under the supervision of the headman). A reasonable supply of fresh meat had to be assured and most of the poor carvers continued trapping. Povungnituk Bay was not a good hunting or trapping area and the hunters and trappers had to travel long distances, in summer or winter, to their traditional hunting grounds. This necessitated a larger number of sea-worthy boats powered by motor engines and an increase in the amount of supplies necessary to the trapper along the trail. Individual hunters could not easily face these new expenses. A collective solution to the problem had to be found. The local trader suggested and succeeded in establishing the following program. The seven or eigth Eskimo groups who lived in relative isolation along the coast prior to their concentration at Povungnituk, were to establish group accounts at the trading post. A fraction of all earnings was to go to the group accounts. With the funds thus accumulated some larger goods for collective use such as boats and new engines could be obtained. Only elected group leaders had authority to spend the funds. No community, supra-group account was envisaged.

The system worked successfully. Following many informal consultations, many of the headmen who enjoyed some prestige among their kinsmen and others were elected. Soon several canoes, new engines and larger motor boats were acquired. The contribution, freely accepted by the group-members, fluctuated from 5 to 35 cents for each dollar earned by the members, depending on the importance of the goods to be purchased. The system was flexible and allowed for larger or smaller savings. Under the control of the group leader, some funds were used to purchase gasoline, ammunition and supplies for the needy

trappers. Needless to say, through their supervision of gasoline purchases, the control of the group leaders over the boats was strengthened generally. The Eskimos had to ask permission before using the boats. Soon tensions occurred between headmen and some hunters who were refused supplies from the group accounts. Another headman who monopolized the use of a boat was bitterly criticized. Similar tensions brought the splitting-up of a group with two separate camp accounts and the formulation of plans for acquisition of personal canoes by some Eskimos. It should be noted, however, that these tensions never endangered the functioning or the existence of the system which was perceived by the natives as highly beneficial. While minor purchases were left to the discretion of the group leader, any major decision concerning the group accounts was taken after many informal consultations and discussions. No formal meetings of the group members took place. This fitted well into the traditional Eskimo pattern of group decision making. No explicit attempt was made by the Euro-Canadians to organize a community council of group leaders. Occasionally the group leaders were called to meetings and asked to answer questions of interest to most of the members. It is relevant that numerous Eskimos were present at these meetings and replied individually. Outside the sphere of group accounts the group leaders had little or no authority over the other Eskimos, except in traditional situations.

Conjointly an attempt was made by the trader to establish an exchange system between carvers and fishermen. The system was intended to provide a compensation for the continual gifts of fish by the hunters to the specialized carvers. The fish was to be purchased by the trader and later sold to the carvers. Thus the traditional sharing patterns were to give way to formalized inter-Eskimo trade relations, reflecting the recent occupational differentiation within the community. The system functioned successfully for some time under the close supervision of the trader. When his control was relaxed, the natives quickly reverted to their traditional sharing practices.

A third organizational project was invented by the local Missionary. Under his leadership a carver's association was

founded. This new cooperative intended to sell carvings directly in Southern Canada, with the help of the Mission. Some intermediaries could be eliminated and the profit margin to the Eskimo increased. The members showed a great interest in the new institution, assembled once a week and collectively priced each carving. All carvings were examined, discussed, and individual styles compared. Good sculptures brought considerable prestige to the carver and some competitive attitudes appeared. A successful carver, himself a group leader, was chosen as president. He failed to exercise any authority and during the group deliberations behaved as an ordinary member. Odd jobs connected with the carving trade were regularly remunerated with the funds of the association.

In the following paragraphs, the factors which contributed to the success of the previously described organizations will be listed.

a) The new forms of collaboration connected with the group accounts were at the group level with some similarity to the interactional patterns developed during the fur-trading period for the acquisition and use of imported vessels.

b) Both the group accounts' system and the carvers' association were created in view of very specific objectives. Far from constituting shallow structures, they existed only in function of their aims which were executive rather than consultative. Furthermore, these objectives were perceived by the Eskimos as highly beneficial to them.

c) The group account system was flexible. It allowed for the formulation of either immediate or long-range projects and variable contributions. The initiative for these projects came from the Eskimos and not from the Euro-Canadians. The natives felt that the group accounts were "their business" and took keen interest in them.

d) The objectives of the new structures (acquisition of boats, providing the needy families with imported supplies, sale of carvings at reasonable prices) were of central importance to the Eskimos, solving problems of economic relations with the

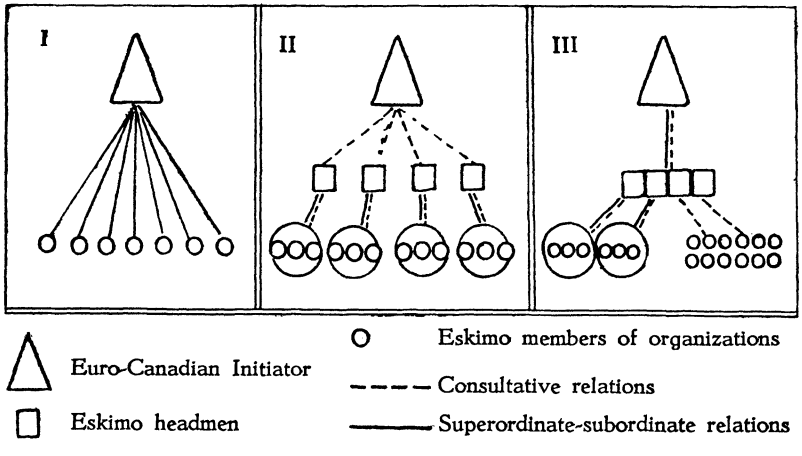
Euro-Canadian agencies that the simple traditional structures of Eskimo society could not face.

e) The group account system was suggested to the Eskimos at the end of a period of crisis when the natives were willing to accept changes. It was a timely answer to their pressing desire to acquire imported goods.

f) The new structures were not only initiated but continually supervised by the Euro-Canadians. The trader, however, controlled the system as such, without interfering with the projects formulated by the Eskimos.

Conclusion

Three recent organizations described above can be presented very schematically as follows: (the charts refer to the actual functioning of the systems and not include normative elements.)



Comparing the three, it is clear that they represent systems of increasing complexity. System I is simple enough, if reflects superordinate-subordinate relations between the Euro-Canadian initiator and the members of the Sculptors' Association. System II indicates the Trader's rôles as community accountant and stimulator, the general absence of formalized inter-leaders' re-

lations, and both the consultative and superordinate-subordinate relations between leaders and group members. System III is characterized essentially by a formal grouping of community representatives, which is a step in advance over system II and represents an integrative effort at a higher level, and by the consultative relations between some councillors and a large portion of the Eskimo community.

Certain normative statements concerning the functioning of these organizations can be listed:

1) It is assumed that the Eskimos of these two communities cannot create by themselves any supra-group structures or spontaneously establish formal group-headman relations. Thus the catalyctic activity of an Euro-Canadian organizer seems necessary. A superior type of social organization may succeed better if, during an initial period, it is closely supervised and stimulated by the initiator. Within the established framework he should allow for the formulations of projects by the natives. His role should become increasingly permissive, without completely abandoning control over the functioning of the system. The nature and the duration of the control exercised by the initiator should depend on the complexity of the system. Complex organizations necessitate a strong leadership and supervision.

2) New structures, representing a superior level of sociopolitical organization, have better chances of success when created for the achievement of specific tasks and when these tasks are well understood by the natives and concern some vital local problems, perceived as such by the Eskimos. Paramount among these, appear the Eskimo-Euro-Canadian economic relations. Thus the trader seems to be an ideal organization initiator. He is the local link between the Eskimos and the Euro-Canadian economy and the "vertical" integrator of the community. (The initiator should direct his efforts both along the "vertical" and "horizontal" organizational axis as distinguished by Dr. R.L. Warren.)

3) Before establishing the chart of the projected institution, the homogeneity of the traditional groups, the headman-group relations and the recent occupational differentiations should be

realistically analyzed and taken into consideration. In localities where a higher level of socio-political integration is necessary, some gradual development of the planned institution may be appropriate. Thus after the natives have been thoroughly familiarized with system II, it is possible to conceive the successful creation of a formal grouping of headman characteristic of system III.

National Museum of Canada,
Ottawa.

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