Some Acculturative Trends Among the Eastern Canadian Eskimos

BY ASEN BALIKCI*

Following a prolonged period of contact with our civilization many Eskimo groups in Northern Canada have reacted in different ways to the activities of the various intrusive agencies. To-day some groups continue to get their subsistence through fishing and seal hunting. Others indulge more in trapping and rely substantially on imported foodstuffs. Still others, wherever the opportunity exists, have accepted wage labour. This paper is mainly a brief description of certain aspects of socio-economic organization and certain religious traits in three such groups: Pelly Bay on the Arctic Coast, Povungnituk and Great Whale River on Eastern Hudson Bay surveyed respectively in the summers of 1959, 1958, and 1957. Some of the facts to be examined here are the relations between certain technological traits and the socio-economic organization of the groups surveyed. In the field of religion the discovery of dual or syncretic processes of change might be of interest.

I. — *THE ARVILIGJUARMIUT, HUNTERS OF PELLY BAY*

a) *Traditional socio-economic organization*

The following is a description of the Arviligjuarmiut annual cycle in 1918. It involved a caribou hunt from kayaks at the artificial crossing place and was the last fully aboriginal annual cycle for this group. The hunters of the large winter

* For criticisms and comments the author is grateful to William Taylor and Dr. T.F.S. McFeat.

camp in the middle of Pelly Bay were sealing together at the breathing holes with antler harpoons. Around the end of May this camp broke into smaller units which separated and moved towards the land in several directions. Our informant's group hunted seals near the coast with the traditional spring techniques. In late spring this small group moved inland to fish trout with leisters through the lake ice until the time for collective stone weir fishing on the spring downrun. In August individuals stalked some caribou, fished with the fishing harpoon, and prepared for the autumn uprun, stone weir fishing. After the end of August they moved south to the caribou crossing place. This collective technique necessitated considerable cooperation between beaters and kayakers. October was the period for intensive fish spearing on Kellett River followed by the preparation of new fur clothing at the sewing place on shore before everybody moved again to the sea ice camp. The migrations of this group of six hunters had covered an ellipse of 50 kil. with the help of 1½ dogs per hunter, only one wooden sled and five kayaks.

What were the main lines of the kinship structure of these winter and summer camps and to what extent did they constitute economic units? With this in mind we asked our elderly informants: who were your relatives at that time? Their answers included 20, 30, or more, adults, mostly consanguineally related, who formed the bilateral ilagheet, or circle of relatives, of the informant. These lived in many areas of the Netsilik country and naturally never camped together since the ilagheets of any two persons (except unmarried siblings) are not the same. The genealogies of this winter group of 1918 revealed the existence, however, of four kinship groups, recognized by our informants as separate, smaller ilagheets. One such restricted ilagheet consisted of an elderly father and his four adult sons, two of whom were married with children. In another were to be found three married brothers and the family of the promised future wife of the son of one of the brothers. The winter camp as a whole had economic functions of its own. Thus not only all the hunters of the winter camp hunted together (RASMUSSEN, p. 156) in order to control the largest number of breathing holes, but highly complex seal meat sharing rules involved them

in multiple sharing partnerships (cf. VAN DE VELDE, Frans, and RASMUSSEN, p. 147). Further, in this camp there was a "leader" for the seal hunts who informally asked the hunters their intentions for the following day and pointed the area where the hunt was going to take place. It is possible to conclude from these data that in certain fields the winter camp formed an economic unit.

The summer camps were much smaller. They consisted usually of one restricted ilagheet. The fishing techniques were individual (leister, fishing harpoon) or collective (stone weirs), caribou hunting involved one hunter (stalking) or the whole group, (crossing places). The meat, however, was shared (the skins to a lesser extent) and the younger hunters informally referred their plans to their eldest or most experienced relative in the camp. Thus, the summer camp constituted usually a kinship and economic unit at the same time.

b) *On certain relations with the supernatural*

Numerous techniques of malevolent witchcraft were known and employed, accompanied by magic words. Paralysis, sickness, death, and poor hunting were wished. In case, however, the magic words failed to accomplish their deed, they could rebound and strike any person in the camp, including the witch and his relatives. A similar relation existed between the shaman and his protective spirits when one of these was dispatched on an aggressive mission. Various malevolent spirits wandering around the camp were prepared to strike the unfortunate anytime. The people thus lived in constant fear from certain supernaturals, including the major deities who controlled the weather and the sea mammals. The protective devices elaborated by the culture included several shamanistic practices and a complex taboo system centered around the crisis periods of "passage." Thus the Arviligjuar had three kinds of shamans. Each one practised different techniques and had a different relation with the spirits. The first could barely perceive the evil spirit and was slow to act against it, the third could locate very precisely its abode and kill it with great vigour. The shaman's activities were purpose-oriented (curing, calling the game, finding lost

objects and hunters, etc.). So was the taboo system, since any breach of taboo could bring misfortune to the people. By virtue of their success some shamans enjoyed considerable prestige. Although usually the relations between the shaman and the people was of the curer-patient type, in certain occasions the shaman acted on behalf of the whole community.

c) *The post-traditional situation, Socio-economic organization*

1926 The 1926 annual cycle of the same restricted ilagheet reveals considerable changes. Regular contacts with the Repulse Bay trading post have been established: one or two travellers annually visit the post and trade on behalf of their relatives. The basic alternation of winter sealing and summer fishing and caribou hunting remains unaltered. The introduction of the rifle has greatly simplified, intensified, and individualized caribou hunting. No more hunts at the crossing places are conducted, kayak-making has been abandoned. Dogs are more numerous, (four per hunter), wooden sleds have been imported. Individual family and group mobility have both greatly increased: the migration circuit is four times longer than previously, over 200 kil. in diameter. Trapping with steel traps (2-3 traps only per hunter) is a spasmodic, marginal occupation conducted during short, day-long trips. There are no trap lines. Steel tools are steadily imported and gradually replace the old antler industry.

This is a period of decreased ecological pressures, higher game returns, simplification of hunting and other techniques, increased group and individual family mobility.

1959 The present annual cycle of the Arviligjuarmiut differs considerably from both the 1918 and 1926 cycles. With a single exception, the migrations of the restricted ilagheets have come to an end.

A mission on the west coast of Pelly Bay had been established in 1936. The missionary operates a trading store, he provides medicine for the sick, and teaches school. The majority of the population (excepting two not too distant camps) is

concentrated near the mission. In winter, simplified breathing hole sealing with two iron tools instead of the dozen traditional antler ones is almost entirely abandoned and replaced by seal hunting at the ice edge with rifles. Also in winter, individual hunters engage in short trips for caribou hunting. Summer sealing again with rifles, takes place from imported canoes. During the good season intensive fishing with nets is practised. Two or three young hunters with their families still migrate inland in summer for caribou. The herds are small, however, and only an insufficient number of furs for clothing can be secured locally. During the second half of August, three young families tried their luck at fishing at a nearby stone weir. In October, the only mass migration of the year occurred; everybody moved to Kellett River for intensive fishing with leisters and nets. Trapping with a limited number of traps (2 to 10) remains a secondary and non-systematic activity, strictly complementary to ice-edge sealing. There are no trap lines. Trappers may object when non-relatives place traps near their own, not because they feel any local rights over the fur-bearing animals but simply to avoid theft of pelts. Very few foodstuffs are imported. Trading is generally for ammunition, tea and tobacco, clothing, and hardware.

What are the basic economic units at present and how do they compare with the traditional ones? First, with the virtual disappearance of breathing hole sealing and its associated sharing rules, no communal co-operative hunting takes place and further, no widespread meat sharing is practised. The large establishment near the mission thus does not constitute an economic unit in winter. Ice edge sealing is practised usually by two hunters at a time; although brothers prefer to go on hunting trips together, usually any hunter may ask anybody else, relative or not, whether he is willing to go with him. Travelling in pairs is preferred in a dangerous environment for safety. On the ice edge the unrelated hunters hunt for themselves and no meat is shared. The same applies to the returns from caribou hunting. Trapping is an individualistic activity and fur money is never shared, even between the closest relatives. Briefly, sharing of local meat is extensive only within the limited circle of closely related kin: an elderly father with his married sons, two brothers with

their families, in one case an individual and his sister's husband, in another, a father and his daughter's husband. These kinship groupings are somewhat smaller than the restricted ilagheet previously mentioned. When non-relatives hunt or fish together (even at the stone weirs), no sharing takes place between them. Thus sharing is determined by narrow kinship bonds.

In comparison with the traditional situation it can be noticed that the introduction of rifles has produced a marked individualization of hunting practices together with a limitation of sharing. When I asked an informant: "Why don't you share your food more extensively to-day as you did anciently," he answered: "Now everybody has a rifle and can go out and get food for himself, there is no need for much sharing." This individualization of hunting patterns, together with trapping and individual ownership of imported goods has increased the importance of the nuclear family as an economic unit; a small number of relatives constitute the group within which sharing takes place. Let us note also that individual mobility has markedly increased, facilitated by a large number of dogs, averaging 8 per hunter. Remarkably enough, as far as can be ascertained, the concentration of most of the Arviligjuarmiut in one locale has not resulted in any decrease in game returns as might have been expected. Pelly Bay is a very good hunting area and, at present, these Eskimos enjoy considerable leisure periods. Some even abstain from hunting during the dark months, subsisting on cached meat. And this despite the fact that Arviligjuar economy is only partially integrated into the Euro-Canadian market system.

d) *The post-traditional situation,*
On certain religious traits

Twenty years after their collective conversion to Christianity, some elderly Arviligjuarmiut still interpret the new belief accordink to the traditional categories. The missionary is considered by some Eskimos as a powerful shaman. The new religious observances are too often considered as protective devices and taboos guarding the people against death and sickness. Even objets of the Christian cult were sometimes used during some shamanistic

seances. Sickness and death are still viewed supernaturally. Beside the new practices several old taboos are still observed, by the elderly generation. Ghosts and evil spirits continue to haunt the people. In periods of crisis the decaying art of the shamanistic curer may be sought. It is acknowledged, however, that no really competent shamans are practising to-day. The religious syncretism observable at present is strigingly illustrated in the testimony of one informant: "I want to be a Christian saint, so that after death I won't become a tönraq kigdloreto (traditional evil spirit)." The younger generation however seems to have a much better understanding of Christian doctrine and practices.

II. — *THE POVERNITORMIUT, TRAPPERS OF EAST HUDSON BAY*

a) *Socio-economic organization*

The traits described here are characteristic of the years 1930 to 1954. The essential elements of this period are the importance of trapping and the considerable reliance on the trading post for imported foodstuffs. The camps were distributed along the coast at the mouths of the larger rivers. The whole inland area was covered by a network of trap lines averaging 100 kil. in length. Caribou hunting with rifles became simply an extension of trapping, when the trapper reached the end of his trail, he wandered further in search for caribou. Individual sealing at the ice edge took place intermitently between trapping trips. Spring sealing was intensive, practised with rifles behind screens. Sometimes it involved short group migrations to a nearby island. In late spring and autumn, individual fishing with nets was practised. The summer was spent hunting seals, white whales, and walrus from canoes and whaleboats. This was essentially a group activity. During ship time most groups migrated to the trading post for a few weeks. Otherwise the store was regularly visited in all seasons, by sled or whaleboat and important foodstuffs, clothing, hardware, fuel and ammunition purchased. The functions of the trader were multiple, he was above all trader, but at times medical practitioner, judge of minor offenses, distributor of relief, superordinate organizer.

These camps numbered 20 to 40 individuals, a small group of close kin constituted its core: an elderly father with his married sons, together with some more distantly related consanguinals and affinals. The existence of a trap line network has stabilized the groups to a considerable degree: the trapper had to remain near the head of his line for most of the winter, thus individual family migrations became limited. Winter after winter the trappers travelled along their trails usually in pairs, checking from 60 to 300 traps. Young men followed their father or uncle on the trail and some day "inherited" the trap line (informants say: "My father showed me my trail.") There is a common feeling to-day of "ownership" of a trail. Trapping companionships involved only the closest relatives: father-son, uncle-nephew or brothers. The permanence of these co-residential groups was further strengthened by the collective ownership of whaleboats. The most successful trapper, usually the elder of the group, owned a larger share of the boat and controlled its use. No trips of importance took place without his acting as captain. Various collaborative patterns appeared between members of the boat crew. Gradually the boat captain emerged as a group leader in various spheres of activity. His prestige was high and his abilities and reliability were recognized by the trader who allowed him considerable debt. As a rule, one of his sons succeeded him in this position of leadership.

Imported goods were usually not shared but, in periods of scarcity, gifts to relatives were made. Winter and summer, seals and fowls were shared immediately among all camp members. During the intensive spring sealing, considering the relative abundance of the catch, every hunter kept his catch for himself. Later in the year, however, if a relative was in need, he was always given a share.

The existence of numerous individual hunting, trapping, and ownership traits make of the nuclear family an important economic unit. The group stability required by the systematic trapping, the collective ownership of whaleboats parallel to the presence of group headmen, and the existence of widespread sharing are important integrating devices making of the camp an economic unit in its own right. By its size, its general kinship structure, and the existence of collective economic activities

and widespread sharing, the Povernitormiut camp of this period offers points of resemblance with the traditional Arviligjuarmiut summer group.

Let us note also that a small number of Eskimo helpers to the trader settle permanently near the store and act also as middlemen between the trader and the coastal camps. They become increasingly attracted to Euro-Canadian culture as a global way of life and constitute the first step towards the appearance of culturally divergent sections within a larger Eskimo settlement (cf. Dr. Frank VALLÉE's report on the Baker Lake Eskimos, chapter on the Kablunamiut and Nunamiut).

After 1956, considerable socio-economic change took place at Povungnituk (see BALIKCI, 1959). Carving small figurines of soapstone was began. This considerably increased the cash income of the Eskimos and most of them were thus freed from the necessity of intensive trapping. Gradually they abandoned their traditional camp sites and settled near the store where they relied mainly on imported foodstuffs. Soon, the need for fresh meat established the necessity for longer summer expeditions. Larger and better boats were needed for these. In a program of directed change the local trader succeeded in establishing a system of group accounts fed by a fraction of every dollar earned through carving and trapping. The funds thus accumulated could help acquire the necessary whaleboats. Only elected group leaders had authority to spend the funds. In 1958, this system worked successfully. Thus in Povungnituk the collaborative devices at the camp level of the preceding period have been strengthened in the following, producing a superior level of formalized socio-economic organization.

The economy of the Povernitormiut during these two periods shows a balance between exploitation of local resources and dependence on imported goods. Gradually, however, the importance of the latter increases furthering the integration of the local economy into the larger Euro-Canadian system.

b) *Certain religious traits*

This period is characterized by an increasing amagicality and a preoccupation with the new religion. The ancient sham-

anistic techniques seem completely forgotten and no popular curer of any kind exists. Various mechanical curing techniques have developed locally. In the winter camps trained Eskimo catechists conduct the Christian services. This insures the partial religious autonomy of the group. Among several groups the camp headman is also the local catechist and this further increases his prestige. Attempts are made to interpret local situations according to the norms of the new religion. Eskimo food sharing finds Bible support. Jesus likes sinners and this may be considered by some individuals as a pardon and an encouragement to pre-and extramarital sex relations. A local messianic movement may be similarly understood: in this cosmogony a local messiah compares himself to St. John. His aim is to save the Eskimos. The Indians and the whites have exterminated the caribou. Soon they will do the same with the seals and the fish. Then the end of the world will come. The whites will fight among themselves. After having brought all the humans to Jerusalem, Jesus will condemn the Indians and whites to Hell, while the Eskimos will go to Heaven. Here again a local ecological crisis situation finds a supernatural interpretation.

Briefly, the disappearance of aggressive witchraft, the local religious autonomy of the groups and the merger of the statuses of catechist and camp headman in one person may be considered as important integrating factors.

III. — *THE GREAT WHALE RIVER ESKIMOS OF EAST HUDSON BAY*

a) *Socio-economic organization*

The socio-economic organization of the Eskimos at Great Whale River in 1957 was characterized by considerable complexity and diversification (on this section, see BALIKCI, 1957). A large construction project at that locale had made available numerous employment opportunities to the Eskimo. This led the groups who previously camped along the coast to concentrate near the main establishment where they formed a distinct cluster of tents. During a beginning phase, almost all able-

bodied hunter-trappers were employed as labourers. Soon after, absenteeism helping, gradually a number of Eskimos abandoned their jobs and preferred hunting in the vicinity while still seeking irregular seasonal employment. In 1957, some seal hunting took place at the ice edge and in spring and summer from canoes and whaleboats. Game returns were low because the immediate area was generally poor in sea mammals. No caribou were killed since there were none to be found in the region. Fish were taken in nets in small quantities after break-up and later in autumn. Fowling produced still smaller returns. Trapping was conducted irregularly and in unorganized fashion; it was considered an unrewarding and unpredictable occupation in comparison with high prestige wage employment. The labourers enjoyed a high income and were able to buy larger quantities of imported foodstuffs and hardware.

The presence of hunters and labourers in this community had produced two occupational groups with divergent cultural orientations. The hunters have returned to the land as a way of life, because working for the whites made them feel inhuman. The labourers on the other side wanted to borrow everything they noticed in use by the whites: frame houses, good clothing, efficient tools, varied food, know-how. Soon tensions arose between the two groups. Considering the information of the labourer's group, it developed around the core of the trader's helpers, previously mentioned, who were already acquainted with some of the white man's ways. To these were added several groups from poor game areas who considered hunting as a life of starvation. The families of the labourers constituted individual economic units in a money economy. No sharing of cash or imported goods took place among these. The labourers, however, continued to receive, irregularly, gifts of fresh meat from neighbouring hunters when large catches were brought in. Thus a truly dysfunctional practice appeared since the labourers who benefited from these meat gifts had no possibility of returning them. The old camp headmen among the labourers have seen their role changed. While previously they were leaders of collective hunts, in 1957 their behaviour as the best wage earners was considered as an example to be followed by others. From organizers they have become models. Among the

hunters, organizational traits similar to those described for the Povungnituk hunter-trappers prevailed; these camp groups constituted economic units. Some small clusters of close relatives, however, devised new organizational patterns. One elderly hunter was given a new canoe, motor and supplies by his two wage-earning sons-in-law who in return were regularly provided with fresh meat.

Despite an unsuccessful attempt by the local administrator to organize an Eskimo community advisory council, no new socio-political or socio-economic forms have appeared tying together all the Eskimos at Great Whale River.

The salient traits of this establishment are the increasing integration of Eskimo economic activities into the Euro-Canadian economic system and the parallel decline of hunting-trapping.

b) *On certain religious traits*

The trend towards amagicality observed previously is fully noticeable now (See HONIGMANN). Curing is entirely in the hands of a nurse and even the local mechanical practices in this field have largely disappeared. A general loss of interest in religious beliefs, values, and practices is observable. No attempts are made to elaborate on religious themes or to justify present social situations with religious norms. The missionary attempts to give a religious or ethical dimension to the culture contact situation distinguishing good and bad new traits. He finds only few followers. With the multiplication of new agents his status has suffered considerably.

CONCLUSION

Following this brief descriptive survey, let us conclude with a few methodological remarks concerning the establishment of trends for the changing culture of these three communities. It is possible to examine how, for a particular group under external influences, certain technological and socio-economic changes have taken place. When these two or more historical periods are compared, one can abstract certain socio-economic trends for

this particular group. It seems possible also to correlate partially some of these socio-economic trends with changes that have occurred in other aspects of culture. For instance, in Pelly Bay, the introduction of the rifle has produced a lessening of ecological pressure, one factor, among others which encouraged the stabilization of these Eskimos and the virtual interruption of relations with the neighbouring Eskimo groups. This stabilization and isolation of the group became partially responsible for a search of mates within the group. Given the traditional, local preference for a well-known and related prospective mate, gradually a preferred cousin marriage pattern emerged. In fact, the development of this pattern is much more complex and the result of numerous factors. Group isolation, however, by limiting the number of choices, facilitated its appearance.

The task of comparing local socio-economic trends with a view to establishing meaningful overall trends valid for large regions is considerably more difficult. This is due, in large degree, to the external character of the influences which determine change and to their variety. They combine locally with different elements and produce different forms. Let us see, in this respect, if the hypothesis of Steward and Murphy, which may have a wide applicability, applies to our data from Povungnituk.

In Povungnituk, individual hunting and trapping characterized by individually "owned" traplines help increase the economic importance of the nuclear family. The systematic nature of continued trapping has stabilized the groups and has produced income used for the acquisition of collectively-owned whaleboats under the direction of headmen. Thus with the persistence of widespread sharing the camp groups constituted economic units. According to Murphy and Steward: "When the people of an unstratified native society barter wild products found in extensive distribution and obtained through individual effort, the structure of the native culture will be destroyed and the final culmination will be a culture type characterized by individual families having delimited rights to marketable resources and linked to the larger nation through trading centre" (MURPHY and STEWARD, p. 353).

This hypothesis is applicable to the Povungnituk data, although the destruction of the culture is far from being the result of only one factor, namely, trapping-trading. It may be noted, however, that in that area the simple trader-trapper-family owned trapline relationship is considerably complicated by the existence of new and old collaborative practices at the camp group level.

If the task of establishing overall socio-economic trends is a difficult one, finding regular relations over a wide area between socio-economic trends and changes in other aspects of culture is more so. The problem of finding similar trends in many communities depends on the level of abstraction at which one operates. At a higher level of abstraction generalizations can be made. In comparing seven villages in different areas of the world Professor Leighton has abstracted a series of patterns of change. Some of these are applicable to a certain extent to our Eskimo data. Such is "a trend away from an economic system that was primarily self-contained and independent" (LEIGHTON and SMITH, p. 81). The presence in many northern locales of missionaries, traders, Northern Service officers, and policemen in superordinate positions has produced "a similar shift in governmental and political affairs from relative local autonomy to dependence on higher authority in the larger social group" (*idem*, p. 81).

The same difficulties encountered in establishing overall trends are met also when attempting to describe acculturation stages valid for several Eskimo groups. By stages I mean here historic phases characterized by a central economic factor like rifle hunting, trapping, some handicraft industry or wage employment. It is certainly not suggested that all communities pass historically through the same stages or that they all tend towards some hypothetical final stage. I believe, however, that these central economic variables produce some *necessary* organizational and cultural changes in many communities leading to the possibility of describing these constellations as wholes. Such an endeavour seems possible only after numerous communities have been surveyed with this aim in mind. Only then, through comparison, will it become possible to distinguish between

the necessary and essential traits associated with one of the previously enumerated central economic activities and the less important and more variable changes. Definitely more research is needed in this field. Only after the results of such research have become available, will it be possible to describe systematically the acculturation stages of the Canadian Eskimos.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BALIKCI, Asen, "Two Attempts at Community Organization among the Eastern Hudson Bay Eskimos," in *Anthropologica,* N.S. vol. I, 1959,

— "Relations inter-ethniques à la Grande Rivière à la Baleine," to appear in *Contributions to Canadian Anthropology* (1960).

HONIGMANN, John J., and HONIGMANN, Irma, "Notes on Great Whale River Ethos," in *Anthropologica,* N.S., vol. I (1959).

LEIGHTON, Alexander H., and SMITH, Robert J., "A Comparative Study of Social and Cultural Change," in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society,* vol. 99, no. 2 (1955).

RASMUSSEN, Knud, "The Netsilik Eskimos. *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-24,"* vol. VIII, no. 1-2 (1931).

STEWARD, Julian H., and MURPHY, Robert F., "Trappers and Trappers: Parallel Process in Acculturation," in *Economic Development and Cultural Change,* vol. IV, no. 4 (1956).

VALLÉE, Frank, Report on the Social Organization of the Baker Lake Eskimos," N.R.C.C., Ottawa (1960).

VAN DE VELDE, Frans, "Les règles du partage des phoques pris par la chasse aux aglus," in *Anthropologica,* no. 3, (1956).