

# Marriage Customs of the St. Lawrence Island Eskimos<sup>1</sup>

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## RÉSUMÉ

Malgré les contacts culturels et les transformations qui se sont opérées dans la culture des esquimaux de St. Lawrence Island, Alaska certaines coutumes concernant le mariage, tels la dotte, la période de travail du jeune homme chez ses futurs beau-parents et le système de résidence matri-patri-locale, conservent une importance considérable.

St. Lawrence Island is located about two hundred miles south of the Bering Strait and about one hundred miles west of Nome, Alaska. Its northwest cape is 38 miles from the Siberian mainland. The island has been the home of an Eskimo population for over two thousand years and there are at present two permanent villages, Gambell (formerly known as Sivokak) and Savoonga. The approximate native population of the villages is

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the Alaska conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science held at the University of Alaska in August, 1960. The abstract, or summary, was published at that time by the A.A.A.S.

375 and 350 respectively. There are only two white families in each, those of the schoolteacher and the missionary. On the northeast cape there is a military installation. This attracts a small number of Eskimo families who make their residence there during the summer months, either for construction jobs or for a ready market for ivory carvings and other native crafts.

Culturally the St. Lawrence Island Eskimos are much like other Eskimo groups, especially those of the Bering Sea region (Hughes 1960:4). Although their emphasis on clans and patrilineal descent marks them off from the generalized model of Eskimo social structure, these features are probably common to much of western Alaska. The closest cultural relatives of the inhabitants of St. Lawrence Island are the Eskimos of the Chukotski Peninsula, Siberia, with whom they maintained contact until recent years. Linguistically, the Eskimo of the Bering Sea region are classed as Yupik-speaking in contrast to the Inupik of northern Alaska, Canada and Greenland.

In this paper we shall consider some of the salient features of the marriage customs of the Eskimos of St. Lawrence Island. Because these people are in a stage of transition between the old established culture and the newer, less familiar ways of the white man, some of the customs now observed are unstabilized and in a state of fluctuation. Except where otherwise indicated for the purpose of contrast, the patterns of behavior described here are those of the present day.

### *Bethrothal*

In previous years marriages were arranged by the parents with little, and in some cases no, consultation with the young people involved. However, in the last twenty years or so this traditional pattern has been undergoing change due to increased contact with white civilization. Most young people are now allowed to choose the mate they desire. They are then expected to inform their parents, who begin negotiations. The oldest living

member of the clan<sup>1</sup> has the greatest authority and his or her advice and consent are sought, no matter how capable are the younger members of the clan. Thus the ultimate decision does not rest entirely with the parents of the young people.

A typical instance may be cited here. Etta's son, Barclay, desired to marry Bernadine, the daughter of Martin and Isabel. Because Barclay's father was dead, it was the responsibility of his mother to discuss the marriage with Bernadine's family. The girl's parent referred her to Bernadine's paternal grandfather for his opinion before they could give their consent. Etta had a very difficult time approaching Matthew on the matter because of his position of respect as an elder in the clan and because of her inferior position as a woman. It is worthy of note, though, that Matthew would not commit himself until he had discussed the matter with the girl, her parents, and their clan members.

It is not uncommon for the girl's parents to make the initial approach to the boy's parents, although it is the boy's family who actually initiates the betrothal with gifts to the girl's family. If both families are willing for the marriage to be arranged, the boy's parents and relatives, both paternal and maternal, "step on" (tuuta) the girl by bringing gifts to her family. The parents and other relatives of the boy, including women and children, go as a group bearing gifts to the girl's home. The gifts may include rifles, hunting equipment, tools, sealskins, food items (e.g., flour and sugar), blankets, radios, and, in addition, usually

<sup>1</sup> The term *clan* is used here in the sense given it by Murdock. A social unit, in order to be properly called a clan, "must be based explicitly on a unilinear rule of descent which unites its central core of members... must have residential unity... [and it] must exhibit actual social integration... There must be a positive group sentiment, and in particular the in-marrying spouses must be recognized as an integral part of the membership." (MURDOCK 1949:68) A number of patrilineal clans, meeting these specifications, exist on the island. It should be noted, however, that these clans are not the type of unilinear consanguineal kin group to which the term clan has often been applied in anthropological literature, and they are not exogamous.

some cash. The specific date for the transaction is agreed upon previously by both parental parties and the young people themselves take no part in it. They are, in fact, not even present.

The gifts are deposited in the girl's home and the donors leave immediately. Members of the girl's immediate family set aside a few items for themselves, after which relatives of both parents come one at a time to select their items. If any fail to show up they are sought out and invited to come and share in the wealth. On one such occasion an aunt of the bride-to-be was first to arrive for her share. As she began to select a number of items the girl's married brother scolded her for taking too much, reminding her that there were others entitled to it. She explained her action by saying, "This first I come." Apparently the immediate family is careful to see that all the clan members receive their share.<sup>2</sup>

The gift-giving ceremony reflects the high esteem in which the girl and her family are held by the prospective groom. One informant put it this way: "When the boy's family likes the girl very much, they gives *lots* of presents, and if they don't likes her very much, they give little."

The importance of the occasion demands that it take place at night. "The more important the business, the later the hour." In general, the gift-giving ceremony corresponds to the giving and receiving of an engagement ring in the white man's culture. The latter custom has, in fact, been introduced in recent engagements in addition to the traditional ceremony.

After the girl has been "paid for" the boy begins his period of groom work for the girl's family. This work often includes such menial tasks as hauling water or chopping ice, and gathering

<sup>2</sup> In the gift-giving and receiving the relatives of both parents may be included. However, upon her marriage, a girl is considered to become the property of her husband's clan, and her children of their father's clan. See HUGHES 1958.

driftwood, as well as becoming a member of her father's hunting crew. The latter practice however, is undergoing modification. If the boy's regular boat crew needs him, he may continue to hunt with them, but his share of the game goes to the girl's family.

The period of groom work is, for the future son-in-law, a time of proving himself to the girl's relatives as to his ability to provide for her and for a family. It shows his subservience and willingness to serve her family even in the humble, and often humiliating tasks he is called upon to undertake. We have observed, for instance, a young man who was "working for a woman", go out in blizzard weather to get ice from the lake a half mile away.

In past years the length of time during which the boy worked for the girl's family was apparently at the discretion of the girl's parents. However, because of some abuse of this, the village council in recent years passed a resolution that the period of groom work must not exceed one year. In certain recent cases the period has been as short as three months, although it is more often a full year.

At the outset of the groom work, the boy may continue to live at home and only work for the girl's family during the day. He may then wait until after the marriage is made legal with a licence and a church or civil ceremony before taking up residence with the girl's family, or he may do so before the marriage is legalized. In one case, after it was discovered that the girl was three months pregnant, the boy bought the licence and moved to her family's home. They were married in a legal ceremony six weeks later. In another case the boy lived with the girl's family as a husband for some months before obtaining the licence and later becoming legally married. In several other cases the boy's parents requested that the couple be legally married before the groom began matrilocal residence. The latter, however, is a departure from the old way in favor of the white man's way.

Betrothal is considered by the older people as being nearly as binding as marriage. Those who have entered into this agree-

ment are considered as husband and wife from the time the girl is "paid for". In case the arrangement is broken by the parties involved, they are regarded, in the old way of thinking, as having broken marriage ties, even though they may never have slept together.

In one case in which a girl was "stepped on", or betrothed, but died before the betrothal period was completed, the girl's family was obligated to return some six hundred dollars in dowry money to the boy's family.

The relationship between the young people is expected to develop and mature during the betrothal period. This was vital in the old days, when the young people may have been strangers to one another or have had no attraction for one another previous to the betrothal arranged by their parents. The betrothal period was one in which any incompatibility should be resolved and a foundation for the marriage partnership established.

### *Marriage*

At the beginning of matrilocal residence the boy sleeps in a separate "bed", but in the common sleeping room with the entire family. After a period of perhaps a few months, he sleeps in a spot adjacent to the girl, and then eventually under her blankets with her. She is expected to offer some token resistance at first, which may or may not be sincere, but which is customary. One informant said that this initial encounter may take on the elements of a pursuit all around the house with yelling and commotion.

Privacy for the young couple is ordinarily totally lacking. In at least one case, however, the young man prepared a separate room for his wife and himself in which to begin their married life together secluded from her family.

In the last several years young people have had wedding ceremonies in the church, performed by the resident missionary or the U.S. Marriage Commissioner, who also issues the marriage licenses. One modern young bride in Gambell ordered a traditional floor-length wedding gown and veil from California. These have been worn by each succeeding bride since then — about

seven in all. One can observe more and more of the white man's customs entering into the ceremonies, even to the inclusion of wedding gifts and reception.

The termination of matrilocality residence is not always simultaneous with the termination of the period of groom work. At the end of the period of groom work the couple may continue to live with the girl's family for a time if it is more convenient. In any event, matrilocality residence is only temporary and terminates when the couple are able to provide other housing arrangements, either with the boy's family or in their own home.

When a girl leaves her family home to live in the home of her husband's family there is another occasion for gift-giving. Typical of such occasions is the one described below.

At the time Velda was to move to Hector's home, his mother sent for two women of her husband's clan (i.e., the groom's father's clan). At about ten o'clock at night the three women went together to escort Velda to her husband's family home. In the absence of the bride's own parents, who showed their disapproval of the marriage by not participating, her paternal grandfather accompanied the three women and the bride. All the way (about 750 yards) Velda was weeping, while the other women tried to comfort her, assuring her that she would often see her father's family and her old home. The groom had no part in this, but was at his parent's home.

It is expected of the girl that she bring her bed and blankets, cooking utensils, and anything needed to supplement the household furnishings or equipment of her husband's family. In addition, the girl's relatives give gifts to the boy's family. These gifts are of the same nature as those given at the time of betrothal. Before the members of the boy's clan can select a share of the gifts, the boy's mother "steps on" the things she intends to keep so that they will not be appropriated by one of the relatives. In the case of a marriage within the clan, it is sometimes the same individuals who both give and receive gifts.

Whether a young couple will live with the boy's parents or set up housekeeping on their own seems to be decided by the parent in some cases. In a family with more than one son, the

father may choose his favorite son to live with him. In at least one case the parents and their unmarried children live in the same house with their two married sons and their families, a total of twenty-two persons.

Although matri-patrilocal residence is the usual pattern, residence at the groom's parental home is not necessarily considered to be a permanent arrangement. There seems to be a trend among the young people to have their own homes and "be their own bosses". In no case, however, are the parents left to live alone. If they do not have unmarried children at home, then a married son and his family will live with them, or at least in an adjacent house.

Young people who have been on the Alaska mainland seem to want to break away from the patrilocal residence pattern and to establish their own homes in the white man's tradition. The old pattern of deference and respect to elders is breaking down among those of the younger generation. They are acquiring disregard for the traditional ways of their fathers in favor of their own interpretations of the white man's ways. The old patterns, however, prevail among those in their mid-thirties and older. Married couples in this age class living with husband's parents show respect and subjection to their elders. The parents have complete jurisdiction over their own homes, including the children, both married and unmarried.

During a two year period of time we have observed seven marriages, in which the age of the groom has ranged from 21 to 25 years. The brides have been somewhat younger, ranging from 16 to 24. Apparently those under sixteen are considered too young for marriage.

### *Irregularities*

Among the people of the younger generation there have been many incidents of sexual promiscuity, and as a result, some illegitimate children. For the young people of Gambell, at least, the presence of the army base near the village for several years was a degrading influence and hastened the relaxing of moral



restraints. However, the village of Savoonga, which is more isolated, has had the same problem with the breaking down of traditional controls. Many factors are involved in this breakdown, but apparently it is a by-product of the transitional process from one culture to another, in which there are no clearly defined norms or standards of conduct.

From the old people's viewpoint, it is not sexual promiscuity as such which is so objectionable. Their displeasure arises more from the social circumstances under which the relationships occur and the fact that such acts represent a defiance of the old people (Hughes 1960).

In the old ways, physical separation was gradually recognized as constituting a dissolution of the marriage. A woman who had been badly treated could be received again by her parents, and the marriage considered as terminated. Now, when the marriage has been legalized by a licence, it must also be legally broken at considerable monetary cost to the parties involved. As a result there are few divorces. Cambell, a village of about 375 people, has had only two legal divorces and two separations. This does not mean, however, that there have been fewer marriage difficulties or that they have been more easily resolved. One of the functions of the village council is to try to resolve marital problems.

In considering the present-day marriage customs as observed on St. Lawrence Island, we see some modifications of the old customs due to the influence of white civilization. It is also evident that the changing culture patterns have disrupted the old norms and have left standards of conduct in a very fluid state. In spite of this, however, the principal features of the old, established customs, including the dowry, groom work, and matri-patrilocal residence remain intact.

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