

# THE GREAT WHALE RIVER ESKIMO: A FOCUSED SOCIAL SYSTEM<sup>1</sup>

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## I

In 1949 and 1950 the Great Whale River, Quebec, Eskimo stood with one foot poised on the threshold of a drastically altered life-space. When I knew them during those two summers neither they nor I could guess the changes which in two or three years would transform the physical and social character of Great Whale River post. The tundra indeed was staked out for what, rumor said, would be runways for aircraft. But I had heard many visions for transforming the North and I doubted if anything would come of this one. I did not expect the Cold War with its radar stations of the Dew and Mid-Canada lines and interceptor bases to reach directly this small trading post frequented by two hundred Eskimo, Montagnais-Naskapi Indians, and half-a-dozen whites.

With the changes that came after 1950 this paper will not be concerned. In one sense what I have to say is only a prologue to what has happened at Great Whale River. Research along this latter line has already been conducted by Asen Balikci of the National Museum of Canada (Balikci, 1960). My attention will go to Eskimo culture as it was before the new era began.<sup>2</sup>

Mainly the object of my paper is to demonstrate how one social system maintains itself through dependence on a larger society. Anthropology has emphasized the study of small social systems but often, at a cost to understanding, deals with them as though they were completely isolated entities, unrelated to the rest of mankind.

The social system I propose to describe is a familiar type of community in the Canadian Arctic and sub-Arctic. It appeared in many places after a foreign body—a trading organization or a church—moved in and, like a magnet, attracted people to semipermanent settlement. Previously no large number of people had ever lived together regularly. For only under exceptional circumstances does food-gathering permit permanent settlements. Beyond the family and kinship group the social structure of foodgatherers is

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<sup>2</sup> I shall not be concerned with the Indians who also visit the trading post. In an earlier paper I dealt with relations between these two ethnic components of the community (Honigmann, 1952).

extremely fluid. When the foreign body—store or church—focusses social interaction on itself, a new type of social system appears. Radcliffe-Brown (1957) points out that any social system is maintained through an adjustment of interests and values as well as by a social structure which assigns roles. In the North, trade goods imported from “outside,” together with religion and other services, became, in Radcliffe-Brown’s sense of the term, social interests that promoted the new basis of social solidarity. The fur trade and the church accompanied by the presence of foreigners brought into being a new social structure, one replete with new tasks, new positions, new roles. We can refer to such communities as focussing their social interaction on one or two dominant centers. Like other focussed social systems, Great Whale River is highly specialized and symbiotically dependent.

## II

Two hundred years of intermittent contact with Europeans and Americans have left the Eskimo in this community with only traces of their former, aboriginal way of life.

When I knew them the people still continued to exploit their offshore and tundra environment for seal, white whales, fish, fowl, and whatever fur-bearing land animals ventured toward the barren coastline. A number of their productive resources remained distinctively Eskimo, like the sealskin covered kayak, whale float, harpoon (the point, of course, being steel, hammered out and filed sharp at home), and semilunar knife. Some of the men continued to dress in birdskin and sealskin clothing in winter and practically everybody wore sealskin boots. In fact, Great Whale River produced a surplus of sealskin boots which were exported by the Hudson’s Bay Company to other places in James Bay where Indians purchased these garments.

Other elements of aboriginal Eskimo culture had vanished in favor of substitutes which provided greater energy or which conserved energy more efficiently. I have in mind the displacement of the oil lamp in favor of portable stoves that burn dry grass, twigs, and driftwood. Snow houses had been abandoned in favor of tents (occupied the year round) mainly because they were incompatible with stoves and stovepipes, apparatus that would quickly cause the snowhouse to melt.

Technical development, however, is not the only principle by which the displacement of aboriginal culture elements can be explained. In distinction to their Indian neighbors, the Eskimo in 1949 had completely abandoned most of their traditional beliefs. The Indians continued to sing for luck; to honor animals by reverently disposing of their bones; they mentioned the bear with respect, and perceived the Anglican catechist, who is an Indian, as continuous with the shaman of olden times. But nobody in the Eskimo community claimed to be an *angakok* and nobody could recall much of old-time

esoteric beliefs. The Eskimo had nearly completely shed their former views of man's relationship to the rest of nature.

### III

The Eskimo of Great Whale River in 1949 constituted a social system whose maintenance overwhelmingly depended upon a larger social system—Canada—in which it operated. From a slightly different perspective, we can say that we are dealing with a symbiotic culture, one which could not survive without undergoing drastic change should its relationship with the host culture be broken. Not only the culture would be threatened. A social system consists of people in relation to one another. Culture is the vehicle of human adaptation and adjustment. Hence the thorough dislocation of a culture might mean the end of a given social system.

To understand how the social system of the Great Whale River Eskimo maintains itself through its dependence on the larger social system, we need to know the cultural arrangements through which each system is equipped to do business with the other. Such an analysis can become quite complex; here I shall simplify. Remember, the ethnographic present tense is used to refer to 1949 and 1950.

The larger, Canadian, social system is specifically equipped to serve Great Whale River and many other similarly remote communities in the Subarctic. That is, Canadian culture is deliberately designed to provide the Eskimo with food, clothing, tools, weapons, gasoline, and hundreds of other commodities. It also provides the Eskimo with a police and legal system, sends them religious leaders, and takes administrative responsibility for their welfare. Some services, like medical attention, are provided freely; the Canadian people through taxes pay the cost of doctors and medicines. But such is the world in which the Eskimo live that food and other physical necessities are not provided freely except in case of emergency. The larger social system is not organized to provide tools, ammunition, guns, flour, sugar, tea, and baking powder unless the smaller social system in exchange gives goods of approximately equal value. At this point a difficulty arises that perplexes members of both social systems. In their ecological relationship—that is, in their relationship to environment—the Eskimo can find or produce little that the larger social system desires. Although they depend on goods produced in the larger social system for survival, the Eskimo cannot pay for all those goods. Because they cannot pay for all they need and because the larger system does not give its wealth freely, the Eskimo are poor.

Aboriginally the Great Whale people were of course not organized to deal with so large a sector of the outside world. They still do not take a dominant role in transacting business with the larger social system. This task is undertaken by outsiders who make Great Whale River their home.

Among these outsiders a key place is occupied by the manager of the Hudson's Bay Company's store. His role essentially is to import goods which the Eskimo will consume and to export wealth that the Eskimo produce in exchange.

However, the actual relationship of the manager to the Eskimo community is much more complex than this simple description indicates. In performing his role as a trader he arouses ambivalent sentiments in the Eskimo whom he serves, primarily because their interests, while complementary, are not identical with those of the Company whose policy the manager represents. For example, each autumn the Eskimo are optimistic about their ability to trap fur during the coming winter. They ask the manager for an advance of food and ammunition. With such goods they will feel free to engage in trapping without having to spend too much time fishing and hunting for food. The manager however, does not dare risk a large investment. He has reason to fear the Eskimo trapper will be unsuccessful and therefore will be unable to pay back the advance. His cautious policy, dictated by good business sense, promotes resentment on the part of the Eskimo. At other points as well, the two parties do not sympathetically understand each other. Hence tension marks their relations.

The missionary is the second key outsider at Great Whale River. His mandate is less clear-cut than the trader's. His church supports him so that he may mediate the people's relationship with God, lead them in prayer, and teach them about the moral order to which they must conform. But this role too gets him into difficulties. The missionary preaches the values of generosity and charity to the poor. The Eskimo perceive themselves to be poor. Furthermore, they think they recognize what is meant by generosity. In their own culture sharing is a paramount value—a real value and not merely an ideal one. Therefore they suggest that the missionary generously share with them his stores of food. Of course, they are refused. The missionary is not unaware of a certain inconsistency in his behavior or of the confusion which his refusal promotes. He is distressed and the Eskimo are distressed.

Goods from many parts of the world which the Hudson's Bay Company in Great Whale River retails to the Eskimo are the focus of social interaction that tie the people to this place. The services of trader and missionary, because the Inuit value them, also connect the Eskimo with the larger social system of which Great Whale River is a part. However frustrated they sometimes become, the trader and missionary, too, are interested in serving the Eskimo, in return for certain rewards which they can count on receiving. As long as they continue to feel satisfied, the social system of which they are a part, and in which the Eskimo participate, will be maintained.

The Eskimo's participation in the social system I have described of course also affects the relations of the Inuit to one another. Many features

of the Eskimo community, family, and kinship relations look very much like traditional Eskimo social relations. Yet, the roles of husband, wife, parent, child, community head man, and of people to one another are by no means untouched by the way the occupants of these positions also act as trappers, churchgoers, purchasers in the Hudson's Bay Company store, and are governed by the legal norms of the larger social system. We can predict from our knowledge of social systems and culture that the introduction of still another dominant group into Great Whale River (for example, an airbase) would further alter Eskimo kinship roles and that it would also alter the roles of the trader and the missionary.

In aboriginal times 200 Eskimo did not regularly assemble for several months of the year in one place to pray, work, and worship together. Such sustained interaction is primarily a product of interests brought into Great Whale River from outside. Eskimo culture has been slow in developing forms of social organization suitable for the style of life. For example, the Eskimo are still without formal leadership and without any formal system of social control. Hence, interpersonal antagonisms are often brought to the missionary or company manager to be resolved.

The fact that the Eskimo are without formal leadership does not mean that differences in authority and power are not present. Some men possess greater prestige than others and they are effective leaders in the coastal winter camps that each accommodate from 20 to 25 individuals. In summer the camps break up. People come to the post and the leading men collectively but still informally make decisions. The power of these four or five men cannot be enforced except through the power of personality.

When the Eskimo social system is viewed from within rather than in terms of its relations to the outside world, we also see it cemented by common social interests which possess great value for the population. To cite only one example, there is the value which condemns aggression. It is interesting to see how this value on nonaggression is reflected in personality as revealed through the Rorschach test.<sup>3</sup> The Eskimo personality shows a tendency to suppress strong emotion. In cultural terms, this suppressive tendency represents an attempt to defend against the open expression of hostility and aggression, expression that would threaten the human relationships on which individuals depend for psychological security. Hostile emotion must be suppressed in order to maintain supportive human relations in a community where formal means of social control are undeveloped.

When we look at the psychological picture in terms of the social system in its widest relations, we see that the psychological defenses which maintain personal security through suppressing emotion also help to control aggression, which, if uncontrolled, would, of course, quickly lead to the dissolution

<sup>3</sup> Rorschach records were interpreted by Mrs. Frances Ferguson.

of the Eskimo social system and disrupt the people's relationship to the larger social system as well, the system from which they derive so many economic and other satisfactions.

#### IV

At the time I knew them, acculturation had introduced the Eskimo to new problems and challenges, but it had not been unduly traumatic. The very unity of Great Whale River and of the Eskimo as a social system was due to the presence of foreign bodies, bodies which provided common interests and a basis of enlarged social solidarity. The Eskimo have become a part of a complex social structure in which they obtain rewards that have transformed many aspects of their life.

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