

# TOWARDS A CLASSIFICATION OF WEST ALASKAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE<sup>1</sup>

by

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## *Problem and Purpose*

The forms of social structure found to be existing along the west coast of Alaska have been given attention of late by some anthropologists.

... it has become extremely doubtful that the relatively dense population of the Bering Sea coast of Alaska is to be included in the type [Eskimo] that bears its linguistic label. (Giddings, 1952:6.)

... St. Lawrence culture is a variant in some important dimensions, such as kinship and social structure, from the generalized model of an Eskimo group. It does, perhaps, fit into what we are gradually seeing as a western Alaskan Eskimo type of socio-cultural patterning that emphasizes clanlike units and patrilineal descent (Hughes, 1960:4.)

This author believes that further investigation will reveal a form of Eskimo culture that is limited to Bering Sea, probably not including St. Lawrence Island and the Aleutians. (Lantis, 1946:259.)

... the North Alaskans can be said to represent a basic Eskimo type of pattern ... Over this is laid a series of Alaskan Eskimo traits. There is then a particular local phrasing of both aspects. It can be said of the North Alaskan Eskimo that theirs was a marginal culture when viewed in the light of Alaskan Eskimo developments at large. (Spencer, 1959:450.)

From the foregoing quotations it should be fairly clear that the authors cited agree on the point that west Alaskan Eskimos are characterized by a social structure aberrant from the more general "Eskimo type" characteristic of the rest of the Eskimo-inhabited north. The concept of an Eskimo type of social organization originated with Morgan (1871:267, 277), was further refined by Spier (1925:79) and attained its present conceptualization at the hands of Murdock:

... the Eskimo type includes all societies with Eskimo cousin terminology and no exogamous unilinear kin groups. ... it is characterized by monogamy, independent nuclear families, lineal terms for aunts and nieces,

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the bilateral extension of incest taboos, and the frequent presence of such bilateral kin groups as kindreds and demes, . . . (1949:226)

My purpose in this paper is both to classify the type of social structure (or structures as the case may be) found to exist in west and northwest Alaska and to suggest the dynamic relationship of such a structure to the Eskimo type social structure. In order to carry out the latter purpose the following postulate is accepted:

. . . the ancestors of the peoples now speaking related languages must once have formed a single linguistic community, which must also have had a common culture including a common social organization. (Murdock, 1949:347.)

The Eskimos of Alaska and the rest of the north are of the same language family (cf. Swadesh, 1951:69; Hirsh, 1954:830). Murdock's concept of survivals will be utilized:

. . . the phenomenon known as "cultural lag" . . . results in the presence of "survivals" from previous forms of organization in most social systems. Analysis of these can frequently yield reliable indications of historically antecedent types of social structure. (Murdock, 1949:323)

to suggest the relationship of the West Alaskan type social structure to the Eskimo type on the basis of a social reconstruction which we will make of three West Alaskan social systems.

Since the writing of *Social Structure* three monographs have appeared which allow us to draw a geographical triangulation of West Alaskan social dynamics. The three Eskimo societies to be examined in this paper are the Nunivak Island Eskimos off the coast of southwest Alaska, the northwest Eskimos including Nuunamiut ("people of the sea") and Tarumiut ("people of the land") and, in the middle, the Eskimos of St. Lawrence Island lying off the west coast of Central Alaska in the Bering Strait.

On the following page (Fig. 1) will be found the kinship system of the three Eskimo societies. Numbers have been substituted for the kinship terms for purposes of visual ease. Applying Murdock's method of classification (1949, p. 224) we arrive at the primary and subtype of social organization of each of the above Eskimo systems.

To find the patrilineal Dakota structure existing in an Eskimo society is somewhat surprising (though perfectly possible on theoretical grounds) due to the usual conception of unilineal and bilateral systems as being mutually exclusive. We will resolve this in the conclusion by recourse to a more recent manner of classifying systems such as the one found on St. Lawrence Island. However, for purposes of effecting an historical reconstruction in the most efficient and convenient method possible, we will adhere, for the present, to the terminology given by Murdock (1949).

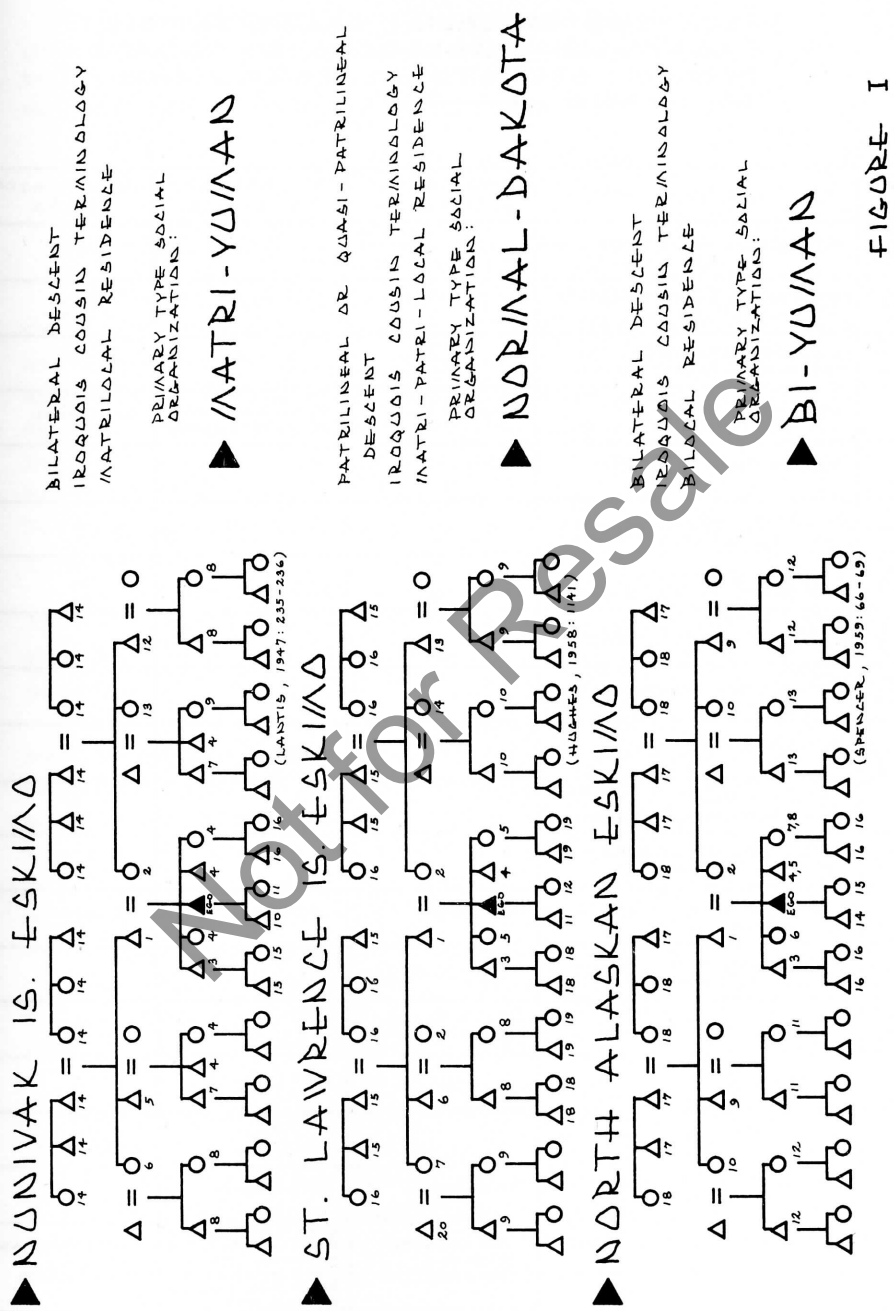


FIGURE I

FEATURES OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATION  
FROM WHICH INFERENCES AS TO ANTE-  
CEDENT STRUCTURAL FORMS CAN  
BE DRAWN

	FEATURES	DUNIVAK IS. ESKIMO	ST. LAWRENCE IS. ESKIMO	NORTH ALASKAN ESKIMO
A	AVUNCULOCAL RESIDENCE			
B	BILATERAL EXTENSION OF INCEST TABOOS		X	X
C	BIFURCATE COLLATERAL TERMS FOR AUNTS AND/OR NIECES	X	X	
D	DESCENT RULES	BILATERAL	PATRILINEAL OR "QUASI-PATRILINEAL"	BILATERAL
E	ESKIMO COUSIN TERMS			
F	BIFURCATE NEEBING TERMS FOR AUNTS AND/OR NIECES			
G	GENERATION TERMS FOR AUNTS AND/OR NIECES			
H	HAWAIIAN COUSIN TERMS			
I	MATRILINEAL INHERITANCE			
K	KINDREDS		X	X
L	LINEAL TERMS FOR AUNTS AND/OR NIECES			X
M	MATRILINEAL EXTENSION OF INCEST TABOOS			
N	NOMENCLATURE FOR X - COUSINS	IROQUOIS	IROQUOIS	IROQUOIS
P	PATRILINEAL EXTENSION OF INCEST TABOOS			
R	RESIDENCE RULES	MATRILocal OR TEMPORARY MATRI- LOCAL	X	BILocal
S	SORORAL POLYGYNY		---	
T	MATRI-PATRILocal RESIDENCE		X	
U	UNILINEAR KIN GROUPS	PATRILINEAL	PATRILINEAL	
V	VARIANT SURVIVALS	NON SORORAL POLYGYNY (VESTIGES)	GREATER DEVELOP- MENT OF TERMS FOR PATRILocal RELA- TIVES THAN FOR SIBS AND KINSMEN; PATRI-CLANS	PATRILocal AND NEOLocal TENDENCIES

We have already noted Murdock's concept of survival. On Figure 2 are given all of the possibly significant survivals found to be existing in Nunivak, St. Lawrence, and the North Alaskan Eskimo groups. Using these survivals we shall now begin our process of historical reconstruction.

## RECONSTRUCTION

*Nunivak Island Eskimo = Matri-Yuman subtype of social organization.*

In this subtype of social organization we expect to find Iroquois cousin terminology, bifurcate merging avuncular terminology, matrilocal residence, and bilateral descent (Murdock, 1949:231). We find that Nunivak Eskimos have all of these characteristics except bifurcate merging terminology. The significant analytic components in Nunivak society are bifurcate collateral terms, Iroquois cousin terminology, and patrilineal kin groups (Lantis, 1946:233-9; Giddings, 1952:7-10). Matrilocal residence of this group is taken to be a recent innovation rather than a survival following the method of Murdock (1949:221).

The possible antecedent forms which we must examine are all given by Murdock (1949:324-6). In regard to Matri-Yuman the two more likely antecedent structures are Matri-Hawaiian and Matri-Eskimo. Less likely antecedents are Normal-Iroquois, Bi-Yuman, Neo-Yuman, and Matri-Fox.

Bifurcate collateral terms, when occurring with a lack of general polygyny and with a residence rule other than patrilocal, tend to support a patrilocal structure prior to the existence of any of the structures offered above as possible immediate antecedents. This is supported by the statement by Lantis that the matrilocal structure is "temporary" (1946:234, 241) and that men often left their hunting gear at their father's house. Also a son might occasionally bring a woman home to live or establish his own residence. These factors tend to support proximate derivation from a patrilocal structure.

Nomenclature for cross-cousins is especially valuable for inferences since it usually changes later than residence and descent. Here, as noted, we find pure Iroquois cousin terms. One of Murdock's "especially clear indicators" is Yuman from either Dakota or Iroquois (1949:329). With the above discussion of patrilocal residence as a penultimate stage we are forced to exclude the Iroquois type social organization as the probable immediate antecedent. Finally, the existence of patrilineal kin groups allows us to infer that Nunivak is derived, ultimately, from a patrilineal-patrilocal structure. The immediate antecedent which best fits these survivals is that of Neo-Yuman. We suggest that this may have been an unstable transition stage from a previous patrilocal structure.

Our first reconstruction then, is as follows:

Matri-Yuman

↑

(Neo-Yuman)<sup>2</sup>

Neo-Yuman has as its more likely antecedents Neo-Dakota and Neo-Iroquois, and as its least likely ones Normal-Yuman, Matri-Yuman, and Bi-Yuman.

The bifurcate collateral terms together with the vestige of non-sororal polygyny tend to support the Dakota in light of the partilineal emphasis. Neo-Dakota is the only available choice for the antecedent form to Neo-Yuman.

Matri-Yuman

↑

(Neo-Yuman)

↑

Neo-Dakota

The only two choices from which we must select an antecedent to Neo-Dakota are Normal-Dakota and Bi-Dakota. Since we find a bilateral emphasis currently existing rather strongly we will, in the interest of caution, choose as an antecedent structure Bi-Dakota. However, having made this choice we find that the only antecedent to Bi-Dakota is Normal-Dakota. Hence, in our reconstruction of Nunivak Island Eskimo society we come to Normal-Dakota, the same primary type social structure as is today found to be existing among the St. Lawrence Island Eskimos. Our completed reconstruction, then, looks as follows:

Matri-Yuman

↑

(Neo-Yuman)

↑

Neo-Dakota

↑

Bi-Dakota

↑

Normal-Dakota

Before going on to the North Alaskan Eskimo to derive our second point of triangulation let us attempt a bit of extrapolation. That is, what can we answer to the question: "what might Matri-Yuman be developing towards in the light of its past evolution?" We find that Matri-Yuman can be an antecedent to Bi-Yuman which can be an antecedent to Normal-Hawaiian and that it can also antecede Neo-Yuman which can antecede Normal-Eskimo.

*North Alaskan Eskimo = Bi-Yuman subtype of social structure.*

Our expectations as to the major characteristics of this form of social structure are the same (except for residence which is tending toward

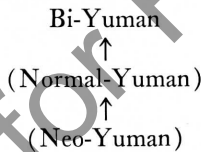
<sup>2</sup> Parentheses indicate less likely antecedents.

bilocality) as those in the Nunivak Eskimo system. To wit, Iroquois cousin terminology, bifurcate merging terminology, and bilateral descent (Murdock, 1949:231). We find all of these except bifurcate merging terminology.

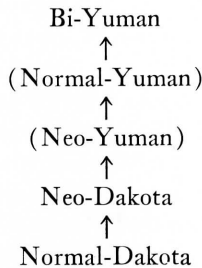
The significant variables for the analysis of the evolution of North Alaskan social structure are lineal terminology for aunts and nieces, Iroquois cousin terminology and patrilineal and neolocal tendencies (Spencer, 1959: 62-71).

The more likely antecedent forms to Bi-Yuman are Bi-Dakota and Bi-Iroquois with the less likely antecedents being Normal-Yuman and Matri-Yuman. The existence of lineal terminology indicates derivation from a neolocal structure (Murdock, 1949:328). Since none of the possible immediate antecedents given by Murdock are characterized by a neolocal structure we are forced to examine the antecedents to the immediate antecedents for a possible penultimate structure.

Both Normal-Yuman and Matri-Yuman are preceded by Neo-Yuman. Neo-Yuman satisfies not only the lineal survival but is also quite compatible with the Iroquois cousin terminology. For the sake of simplicity of illustration we shall make an arbitrary choice and consider the immediate antecedent to be Normal-Yuman. It should be carefully noted that the important point is the transition from Neo-Yuman to Bi-Yuman, and not the exact intermediate stage. Our reconstruction then is as follows:



Likely antecedents to Neo-Yuman are Neo-Dakota and Neo-Iroquois while less likely antecedents are Normal-Yuman, Matri-Yuman, and Matri-Fox. The persisting patrilineal tendencies together with Iroquois cousin terms suggest that the social system in question is derived from a structure emphasizing the patriline. Since one of the clear indicators of antecedent is Yuman from Dakota we suggest Neo-Dakota as an antecedent to Neo-Yuman. The only antecedent to Neo-Dakota is Normal-Dakota so our completed reconstruction is as follows:



As was the case with the Nunivak Eskimo we cannot help but notice that what is a structurally very unstable form (Bi-Yuman in this case and Matri-Yuman in the latter) has been reconstructed through a series of residence changes to what would appear to be a unilineal structure that is more stable but unexpected.

Extrapolating as we did with the Nunivak we find that Bi-Yuman is an antecedent to Normal-Hawaiian and also to Neo-Yuman which is in turn antecedent to Normal-Eskimo. It is quite possible then, that given the inherent instability of the Yuman type of social structure, both Nunivak and North Alaskan Eskimo social structures are evolving into the Eskimo or Hawaiian types. Given the strong emphasis on collaterality it is possible to eliminate Hawaiian and suggest that these societies are developing into the Eskimo type.

We now move to our third society for examination. Unlike the previous two Eskimo societies it currently has a Normal-Dakota structure. We shall not only reconstruct this system but, in so doing, try to suggest the relationship of the reconstruction to West Alaskan social structure in general.

*St. Lawrence Island Eskimos = Normal-Dakota subtype of social structure.*

We expect to find, with this type of social structure, patrilineal descent, Iroquois cousin terminology, non-sororal polygyny, patri-clans, and bifurcate collateral or bifurcate merging avuncular terminology (Murdock, 1949:236). We find all of these characteristics existing except true patrilocal residence. However, the residence form known as matri-patrilocal is a subtype of patrilocal residence and, rather than consider it as a survival we chose to consider it as a recent development. Our choice is based on the postulate by Murdock that residence is the first variable to change (1949:221). It may well reflect change in the direction of Bi- or Neo-Dakota.

The survivals existing in this Eskimo society are startling when found in a unilineal system and further support our feeling that though we label this system Normal-Dakota for purposes of social reconstruction we must bear in mind that in all probability we are dealing with what might better be termed as "quasi-unilineal" system. The survivals are bilateral extensions of incest taboos, kindreds, and Iroquois cousin terminology.

The most likely antecedents to Normal-Dakota are Normal-Guinea, Normal-Yuman, and Duo-Iroquois. Less likely antecedents are Patri-Fox, Bi-Dakota, Neo-Dakota, Normal-Omaha, Normal-Sudanese, and Patri-Iroquois.

The bilateral extension of incest taboos indicates derivation from a bilateral structure; this indication is fortified by the existence of kindreds: "... their presence in a unilocal sub-type of any unilinear type indicates derivation from a bilateral structure. . ." (Murdock, 1949:328).

The Iroquois cousin terms support a Yuman structure given the above emphases. With this strong bilateral emphasis we must choose Normal-Yuman as the immediate antecedent subtype.



Normal-Dakota



Normal-Yuman

The most likely antecedents to Normal-Yuman are Patri-Hawaiian, Patri-Iroquois, and Patri-Eskimo while the less likely are Normal-Dakota, Bi-Yuman, Neo-Yuman, and Normal-Fox. The bilateral extension of incest taboos together with existence of kindreds indicates a Hawaiian or Eskimo antecedent. The bifurcate collateral avuncular terminology weights the decision in favor of Patri-Eskimo.

Normal-Dakota



Normal-Yuman



Patri-Eskimo

The antecedents to Patri-Eskimo are Normal-Eskimo, Patri-Nankanse, Bi-Eskimo, and the less likely Matri-Eskimo. Again, turning to the factors of bilateral extension of incest taboos and the existence of kindreds we choose Bi-Eskimo as the most likely antecedent. Our conclusion then is that it was the change to patrilocal residence that began the evolution of St. Lawrence Island Eskimo society from Eskimo to Dakota.

Normal-Dakota



Normal-Yuman



Patri-Eskimo

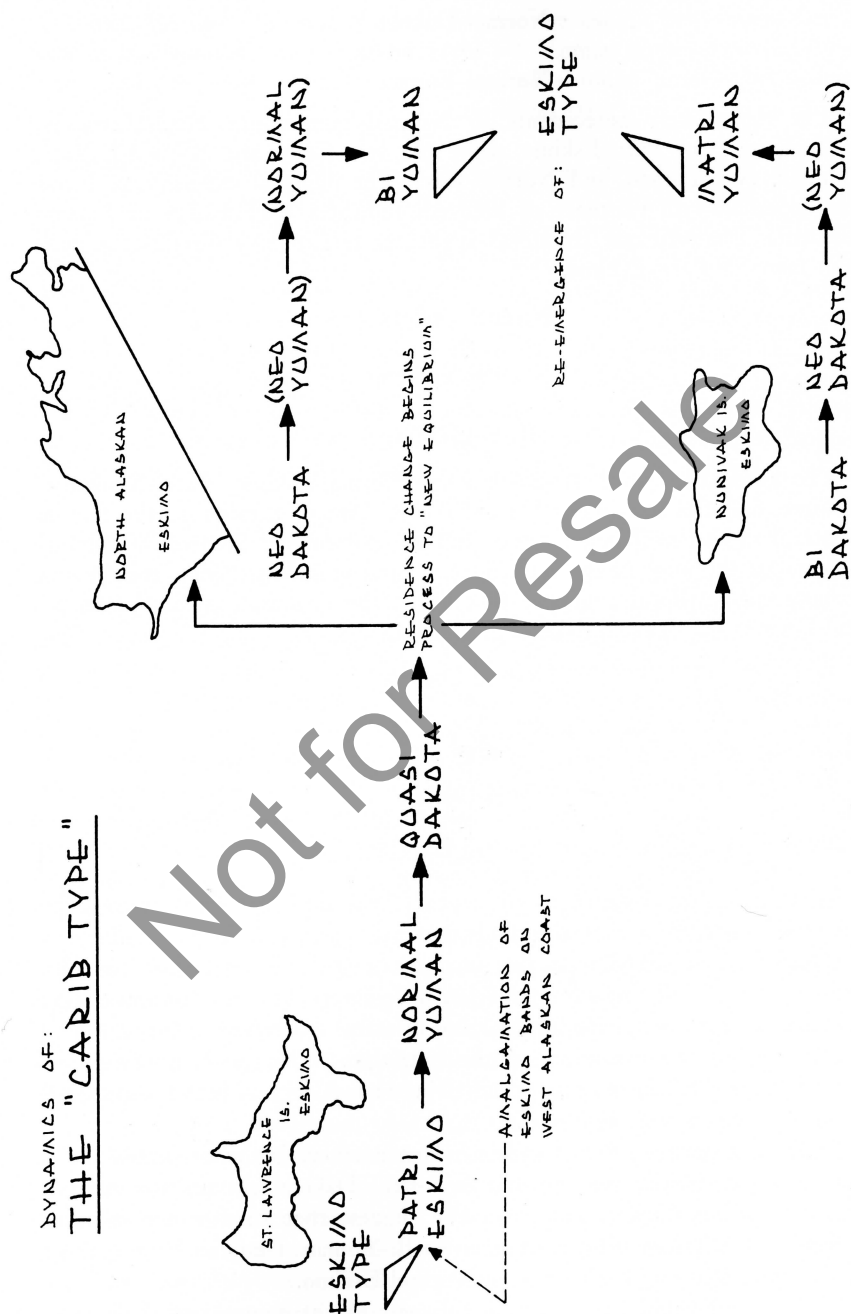


Bi-Eskimo

What probably occurred in this society was that, for some reason, the patriline became a focus with the result that patridemes developed. The patridemes probably continued to evolve incorporating the descent principle into the residence principle until the patriclan developed. This process must have been relatively rapid since the kindred and bilateral extensions of incest taboos remained during the evolution of the patriclan. This again fortifies our feeling that the Dakota type as it exists in west Alaska is better considered something less than truly unilineal.

Extrapolating from the available evidence which is the presumed to be recent matri-patrilocality we find that any of the Dakota subtypes are antecedent to the various Yuman subtypes. We suggest that further evolution of this type will be from Normal-Yuman → Bi-Yuman (indicated by current matri-patrilocality) → Neo-Yuman → Normal Eskimo.

What relationship can we find between the structural types in west



Alaska; what is their relationship to the Eskimo type of social structure? It seems that our reconstruction of the Dakota type to the Eskimo type has some empirical support:

Previous ethnographic sketches . . . and contemporary informant's testimony suggests that prior to the modern era each of the small settlements scattered around St. Lawrence Island was composed of persons of only one descent group . . . a band of related people who were identified as coming from a particular place. In these groups marriage very probably was patrilocal and it may have been endogamous . . . (Hughes, 1958: 1145).

The internal structure of the group was apparently much the same as we find today in Eskimo bands of Canada and Greenland, consisting of a loose bilateral kindred . . . (*Ibid.*).

Hughes further suggests that these bands merged on St. Lawrence Island and formed patrilans which further merged into two villages. Today the villages are still in the process of consolidating. He infers this from archeological data which ". . . imply the immigration to St. Lawrence of a clan from the Siberian shore during the 18th century . . ." (Hughes, 1958:1146). Hughes further asserts that the "Reasons for this gathering into a larger heterogeneous village unit are mainly economic as far as we can judge." (*Ibid.*)

If the development of the patrilan and consequent "Quasi-Dakota" structure on St. Lawrence Island is at all characteristic of a general process of social evolution on the west coast of Alaska then we have some suggestions to make. It will be noted that the development on St. Lawrence Island is a recent one. It seems entirely possible in view of our reconstructions of Nunivak and the North Alaskan Eskimo that these societies once went through a similar process but began to develop back toward the Eskimo structure as they moved from the rich and crowded Bering Strait area. (Collins [1951:457] establishes Eskimo migration to be via the Bering Strait.)

Consider patrilocal Eskimo bands to merge as they congregate together on the west coast of Alaska and islands off the coast. A patrilan system develops for economic reasons and takes on the appearances of a unilineal system; then, for one reason or another, residence changes and the system begins to change back to its original (Eskimo) form. This is probably hastened by any movement inland away from the more productive sea.

If these suggestions are viable then we must consider the Quasi-Dakota type as it exists, or existed in west Alaska to be an aberrant form of a bilateral social system. Murdock (1960) has made a re-examination of such forms as Yuman and Dakota and suggests the category "quasi-unilineal" for them. Further, he suggests "Carib type" to distinguish the quasi from the true unilineal (1960:8). The Carib type embraces both the Yuman and the Dakota

type. It may be said to be the characteristic type found to exist in west Alaska. Though this type may appear to be unilineal in some respects, "In all cases, . . . the unilineal principle of organization remains subordinate to the cognatic principle." (1960:7; see also p. 14).

Figure 3 presents a diagram of our conception of the Carib type in dynamic relationship to the Eskimo type. In brief summary: Patrilocal Eskimo groups congregate on the coast and islands and merge for economic reasons. This merger brings about the evolution of the patriline from the patriline. With a change in residence, the patriline system begins to break down and the system begins to change toward the Eskimo structure characterizing the rest of the Eskimo-inhabited Northland, east of the coast of Alaska. What reason can we find for the development of Yuman and probable eventual emergence of the Eskimo type once the Dakota type has been established? Like the reason for the congregating of Eskimo bands we suggest that the consequent development of the bilateral structure and dispersal of bands is due to changing economic conditions (cf. Spencer, 1959:442-3).

Our analysis thus far has been somewhat tenuous. Nevertheless, the conclusions seem justified by the data. Let us now see what further implications may be derived by accepting the process which we have suggested above.

### IMPLICATIONS

Lantis' suggestion that: "further investigation will reveal a form of Eskimo culture that is limited to Bering Sea, probably not including St. Lawrence Island . . ." (1946:259) is not borne out by our analysis. We find that all three groups studied, from Nunivak Island northwest to St. Lawrence Island and northeast to North Alaska may be considered as members of the same general type of social system, merely representing different levels in the evolution from Eskimo to Dakota and back to Eskimo. The implication is that that stage of social organizational development varies concomitantly with the ecological situation though this paper has not dealt directly with this question. It seems that the next step in an analysis of the sort that has been here attempted would be to reconstruct both the movement of Eskimos of west Alaska and note the changing ecological patterns. The hypothesis to be tested is that the richer the environment the more clustered the Eskimo society and the more the tendency towards the Dakota system whereas the less rich the environment the more scattered and more Yuman or Eskimo the society would appear.

Before closing this paper we must make some comment as to the utility of Murdock's method (1949). It should be obvious that a great many *a priori* decisions are necessary to effect a reconstruction. Nevertheless, there is definitely a level of consistency which overcomes, to some extent, errors in judgment. We deliberately made some errors or false insertions (not included in the present paper) to observe the outcome. Invariably, utilizing Murdock's

concept of survivals we eventually arrived at the same reconstruction as we would have arrived at by making the more reasonable assumptions and consequent insertions of structural components necessary in reconstructing. Although it is not possible to maintain that the exact sequence of evolution herein presented for each society actually occurred in all particulars, it is possible to state that quite probably a similar process did take place. Since these societies fall into the same general type and follow the same general process it seems reasonable to infer relationships between them and their closest antecedent and probable predecessors, the Eskimo type.

To conclude, west Alaskan Eskimo societies may be classed as members of the Carib type of social structure which differs from the Eskimo type of social structure in degree of complexity, its major defining quality being a quasi-unilineal emphasis. West Alaskan Eskimo society differs from that of other Eskimos in degree, not kind, and is quite possibly traceable to a difference in ecological setting plus, perhaps, factors of historical accident such as a timely change of residence.

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