

The Personal Life Cycle

organized. To be sure the threat of public ridicule was not to be taken lightly by the Eskimo. Indeed, contests in which two participants each sang songs of derision about his opponent provided a common way of settling disputes. The derision would continue until one or the other broke into tears or exploded with anger from the humiliation caused by his opponent's ridicule and thus lost the contest. In some groups, for example, the Netsilik, fisticuff contests were staged in order to settle disputes between men. Withdrawal was probably the chief means of resolving conflicts between individuals or among factions. Individual families or larger units would simply move off to another hunting district or join another band if friction became too intense. On the other hand, there were public nuisances—bullies, wife stealers, and homicides—who caused considerable unrest in a community before action would be taken. In such cases execution was sometimes arranged by common consent of the men of the village.

Infanticide and a high rate of infant and childhood deaths from a variety of other causes prevented at least half of the children from reaching adulthood.

The difficulty of supporting large families and the highly nomadic life forced some Eskimo to abandon children soon after birth. Among the Netsilik, Copper, and Caribou Eskimo female infants were usually singled out for abandonment either because of their less important role in the economy or because of the custom whereby the girl left her father's household at marriage.

If an individual was fortunate enough to survive infancy he was usually nursed for three to five years unless other children were born and survived in the meantime. Children were patiently taught adult pursuits. In the case of girls, caring for children, tending the lamp, preparing skin for clothing and a variety of other household chores were learned. The boys were taught the use of the whip, snow-house building, and hunting techniques. This training was carried out over an extended period so that by the time of marriage a fair degree of skill had been attained. The Eskimo are quite lenient toward children in most matters, but subtle forms of discipline are evident, especially those pertaining to restraint of physical violence toward others.

Usually girls married at the age of 12 or 14 and boys somewhat later. In some areas the young man worked for a period in "bride service" for the father-in-law. Marriage was rather brittle in early years, with divorce and remarriage being quite common. There were no special ceremonies for either marriage or divorce.

During the adult years one man's career differed little from his neighbour's. Hunting and talk of the hunt occupied much of his time. The Eskimo male had to be a craftsman in order to fashion weapons and tools and to keep them in good repair. Travel was also an important

occupation, frequent relocations being required in the course of the year's hunting cycle.

The women passed much time visiting between the snowhouses or tents while the men hunted, but at some seasons the women participated in the pursuit of game as well. This was especially true during fishing activities and at caribou drives. Considerable hard physical labour was required of the Eskimo women, particularly among the more nomadic groups, where women were called upon to carry heavy back loads in summer moves and to help the men and dogs haul the sledges during winter relocations.

The life span was not long for members of either sex, with few people living beyond the age of 60, and under extreme conditions it was sometimes necessary to abandon the aged or invalids. Indeed travel became increasingly

difficult for the aging Eskimo. It was mainly during periods of famine that the old or otherwise less robust Eskimo died.

A number of observances surrounded death. The body was wrapped in sleeping skins and passed through a hole in the snowhouse or tent other than the ordinary entrance. In burial the body was laid within a ring of stones which at times held down a skin that covered the body. Implements used by the deceased were laid in the grave for use in the afterlife. For three or four days a period of death tabus prevailed during which no one in the village could do work including feeding the dogs, trimming the lamp, cutting up meat, etc. If these tabus should be broken it was believed that the soul of the dead would return in the form of an evil spirit and would strike the disobedient with sickness.



Plate 11. In burial, the deceased was wrapped in sleeping skins and his implements were laid beside him.