

The Changing Eskimo

The Eskimo of the eastern part of Arctic Canada have had contact with explorers and whalers for several centuries. From these contacts material goods such as wooden boats, rifles, fabric clothing, and iron tools came into use. With the coming of the whalers to that area about 1900 contact became intensified and introduced diseases reduced the population by nine-tenths.

With the development of the Arctic fur trade all the Eskimo of Canada quickly became caught up in the market system of the outside world and trade items reached every part of Eskimo country by the 1920's. Rifles, ammunition, matches, flour, tea, tobacco, fabric clothing and a variety of utensils, lanterns, and stoves became part of the inventory of possessions of each family.

Marked changes in the economic life occurred during the early part of the 20th century. Breathing-hole sealing was replaced in many regions by floe edge rifle hunting of seals, winter shooting of caribou, and fishing with nets in lakes and streams. With the gradual but general disappearance of the large winter sealing village a number of social features associated with concentrated settlement began to disappear. The trapping-hunting camp, which was a smaller unit and somewhat more permanent, became the typical winter settlement.

The firm establishment of the fur trade and its importance naturally made the role of the trader more prominent. He was the outside agent who controlled, to a large extent, the economic destiny of the Eskimo. Other agents of the outside world were also important. The RCMP patrolled by dog sledge to most of the outlying villages and brought back census information, information on Eskimo

health, and game conditions in each locality. They also investigated cases of suspected homicide and muskox killing (which was outlawed in 1917). The rather diffuse social control of the native society was thus replaced to some extent by involvement in the legal system of Canada.

Missionaries established themselves in a wide area, some missions being placed in very remote areas. While most of the Eskimo of Canada have been quickly converted to Christianity it is likely that almost everywhere elements of traditional belief continue to exist side by side with the teachings of the missionaries.

Since about 1955 the Eskimo of Canada have been drawn more and more to larger communities, which have formed around such establishments as DEW-line sites, missions, schools, trading companies, nursing stations and offices of government administration. At times the reason for this centralization has been disappearance or reduction of game animals in their customary hunting districts. At other times the prospect of employment has been a chief motive for movement to the new communities. Unfortunately in most cases employment opportunities in these communities have not kept up with the influx of the available labour force.

In order to help remedy the employment problems, cooperatives have been developed to organize collective fishing for export and the manufacture of handicrafts. One of the most important economic developments of the recent period has been the appearance of an industry in soapstone carving in the Canadian North. As early as the 19th century carvings had been made for souvenirs for sailors on the whaling ships.



Plate 13. Copper Eskimo ceremonial garb.

Most of this work was in the traditional media of ivory and bone. Since 1949, a new form of Eskimo art has appeared. This art is mainly sculpture in soapstone, a medium which had formerly been used for such household implements as lamps and pots. The carvings are designed (under the guidance of craft officers, missionaries, traders, etc.) to appeal to the outside market. Rather than being restricted to traditional subjects such as animals or solitary persons much of the new art depicts scenes from Eskimo life. Although the soapstone art cannot be considered a truly native development, many outstanding pieces have been produced, and carving has provided an important source of income for a number of Eskimo communities.

Whatever the success of the carving industry, fishing cooperatives and other local industrial schemes, other means of earning cash income will have to be made available to support the Eskimo population, which is expanding rapidly because of improved health facilities and less rigorous living conditions.

As formal education and other means of getting information from the outside world become more and more available, the mental world of the Eskimo is entering a period of drastic change, paralleling the changes in economic life and technology that occurred earlier. The aspirations of the young are no longer directed toward the traditional aims or occupations. The appeal of a relatively self-sufficient but isolated life on the land is rapidly dying. The Eskimo of today do not want to be regarded as a backward or rustic people, rather they long to acquire the sophistication, comfort, and luxury which to them is the life of the Euro-Canadian representatives around them.



Plate 14. Mackenzie Eskimo costume.