

THE FAMILY AMONG THE WESTERN ESKIMO¹

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Anthropologists have long disagreed about the relative importance in human society of the family and larger kin groups. As early as 1877 Morgan recognized that the type of marriage plan in force—more specifically, whether or not sexual unions included a lasting contractual relationship and what this relationship involved—is a key element in the development of family organization. The highest level of development in his evolutionary scheme was monogamous marriage, which gives rise to a family unit composed of a man, his wife, and their offspring: "The idea of the family has been a growth through successive stages of development, the monogamian being the last in a series of forms" (Morgan, 1877, p. 393). To reach this highest form the family has to evolve through four other family types, based upon various marriage plans: promiscuity, sisters with joint husbands, pairs without exclusive cohabitation, and polygyny. Besides hypothesizing an evolutionary scheme for the family, Morgan set up five family types coincident with five forms of marriage, each of which gave rise to a system of consanguinity: "Nothing can be plainer than that this (the monogamian) form of marriage made this form of family, and that the latter created this system of consanguinity. The three are necessary parts of a whole where the descriptive system is exclusive . . . Any of these three parts being given, the existence of the other two with it, at some one time may be deduced with certainty" (Morgan, 1877, pp. 497-498). While Morgan, with his evolutionary approach, did not discuss the functioning of the "monogamic" unit of man, wife, and children in his four other family types, he suggested that this unit, if it exists at all, is, for all practical purposes, obscured, and that it is not clearly recognizable except in a monogamous system.

In 1920 Lowie contradicted this thesis: "It does not matter whether marital relations are permanent or temporary; whether there is polygyny or polyandry or sexual license; whether conditions are complicated by the addition of members not included in *our* family circle: the one fact stands out beyond all others that everywhere the husband, wife, and immature children constitute a unit apart from the remainder of the community" (Lowie, 1920, pp. 66-67). He was still of the same opinion in 1948 when he wrote that on the basis of present knowledge "virtually all recent scholars—Swanton, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Wilhelm Schmidt, to take a few examples—agree that the family occurs everywhere. And, going beyond contemporary indications, many infer

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that it antedated other units of larger extent, being found in clear-cut form precisely among the tribes that represent materially and otherwise the simplest level of culture" (Lowie, 1948, p. 217).

Murdock, in line with Lowie on this point, took an even stronger view: "Among the majority of the peoples of the earth, however, nuclear families are combined, like atoms in a molecule, into larger aggregates . . . The nuclear family is a universal human social grouping. Either as the sole prevailing form of the family or as the basic unit from which more complex familial forms are compounded, it exists as a distinct and strongly functional group in every known society" (Murdock, 1949, pp. 1-2).

Linton, on the other hand, concluded that the unit formed by a man, his wife, and their children is not important in all societies: "It is hard for Europeans to realize the sharp disjunction which exists in many social systems between the reproductive unit composed of mates and their offspring and the authentic, institutional family. It happens that in our own society these two units coincide much more closely than in most. As a result, European students have shown a strong tendency to assume that any grouping composed of father, mother, and children must constitute the social equivalent of the family among ourselves. Actually, such groupings play an insignificant role in the lives of many societies, while at least one society refuses to give them any formal recognition" (Linton, 1936, p. 153).

In each instance cited above, the unit under discussion is the same. Morgan termed it the "monogamian family;" Murdock, the "nuclear family." In the following discussion of the Western Eskimo family, it will be shown that, for the area under consideration, the nuclear family is a distinct structural unit, although it shares functions with larger structural units such as the extended family, polygamous family, and multi-family household. Further, while it stands as a clear-cut structural unit, its membership is in flux.

Murdock's terminology will be used because it provides labels for all of the distinct family types occurring among the Western Eskimo. The term *nuclear family* will be used to mean "a married man and woman and their offspring." An *extended family* consists of "two or more nuclear families affiliated through an extension of the parent-child relationship." A *polygamous family* is made up of "two or more nuclear families . . . having one married parent in common." The *polygamous member-family*, a term not used by Murdock, but useful for the Western Eskimo system, will be used to indicate a wife of a polygynous man, and her offspring. A polygamous member-family has the same relationship to the polygamous family as the nuclear family has to the extended family.

Ethnological accounts of the Western Eskimo are sparse,² but a

² There is only one full monograph on the social culture of a tribe in this area: Margaret Lantis, **The Social Culture of the Nunivak Eskimo**. Kaj Birket-Smith, **The Chugach Eskimo**, contains a chapter entitled "Social Life," which treats marriage rules, kinship, life crises, the village community, and customary law.

number of references to family make-up can be gleaned from early accounts written by untrained observers in the area. A survey of the literature shows that, as residence units, three major family types—extended, polygamous, and nuclear—occur in the area.

The Polygamous Family. Reports of polygyny and polyandry are frequent in the early literature. A careful survey, however, indicates that except for the Aleuts and the Kanyaghs both forms of plural marriage were restricted to "chiefs" and a few wealthy individuals. Although polygyny correlates with prestige and wealth factors, and so may be considered a "preferred" form, monogamy is much more prevalent. The polygamous family as a dominant type occurs only in the Aleutians and among the Kanyaghs.

There is considerable indication that the *polygynous member-family*, the equivalent under polygyny of the nuclear family, maintains itself as a distinct residence and functioning group within the larger unit. Drawing on the report of Krenitzin and Levashef (1768-69) concerning the Aleut, Coxe described each wife and her children as a separate unit: "The wives do not all live together, but, like the Kamtchadals, in different yourts" (Coxe, 1787, p. 217). It is probable that these were summer dwellings, and that multiple family structures were used in winter. Even then the member-family retained its identity, for every woman occupied a distinct walled-off division (Sarytchev, 1806, p. 8). Lisiansky reported that polygyny existed among both the Toyons (chiefs) and "private persons" among the natives of Kodiak Island (Lisiansky, 1814, p. 198), but he did not say whether or not member-families functioned as separate units. Since the most frequent house-type was a multiple-family barabara, similar to that of the Aleuts, it seems likely that these polygynous units occupied a single house structure, in a manner similar to that of the Aleuts.

Plural marriages occurred less often among other Alaskan Eskimo groups. While there are many references to their existence, few throw any light upon the problem of the position of the member-family with respect to the larger group. Among the Chugach polyandry was said to be unknown, and only a few, rich men practiced polygyny (Birket-Smith, 1953, p. 81). Lantis reported that both polygyny and polyandry were practiced, but were rare, among the Nuniwagmiut (Lantis, 1946, p. 198). Polygyny among the Kaviagmiut was restricted to those who could afford to support more wives. When it occurred, it was often sororal (Dall, 1870, p. 138). A similar arrangement existed in the Norton Sound and the Lower Yukon region (Nelson, 1899, p. 282). Thornton, who reported that "polygamy is practiced by some of the rich men" among the Kinugumiut, explained polygyny there on a purely economic basis: "The custom probably arose from the fact that it was found more convenient, and perhaps cheaper, to have a number of wives than one wife and several servants—a cause which may have produced much of the polygamy that has thus far existed; though it is quite possible that among these Eskimos the desire for male offspring has had its effect in certain cases." Kinugumiut polygynous families lived in

one house and were sometimes bilocal extended families as well (Thornton, 1931, pp. 63, 220). There is no indication here of separate divisions for the member-families in the larger household, but there is a suggestion that some status differences did prevail. A similar situation has been described for the Point Barrow region: "They [secondary wives] are taken into the family more as assistants to the first wife, as she rules over them, treating them as servants . . ." (Ray, 1885, p. 44). However, both Murdoch (1892, p. 411) and Ray reported that polygyny was rare at Point Barrow, and confined to "wealthy" and "influential" men. Maguire's report corroborates their statements (1854, pp. 376, 385).

Polygyny and polyandry were exceptions rather than the rule among the Mackenzie Eskimo. Stefansson reported that: "A day was devoted to inquiry into plural marriages where I recorded names and relationships of all persons concerned and available facts about their lives. I found that polygamy and polyandry seem to have been about equally common before the coming of white men and both together doubtless made up less than five per cent of all marriages" (Stefansson, 1921, p. 466).

Statements on the Siberian Eskimo conflict. Moore, writing about the St. Lawrence Island Eskimo, whom he considered immigrants from the Siberian groups, stated that "formerly when there was less disproportion between the sexes, polygamy was common, as it is today among their close kin who live across the channel at Indian Point, Siberia—one man there being the possessor of six wives" (Moore, 1923, p. 367). On the other hand, Bogoras reported that monogamy was the rule, and gave as the reason that it was almost impossible for a man to support more than one wife (Bogoras, 1909, p. 611). Perhaps Moore has confused the practice of the few with that of the many.

Plural marriage, then, is the predominant form only among the Aleuts and Kanyags, but a small percentage of the people in each Western Eskimo "tribe" practice it. The available evidence suggests that more often than not the wives of one man lived together in the same multi-family house structure; and where clear-cut descriptions are available, they indicate that the member-families of the polygynous family maintained separate quarters within the house.

The Extended Family. Only a few definite statements concerning the extended relationship of nuclear families living within a single house structure are found in the literature. Census data showing the composition of households is available for only one locality. Lantis lists thirty households. Of these, fourteen are nuclear families, seven are matri-extended families, five are patri-extended families, one is a bilateral extended family, two include a joint family made up of a brother and a sister and the nuclear family of each: and one is a joint family composed of two unrelated nuclear families (Lantis, 1946, appendix 1, p. 317). Garber described a bilocal extended family as often found among the "western Eskimo": "In this small room may often be found living a father and mother, three to six children, possibly an older son or daughter, who is married, and likely the grandparents"

(Garber, 1935, p. 216.) Both Curtis (1930, p. 48) and Lantis (1946, p. 159) found a matri-extended family among the Nuniwagmiut of Nunivak Island. The following statement from Lantis' report makes clear the composition of the Nuniwagmiut family: "A son-in-law came to live with the bride's parents; hence the two or more families occupying one house were related. Besides the parents and children, there was often an old great-aunt or a foster-grandfather, a widowed sister who had not yet found a new husband, or some other single person in the household" (1946, p. 159). But, in view of the fact that frequently matrilocal residence was only temporary, the extended family must needs be temporary also, or it must have contained a fluctuating membership. Under these circumstances, it is obvious that the nuclear family retained enough of its identity to detach itself from the larger extended family group.

The Chugach of Prince William Sound had no strict residence rule, although there was a tendency toward a temporary matrilocal residence. Birket-Smith has recorded the situation as follows: "It seems that as a rule the couple would live in the bride's village first and then in that of the husband, so that the parents would not feel lonesome in the beginning." However, the young people could set up a separate residence if they chose (1953, p. 81). He also described a collateral extended family: "Two or more brothers might marry two or more sisters and would then sometimes live in the same house . . ." (1953, p. 80).

Thornton found that the extended family is one of a number of types among the Cape Prince of Wales Kinugumiut: "The other rooms, which connect with the anteroom, are occupied by different families; or, in the case of a chief with several wives and a large family, by his supernumerary wives and their families. Some igloos, however, are occupied by only one family, and some by only two" (Thornton, 1931, p. 220). The multi-family house was divided into "rooms" for nuclear or member-families.

There are numerous references to this condition everywhere in the area. Aleut dwellings were divided into *pologs* by rude partitions of deerskin or straw mats. Each *polog* was occupied by a separate family (Coxe, 1787, p. 119, 175, 214; Sarytchev, 1806, p. 72; Langsdorff, 1814, p. 32; Schwatka, 1900, p. 112; Muir, 1917, p. 42). Schwatka stated that 200 or more people lived in each dwelling; and Muir said three or four families. Dall's report that such houses were often occupied by as many as 100 families is probably erroneous (Dall, 1870, p. 6). As stated above, these were frequently polygynous families, but it is quite possible that here, as elsewhere in Alaska, unrelated families occupied a single house structure. Nuclear families were separated within the structure, but there is no information concerning their economic independence or interdependence.

Nelson's account of King Island and East Cape, Siberia, Eskimo houses is similar to those for the Aleuts. Both had multiple-family structures, with separate *pologs* for each family (Nelson, 1899, pp. 225,

258). Each structure usually contained two families, but whether or not they were related is not known.

The Ikogmiut of St. Michael had a one-room dwelling for three families. Each family had a separate bed platform on one of the three sides of the room. Each family had its own clay lamp, but all used a common central fireplace for cooking (Nelson, 1899, pp. 243-244). A similar arrangement is reported for the Bering Strait and Kotzebue Sound region (Nelson, 1899, pp. 288-289; Curtis, 1930, p. 162). Nelson also reported separate family rooms connected by passages to a central community cooking room at Cape Nome (1899, pp. 253-254).

The Nuwakmiut of Point Barrow (Jenness, 1918, p. 95) and the Mackenzie Eskimo (Stefansson, 1914, p. 135) had one structure for two or three families. They may or may not have been related. Each nuclear unit functioned separately, but the practice of hospitality and obligatory gift giving made them somewhat economically interdependent.

The multiple-family house type predominates throughout the Western Eskimo area. However, no definite statement on the distribution of the extended family can be made. It seems probable that some relationship did exist between the families in a given structure; but data indicating what these relationships are and the frequency of each are not available. It is fairly evident, however, that the nuclear or member-family retained to a large extent its identity as a residence unit, either by occupying a separate room, a separate platform, or a separate area in the multi-family dwelling.

The Nuclear Family. The nuclear family unit, consisting of parents and their children, is important everywhere in the area whether or not it is attached to a larger family unit. It functions as an economic and household group, and as a reproductive unit. However, everywhere in the area, the nuclear family shares each of these responsibilities with a larger social group.

The nuclear family rarely exists as a separate residential unit in the area. Only on Little Diomed Island are separate winter dwellings reported for each nuclear group (Curtis, 1930, p. 111). The nuclear family sometimes resides alone in a tent or temporary structure in summer camps and while traveling.

But even within multiple-family structures, there is a tendency for the nuclear family to retain its individuality. As already stated, in the Aleut, Kanyagh, and Siberian and St. Lawrence Island Eskimo house, each family had a walled-off sleeping section, while the Ikogmiut provided separate bed-platforms for each family. The following quotation from Nelson's account of the Norton Sound and Lower Yukon region shows the degree of independence of each nuclear family there: "Each woman who is the head of a family has an oil lamp beside her sleeping bench where she sews or carries on her household work. Her own cooking utensils and wooden dishes for food, together with the stock of seal oil, dried salmon, and other articles of domestic economy, are kept at one side of the platform or in a corner of the room devoted to

this purpose" (Nelson, 1899, p. 288). Each nuclear group at Cape Nome (Nelson, 1899, p. 253) and St. Michael (Nelson, 1899, p. 243) had its own assigned side of the structure. "In perhaps a greater number of cases housemates consisted of two or more families independent of the other" (Stefansson, 1914, p. 135) among the Mackenzie Eskimo.

From the economic aspect, however, the nuclear families were not quite so distinct. In the important matter of food-getting, the responsibility for, and the ownership of, foodstuffs was divided. Provision of much of the family's food supply was the responsibility of the nuclear family head, and he owned his catch. At Point Barrow, a caribou belonged to the hunter who killed it (Stefansson, 1913, p. 65), and in the Aleutians, fish belonged to the fisherman who caught them (Langsdorff, 1814, p. 45). The King Islanders cached the winter's meat supply in a village-owned cache, but each piece was marked to indicate the individual owner (Weyer, 1932, p. 184). However, among the Chugach "the meat was always common property, being divided equally between the villagers, and just as the inhabitants of a house hunted together so they ate their meals in common. There were no special cuts or sections, and neither chiefs nor whale killers received a greater share than anybody else. At present all persons who come down to the beach in Chenega when a sea lion has been caught will get their share, but no others" (Birket-Smith, 1953, p. 96). In some cases, especially with whale and walrus, the first catch of the year, or a young man's first catch, the game was owned by the village and distributed according to pattern (Birket-Smith, 1953, p. 110; Lantis, 1946, p. 258; Langsdorff, 1814, p. 45; Weyer, 1932, p. 183).

Food was either cooked jointly by families living in a given structure, or a single fireplace served each in turn. Nelson reported that at Bering Strait "when the time approaches for the preparation of a meal, a fire is built in the middle of the room and the food made ready, after which each woman places a quantity in one or more wooden dishes, takes it to the *kashim* [men's house], and sets it beside her husband, father, or whomever she has provided for" (Nelson, 1899, p. 289). At Kotzebue Sound the same lamps and cooking utensils were used in turn by each family (Curtis, 1930, p. 162). If a young Chugach couple lived with either the bride's or the groom's parents, the newly wedded wife would use her mother or her mother-in-law's cooking basket until she got one of her own (Birket-Smith, 1953, p. 81).

Even the factor of reproduction, usually reserved to the nuclear family unit, is shared by the custom of wife lending, which occurred in almost every group in the area. The sources for the Aleut (Coxe, 1787, pp. 200; 217-218; Sarytchev, 1806, pp. 76-77; Landgsdorff, 1814, p. 47; Schwatka, 1900, p. 112), the Eskimo of the Yukon and Kuskokwin Delta (Garbor, 1935, pp. 225-226), the Nuwukmiut of the northern coast and Point Barrow (Andrews, 1939, p. 102; Murdoch, 1892, p. 413), and the Siberian Eskimo (Bogoras, 1909, p. 606) describe wife lending and place no limitations upon it. The institution was limited to an exchange between brothers and close friends among the Nuniwagmiut,

the Malemiut of Kotzebue Sound (Curtis, 1930, pp. 49, 244), and at the Mackenzie Delta (Stefánsson, 1914, p. 164). Among the Chugach, a man might sleep with his female cross-cousin while her husband was away without arousing the anger of the husband, and brothers married to sisters and living in a joint household were permitted to exchange mates (Birket-Smith, 1953, p. 80). Children belonged to the recognized husband of the mother even though paternity was obscured. Adoption also occurred throughout the area, and adopted children were identified with own children within the nuclear family.

The high frequency of divorce tended to further obscure the consanguineal ties of the nuclear family. In every group in the area except the Aleut, divorce was accomplished by mutual agreement to separate. Among the Aleut a man could send a wife back to her family, thus accomplishing the divorce. New marriages were usually made by both members of the divorced couple. Nuclear family memberships were constantly being realigned. In some areas there was simply a sibling identification of half-siblings residing together. The Nuniwagmiut, however, used different terms for true siblings, for siblings with the same father but different mothers, and for siblings with the same mother but different fathers (Lantis, 1946, p. 236). Although this terminological distinction may be an adaptation to a predominantly polygamous society (Lantis reports this as rare in 1946, but the terminology may date back to a period in which its frequency was significant), the terms may have been usefully extended to cover the situation in cases of divorce and remarriage. Similar distinctions may have been made in other areas, but unfortunately kinship terminologies are wholly or partially unknown.

Western Eskimo social organization has a definite structure of nuclear family, multi-family household of lineally, collaterally, or polygynously extended, or unrelated families, and villages. This structuring is not controlled by strict residence and/or descent rules, or by strong kin group affiliations. The literature yields very few references to any type of kin group larger than the extended family. Lantis (1946, pp. 239-240) has reported patrilineages on Nunivak Island, Nelson (1899, pp. 322-326) imputed patrilineages to the Eskimos of the Kuskokwim River northward, and there is evidence that either an incipient or a disintegrating system of matrilineages existed among the Aleut at the time of contact. Although Nelson tried to establish "gentes" (patri-sibs) in the area from the Kuskokwim River to Point Hope on the basis of patrilineally descending "totem marks" it is doubtful that these were true gentes. Dall (1870, p. 145) stated that no totemic system was to be found around Norton Sound, and Murdoch (1892, p. 42) found patri-sibs absent at Point Barrow.

Each individual is always a member of three units: 1. a nuclear family; 2. a larger dwelling unit in which some functions, such as cooking, are communal; and 3. a village group. Any or all of these affiliations may be changed at any time because of economic factors or simply a desire to shift. At any given point of time, an individual can

be affiliated residentially, economically, and procreatively with one unit of each kind. His residential tie is strong with all three. His economic responsibility is primarily to his nuclear family unit and to his village through game distribution, and secondarily to his dwelling mates by reciprocal and obligatory gift giving. His part in procreation, when he becomes an adult, is within his new nuclear family, but it becomes village-wide through wife lending, divorce, and adoption practices. He may change his membership in these units at any time, but the intergroup functions and the individual's responsibilities within each type of unit remain the same.

With reference to the existence of a nuclear family and its relationship to other family types and larger kinship groups, the Western Eskimo system is a substantiation of the views of Murdock and Lowie. Everywhere in the area under consideration, "husband, wife, and immature children" do "constitute a unit apart from the remainder of the community," and this unit does exist here among tribes that represent a simple socio-political structure. Further, the nuclear families do seem to combine "like atoms in a molecule" into the larger aggregates of multi-family households and village groups.

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