FEMALE INFANTICIDE ON THE ARCTIC COAST

ASEN BALIKCI

Université de Montréal

For many years anthropologists and explorers travelling across northern North America have observed that the custom of infanticide exists in many Eskimo groups. More particularly, Stefansson writing on the inhabitants of northern Alaska, Jenness on the Copper Eskimos, Rasmussen on the Netsilingmiut, Boas on the east Baffin Islanders and Turner on the Labrador Eskimos have vividly described this practice. Most of the observers agree on the prevalence of discrimination against female children, who are more frequently killed than male infants.

Weyer (1932: 134) has assembled demographic data on children from several Eskimo groups which show a marked preponderance of boys over girls. It is reproduced in part here:

Location of tribe	*No. of girls*	*No. of boys*	*Girls per 100 boys*
Cape Smyth, Alaska, 1902	14	27	52
Netsilik Eskimos, 1902	66	138	48
Quernermiut (Barren Grounds), 1929	11	24	46
Aivilingmiut (northwest coast of Hudson Bay), 1902	15	27	56

Only a high rate of female infanticide can explain this imbalanced sex ratio. The scattered observations on infanticide made by travellers are thus corroborated by statistics. Field ethnographers, impressed by the 'callousness' of Eskimo parents, have repeatedly sought explanations for these acts. Many different specific reasons have been propounded, combining statements from informants and the ethnographer's own views on the matter. Two authors have attempted more general interpretations: Weyer in his general work on the Eskimos (1932: 131–49) and Hoebel (1961: 74–9). Hoebel relates infanticide, invalidicide, senilicide and suicide and considers them to be privileged acts: approved homicide. A basic postulate, 'life is hard', and its corollary, 'the insupportability of unproductive members of society', govern these acts. 'Life is hard' is a very general statement lacking specific content. Weyer's approach is even broader. Female infanticide, which he holds to be an artificial check against population increase, he considers to be a reaction to a population problem and part of the 'population policy' of the Eskimos (1932: 131). He admits that scarcity of food sets a low maximum on the density of population in the Eskimo region (1932: 141). Unchecked, population will increase beyond the optimum. Infanticide and senilicide are essential in establishing an optimal balance between resources and society, a balance that can be expressed in quantitative terms. Weyer perceives the importance for the subject of infanticide, 'for it involves a fundamental question in racial survival which is governed by laws closely analogous to those of organic evolution' (1932: 146).

Particularly high is the infanticide rate among the Netsilingmiut, as noted by Boas for 1902. Twenty years later, Rasmussen on his journey across Arctic America made a careful survey of this custom among the Netsilik Eskimos living at Malerualik on King William Island. 'I asked all the women how many children they had borne and how many girls they had put out of the way. I went into every single tent and spoke with every one of them' (Rasmussen 1931: 140). The list he compiled showed 96 births for 18 marriages, and 38 girls killed. This ratio is in harmony with his 1923 census of the Netsilik tribe as a whole: 259 individuals, of whom 150 were males and only 109 females. Rasmussen concluded: 'Despite the high birth rate, the tribe is moving towards extinction if girl children are to be consistently suppressed' (1931: 14).

This article questions Rasmussen's statement and presents first a brief exposition of the various adaptive processes of Netsilik society, which appear relatively complex despite the alleged simplicity of Eskimo culture and the directness of Eskimo responses to harsh environmental conditions seen in their specialised technology. Second, female infanticide will be viewed in relation to the other elements of Eskimo 'population policy,' namely senilicide, invalidicide, adoption and migration. Third, a description will be presented of the strategies used by these Eskimos when faced with a shortgage of women resulting from female infanticide. Finally, an effort will be made to see whether female infanticide, a flexible practice, is in harmony with Netsilik ethos and the general flexibility prevalent in Eskimo socio-economic organisation. Most of the data included here come from contributions published by Rasmussen, Van de Velde, Steenhoven and the author. The unit of analysis is the Arviligjuarmiut of Pelly Bay, an eastern sub-group of the Netsilik Eskimos.

Adaptation, flexibility and ecological pressure

The Arviligjuarmiut inhabit a vast area around Pelly Bay, on the Arctic coast of Canada. This arm of the sea, surrounded by rocky hills, is about sixty miles long. The climate is arctic, characterised by continuous extreme cold in winter and a cool summer. The sea begins to freeze in October, and the sea-ice does not disappear until the end of July. The Pelly Bay area lies entirely in the arctic tundra biogeographical zone and is considered by the Eskimos to be relatively rich in game. The ringed seal is abundant, more so than in the western Netsilik region. The valuable bearded seal is also to be found in the northern end of Pelly Bay. There are no walruses or large whales, and the white whale is rare. Salmon trout are vital to the subsistence economy of the Arviligjuarmiut, primarily during the running season along the several large rivers flowing into Pelly Bay. Arctic cod are scarce in the area, but there are many deep-water lakes abounding in lake trout.

Caribou have never been plentiful around Pelly Bay. There is evidence to suggest that in traditional times musk oxen were distributed widely south and west of Pelly Bay. These four animals—seals, fish, caribou and musk oxen—were the main species on which the Arviligjuarmiut relied. Foxes, marmots, polar bears, arctic hares and various birds were irregularly distributed and only occasionally hunted.

Despite the relative abundance of game in the area, Rasmussen writes: 'There is scarcely any country on earth that presents conditions more severe and inclement

for man than the most easterly parts of the Northwest Passage, for it lies waste and bare of all that is otherwise necessary to life' (1931: 131). Survival of the Arviligjuarmiut in this harsh environment was insured mainly by three forms of adaptation: technological, socio-ecological and demographic. Although this article deals specifically with infanticide as a form of demographic control, it is important to first describe the socio-ecological adaptive pattern to which it is related. Technological adaptation we can omit as irrelevant to the topic.

The socio-ecological adaptation of the Arviligjuarmiut seen in their two-phased migration cycle followed the typical central Eskimo pattern (Mauss 1906). In winter large communities of over sixty people were formed on the sea ice, and seal hunting was conducted collectively at seal breathing holes. This marine phase was characterised by elaborate shamanising, drum dancing, and rigorous food-sharing rules. In spring the band split into smaller units with extended families as their cores. Seals were hunted by a group of harpooners at open breathing holes. In early August large amounts of salmon trout were caught at stone weirs. Autumn was the season for collective caribou drives. As the caribou crossed certain lakes and large rivers, they were speared by the fast-paddling kayakers. In the late autumn fishing for salmon trout with a leister through the thin ice was profitable. This brought to a close the inland phase of the annual migration cycle, marked by a social life of much lesser intensity (Balikci 1964: 41–4). It is evident that a keen knowledge of local game distribution allowed the people to exercise prediction and develop an orderly migration pattern.

At this level of analysis, survival of the Arviligjuarmiut was made possible by the application of certain adaptive processes or strategies. Important among these strategies were delayed consumption, which required reliable caching techniques, and the several food-sharing practices which equalised the food supply both over time and within the community. Particularly important was flexibility in the application of known techniques to changing conditions or in the choice of alternative techniques. Many cases attest ingenuity in the substitution of one weapon for another or the novel and imaginative use of artifacts. The bow and arrow could replace the kayak for caribou hunting, the fishing harpoon was used when fishing with a leister failed. Further, many seasonal hunts had some alternative; thus, musk ox hunting or fishing could be substituted for sealing. In situations when the more efficient collective techniques could not be used, there were individualistic alternatives to fall back on. Such instances of flexibility enabled individuals and groups to survive temporary difficulties.

Flexibility was also apparent in the choice of residence. The traditional Netsilik community, lacking formal chieftainship, was held together by three main organisational factors. The first was economic co-operation, the need for collaboration in the hunts that were vital to survival. Second was the functioning of extended, patrilocal families which constituted the basic kinship unit of the Netsilik. As one informant put it: 'The *ilagiit* [extended family] are the related people who may go away but come back and then share food, help each other and stay together.' Third was the existence of numerous patterned dyadic relations of a balanced reciprocal nature that cut across kinship units: joking partnerships, meat-sharing partnerships, wife-exchange partnerships, song partnerships, avoidance partnerships. A family could temporarily part from its community and join

another band where better hunting opportunities existed. There the family joined temporarily a related *ilagiit*, the hunter participated in the collective activities and was integrated into the network of dyadic relations. The organisational framework of Netsilik society was simple and flexible enough to allow for such movements. These may be considered as adaptive in the sense that they allowed the hunter to exploit different and somewhat richer hunting grounds and to strengthen valuable social relationships.

The preceding description does not give an understanding of the endless hardships that the Netsilik, 'so harshly treated by nature,' had to face almost continuously. There was not much time for leisure. 'Everything is naturally focused entirely and absolutely upon the requirements that the increasing search for the daily meat necessitates' (Rasmussen 1931: 142). Travelling and moving camp was an arduous task. A family owned only one or two dogs, and the small skin sledges had to be pushed and pulled by men and women. Old people had to drag themselves behind. Sealing in winter obliged the hunters to spend hours motionless in the intense cold. A particular spring sealing technique involved spending a whole night in front of the breathing hole, waiting for the seal to surface in the morning. At the stone weir it took several days for the dam to be built, the men up to their waists in the ice-cold water. Beating the fast-running caribou over great distances in the tundra was an exhausting task. Stalking the caribou with bow and arrow also involved endless pursuits across the tundra. Hunting was a never-ceasing pursuit; the game had to be brought to camp at all cost. 'The man that is wise never lolls about idle when the weather is good; he can never know when bad days may eat up his meat caches and drive him and his family into starvation' (1931: 134). It is this endless succession of strains and hardships expressive of the relations between the Netsilik and his environment that we may call continuous ecological pressure.

Under various circumstances game may suddenly decrease and cause starvation. 'If the Netsilik do not succeed in gathering a sufficient winter supply they may take it more or less for granted that before the end of the year there will be a time of privation with death as the probable outcome' (1931: 132). For the two years preceding his journey of 1923, Rasmussen counted 25 deaths due to hunger, equivalent to 10 per cent. of the tribal population. It is to such critical situations that we shall apply the term extreme ecological pressure.

Female infanticide among the Netsilik

I mentioned previously that Rasmussen, in 1923, examined 18 marriages among the western Netsilik and discovered 38 cases of female infanticide among 96 births. Unfortunately, Rasmussen did not conduct a similar survey among the eastern Netsilik. His population census for Pelly Bay and Simpson Peninsula reveals a total of 56 individuals, 32 males and 24 females. The adults outnumber the children: 36 adults and 20 children, of which 13 were boys and 7 were girls. Among the adults Rasmussen counted 19 men and 17 women. It is clear from this census that female infanticide was practised to a high degree among the Arviligjuarmiut. This tends to be confirmed by the case of Orpingalik, a Pelly Bay Eskimo not included in the population census for 1923. The case was described by Rasmussen (1931: 11

and again 1931: 141 under the name of Imingasruk) and Steenhoven (1959: 50) and verified by Van De Velde (personal communication). Orpingalik had had twenty children, of which ten girls had been killed, four boys died of disease, one son had drowned and four sons and one daughter were alive.

In different seasons, different techniques of infanticide were practised. In winter the newborn infant was placed in the snow porch where its cries could be heard by all visitors. Abandoned on the ice floor, it would rapidly freeze. Another method that had no season was suffocation. The baby would be laid on its back on the sleeping counter and a heavy and particularly furry skin would be brought over its face until it suffocated. In summer, a small stone grave was made right by the skin tent and the baby was placed inside, where it cried for many hours until it died. Apparently no active killing methods were used. However, according to informants, preparations for infanticide—such as making the stone grave—were made by the mother.

Naming may have restrained infanticide. The name carries a personal, supernatural power among the Netsilik; it is independent of the sex of its bearer and can be transmitted from generation to generation. There is a vague belief that the dead have a strong desire to reincarnate and that they make their own choice of the infant in whom they wish to live again. This is done by the mother's trying several names during childbirth, with the one most helpful at delivery being retained. 'I am named Manelaq because when that name was mentioned I came out of mother's womb' said one of Rasmussen's female informants (1931: 221). Infants thus may be named moments before birth, before their sex is known. The name might restrain the parents from letting a child die, because killing a named child could offend the reincarnated ghost. Two cases may be quoted in this respect. A female informant of Van de Velde, describing the killing of her elder sister, added: '*attiksalioralluar*,' meaning 'although she had a name,' thus implying that this killing was somewhat improper. In the second case a male infant named before birth was born with a crooked mouth and a deformed ear. When this was discovered it was decided to let him freeze. At this moment his mother fell in a trance, crying and gesticulating and apparently very sick and near death. The child was allowed to live, the presumption being that the name (child) had a strong desire to live and that he was taking vengeance upon the mother. The influence of naming upon infanticide is still unclear. It may be considered, however, as the only supernatural element affecting infanticide, which otherwise has no religious or sacrificial connotation.

Decision patterns in relation to infanticide seem variable. Van de Velde (1954: 6) states that the decision could be made by the mother, the father, the grandfather or the widowed grandmother. Arnakayak killed her child under orders from her husband: 'There was no other way, at that time we were very scared by our husbands.' Orpingalik's daughters were killed under his orders: 'none of these [girls] were allowed by Orpingalik to live. When the tenth [*sic*] was born, Orpingalik was busy in the *sapotit*, i.e., in the stone weir where the arctic char are speared. The catch was very good at the moment when the news of the birth reached Orpingalik. He finished the spearing, then returned to his tent where he allowed the girl to live. It was thus owing to his good mood at that moment that the girl owes her happy existence' (Steenhoven 1959: 50). Grandmothers, too, seem

to have been in a favoured position regarding decision-taking for infanticide. The elderly female in the extended family was considered a 'food boss' in the igloo. No one could take any food without her permission. Food gifts that the children received in neighbouring igloos had first to be taken to the grandmother and then eaten with her approval. Furthermore, the elderly woman, being more experienced in child-rearing, often acted as supervisor for the children, freeing the young mother for other chores. Old Nalungiaq told Rasmussen, after stating her views on infanticide: 'If my daughter Quertiliq had a girl child I would strangle it at once. If I did not, I think I would be a bad mother' (Rasmussen 1931: 140). My informants, however, repeatedly stated that such decisions were taken by the strongest personality in the household, man or woman, whose will and leadership had been established. This was certainly true in the case of Orpingalik, 'a shaman in high esteem . . . not only intelligent but having a fertile wit. As a hunter he stood high . . . he was a strong and deadly archer and the quickest kayakman . . .' (Rasmussen 1931: 13).

It is clear that decisions on infanticide were made within the nuclear or the extended family, usually consisting of elderly parents and their married sons. No one outside this group interfered in such an important decision. The decision was made rapidly, without much discussion or hesitation, shortly after birth.

There were other factors and situations, sometimes involving neighbours, which tended to prevent discrimination against female infants, such as adoption and demands in marriage.

Adoption was important among the traditional Netsilingmiut. It was motivated by many considerations which cannot be analysed here in detail. The 1923 census reveals that of the twenty Arviligiuar children, four were adopted, namely two boys and two girls. Two families with no children had adopted one boy each, while two families with one male child had adopted one girl each. Unfortunately Rasmussen does not elaborate on the motivations and conditions for adoption in these cases. We have to refer to general statements on the subject and case material from the traditional period collected recently.

Couples who did not have children or who wished for more could adopt unwanted children. This is supported by the 1923 Arviligiuar cases. 'Their pleasure in their offspring is great, and children always unite parents closely. If they cannot beget children, a little adoptive child usually has the same effect and influence' (Rasmussen 1931: 193). The strains of nomadic life in this harsh environment were such that a hunter was not very old before he had to rely on his sons to help him in the hunt. Sons were an asset in old age. This was the main motivation behind adoption in Netsilik society. Adoption usually took place at birth and usually involved payment. The adoptive mother fed the child with the mouth-to-mouth technique. Although the request for adoption usually took place before birth, any visitor who heard the cries of an abandoned baby could take it home and adopt it (Van de Velde 1954: 6). The adoption of girls can be explained in two ways. First, mothers preferred to keep their boys, leaving mainly girls for adoption. Second, the Netsilik held the belief that the first-born infant of either sex should be allowed to live, because that child's death might bring misfortune to later children. Frequently the first child, male or female, was adopted by the grandmother and raised with particular care. It should be noted that a girl also offered old-age

security to her grandmother; the old woman could later reside with her married grandchild.

There was great variety in the methods of spouse selection among the Netsilik. One form, promised marriage, might have had a bearing upon infanticide: 'Most young men and women are "engaged" before they are born, which means that the parents agree that their children are to have each other' (Rasmussen 1931: 194). Sometimes such requests for engagement came shortly after the birth of the female infant, effectively preventing infanticide (Balikci 1963: 92). However, there are not sufficient data to evaluate the restraining influence that this practice had upon infanticide, although such an influence undoubtedly existed.

It is clear that although the decision for infanticide was made within the family circle, unrelated people could influence the decision by a request for adoption or for a promise of marriage. These requests benefited other families, however, and were not made in the name of the 'community'. The Netsilik camp lacked institutionalised leadership; and the seasonally co-residential group was not concerned with infanticide.

The reasons for infanticide as described by Rasmussen's, Van de Velde's and my informants show a remarkable consistency. We may group them in three categories, with examples from my fieldwork.

1. Cases of attempted (or accidental?) child murder that seem to have purely social causes and cannot be related to environmental factors. For example, the woman M. had a boy from her first marriage. When she married her second husband N., the latter decided to kill the child 'because he had another father'. He did not have time to proceed with the execution (or the child was found abandoned but still alive) and the infant was adopted by someone else. Or again, the woman Nulianoaq had a small boy who, one day, broke her soapstone pot, a highly valued possession. In her rage the mother stabbed the child with her knife. The child died shortly after.

2. Second, conditions of extreme ecological pressure may produce infanticide. For example, Kadjak and Iksivalitak were starving while on their way to Pelly Bay. They were dragging their little sled and were so weak that they could hardly pull any more. Their adopted son Pupupuk, about eight years old, could not walk any more; so they abandoned him, still alive. Again, Apitok was starving with her husband and their little daughter. The hunter could not follow any more and fell behind. Then Apitok, dragging a little sled with the girl on it, joined Itoriksak's family, also on the move. Itoriksak asked Apitok to kill the girl, which she did, although with some hesitation. And again, the shaman Samik described the following case to Rasmussen (1931: 138). 'Once when there was a famine Nagtak gave birth to a child, while people lay around about her dying of hunger. What did that child want here? How could it live, when its mother, who should give it life, was herself dried up and starving? So she strangled it and allowed it to freeze and later on ate it.'

3. To the third category belong the numerous cases of female infanticide that take place shortly after birth, under apparently normal conditions of life. Informants agree on one of the reasons behind infanticide; namely that women do not hunt, they are not self-sufficient, and they are less independent than men. A hunter has to feed his daughter for many years, and when grown up she gets married and

leaves the family at the very time when she is becoming useful. A comparison is made with dog teams, where usually only one bitch is to be found in each team: 'bitches simply don't pull as hard as the male dogs do'. A positive reason is also added. Boys, who will one day become reliable hunters, are greatly desired. If a woman is to suckle a female infant for two or three years she has not the chance of having a son during that period. The daughter is thus killed in order to make room, hopefully, for a son.

The Netsilik apparently remain unconscious of one danger involved in female infanticide, namely, scarcity of women. Van de Velde describes (1954: 6) that a group of little girls accompanied by a boy were playing in his house at Pelly Bay. The father of the boy remarked regretfully: 'If only all these children were males!' Van de Velde replied: 'Your boy is not even engaged and you would like all these girls to be boys? Where is he going to find a wife then? Boys will have to kill each other in order to get one!' The Eskimo replied with a stupid smile: '*Izagoralluar* (it is true, yet despite that) . . .'

Infanticide is a flexible practice that cannot be considered as an expression of a single, rigid social rule. The decision to kill is made hastily, in the family, and is based on several factors such as naming, order of birth, the mood of the family headman, probably the size of the family and the state of the hunt at the particular season. Above all, infanticide is a flexible practice in the sense that there are alternatives to it: adoption or engagement for marriage.

Female infanticide, demography and marriage

Considering the prevalence of such a high rate of female infanticide, it is appropriate first to examine briefly its demographic implications in relation to other forms of death, voluntary and accidental, and in relation to the adult sex ratio of the band. Second, female infanticide results in a marked shortage of marriageable women. Thus, it is useful to summarise the various strategies employed by the Netsilik men in their search for spouses. It is assumed here that the acquisitive efforts of the hunters are at an optimal constant and the only way left to lessen the strain of continuous ecological pressure is by limiting population and reducing the number of mouths to be fed. Thus female infanticide is practised in all seasons, and as far as we know, independently of the quantity of food available at the time of birth. Senilicide, invalidicide and certain forms of suicide can also be ascribed to factors of general ecological pressure. Elderly or incapacitated people, unable to contribute to the family store and support the strains of nomadism and intense cold, may kill themselves or ask to be killed. Female infanticide, senilicide and adoption are thus measures designed to adapt family size to the productive capabilities of the active males in the commensal unit, under conditions of continuous ecological pressure. Female infanticide is a vital part of the long range '*family* population policy'.

Numbers were kept low among the Netsilik by causes of death other than those related to disease or old age. There are numerous cases of starvation, cases of infanticide under extreme pressure or for social reasons (as described in the previous section), several cases of murder related to wife-stealing and many cases of suicide motivated by purely social factors (Balikci 1961). As distinct from regular female

infanticide, we consider socially determined deaths and those resulting from peak environmental pressure as having no adaptive value, as being detrimental to survival and as expressing extraordinary tensions between either humans and environment or between men.

It may seem obvious, as Rasmussen noted, that a consistently high rate of female infanticide would disrupt the sex ratio in the society, leading the tribe towards extinction. To a considerable degree, however, the high death rate for adult males was a counterbalancing factor, While Rasmussen's census of the Arviligjuarmiut indicated a gross imbalance between the numbers of boys and girls, the same was not true for adults; he counted 19 men and 17 women. This tendency towards equilibrium in the sex ratio for adults can be explained by several factors. First, by the 'higher death rate among men due to the natural hazards in hunting' (Weyer 1932: 136). This statement is valid for the whole of the Eskimo area although we do not have quantitative data for the Netsilik in the traditional period. Among the Netsilik, drowning, either during kayak-hunting or when crossing lakes and rivers, seems to have been the most frequent type of accident. Hunters also were devoured by polar bears. Starvation, too, seems to have found more victims among men. Of the 25 deaths from hunger counted by Rasmussen, 16 were men and only 9 women (1931: 135). Furthermore, men had a greater tendency to commit suicide than females (Balikci 1961: 577). Finally, in all of the murder cases described by Steenhoven the victims were men.

The higher death rate affected adult men of all ages. As a consequence of female infanticide, many young men reaching adulthood suffered from the lack of marriageable women. 'Men fight among themselves for a wife, for a simple consequence of the shortgage of women is that young strong men must take women by force if their parents have not been so prudent as to betroth them to an infant girl' (Rasmussen 1931: 199).

The Netsilik knew of a number of ways of securing a wife (Balikci 1963). The preferred mate was the first cousin, no distinction being made between parallel or cross-cousins, matrilateral or patrilateral. Parents usually arranged for their children's marriages before birth. Similar promised marriages could be arranged at various times during childhood, but such engagements did not often occur, and some parents might still be seeking wives for adult sons. Yet several cases show that their efforts could be successful.

Young men did not rely exclusively on their parents to find them wives. They looked for themselves, too. The Utkuhikjalingmiut living to the west of the Netsilik apparently did not practise female infanticide to such a high degree, and women were relatively more numerous there. Netsilik men sometimes travelled to this neighbouring tribe to acquire a widow or a woman who had left her husband.

When all these wife-securing techniques failed, men resorted to violence. Women were brutally grabbed. There are cases of wives who were stolen from visiting strangers or weak husbands. In addition, Steenhoven has described cases in which a husband was murdered for the purpose of stealing his wife (1959: 43). Faced with the shortage of women, the Netsilik could adapt in various ways, including polyandry and the importation of women from neighbouring tribes. This scarcity undoubtedly involved hardships: that of waiting for many years before a woman became available, that of the threat of murder involved in

polyandrous arrangements, or, if everything else failed, that of emigration to a different land where matrilocal residence had to be accepted. Yet the marriage pattern was highly flexible: marriage to a first cousin was preferred, but there were a number of alternatives. There were many ways out of a difficult situation. The shortage of women resulting from female infanticide is thus in harmony with the flexibility of the marriage pattern.

Conclusion

The Netsilik place great value on individual independence and self-reliance. An informant described 'the good man' as the capable hunter who brings in the game no matter how difficult the conditions. An element of aggressiveness enters this behaviour. Mirsky has defined the ideal personality of the east Greenlanders: 'The Ammassalik ideal man is one who is outstanding in skill, in strength, in power, a man who expresses his personality fully and without being deterred by economic, social or supernatural sanctions' (Mirsky 1937: 73). This definition seems to fit the Netsilik conception as well. We do not know what the ideal image of the Netsilik woman is; yet this is a society dominated by the hunter, and a woman's survival depends on her man. The observer is left with the impression that this image of the ideal Netsilik personality, although applied only to men, is accepted by both males and females. Women, being less independent, are more easily spared than men in times of environmental pressure. *Female* infanticide is thus in harmony with the image of the ideal Netsilik personality.

Female infanticide works flexibly. It is not governed by a rigid social rule; decisions to kill seem to be made on an *ad hoc* basis within the family. There are alternatives: engagements, and the adoption of a child by neighbours. The flexibility evident in this practice is in harmony with the flexibility in other aspects of Netsilik culture, and is a part of the same behavioural strategy. Just as the Netsilik must be flexible in his hunting pursuits, choice of residence and search for a wife, adapting himself constantly to changing conditions and looking for a way out of difficulties, so he has to be flexible in relation to the size of his family and adapt it to his productive capabilities. The examples of Netsilik behavioural flexibility described here seem to be in harmony with the ethos of another Eskimo group living on east Hudson Bay, which is characterised by a 'lack of perfectionism, compulsiveness, or rigidity' (Honigmann 1959: 119). This does not mean that there is no structure in Eskimo society. Damas has recently produced a structural analysis of Igluligmiut kinship and local groupings (Damas 1963). All that is implied here is that rules have to be adapted in a flexible manner to varying conditions, and that there are alternatives to many rules.

Contrary to the opinion of Rasmussen, who saw in this high rate of female infanticide the danger of tribal extinction, we assume that female infanticide was an adaptive measure, increasing the survival chances of the Netsilik family. Through adaptability in hunting patterns and residence choices, the Netsilik family was better able to face seasonal difficulties. Through female infanticide and its alternative, adoption, the basic social unit could control its size in the face of continuous environmental pressures, the supportive capacity of the hunter, and of future family developments. Female infanticide is adaptive also in relation to the

higher mortality rate of males, and it is in harmony with the flexibility of the marriage pattern.

Eskimo ingenuity and adaptability to an extreme environment through the use of an elaborate technology has been the subject of numerous studies. In this sense Weyer has written: 'The Eskimo is a cultural success: he survives further north than any other people on earth, in exceedingly wretched and difficult conditions—an exemplification of man's cultural adaptability to nature in the raw' (Weyer 1956: 50). At the community level, within the framework of the seasonal dichotomy of the annual cycle, Eskimo social life has been analysed in the classic study of Marcel Mauss. The study of female infanticide enables us to understand Eskimo adaptability at the family level in two ways; the adaptation of the family to a harsh environment, and the adaptation of the family to its neighbours.

NOTE

Fieldwork among the Netsilik Eskimos of Pelly Bay was conducted during the winter of 1959–60 when the author was on the staff of the National Museum of Canada. Additional field trips in the area were undertaken in 1963, 1964 and 1965 for the purpose of making a series of ethnographical films on the annual migration cycle of this Eskimo group.

REFERENCES

Balikci, Asen 1961. Suicidal behavior among the Netsilik Eskimos. In *Canadian society: sociological perspectives* (ed.) B. Blishen. Toronto: Macmillan.

——— 1963. Le régime matrimonial des esquimaux Netsilik. *Homme* **3**, 88–101.

——— 1964. *Development of basic socio-economic units in two Eskimo communities* (Bull. natn. Mus. Can. **202**). Ottawa: National Museum of Canada.

Damas, David 1963. *Igluligmiut kinship and local groupings: a structural approach* (Bull. natn. Mus. Can. **196**). Ottawa: National Museum of Canada.

Hoebel, E. Adamson 1961. *The law of primitive man.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press.

Honigmann, John J. 1959. Notes on Great Whale River ethos. *Anthropologica* (N.S.) **1**, 106–21,

Mauss, Marcel 1906. Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétées eskimos. *Année sociol.* **9**, 39–130.

Mirsky, Jeannette 1961. The Eskimo of Greenland. In *Cooperation and competition among primitive peoples* (ed.) M. Mead. Boston: Beacon Press.

Rasmussen, Knud 1931. *The Netsilik Eskimos* (Rep. Fifth Thule Expedition **8**). Copenhagen: Nordisk Forlag.

Steenhoven, G. van den 1959. *Legal concepts among the Netsilik Eskimos of Pelly Bay, N.W.T.* (North Co-ord. Res. Cent. **59**). Ottawa: Dept. of Northern Affairs & National Resources.

Velde, Franz van de 1954. L'infanticide chez les esquimaux. *Eskimo* **34**, 6–8.

Weyer, E. M. 1932. *The Eskimos.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press.

——— 1956. How the Eskimo uses his environment. In *Societies around the world* (ed.) Howard Becker. New York: Henry Holt & Co.