

= Eskimo ( film ) =

Eskimo ( also known as Mala the Magnificent and Eskimo Wife @-@ Traders ) is a 1933 American Pre @-@ Code drama film directed by W. S. Van Dyke and released by Metro @-@ Goldwyn @-@ Mayer ( MGM ) . It is based on the books Der Eskimo and Die Flucht ins weisse Land by Danish explorer and author Peter Freuchen . The film stars Ray Mala as Mala , Lulu Wong Wing as Mala 's first wife Aba , Lotus Long as Mala 's second wife Iva , Peter Freuchen as the Ship Captain , W. S. Van Dyke as Inspector White , and Joseph Sauer as Sergeant Hunt .

Eskimo was the first feature film to be shot in a Native American language ( Inupiat ) , and the first feature film shot in Alaska . The film also incidentally documented many of the hunting and cultural practices of Native Alaskans . The production for the film was based at Teller , Alaska , where housing , storage facilities , a film laboratory , and other structures were built to house the cast , crew , and equipment .

It was nicknamed " Camp Hollywood " . The crew included 42 cameramen and technicians , six airplane pilots , and Emil Ottinger ? a chef from the Roosevelt Hotel . Numerous locations were used for filming , including Cape Lisburne in March 1933 , Point Hope and Cape Serdtse @-@ Kamen in April to July , and Herald Island in the Chukchi Sea in July . The film crew encountered difficulties recording native speech due to the " kh " sound of the native language . Altogether , pre @-@ production , principal photography , and post @-@ production took 17 months .

The motion picture was well received by critics upon release on 14 November 1933 , and received the first ever Academy Award for Best Film Editing , although it didn 't fare well at the box office . Scholar Peter Geller has more recently criticized the film as depicting the Eskimo as childlike , simple , and mythic " noble savages " rather than as human beings .

= = Plot = =

Mala is a member of an unspecified Eskimo tribe living in Alaska . He has a wife , Aba , and an infant son . He and the villagers are shown welcoming a newcomer to their village , hunting walrus , and celebrating the hunt . Mala learns of white traders at nearby Tjaranak Inlet from another Eskimo . Mala learns about rifles and desperately wants one , and Aba longs for needles and other white men 's goods . Mala gratefully offers Aba 's sexual favors to the man for telling him about the trading ship 's presence . Mala and Aba travel to the trading ship with their children , where the white ship captain takes all of Mala 's tanned animal skins in exchange for a single rifle . The captain demands that Aba spend the night with him . He gets her drunk and gives her worthless gifts , and has sexual intercourse with her . Mala is upset , but is told by the English @-@ speaking Eskimo Akat that " the white man is always right " .

Mala and the Eskimos go bowhead whale hunting in wooden boats and with harpoons provided by the white men , and an actual whale hunt and carcass slaughtering is depicted on film . After the successful hunt , two drunken white men kidnap Aba ( and prevent Mala from rescuing her ) and force her to get drunk . The ship captain rapes Aba , who escapes at dawn . The Captain 's Mate , hunting seals with a rifle , mistakes Aba ( passed out on the ice ) for an animal and kills her . Mala kills the ship captain with a harpoon ( mistakenly believing the captain shot his wife ) . He flees back to his village with his children .

Lonely and needing someone to care for his children and help with the sewing and other chores , Mala takes the young girl Iva as his new wife . But Mala still longs for Aba , and their relationship is a cold one . The Eskimos go hunting caribou by stampeding the animals into a lake and then hunting them with bow and arrow and spears from boats . Mala is haunted by Aba 's death , and after pouring out his grief through dance and prayer he changes his name to Kripik . Kripik 's attitude toward Iva softens dramatically , and they make love . The hunter whom Mala welcomed to the village the previous year returns to his village , and gives Kripik his wife in gratitude . The woman is more than happy to live with Mala , and Mala makes love to her as well .

Some years pass . The Royal Canadian Mounted Police establish a post at Tjaranak , bringing law to the area for the first time . Several white men accuse the Eskimos of being savage and without

morals , and charge Mala with the murder of the ship captain . Sergeant Hunt and Constable Balk try to find Mala and arrest him , but get lost in a blizzard and nearly freeze to death . Kripik finds them , and saves their lives . Kripik is angry with the men until Hunt explains that they do not want Kripik 's wives . When Hunt asks if Kripik knows Mala , Kripik says " Mala is no more " . The Mounties believe Mala is dead , but their misunderstanding is corrected by Akat , who arrives in the village and innocently exposes Kripik .

The Mounties convince Kripik to come to the post to answer questions , and Kripik agrees . Several months pass . Hunt and Balk give Kripik the freedom of the post , and Hunt learns about the horrors the white traders visited on the Eskimo . When the Eskimo village moves on to new hunting rounds , Kripik 's family stays behind to wait for him . They begin to starve , and Kripik learns of their plight . However , the rigid and rule @-@ bound Inspector White has arrived at the RCMP outpost , and he demands that Kripik not only no longer be allowed to hunt during the day but also be chained down in his bed at night . Hunt tries to dissuade White , but White insists ? and Hunt is forced to break his word that Kripik will not be chained .

During the night , Kripik pulls his hand free of the single manacle used to chain him down , but mangles his hand while doing so . Kripik flees the post with his team of sled dogs , heading for his family 's old village . Hunt and Balk pursue him . The rifle Kripik steals proves useless when the bullets are not the right gauge . Kripik is forced to kill his sled dogs one by one for food . In a driving blizzard , Kripik falls short of reaching his family , and is attacked and injured by a wolf ( which he manages to kill ) . Kripik is found by his eldest son Orsodikok ( now a teenager ) , rescued , and fed by his family .

The Mounties arrive the next morning , in hot pursuit . Kripik prevents his eldest son from killing the Mounties , and says he will leave and never come back . Kripik departs on foot , but Iva professes her love and goes with him . The Mounties pursue them on foot across the ice , which is breaking up . Sergeant Hunt takes aim at Kripik with his rifle , but cannot shoot him because Kripik has saved their lives and exhibited more honor and decency than white men have . Kripik and Iva escape on an ice floe , Hunt calling out goodbye and good luck to them . Hunt tells Balk that the ice will take Kripik and Iva across the inlet , and that the adults will be able to return to Orsodikok and the other children next spring .

= = Cast = =

Following is a list of the cast members :

Ray Mala as Mala

Lulu Wong Wing as Aba

Lotus Long as Iva

Iris Yamaoka as the Second Wife

Peter Freuchen as Ship Captain

Edward Hearn as Captain 's Mate

W. S. Van Dyke as Inspector White

Joseph Sauers as Sergeant Hunt

Edgar Dearing as Constable Balk

= = Production = =

= = = Script and casting = = =

The script for Eskimo was based on books by Danish explorer and author Peter Freuchen . W.S. Van Dyke was assigned by MGM to direct , but it was not a film which Van Dyke was interested in doing . He wrote to his uncle , John Charles Van Dyke , on May 24 , 1932 , " Am going to film Peter Freuchen 's book Eskimo . Don 't fancy the job a damn bit , but it brings in the bread and butter . "

Van Dyke intended the picture to depict the corrupting influence white culture had on the Eskimos ,

much as he had done in *White Shadows in the South Seas* . The script originally ended with Mala and Iva escaping onto the ice , only to drown . But producer Hunt Stromberg felt this ending was too downbeat , and changed it in April 1932 to the ending now seen on film .

Both Stromberg and Van Dyke wanted the Native Alaskans in the film to speak in their native tongue . However , MGM production chief Irving Thalberg worried that intertitles were too distracting and would seem old -fashioned , and Stromberg agreed . By this time , however , it was September 1932 . To refilm the shot scenes in English would be prohibitively expensive , and Stromberg changed his mind so that intertitles ( not subtitles ) were used in the final film to translate the Inupiat language into English .

Stromberg demanded complete authenticity in casting , language , and the depiction of Eskimo life . Casting was critical . Van Dyke cast Inupiat natives ( most of them from Barrow , Alaska ) for all the minor roles , but Stromberg was so insistent on finding the perfect male lead that casting the title role of Mala / Kripik proved difficult . MGM wanted Ray Wise , the actor and cameraman ( who later changed his name to Ray Mala ) , as the star of the picture , and he would become Alaska 's first movie star . Wise was a half Inupiat , half Russian Jew who previously starred in the 1932 documentary film *Igloo* . Van Dyke wanted an all native cast , not a half native lead , and rejected Wise . A young native Alaskan was hired for the role , but he walked off the set in July 1932 when the stress of filming proved too great . Already on location in Alaska and isolated from the studio , Van Dyke turned to Ray Wise . Not only could Wise perform his own stunts , but Stromberg praised him as an immensely realistic actor . Wise came to Hollywood in 1925 , and in addition to his work on *Igloo* was working as an assistant cameraman . He was hired as a guide for Eskimo 's production to Alaska , and was able to offer his services to the film when the original actor quit . Although the film 's credits state that professional actors were used only for the Canadian police roles , in fact the major female roles were played by professional actresses Lotus Long and Lulu Wong Ying . Numerous minor roles are also clearly filled by trained actors in make up and costume .

According to Peter Freuchen , MGM considered filming in Greenland , where Freuchen 's novels were set . But the difficult weather and bright summer light ( which made filming difficult ) dissuaded them , and the production settled on Alaska instead . Freuchen accompanied the production not only as an actor , but as an interpreter as well .

== = Principal photography and filming locations == =

The start of production is not clear . A commercial transport ship , the *Victoria* , took the cast and crew from Seattle , Washington , to Nome , Alaska . There , the schooner *Nanuk* was rented by the studio to take the production team farther north . Originally known as the *Pandora* , the schooner would next be used in the 1935 production of *Mutiny on the Bounty* , and rerigged for the 1937 film *Maid of Salem* . The *Nanuk* acted as a mobile base of operations , and as a set for the shipboard scenes . MGM bought the schooner outright during the production . On screen credits for the film claim filming began in April 1932 , but *The Hollywood Reporter* said it began in July and the *New York Times* said June .

The production had its land -based home at Teller , Alaska . Housing , storage facilities , a film laboratory , and other structures were built to house the cast , crew , and equipment , and the cast nicknamed the site " Camp Hollywood " . The crew included 42 cameramen and technicians , six airplane pilots , and Emil Ottinger ? a chef from the Roosevelt Hotel . The production took 50 stone ( 700 lb ) ( 32 metric tonnes ) of food with them to Alaska , as well as medical supplies , a mobile film processing laboratory , and sound recording equipment . Many native people ate bacon , corn flakes , and oranges for the first time , and became enamored of the food . Film was flown out of Teller back to Los Angeles every seven or eight weeks .

There are varying accounts about how much danger the production encountered during the 1932 -33 winter season . *The Hollywood Reporter* said in October 1932 that the *Nanuk* was caught in the ice off Alaska and sled dog teams had to be used to rescue the film crew . However , crew on the film noted that the *Nanuk* wintered in Grantley Harbor at Teller . A press release by MGM in

November 1932 claimed that the Nanuk reported via radio that it was frozen in the sea ice and drifting with 35 people aboard , unable to continue shooting until the spring . A report by the New York Times in February 1933 also claimed the Nanuk was locked in sea ice between Teller and Barrow . Peter Freuchen also relates that the Nanuk was blown off course by heavy winds several times .

Filming locations varied widely . Scenes of Eskimo villages on the ice , and some of the polar bear footage ( not used ) , were shot on sea ice 5 miles ( 8 @. @ 0 km ) off Cape Lisburne , Alaska , in March 1933 . For this set , separate camera houses were built some distance away from the igloo sets , and accessed via tunnel below the snow . At one point , a sudden warm spell melted the igloos the production set up to house cast and cameras . Some interior and other shots were filmed on sets at the MGM studios in Culver City , California .

At one point , most of the Native Alaskans in the film went on strike . They were paid \$ 5 per day for being extras , participating in hunts or tribal ceremonies , or for acting in minor roles . Although this was a large sum for Alaska at the time , many decided to strike for \$ 10 or \$ 15 a day . Van Dyke immediately hired strikebreakers from among the other native people as replacements , and the strike ended .

Although cinematographer Clyde DaVinna is credited with the cinematography , additional footage was shot by George Gordon Nogle , Josiah Roberts , and Leonard Smith . Screenwriter John Lee Mahin claims he shot a few of the scenes with Eskimo women when coverage was found to be lacking . Numerous days of shooting were lost in the summer when strong sunlight made it impossible to film . To reduce glare from the snow , most of the sets were sprayed with pink paint from the air .

Because Native Alaskan languages are somewhat staccato in nature and makes heavy of the " kh " sound , sound recordists initially had trouble recording native speech . The " kh " sound overwhelmed the microphones ( a problem known as " chopping " ) , which would then not pick up the following sounds . Significant adjustments were made in order to correct the problem .

= = = Hunting and wolf attack scenes = = =

The scenes of walrus , bowhead whale , and caribou hunting are all real . Because the hunting season for caribou , polar bear , walrus , and whale occur at the same time , the production was forced to spend more than a year in the Arctic ( covering two hunting seasons ) in order to get the necessary footage .

The walrus and polar bear hunts were filmed in July 1932 at Herald Island in the Chukchi Sea . Walrus carcasses were used as dog food and to attract polar bears . Additional polar bear hunting was filmed in March 1933 off Cape Lisburne . The bowhead whale hunt was filmed from late April to July 1933 in two locations : Off Point Hope , Alaska , and off Cape Serdtse @-@ Kamen on the Chukchi Peninsula . The whale hunting shoot took nearly three months because the whales kept fleeing every time they spotted boats . As depicted in the film , the Inupiat also hunted polar bears by roping and drowning them , but little of this footage made it into the picture .

According to Peter Freuchen , the scene in which the wolf attacks Mala is real . Freuchen says that Mala , armed with a rock and a pistol beneath his fur jacket , spent three afternoons trying to lure a wolf into attacking him . A rifleman and a cinematographer using a camera with a telephoto lens followed at a distance . The wolf attack was filmed from far away , with the rifleman ready to shoot the wolf in case Mala was unable to kill it . As shown in film , Mala was able to kill the wolf without using his pistol or relying on the rifleman , and was not injured in the attack .

= = = Post @-@ production = = =

Principal production appears to have ended about March 25 , 1933 . Van Dyke was back aboard a commercial ship , headed for California , while Frank Messenger ( aboard the Nanuk ) continued to shoot second unit footage for the next month or two .

In the summer of 1933 , MGM staff realized that additional footage was needed to complete the film

. This involved casting an actress for the role . The production staff visited San Francisco , California , to identify an actress for a minor female part . Ray Mala offered the role of Iva to Sadie Brower , a 17 @-@ year @-@ old half @-@ Inupiat girl . But after her father refused to let her appear in movies , a Japanese American ( who could not speak any Eskimo ) was cast in the role instead . According to Brower , this woman 's Eskimo was so bad that it was unintelligible . Dortuk , Elik , Kemasuk , Nunooruk , and four other Inupiat actors were brought to California to act in the reshoots and new scenes .

William Axt is credited with the musical score . However , some of Modest Mussorgsky 's " Night on Bald Mountain " may be heard on the soundtrack when the Eskimos go off to hunt whales . Altogether , pre @-@ production , principal photography , and post @-@ production took 17 months .

The total cost of the picture was reported variously as \$ 935 @,@ 000 or \$ 1 @.@ 5 million . Even the lower figure was an exceptionally large amount for the time . To recoup its costs , MGM kept the film in circulation for many years . The running time of the film in previews was 160 minutes . Major cuts were made afterward , however . The final running time for the film was either 117 or 120 minutes .

= = Premieres and critical reception = =

= = = Premieres = = =

Eskimo premiered at the Astor Theatre in New York City on November 14 , 1933 . MGM did not promote the film as a tale of colonial corruption or revenge , but rather played up its sexual motifs . The studio placed large neon signs on Broadway Avenue declaring " Eskimo Wife Traders ! Weird Tale of the Arctic ! " Lobby cards in theaters contained lurid descriptions : " The strangest moral code on the face of the earth ? men who share their wives but kill if one is stolen ! " MGM more appropriately advertised Eskimo as " the biggest picture ever made " .

The film did not do well at the domestic box office , however . As Angela Aleiss put it , " The film 's adventurous scenes were certainly impressive , but few Americans would be stirred by Inupiat survival in the far north . " To boost receipts , MGM changed the film 's title to Eskimo Wife @-@ Traders . But the change did not help , and MGM lost \$ 236 @,@ 000 on the film domestically . The film was released in the UK and Australia as Mala the Magnificent . The UK premiere was on October 20 , 1934 , and the Australian premiere on October 31 , 1934 .

= = = Critical reception = = =

Conrad A. Nervig won the very first Oscar for Best Film Editing for his work on Eskimo . Mordaunt Hall , writing for the New York Times in 1933 , generally praised the picture . The script managed to sustain interest in the various scenes , he was surprised to find moments of " genuinely effective comedy " , and he found the acting by native people " really extraordinary " . He singled out Ray Mala , Lulu Wong Wing , and Lotus Long for being particularly effective in conveying emotion . He also found the use of native language and realistic sounds ( recorded in Alaska ) one of the film 's best elements . However , Hall felt the picture was a bit long , and various hunting scenes ( although often thrilling ) were too reminiscent of many such scenes in previous motion pictures . Other reviews were also generally positive , but nearly all critics compared the film to other motion pictures ( such as Igloo and Nanook of the North ) which had also captured exquisite scenery and scenes of Inupiat people . To many critics of the day , the footage of tribal customs and hunting actually made Eskimo a documentary film rather than a drama .

Scholar Peter Geller has more recently criticized the film as depicting the Eskimo as childlike , simple , and mythic " noble savages " rather than as human beings . Film historian Thomas P. Doherty concludes that the picture favors scenery and typecasting over real characters .

Eskimo was not the first dramatic film to use an all @-@ native cast for the native roles ; that was

the 1914 silent film *In the Land of the Head Hunters* . It was , however , the first motion picture to be filmed in the language of a Native American people , and the first feature film shot in Alaska . Ray Mala became nationally famous for his work in *Eskimo* , and subsequently had a long career as a lead and supporting actor in Hollywood .

= = Box Office = =

The film grossed a total ( domestic and foreign ) of \$ 1 @, @ 312 @, @ 000 : \$ 636 @, @ 000 in the US and Canada and \$ 676 @, @ 000 elsewhere resulting in a loss of \$ 236 @, @ 000 .