

SONGS OF THE CANADIAN ESKIMO

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UNTHINKING ADULTS sometimes ask: why bother with writing or reading poetry? After all, poetry has no real use, like developing a hog with more bacon meat has real use. Neither small children nor primitive peoples ask for reasons to enjoy music, or dance, or poetry. They recognize what western adults seem to have had drilled out of them: that human beings must and do live as much by rhythm and symbol as by the tangible things that surround them. Man does not, like every other animal, merely gorge and rest and procreate; he also has ideas, feelings for friendship and community, sometimes even beliefs. These, rather than merely eating and being comfortable, make him a human being.

Sixty years ago the Eskimos of northern Canada were still a primitive people. They had developed great skill in finding food and staying warm in an overpowering, ruthless land, but, much more, they had survived as human beings. This, not simply their animal survival in a dreadful climate, impressed anthropologists like Franz Boas (1880's) and explorers like J. B. Tyrrell (1890's). They found that the complete Eskimo man was not only a skilful hunter but also an accomplished singer and dancer; to be continually outsung and outdanced was as shaming as to be continually outhunted. This paper is intended to be a brief introduction to such classic Eskimo song and poetry — "classic" in the sense that it was unaffected by western rhythms and images, as Eskimo song since the record player and particularly the transistor radio is not.

Between 1912 and 1925 both Knud Rasmussen of Denmark¹ and Diamond Jenness of Canada² lived for years with the Eskimos of Greenland and the

Canadian Arctic and, among other activities, wrote down many of their songs. Jenness' work is particularly useful to someone who knows no Eskimo; not only does his printed report contain line by line phonetic transcription, English translation, and musical notation by H. H. Roberts of some one hundred songs collected from the Coppermine Eskimos in 1914-16, but in the National Museum at Ottawa are preserved the wax cylinders he made of the people singing these very songs.³ These invaluable recordings (somewhat scratchy, but amazingly clear considering Jenness's stories of trying to record in snow houses while his wax kept hardening prematurely) are vivid examples of primitive song; they are strange, beautiful in words, rhythm, melody.

The recorded songs are not difficult to follow if the Jenness-Roberts report is studied; this is so even if one does not understand any Eskimo. Indeed, as Rasmussen explains (his mother was Eskimo and he spoke it as his native tongue), understanding the language is no necessary help in understanding a song because, as with all primitive peoples, the subjects are their day-to-day activities. Eskimo groups are very small; members know everything that happens to everyone included, so the Eskimo poet may with one key word recall a striking occurrence for his group, and an outside listener, though he knows Eskimo perfectly, will not understand the overtones that echo to give it depth. For Eskimo poetry, like our own, tries to convey the most vivid sensations with the fewest words possible.

For us, then, appreciation of Eskimo song must be based on its rhythmic line and its repetition of word and refrain; this appreciation is helped by the fact that, as with all primitive songs, the verse was composed in the mind alone and not in writing. Further, songs were carried about in the memory, not on paper, sometimes for generations. Like all unwritten poetry, they work for immediate rhythmic and sound effects: they need not be studied for complex inter-weaving of image, though strangely enough, that too is there more often than not.

Very simply, we could speak of two kinds of Eskimo song: prayers, which are private, and festival songs, which are very much public. To speak of prayer songs first: Eskimos believe that the first songs of mankind were spirit songs;⁴ when an Eskimo sings, he is attuned to that great primeval song and his prayer draws power from it. If petitioned correctly through private prayer songs, certain familiar spirits will help humans in specific trouble. The prayers to call them are private property — sometimes passed on to an heir at the moment of death — and are used only by the person to whom they have come, often in a great moment of vision. Jenness records a three-part weather incantation⁵ sung by

Hagunjag, a Coppermine woman; it begins with the singer speaking of herself in the third person (he) pleading with her familiar spirit (thou) to come to her aid:

Come, he says, thou outside there; come, he says, thou outside there,
Come, he says, thou outside there; come, he says, thou outside there.
Thy Sivoangnaq he bids thee come,
Telling thee to enter him.
Come, he says, thou outside there.

With a slight variation of tune, the prayer becomes more personal:

Only come, only come,
Only come, only come.
I stretch out my hands to them thus.
Only come, only come. (*repeated*)

Finally, with another variation in tune, the spirit answers through the voice of the one praying:

I come again, I again,
I come again, I, dost thou not know? (*repeated*)
I come again, I again.

Rasmussen gathered some more complex prayer words, though his translations must be accepted with the knowledge that he tends (in contrast to Jenness) to "fill out" the prayers in terms of what he considers more intelligible poetry. Words to make heavy things light (that is, on the trail):

I will walk with the leg muscles
which are strong
as the sinews of the shins of the little caribou calf.
I will walk with leg muscles
which are strong
as the sinews of the shins of the little hare.
I will take care not to go towards the dark.
I will go towards the day.

Words to a sick child:

Little child! Your mother's breasts are full of milk.
Go and be nursed,
Go and drink!
Go up to the mountain!

From the summit of the mountain you shall seek health,
You shall draw life.

Words to stop bleeding:

This is blood from the little sparrow's mother.
Wipe it away!
This is blood
That flowed from a piece of wood.
Wipe it away!⁶

The latter prayer demonstrates the poet's absolute faith in the power of the word (Eskimo is an agglutinative language and most of the lines consist of only one word, despite the necessary translation length): he must be capable of believing that a piece of dry wood, the driest thing he knows, can actually shed warm red blood. Only if he believes will the spirit come and the bleeding stop.

These are the prayer songs: simple, repetitious, beautiful; one cannot listen to the Jenness recordings without feeling the fervent depths to which the prayer, in chant melody and rhythm, carries the singer. But the glory of Eskimo humanity is their great festival songs. Rasmussen describes the most beautiful custom in a land of darkness and cold: when in their wanderings one group meets another, they build a festival house, and sing and dance. Everyone has a song; to be outsung is as bad as to be outhunted. Though there are several modes of performance, the most common is that the men form a circle, the women and children kneel on the snowbench at the back, the singer (either man or woman) holds the huge sealskin drum in one hand and, beating on its rim, dances slowly around the circle in time to his own beat, composing on the spot as he moves and sings. The audience sways as the emotion and rhythm mounts in the tight snow-house, joining in after every verse on the refrain of "ayayaya — ayaya". Under the long oppression of polar night, Eskimos say these festivals are what keep them sane. Rasmussen tells how they may continue for twelve or sixteen hours at a stretch; as soon as one singer is exhausted, another leaps into the ring, seizes the drum, and breaks into his or her song and vision. Here is one by Aijuk, "A Dead Man's Song", composed from a dream by his friend Paulinaoq:

I am filled with joy
Whenever the dawn rises over the earth
And the great sun
Glides up in the heavens.
Aja — aja — ja

But at other times
 I lie in horror and dread
 Of the creeping numberless worms
 That eat their way in through hollowed bone
 And bore eyes away.

In fear I lie, remembering:
 Say, was it so beautiful on earth?
 Think of the winters
 When we were anxious
 For soles to our footwear
 Or skins for our boots:
 Was it so beautiful?

In fear and in horror I lie,
 But was I not always troubled in mind,
 Even in the beautiful summer,
 When the hunting failed,
 And there was dearth of skins
 For clothing and sleeping?
 Was it so beautiful?

In fear and in horror I lie
 But was I not always troubled in mind
 When I stood on the sea ice
 Wretched beyond measure
 Because no fish would bite?
 Or was it so beautiful
 When I flushed with shame and dismay
 In the midst of the gathering,
 And the chorus laughed
 Because I forgot my song and its words?
 Was that so beautiful?

Say, was it so beautiful on earth?
 Here, I am filled with joy
 Whenever the dawn rises over the earth
 And the great sun
 Glides up in the heavens.

But at other times
 I lie in horror and dread
 Of the creeping numberless worms
 That eat their way in through hollowed bone
 And bore eyes away.⁷
 Aja — aja — ja.

Or this dance song by Nitanatciaq, reviewing all the things that give her joy:

He was in a state of rejoicing,
The fishing-line jiggling it properly.
ai ye yai ya

Refrain:

i yaj ai ye yaji ya
ai ye yaji yaj i yai ya

The fishing-line when it sank right down,
His line too he pulled it right up.

(Refrain)

He was in a state of rejoicing,
The caribou weapon [arrow] flying straight.

(Refrain)

The arrow when it flew,
The arrow it struck home.

He was in a state of rejoicing,
The weapon for getting broth [sealing harpoon] being hurled down.

(Refrain)

He was in a state of rejoicing,
The weapon for getting broth being let down.

(Refrain)

The weapon for getting broth when it was hurled down,
His stinking seal he drew right up.
Ai ye yai ya i yai ya⁸

I
N THE FESTIVAL HOUSE Eskimos find not only joy, but also social release. If someone has angered you, here you insult him to his face with a satiric song; then he leaps into the ring and insults you. Everyone laughs as the abuse piles higher, and in the laughter hard feelings vanish. This custom may help explain why the subject of war is unknown in Eskimo poetry: they work out their hatred in songs, not, like "civilized" peoples, by mass killings. The subject of love between man and woman is also entirely lacking, which underlines again how totally non-western Eskimo song is.

Their songs tell of their daily life: hard travel, hunting, building snow houses, the festivals themselves. Using a kind of kenning, they sing of hunting “the bearded one” — the seal, or “the careless dweller of the plains” — the caribou. The greater his feat of hunting, the more modest the singer can be about it (since everyone knows the actual facts) and only brief words are thrown out to allow the chanting chorus’ imagination to work. So Aua sings his bear song of a struggle that lasted an entire day and in the last verse takes a poke at the braggarts who everyone knows have less to sing about:

It chanced that I caught sight of
 one wearing the skin of a bear
 out in the drifting pack ice.
 ajaja'ja aja aja'ja.

It came not threateningly.
 Turning about
 was the only thing that seemed to hamper it.
 ajaja'ja aja aja'ja.

It wore out its strength against me,
 And I thrust my lance
 into its body.
 ajaja'ja aja aja'ja.
 ajaja'ja aja aja'ja.

I call this to mind
 Merely because they are ever breathing self-praise,
 Those neighbours of ours to the south and to the north.⁹

Examining many Jenness songs shows that a basic song technique is to compare two differing activities that raise the same emotion. In the following song by Kunana the fear of not being able to build a snow house (a life-and-death matter on the barrens) is compared to the fear of having to dance (i.e. lead in a song) and not doing it skilfully; the two belong together in a further aspect: both seem to share the added physical difficulty of taking place in too crowded a circle:

It terrifies me here
 On hearing the loud sound, that one,
 Of Singittoq's drum.
 ai yai ya hai yai yai
 ya he yai yi ya qa
 ye yi ya qa

How I am I going to move about [in dancing]?
A greater space than this one it being hard to find?
It terrifies me here
On hearing the loud sound, that one.
Qingaloqana and Katuttaq.

(Refrain)

How I am I to move about?
Just think. That thing,
My lower circle of snow-blocks I hardly
know how to build it.
I continue nevertheless without stopping.
Here, too, on the floor here.

(Refrain)

How am I to move about?
It terrifies me here
On hearing the loud sound, that one.
Tamarsuin and Iviutaq.

(Refrain)

How I am I to move about?
Just think. That one, that one,
My lower circle of snow-blocks I hardly
know how to build it.
I continue nevertheless without stopping.
Here, too, in the tent here.

(Refrain)

How I am I to move about?¹⁰

A slightly more elaborate use of such comparison is found in the following Copper Eskimo song; the difficulty of drawing the heavy horn hunting-bow and shooting the arrow straight is compared to the difficulty of pulling a song-theme into place:

He constantly bends it, he constantly sends it straight;
So the big bow, he constantly sends it straight.
Refrain: He constantly bends it,
He constantly bends it.

Just as he seeks well for words in a song,
The big bow, he constantly sends it straight.

He constantly bends it,
He constantly bends it.

He constantly bends it as he walks along,
In summer as he walks along.
He constantly bends it,
He constantly bends it.

It is clearly easy to shoot big birds,
As he carries his pack walking along.
He constantly bends it,
He constantly bends it.¹¹

Some of the songs are more philosophic, as suits the nature of the individual singer. Rasmussen tells how at Repulse Bay an old Iglulik man, Ivaluardjuk, "whose joyous days of life were long since over and past", sang his song of remembrance while his wife chanted in the background a few notes repeated again and again:

Cold and mosquitoes,
These two pests
Come never together.
I lay me down on the ice,
Lay me down on the snow and ice,
Till my teeth fall chattering.
It is I,
Aja — aja ja.

Memories are they,
From those days,
From those days,
Mosquitoes swarming
From those days,
The cold is bitter,
The mind grows dizzy
As I stretch my limbs
Out on the ice.
It is I,
Aja — aja — ja.

Ai! but songs
Call for strength
And I seek after words.
I, aja — aja — ja.

Ai! I seek and spy
 Something to sing of,
 The caribou with the spreading antlers!

And strongly I threw
 The spear with my throwing stick.
 And my weapon fixed the bull
 In the hollow of the groin
 And it quivered with the wound
 Till it dropped
 And was still.

Ai! but songs
 Call for strength.
 And I seek after words.
 It is I,
 Aja, aja — haja — haja.¹²

However, when Rasmussen tried to question the patriarch about his view of the world, he found reserve. Men, Ivaluardjuk felt, knew so little of things apart from their food and sleep and rest; it might easily seem presumptuous if they endeavoured to form any opinion about hidden things. Happy folk should not worry themselves by thinking.

Such complete surrender to joy is found in a dance song Jenness records, composed and sung by Higilaq, a Coppermine woman. If a record were possible with this essay, this is the song I would include; it is as beautiful, as enchanting as any song I have ever heard, and the hundreds of people for whom I have played it have invariably agreed. The song describes the points of travel the composer and her husband touched in making their yearly round of living. It begins in a strange surrealism, moves to a refrain whose burden syllables help you catch the basic song rhythm, and at several points crests an incredible ecstatic cry of sheer happiness which only a natural (or highly-trained opera singer) could physically produce.

Wishing to begin to walk
 Wishing to begin to walk
 e ye ye yane ye ye ya
 e yana
 Wishing to begin to walk
 To Kuluksuk I proceeded to walk.
 e ye ye yane ye ye ya
 e yana

My stomach [?] when it was empty within me
 To Kuluksuk I proceeded to walk.
 e ye ye yane ye ye ya
 e yana

[Lake] Uluksaq when I reached at last
 The lake trout I pulled out one after another.
 e ye ye yane (hu hu hu hu hu hu)
 e yana

Wishing to begin to walk
 Wishing to begin to walk.
 e ye ye yane ye ye ya
 e yana

Wishing to begin to walk
 To the Kugaryuaq [river] I proceeded to walk.
 e ye ye yane ye ye ya
 e yana

[Mt.] Aptaloq on the road that seemed to lead to it
 To the Kugaryuaq [river] I proceeded to walk.
 e ye ye yane ye ye ya
 e yana

To the Kugaryuaq [river] when I reached at last
 To Utkusiktaq too I reached at last
 e ye ye yane ye ye ya
 e yana

To Utkusiktaq when I reached at last
 Thoughtlessly I did not go and finish them [the stone pots].
 e ye ye yane (hu hu hu hu hu hu)
 e yana

Wishing to begin to walk
 To Asiak I proceeded to walk.
 e ye ye yane ye ye ya
 e yana

Bull caribou, though thinking I should see many,
 Because I had no bow I was unable to do anything.
 e ye ye yane ye ye ya
 e yana

Wishing to begin to walk
 Wishing to begin to walk.

e ye ye yane ye ye ya
e yana

Wishing to begin to walk
To Aqoviyaq I proceeded to walk.
e ye ye yane ye ye ya
e yana

The sealers though they hauled up many seals,
The one seal I obtained I could not procure a companion to it.
e ye ye yane ye ya
e yana

Wishing to begin to walk
To the land behind [northward] I proceeded to walk.
e ye ye yane ye ye ya
e yana

The thought entered my mind, Apiana [man's name?]
Expecting to meet him I proceeded to walk.
e ye ye yane ye ye ya
e yana

What is this, this here, the thought that enters my mind?
His sled it caused him to be exceedingly angry [because it upset].
e ye ye yane ye ye ya
e yana

And I then having no possessions [on the sled]
Since I did not become angry I laughed aloud at it!
e ye ye yana e ye ye ya.¹³

The word "inspiration" does not, apparently, exist in Eskimo; Ivaluardjuk¹⁴ was astonished when Rasmussen explained to him that only certain persons were considered poets in the white man's world. For the Eskimo to be "inspired" is simply to "feel emotion", and therefore all human beings are poets in the Eskimo sense of the word. But it is true that sometimes special people are visited by a truly great emotion (Rasmussen gives an example of a woman seeing a meteor); these people (for the rest of their lives) are then capable of composing especially memorable songs like Higilaq's quoted above. Perhaps the most profound statement on Eskimo song composition comes from the Nesilik man Orpingalik:

Songs are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices. Man is moved just like the ice-floe sailing here and there out in the current. His thoughts are driven by a flowing

force when he feels joy, when he feels fear, when he feels sorrow. Thoughts can wash over him like a flood, making his breath come in gasps and his heart throb. Something like an abatement in the weather will keep him thawed up. And then it will happen that we, who always think we are small, will feel still smaller. And we will fear to use words. But it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves — we get a new song.¹⁵

It is time, I feel, that we began exploring this Arctic heritage of “new songs”.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Rasmussen's findings are published in many articles and books. Those most readily available are: *Across Arctic America*, New York, 1927; *The Netsilik Eskimos*, Copenhagen, 1931; *Report on the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-24*, v. VII, #1: *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*, Copenhagen, 1929; and a collection of poems drawn from these sources: *Beyond the High Hills*, Cleveland, 1961.
- ² Diamond Jenness: *Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913-18*, v. XIV: *Eskimo Songs*, Ottawa, 1925; with H. H. Roberts.
- ³ The Folklore Division has now transcribed these to tapes and makes copies available to bona fide researchers.
- ⁴ Rasmussen (*Iglulik*, p. 234) conjectures that originally all Eskimo song was for magic purposes, quoting as evidence the special, ancient, vocabulary sometimes used in song that is never used in daily life, and also whole song fragments of no intelligible meaning passed on as legacy among the Iglulik Eskimos.
- ⁵ Jenness: *Songs* #96 (IV, C, 63a), #97 (IV, C, 63b), #93 (IV, C, 63b).
- ⁶ Rasmussen, *Iglulik* . . . , p. 166-67.
- ⁷ Rasmussen, *Across* . . . , p. 264-6.
- ⁸ Jenness, *Song* # 25 (IV, C, 90a).
- ⁹ Rasmussen, *Iglulik* . . . , p. 237-38.
- ¹⁰ Jenness, *Song* # 9 (IV, C, 96b).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, *Song* #52 (IV, C, 33).
- ¹² Rasmussen, *Iglulik* . . . , p. 18-19.
- ¹³ Jenness, *Song* #1 (IV, C, 80).
- ¹⁴ Rasmussen, *Iglulik* . . . , p. 233-34.
- ¹⁵ Rasmussen, *Netsilik* . . . , p. 321.