

# Civilization's Mixed Blessings



Dr. Norman Chance

improving the lot of previously isolated Eskimos also created several serious problems

By CONNIE RUGGLES

**A**N OKLAHOMA woman in high heels and light-weight dress is generally considered appropriately dressed for the hot, dry Midwestern summers. The same garb is hardly practical for summer wear on an isolated Eskimo island off the coast of northern Alaska where late summer temperatures dip to 25 degrees. And yet Dr. Norman Chance, assistant professor of anthropology at O.U., found this strange behavior just one facet of the new way of life on Barter Island.

Dr. Chance has been making visits to the island for the past three years to study the effects of rapid cultural change on a previously isolated group. His work has drawn interest and financial support from the Arctic Institute of North America, the American Philosophical Society, the Office of Naval Research, the National Institute of Mental Health, the Russell Sage Foundation and the O.U. Faculty Research Fund.

The Eskimos on Barter Island had had little experience with modern Western cul-

ture before the late 1940's when the Air Force built a landing area near the village. For generations they had lived in small family units exercising a sort of communal living with cooperative sharing of food, goods and labor. The only contact they had had with whites had been an occasional bush pilot, a missionary or, more rarely, a doctor or nurse. Neither had they had much contact with other Eskimos. The nearest community, Barrow, an all-Eskimo town of 1,500 persons, is 300 dogsled miles to the west, and Fairbanks is 400 miles southwest over the rugged Brooks range.

Then suddenly the whole Eskimo way of life was radically changed. In 1953 American Air Force personnel moved into the area to construct a Distant Early Warning Line, commonly known as the DEW Line. All available men on the island were hired to help with the construction. Almost overnight Barter Island became a capitalistic society with individual salaries ranging from \$6,000 to \$12,000 a year, and soon

Western culture had taken hold among the Eskimos.

When the construction was finished, most of the men took maintenance jobs, and their salaries leveled off at about \$7,200 a year.

Although the scurry of activity had ended and incomes were stabilized, the Americans had left much of themselves behind. In place of an isolated Eskimo village, there was now a group of people thoroughly exposed to all types of Western culture. This was true, at least, of the male population of the village. Through their contacts with white workers, the men had learned English, adopted modern dress, read American magazines and had become familiar with the urban way of life. They were ready for the cultural change and adapted to it easily.

The women, however, presented a different problem. They had not been constantly exposed to the people from the

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The Eskimo blanket toss, forerunner of the modern trampoline, is still a popular sport among the Barter Island natives. About 20 people are required to hold the blanket taut enough to spring the jumper high into the air.

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United States and had no ready frame of reference to help acclimate them to the change. Consequently they were left behind in the sweep toward Westernization. Gradually they have learned to accept the changes—the advent of electricity, the ability to buy and use such things as washing machines, outboard motors, Fibreglas boats and artificial lighting—but acceptance has come through some sacrifice of emotional stability.

The cultural revolution on Barter Island took place in a matter of a few years. Because of the rapidity of transition, the relative isolation of the area and the small number of persons involved, the Eskimos were ideal subjects for Dr. Chance's three-year study. His first visit was in the summer of 1958 when he lived with the Eskimos for three months.

"When I arrived on Barter Island," he recalls, "I knew no one, did not even know the language, and had no idea where I would stay the night, let alone the next three months."

Once Chance had explained that he was a teacher, the people were willing for him to stay, and he pitched a tent on the outskirts of the community. But in Alaska, summer is not ideal camping weather. It is cold and damp, and what is more, the sun shines 24 hours a day.

Because of the long hours of sunlight, Dr. Chance found his daily schedule far different from his normal routine. Children played outside his tent until late at night, and then slept until noon.

"Many times," Chance says, "I would play volley ball with the kids until I was ready to drop, then stagger into my own tent about 1 or 2 a.m., only to be roused by someone wanting to play some more."

At first the people were withdrawn and shy, even a little suspicious of Chance. The children, however, with their natural curiosity, made friends quickly. Gradually he came to know all the Eskimos and could begin his study.

"A change such as the one effected on Barter Island is a common characteristic of people all over the world," Chance says, "as for instance in Africa and Asia in the newly emerging countries and also in various small tribes."

The results of his first study showed an amazingly placid reaction to the changes which had taken place. Outwardly there were few signs of neurosis among the Eskimos, and most of them seemed happy with their new life pattern. It was fairly obvious, however, that the men had made more satisfactory adjustment, and Chance was eager to study the reactions of the women more closely.

He gave them a revised version of the Cornell test for physical and mental health in the summer of 1960, but then he was stymied. The Eskimo women were naturally shy about talking with white men, so Chance had to find a woman anthropologist to interview the native women and collect additional data.

To aid him in his work Dr. Chance selected Jean Briggs, a doctoral student at Harvard. She spent three months this summer gathering information. Chance joined her on Barter Island in August, and with the final data ready, he could begin determining the mental adjustment of the Eskimo women to the advances of civilization.

The results of Dr. Chance's mental health tests divided the Eskimo women into two distinct groups. First there were those who spoke little English, were satisfied with the way of life they had known before the Americans came, and had no desire to adopt Western style. The second group was composed of younger women who desperately wanted to conform to the new pattern in every way. This group was broken up into sub-groups. One section of these women had made a relatively good adjustment to the change. They had something on which to base their strong identification with the West. They were familiar with many of the American ways, spoke English and adapted well. They showed few neurotic tendencies. The second group of young women felt a deep need to be part of the crowd, but they had nothing to prepare them for the changes. They had not been exposed widely to Western ways and were frustrated in their efforts to adapt. They exhibited a high degree of neurosis.

Despite their frustration the younger women eagerly adopted the new styles, although contemporary fashion is hardly