

Cleft Lip of Ayagutak, The Eskimo

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Eskimo people, Inuit, differ by their culture and in many ways by physical characteristics from other mongoloid- or yellow-brown race people. Prevalence of several congenital abnormalities deviates considerably from that in Caucasians and Negroes. However, it agrees quite closely with those found in North American Indians which is not surprising considering their common racial origin. For example, cleft uvula was found in 8.6% of 1571 Eskimo children from the high Arctic by Jarvis (1). This figure agrees with 10.24% in Chippewa Indians from Minnesota as found by Cervenka and Shapiro (2), and 18.8% found in Navajos from New Mexico by Shapiro et al. was even higher (3). Contrasting prevalence of 1.5 to 1.8% in Caucasian population (4) stresses the racial difference. If it is assumed that cleft uvula in certain families is regarded as microform of cleft palate we would expect the incidence of cleft lip and/or palate to be much higher in Eskimos than in Caucasians and to be quite close to the incidence of clefts in North American Indians. It was surprising that when Jarvis examined the largest group of Eskimos yet reported (1571) she did not find any cleft lip or cleft palate, while projecting her data on cleft uvula would indicate expectation of about 4-5 cases (1:350 clefts in American Indians) (5, 6). The reason for this finding is not clear but one of the obvious explanations would be that severe and primitive living conditions of Arctic Eskimos even at very recent times do not allow the affected individual to survive early neonatal period or childhood (children are often breast-fed until 4-5 years of age).

From the following story it appears that the cleft of the lip was not generally regarded as an ominous sign nor criterium for actively disposing of the affected baby as was the case in some North American Indian tribes (7). The story also demonstrates, in very beautiful manner, the humane attitude to Ayagutak, the man with unrepaired facial cleft. The attitude is quite different from that frequently seen in our complex civilization.

It forces us to appreciate their distinct way of social intercourse and the way of life in general. The extremely severe natural conditions did not leave room for any form of asocial or antisocial behavior. The scarcity of game did not allow for gathering of Eskimos in large communities and

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developing social structures which will maintain rulers, classes, strong prejudices, religion and similar artificial phenomena. In simple terms this story demonstrates the nature of Inuit—the nicest of peoples I have known.

Ayagutak

I remember as follows: I had an uncle, my mother's cousin, called Ayagutak. When I first saw him, I wondered how he drank, for he looked strange. He was an old man, my mother's cousin, my uncle. My mother told me the story about her cousin like this:

He was born while his father was away hunting. He looked strange; his mother wasn't sure he could nurse. Then, when his father arrived, he said, "if he can't breast-feed, he will die. But let him be tried out to see whether he can breastfeed." So said his father. Part of his upper lip was split open, with the bone showing. That was the way he was, so it was not so strange. But when you first saw him, you used to wonder how he could drink. He did not have any trouble drinking because he got used to it even though his upper lip had a complete gap. That was the way my uncle was. He lived until he was an old man. When he smoked, the corners of his upper lip were very beautiful to look at indeed. These two pretty points of his upper lip had very good muscles. When they smoked, it was only with a pipe, and when he was smoking, you would want to watch him all the time. You could see these muscles in his dear upper lip and the nice flesh at the edges. This didn't seem strange, for some people are born handicapped. When people saw him, they just used to wonder how he managed. That is as much as I remember of my uncle. He used to look after me, and I'm thankful about that. Still using my same old neckpiece, I am still just myself.

(Translation of tape-recorded story by Aisa Tulugaq, Anthropological Series E9-853, AR6-26).

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