Functions and Limitations of Alaskan Eskimo Wife Trading

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ABSTRACT. Eskimo wife trading has often been reported and commented on but has seldom been analysed from the standpoint of structural contexts or social function. Data from arctic Alaska indicate that, for that area at least, the institution was more complex than had been supposed. Rather elaborate rules determined who could or could not exchange wives, and doing so validated a formal contract which restructured society to the advantage of the families of all four participants. Eskimo society is almost unique in that contracts validated in this manner did not contradict other social institutions.

RÉSUMÉ. *Fonctions et limites de l'échange des épouses chez les Esquimaux.* On a souvent signalé et commenté l'échange des épouses chez les Esquimaux, mais on l'a peu souvent analysé du point de vue de ses contextes structurels ou de sa fonction sociale. En Alaska arctique, les données indiquent que, du moins dans cette région, l'institution était plus complexe qu'on ne l'avait supposé. Des règles assez compliquées déterminaient qui pouvait ou ne pouvait pas échanger son épouse et qui, par le fait même, devenait partie à un contrat en règle restructurant la société à l'avantage des familles des quatre participants. La société esquimaude est unique en ce que de tels contrats ne contredisent pas ses autres institutions sociales.

РЕЗЮМЕ. *Обряд по обмену жен у эскимосов Аляски.* Многие авторы ранее отмечали, что у эскимосов Аляски существует обряд, связанный с обменом жен. Однако этот обряд редко анализировался с точки зрения его структурного содержания и социальных функций. Данные наблюдений, полученные в полярной части Аляски, показывают, что, по крайней мере, в этом районе обряд более сложен, чем предполагалось ранее. Установлено, что существуют довольно сложные правила, определяющие тех, кто может и кто не может обменять своих жен. Причем при таком обмене заключается формальный договор, который изменяет социальную структуру общества в пользу семей всех четырех участвующих сторон. Общество эскимосов является почти уникальным в том смысле, что договоры, заключенные таким образом, не противоречат другим социальным обрядам.

At least two excellent library surveys have been published on the subject of Eskimo wife trading (Guemple 1961, Rubel 1961). Both reports reach similar conclusions: although wife trading has been reported many times, little is known about it other than that it did take place. Spencer (1968) has since reduced this deficiency by publication of his article, "Spouse Exchange Among the North Alaskan Eskimo."

This scarcity of supporting details has not kept the example of Eskimo wife trading from being used as basic data for theories and as textbook examples of human adaptive processes. Scholarly explanations of the practice, although often only implicit, seem to fall into two broad categories which might be called the economic expediency theory and the lost paradise theory.

The first, an anthropological approach, goes something like this: why is a

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practice, absent elsewhere for the obvious reason that it would be disruptive in any other society, not disruptive for the Eskimo? The usual answer is that Eskimos have adapted to a peculiarly harsh environment and, in doing so, have made drastic compromises in their social order. A hunter needs a woman to chew his boots, the argument goes, but if his wife is incapacitated when the caribou are running, he is faced with a desperate problem: he can neither hunt nor leave off hunting. The problem is solved by the hunter's borrowing someone else's wife, leaving his own in the other person's care. No one is offended because everyone recognizes the necessity of the act and knows that the other husband might have to use the same expedient in the future. Thus life is maintained in the Arctic. (For illustrative examples see Farb 1968, p. 68, Hoebel 1966, p. 364.)

An implication of this first approach is that social control is a luxury of more prosperous societies. It would seem that if Eskimo economy became more secure, then wife trading would no longer be necessary, would arouse jealousy and social sanctions and guilt inculcation would be applied against it.

The second ("lost paradise") approach takes the opposite view that social or psychological constraint is oppressive, stultifying and unnecessary. According to this reasoning freedom retreats as civilization advances. The individual can never realize his potential until he has shaken off the constraints of society. This argument seems to be used more by novelists such as Heinlein (1968, p. 348) and social critics than by anthropologists, but any anthropologist in the room is likely to be caught short of basic data.

Material which I gathered in 1961, 1962 and 1967 shows that, for Northern Alaska at least, neither theory holds water. In this area legitimate wife trading was a strategy for building social ties, not a hunting technique, and was much too hemmed in with rules and constraints to satisfy the lost paradise theory. The practice of Eskimo wife trading will be reexamined here in the light of this information, from the viewpoint of balance between cost and benefit to the society. The questions are: how did the system work; how did it contribute to the maintenance of the larger society; and what structural limitations explain its absence elsewhere? It should be noted that the ethnographic present in this case ends during the 1890's, when missionaries put an end to the practice.

In trying to understand why Alaskan Eskimos traded wives and with whom, it helps to keep two points in mind: a stranger was seen as an enemy to be killed on sight on the assumption that the other fellow had the same idea, and one could not trade wives with close relatives. Informants are consistent on these points.

When two hunters met on the tundra the first impulse was to kill or run. Any number of case histories contain this theme. The concept of stranger to the Eskimo included not only persons whose faces could not be recognized but anyone who could not be placed in some positive relation to Ego, the two being the same in most cases.

Stories told in the *kardigi* (ceremonial house) run something like this: a hunter comes upon a stranger on the tundra, kills him and hides the body, usually by stuffing its guts with stones and sinking it in a river. The killer is not at all sure the events went unwitnessed, perhaps by a younger brother of the slain man who had been left in hiding. Even if the killer were not known, trouble might arise.

Whenever a hunter failed to return it was assumed that he had been killed, and suspicions developed about who was responsible. Suspicions and resentments were passed on from generation to generation, so that only an individual with whom one had positive structural relations could be trusted.

The individual tried to protect himself by building a network of helpful relationships, thereby reducing the number of "strangers" in his environment by making friends. Often the relationship was described in kinship terms. Given the bilateral Eskimo kinship system, almost anybody could be counted as a relative but, outside a core of close kinsmen, recognition of consanguineal bonds depended on mutual acting out of kinship patterns (Heinrich 1960, pp. 110-111).

If a visitor to a strange village heard his *akanakaan* (roughly, cousin) address someone else as "*akanakaan*," he immediately rushed to his new kinsman and tried to establish himself as a relative. An example of the potentiality and instability of the kinship system is found in the following folk history. Warriors from Barrow had lined up for a battle against Wainwright. Suddenly a Barrow man began running back and forth between the lines, shouting that he didn't know which side to join because he had so many relatives in both groups. Soon warriors who had talked against the fight began remembering kinsmen on the other side, and the battle was called off. Informants agreed that the champion had not really been in a quandary but had used kinship as a diplomatic ploy to make both sides feel uneasy.

A further disadvantage of the kinship system was that in case of trouble one's distant relatives were likely to side with their own close kinsmen and so be of little help. This gap was bridged by a series of achieved relationships. These non-kin bonds included trading partners (*neivik*), namesakes (*atik*), amulet partners (*kopnegiit*), people who were kinsmen in the other world before birth and, of interest here, wife trading partners. The advantage of having such ties was that the other fellow could be expected to stand up against his own kinsmen in defence of his partner. Cases are remembered where wars were avoided because someone tipped off his partner on the other side that an attack was planned.

The second point in understanding the practice of wife trading was that North Alaskan Eskimos recognized a taboo which can be generalized as, "I may not have sexual relations with anyone who has had sexual relations with one of my close relatives." This levirate and sororate taboo also included parents, parents' siblings, parents' siblings' children and siblings' children, after which "may not" shaded off into degrees of "should not," until no kinship bonds were recognized (Spencer 1959, p. 75). Violations of this rule have been known to lead to suicide or patricide. Wife trading partners (and also marriage partners) then were chosen from socially distant and potentially dangerous families.

These two considerations, it should be noted, had the same consequence, the scattering of social ties among a large number of alien groups.

The system seems casual to an outsider at first. An acquaintance dropped in for a visit, there was a period of ordinary conversation, then the guest said, "I think your wife is rather pretty." The host had the option of replying either, "I think your wife is pretty also," or "I agree, my wife is pretty." In the first

case a trading agreement had been reached; in the second the visitor had been politely refused. The response of the wife is not known for sure. Informants say that she would have nothing to do with the other fellow at first, "but she always gave in at last." Ceremonial reluctance was common however for true marriages also, and it is not clear how much of this feminine hesitancy was spontaneous and how much was custom.

The exchange was without ceremony but was not secret. Several informants remember coming home from watching a messenger feast dance to find their mothers copulating with a strange man (exchanges were always uxorilocal).

The system did have a formal structure however, well noticed by the Eskimos themselves. Partners of the same sex addressed each other as *Aipak* or *Aipagiik* (another me); the same terms were used between co-husbands in polygyny and co-wives in polyandry. If the partnership was terminated, members of the same sex addressed each other as *Anatuakaan.* Informants say the first term means "copulating with the same individual" while the second means "divorced." Case histories indicate that the first term referred to a condition of mutual trust and helpfulness, based on the socially recognized criterion of having copulated with the same individual, while the second stated that this trust had been terminated. Informants, discussing their own relatives, might say, "he married this other man's divorced wife so he had a right to call him *Aipak.*" Children born after a wife trading encounter referred to their parents' partners as *Aaparuk* and *Aanaruk* (little father and little mother respectively) and were called *Inikrunja* and *Puninrunja* (resembles son and resembles daughter). Wife trading partners of the opposite sex referred to each other as *Nuleronga* (copulates).

An offspring of one family, conceived after consummation of wife trading, addressed an offspring of the other family conceived after that date as *katuk* or *katagiik*. This term has two definitions, either "half sibling" or "one of two otherwise unrelated individuals conceived after intercourse between one or both of their parents." If an individual addressed another as *katuk*, he indicated either, "We are biologically related through one parent only," or "at least one of my parents had sexual relations with at least one of your parents before either of us was conceived." It may be obvious that no biological relationship existed between *katuks*, but kinship implications set the rule of conduct in every case. To the Eskimo a *katuk* was a half sibling and must be treated as such. *Katuks* could result from divorce, widowhood, adultery or even rape, but wife trading gave some regularity to the system.

The above words are terms of address, although they could also be used as descriptive terms or labels. (For additional vocabulary, see Gubser 1965, p. 68). This elaboration of the system and public testimony of social relationship, through terms of address, were consistent with the part wife trading played in the maintenance of society.

North Alaskan Eskimos recognized three general situations in which wife trading was legitimate: settling marital disputes, reinforcing the status of important people, and producing kinsmen for one's children.

The first, or dispute settling strategy, was seldom used in practice. Many cases of disputes over women are available, but informants remember only a

few instances of these quarrels being resolved by wife trading. A woman in Wainwright committed adultery; after her husband died the facts became known. The lady's second husband approached the adulterer with the proposition that since the situation had already started it might as well continue. The two became wife trading partners and addressed each other as *Aipak* even years after the coming of Christianity put an end to their exchanges.

A hunter near Kotzebue drifted out on the ice and was presumed dead. The supposed widow remarried; then the first husband returned, addressed the second as *Aipak*, thanked him for taking care of his wife while he was gone and took her back. No trouble arose. Here, presumably, defining the situation as wife trading rather than remarriage gave the second husband a face saving excuse for letting his wife be taken away.

A woman of Barrow committed adultery; her husband learned what was going on and seduced the other man's wife in revenge. Later the offended husband publicly addressed the other man as *Aipak*, thereby achieving three goals: he let the other man know that he knew what was going on, that the score had already been evened, and he gave the adulterer an honourable excuse for not starting a fight. The adulterer hesitated a long moment, according to the story looked very uncomfortable, then replied with the honorific term *Aipak*. The matter ended there. This last case is rather pat and may be stylized advice rather than a historical event.

One reason why such cases are hard to come by may be that adultery was rather rare. Another factor is that wife trading under these circumstances was safest for mature adults with established reputations, while disputes over women were often problems of the young.

A second, and much more likely, situation was wife trading between important persons and those they sponsored. Skill in hunting and good character merely qualified an individual for social advancement. To become an *umailik* (rich man) or *kowklik* (chief) one had to be patronized by someone already in that position. The last messenger feast in Barrow suggests how the system worked. For years Kapoon, a remarkably good hunter, had given meat and political support to Sovalik, a recognized *kowklik*. Kanipak was also on excellent terms with the old man. After many years the two helpers were trained in the complex task of organizing a messenger feast and appointed second and third *kowklik* respectively. Since the sponsor was old, it was assumed that he would soon die and the other two would literally move up a notch, since the record was kept on a notched "messenger stick."

Sponsor and sponsored cemented their relationship in one of two ways: the older man could give his daughter in marriage to his helper or the two might exchange wives. The rationalization here was that the two people liked each other very much and so wanted to do everything they could for each other, and wife trading under these circumstances brought good luck. For example, in Barrow a whale captain and his harpooner decided to exchange wives just before the whaling season. When the captain's wife protested vigorously, she was told that if she didn't cooperate they would not get any whales that year. When they didn't get any whales anyway she was furious. This case is remembered for

the wife's antics, not for the logic of the situation which was seen as too reasonable to be entertaining.

Analysis of case histories of trouble situations brings out a much more fundamental consequence of wife trading under these circumstances. Duels, vendettas and other forms of local violence were much feared, and important people were especially in danger because they aroused envy. In remembered cases, when a rich man was killed, it was his wife trading partner, not his kinsmen, who tried to avenge him. In principle this resulted in a neat balance of power. If a rich man killed a poor man, he created a revenge cycle with one family. If a poor man killed a rich man and then killed his wife trading partner in self defence, he created a revenge cycle with two families. If there was more than one wife trading partner the poor man's position could become hopeless. On the other hand, if a rich man involved his partners in too many disputes he was likely to lose help when he needed it most.

For example, a rich Wainwright man stole a poor man's only dog. The poor man brooded over this insult for several days, then challenged the rich man to a duel. They fought in full public view until the rich man was killed. The poor man then challenged the crowd, demanding to know if anybody wanted to do anything about it. The rich man's wife trading partner said that if he didn't have a hurt knee he would fight his partner's killer right away. The affair then ended. At the end of the story the informant and several others present commented that it was lucky the partner had a good excuse for not fighting because it would be a shame to have to avenge such a mean rich man.

This case may be an aphorism, but the point is that informants sensed that the story was not complete until the matter of the wife trading partner was settled. Wife trading then can be seen as preserving law and order and supporting proper leadership.

The third and, from the Eskimo's point of view, by far the most important motive for wife trading was to create kinsmen in distant villages for one's children. Children born after spouse exchange were *katuks* or half siblings and must protect each other from enemies. As one informant put it: "Now in the old days they were always happy to make their children some *katuks*, which means brothers and sisters. Now, for example, if you go to another place and your father has been trading wives with this guy, his children are your *katuks*, your brothers and sisters. Maybe some guy will try to kill you and you have *katuks* there; this *katuk* can try to help you, your brother or sister. That's why in the old days they were always happy to make *katuks* for their children."

A few examples will suggest how much emphasis Eskimos themselves placed on this particular relationship.

A hunter from Barrow came upon a lone individual on the tundra. Both parties set their arrows and circled toward each other. When they got close, the Barrow man demanded, "What is squirrel?" and was told "*Sigrigak*." The Barrow man asked for several other words until he recognized the other man's accent as that of Wainwright. After more questions the confronters learned that their parents had traded spouses. Weapons were immediately dropped and the two hunters embraced each other.

A man from Utukok, hunting alone on the tundra, spotted a group lying in wait for him in a culvert. One of the enemy jumped out and challenged him to a duel. After some serious fighting the Utukok man cut the other's bowstring and drove him back into the culvert. Another enemy jumped out to challenge the stranger and so on until five of the larger party had been bested. The Utukok man was then able to make an unchallenged retreat. More than a year later the hunter learned that one of his *katuks* had been in the enemy party and had risked his life for his half sibling. The *katuk*, being hopelessly outnumbered, settled on a compromise: if this party challenged his brother one at a time, he wouldn't fight them; if they ganged up, they would have two enemies on their hands.

A man from Cape Lisburne, just north of Point Hope, found a foreigner who had drifted in on the ice. He recognized the other man as "a *katuk* by accident at Sheshalic," that is, his mother had committed adultery during the annual trade fair at Sheshalic, just north of Kotzebue. The lost hunter, who had drifted in from Cape Espenberg on the Seward Peninsula, was in terrible shape. He was given meat and water but was not brought in until dark. The Point Hope man kept his *katuk* hidden until just before the whaling season, then sneaked him into town under a pile of skins. At dawn the stranger was found waiting in the *kardigi* (ceremonial house). One loud fellow declared, "I suspected all along that you were hiding a man in your house." The Point Hope man replied, "I kept him all winter because he is my *katuk*." The others said that in that case they would not kill him and were told that, "If you had I would have lain down beside him" (e.g., would have committed suicide). The stranger remained in Point Hope during the whaling season and was returned to his own people during the next trade fair at Sheshalic.

One more example of danger for contrast: three hunters, starving and nearly dead, drifted in on the ice near Point Hope. The men of Point Hope recognized the hunters by their accents as being from well to the south. They cut the strangers' throats and left their bodies on the ice.

There were also circumstances in which one could not trade wives. As already mentioned, close relatives could not share the same individual sexually. If brothers could exchange wives the function of scattering social ties would be lost and, in addition, the resulting chaos in the kinship system might be more than the structure would bear.

Another rule was that wife trading should not have the appearance of self-indulgence or exploitation. For example, young people should not exchange spouses within the community on their own initiative. Informants were emphatic in condemning young people who "sneaked around." Transgressors were in a difficult position; if they tried to keep their affairs secret they were accused of dishonesty; if they addressed each other as *Aipak* they were open to ridicule for "acting just like rich people." It is easy to see that if anyone could exchange wives the function of protecting important people would be lost.

Wives could not be exchanged between recognized enemies. Warfare was common and women were sometimes captured but, if raped, they were killed soon after to prevent the creation of half sibling relations. Several cases were remembered where females were held prisoner for a time without being used

sexually. Again, the system probably would not work if kinship obligations directly contradicted revenge obligations.

The rules then were that a man should have wife trading partners in every community he regularly visited or expected his children to visit. He might also exchange wives with important people in his own community if he were willing to pay the price in revenge obligations. And, once he had established his position in the community, he might use wife trading to settle marital disputes.

Other acts of infidelity were strongly discouraged. In one case a Point Hope man returned from a long hunting trip to discover that his wife had been having regular sexual relations with his wife trading partner without his permission. The offended husband "stomped" his wife to death and later began to go crazy, until at last he was executed. Informants said that although the wife's unfaithfulness was not necessarily causal, it was at least symptomatic of the hunter's decline.

One informant married a white man at Point Hope, became pregnant and was abandoned on the Seward Peninsula several hundred miles from her home. During her desperate journey back the informant took a protector and lover. Her mother discovered what was going on through shaman power and forced her daughter to give up this illicit affair, which might seem reasonable to us.

Three functions have been mentioned for wife trading; any number more might be added, but one important consequence might come as a surprise. The practice served to reinforce tight standards of sexual morality. It was unthinkable that a parent might not inform his own children who their half siblings were; to fail to do so might result in ingroup homicide or incest. Consequently, sexual transgressions could not be kept secret. Stories are told of more than one mature lady who gathered her children about her to describe her own acts of unfaithfulness and to lecture them on their consequent obligations to *katuks* they never knew they had.

Sexual transgressions were good gossip and most informants can recall a few stories, but it is easy to see that, given even moderately loose morals, the system would not work. This note of puritanical ethic contradicts what has so often been written about Eskimos. Other reports, usually from Greenland or Canada, stress such seemingly carefree practices as mass wife trading during the "putting out the lamp" game or offering "guest privileges" to explorers (Birket-Smith 1959, p. 140; Jenness 1959, p. 52-53). While these descriptions may be correct for the eastern Arctic, the sex life of the North Alaskan Eskimo was tightly circumscribed.

Girls usually became "engaged" shortly after their first menstruation but married several years later when their husbands had become good hunters. Women had plenty of time to become pregnant before marriage; yet only two such cases are remembered. In the first case the woman lost all interest in life, allowed herself to become louse infested and did not eat. She died before giving birth, as the community supposed she intended. In the second instance the girl kept her pregnancy a secret (which was not difficult considering the heavy clothing worn), gave birth alone and buried the baby. The little corpse was discovered but the mother refused to name the father until years later.

Rarity of birth out of wedlock is not a sure sign of sexual constraint. If a man got a woman pregnant, he was required to marry her. One informant suggested that this was the most common cause of polygyny but could give no examples. At any rate, sexual activity outside of marriage was taken seriously, and this concern was verbalized in terms of wife trading.

Now for the third point, concerning the uniqueness of Eskimo wife trading. The usual question is how can such an unnatural practice exist in Eskimo society? In retrospect it seems at least as meaningful to ask why the institution is not more widespread. Typically around the world contracts are validated by sharing such tension reducing practices as eating, drinking alcoholic beverages or dancing. This strategy is so effective that when two groups cannot reach a mutually agreeable accommodation there is also a taboo against sharing tension reducing activities. In both the United States and Asia, for instance, there is a deeply sensed feeling that eating in the same room with someone of a different caste is a threat to the system. Why is it that with so many cultures in the world the idea of validating a contract through sexual release has so seldom been hit upon?

One answer is that wife trading is not so rare as had formerly been thought. The practice was found in much of western North America (Smith 1936, p. 567; Wallace and Hoebel 1952, pp. 138-139), Southern Asia (Berreman 1962, pp. 60-75), Australia (Durkheim 1915, p. 247), and Oceania (Linton 1937, pp. 137-196), to name a few cases where wife trading is expected rather than merely permitted. Almost always, however, wife trading is fraternal (or sororal) and functions to reinforce the levirate (or sororate); thus it is radically different in both form and function from the Eskimo version (Murdock 1949, p. 268). Rare exceptions to the rule do not seem to contradict the uniqueness of Eskimo wife trading. The Arunta of Australia abandon many taboos, including the taboo on wife trading, during an annual religious ceremony (Durkheim 1915, p. 247). Chiefs in the Marquesa Islands built harems and used the resulting scarcity of the sexual commodity to attract followers (Linton 1937, pp. 137-196). Nayar husbands of southern India left after three days of marriage to allow their wives to become pregnant by anyone of the appropriate caste (Gough 1959, pp. 23-24). In these instances only a few of the potentialities of wife trading have been developed.

One problem which quickly comes to mind is the threat to the system through arousal of jealousy. Eskimo informants remember several such cases and explicitly recognize the danger. About seven miles south of Barrow, near the coast, two large rocks stick up through marshy ground. Whenever hunters pass this spot they tell the story that those rocks had once been wife trading partners. One of the women, they say, became jealous, wanting both men for herself alone. She played on the vanity and latent resentment of the two men until they had a duel. One man was wounded but managed to kill the other before crawling off a little way to die. The two bodies became transformed into stones. "That's how families split up," the story ends; "when people become greedy, that's how families split up."

Although the threat of jealousy was real, Murdock (1949, p. 264) claims no more than five percent of the cultures of the earth contain a general prohibition of sex relations outside of marriage. The fact that Eskimos fall into the 95% category suggests that jealousy is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause for the widespread rule against wife trading.

Another limitation is that the Eskimo version of wife trading requires both the levirate and the sororate taboo. In most societies, the larger problem is not to extend social ties but to preserve those already in existence. Consequently the levirate and sororate are often more valuable than prohibitions against them. In North America, for example, only the Eskimos and the Zuni have levirate and sororate taboos, and the Zuni could not possibly tolerate the danger of violence arising from wife trading (Benedict 1934, pp. 74-75).

Still another structural limitation in Eskimo wife trading is that since the exchange is symmetrical, the kinship system must be bilateral. A chief in a society based on patrilineal sibs might collect a harem of women from other sibs in order to establish defensive alliances. It would be superfluous at best however to "borrow" a wife. Even if the woman were returned to her own people after the first night, as in some Moslem royal families, nothing is lost by honouring her as a temporary wife. The chief cannot enter into an arrangement where the obligations of resulting offspring are either shared with two unilineal sibs or are in doubt. This fact of life by itself limits Eskimo type of wife exchange to a minority of known societies.

One final and rather obvious note: the balance between sexual outlet and restraint reached in different societies often cannot be combined. Much has been written about the advantages to the individual and to society of premarital sex play. Prohibition of such experimentation would involve an administrative effort at least. This is a cost many societies do not need to pay because problems Eskimos settled through wife exchange they handle in other ways.

In summary, Alaskan wife trading was a stylized formal validation of contract, surrounded by obligations and taboos and not lightly entered into. The institution had a number of personal and social functions, most of which involved broadening of social alliances and reinforcing of sexual norms. These advantages could be gained in this way only in a society with a bilateral kinship system, a levirate-sororate taboo and a prohibition on premarital sex play. These conditions, which may be thought of as constituting necessary but not sufficient conditions for the practice, are met in so few societies that the uniqueness of Eskimo wife trading in those instances where it is possible may well be a matter of historical chance.

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