

THE STRANGE TURNABOUT

One of the puzzling things to see in Alaska today, especially where the climate is the coldest, is the way some of the Native people dress compared with non-Natives. This is especially true among the young Native people. These young Natives are dressing more

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like white people and the white people, to a noticeable extent, are beginning to dress more in traditional Eskimo attire.

The editor once received a letter in which the writer wondered why some of the white people were wearing mukluks while the Native youngsters were wearing tennis shoes--and this in cold winter weather. This is also true in wearing of parkas. More and more white people are wearing them while the young Native people seem to prefer jackets and other less warm clothes. What is the reason behind this? Is acculturation working both ways?

The Native people through the centuries past learned to dress for the weather and the designs and utilitarian aspects of the clothing they ultimately designed, were just about the best to wear under the severe climatic conditions. Since Alaska will be a cold country for a long time to come, the basic designs of the oldtime Eskimos will, no doubt, influence the winter attire in Alaska at least. As far as non-Natives are concerned, they have been pretty much influenced because they have found that such winter wear is the best under the conditions. Really cold weather has no respect for ill-designed clothing.

Acculturation of the Native people to Western styles in Alaska, in the northern areas especially, has been going on for about 75 years. However, during that time, the acculturation agents of the West have not quite been able to talk the Eskimos out of their parkas, the older ones anyway, but they apparently have made some inroads as far as younger people are concerned. This was done probably by making them ashamed of the things they traditionally had, even of those things that have been proven to be most practical and useful.

On the other hand, even though the Native people have not made concerted efforts to acculturate the white people into their traditional ways, many non-Natives have found that parkas, and mukluks, were indeed the best kind of winter attire in Alaska. They have found them to be both utilitarian as well as attractive. They have discovered that such dress is the best insurance against being frozen to death. It is rather ironic to note that quite a few white people are doing things directly opposite their own acculturation agents in adopting some of the Native peoples' traditional wear. They are finding out that what works best in the temperate zones doesn't always work in Alaska.

There will, of course, be a great deal of acculturation of the Native people of Alaska in the future, but we don't think that those who might profess that Western ways are the best in the world are altogether correct. They should, at least, consider and respect those things that have been proven to be practical and useful and perhaps leave them alone. Instead, there should be an opportunity given the people in Alaska, both non-Native and Native, a freer hand in getting used to one another's ways. If given this opportunity, both peoples could probably work cooperatively and figure things out that would work best in this unique land--Alaska.