Inuit and Eskimo

The word ‘Eskimo,’ which was a term used to refer to the Inuit, seems to generate from the language of the Montagnais Indians, with the meaning, ‘snowshoe-netter’ (Issenman 6). In the 1970's, because of certain constitutions the Canadian government decided that this tribe would no longer be referred to as Eskimos, and that they would be called ‘The Inuit.’ The Inuit have adapted themselves to the various regions they inhabit by hunting and whaling for food and constructing igloos for shelter. At one point the Inuit were considered to be among the healthiest people in the world (Gardiner 2007).

Geography

Inuit communities are found in the Arctic, the Northwest Territories, Labrador and Quebec in Canada, above the tree line in Alaska, and in Russia. There are 21 tribes of Alaskan Eskimos, yet tribe is used loosely amongst Eskimos (Gardiner 2007). The Alaskan Eskimo represented a little less than half of the 73,000 Eskimos that presently reside spread across Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and northern Siberia as seen in Figure 1 (Chance 1966:6). The Eskimo's of Alaska spoke either Inupik or Yupik including the Cux, Suk, and Yuk dialects (Oswalt 1967:5). “In some areas, Inuit people are called ‘Eskimos,’ however, many Inuit find this term offensive. The word ‘Inuit’ means ‘the people’ in the Inuktitut language” (Gardiner 2007).

If the geography isn’t harsh enough the extreme winters that contain wind storms and temperatures that get as low as -60 degrees F and the summers that get as hot as 65 degrees F make it a very hard climate to live in (Chance 1966:8). This harsh climate doesn’t seem to affect the wild life, animals such as caribou, mountain sheep, polar bear, moose, walrus, wolf, lemming and so on, survive in those areas.

Inuit Homes

Traditional Inuit communities depended on a restricted amount of building materials. Since it snowed almost all-year round, snow became one of the primary resources used for construction. In the winter, Inuit lived in “igloos” which were round small buildings made out of compact snow blocks (Gardiner 2007). During the warmer seasons, the Inuit migrated from place to place and built homes made from animal skins. At times, they would also build tents made from caribou hides with wooden frames (Gardiner 2007).
Soon after World War Two, permanent settlements were established around airbases and radar stations (Gardinar 2007). These settlements soon included more westernized homes, as well as a health care center, grocery store, church and school. Inuit children are now required to attend schools that teach both traditional Inuit history as well as “non-native traditions” (Gardinar 2007).

Transportation

The Inuit had different transportation reserved for use in specific terrain. Kayaks and Umiaks were mainly used to travel on water. The Kayaks held one person and were rowed with a double-bladed paddle. The Umiak was significantly larger holding up to more than 20 people. On land, "the Inuit used sleds made of animal bones and skins pulled over the snow and ice by dogs." (Gardiner 2007)

Finding Food

The Inuit diet consisted primarily of foods that could be hunted: "Whales, walruses, seals, fish were staples of the Inuit diet" (Gardiner 2007). Seal meat was an important part of the Inuit diet because it was considered to be a source of protein. As soon as the animal was hunted, the hunters would drink the blood because it would keep them warm (Gardiner 2007). The Inuit rarely ate plants because not much grows in the frigid regions they inhabited. Today, the Inuit still eat many of the traditional meats that they were known for hunting as well as buying many western grocery items such as tea, sugar, flour, bread, powdered milk, canned fruit, and candy (Chance 1966:47).

Inuit Clothing

One of the most important factors in ensuring survival was to make clothing that would provide warmth in the frigid and harsh winters of the Arctic environment. The Inuit made all their clothing from animal skins and hides—preferably those of the caribou because it was lightweight and warm. In winter they wore two layers of caribou skin clothing. The outer layer had the fur facing out, while the fur of the inner layer faced in (Inuit). The outer garment was a hooded parka. Presently, the hooded parka has been adopted in other countries around the world, but it is made of different materials (Gardiner 2007). Boots were also made from Caribou skin (Gardiner 2007).

Traditions

For early Inuit women in this culture usually got married near after puberty and men usually got married when they were old enough to support another. In most tribes it was expected that the young couple would live with the wife’s family for at least the first year or so and generally the families were matriarchal (Chance 1966:48). Presently women and men are free to choose whom and when they would like to marry based on love. Marriage between first cousins is now looked down upon unless in small villages (Chance 1966:49).

Traditional ceremonies were very prominent in Inuit culture. The most popular ceremonies were centered around hunting. The ritual known as the "First Fruits," was a widely held when celebrating the first kill of a certain species during a particular season (Oswalt 1967:225-226). These ceremonies are still held today as well as celebrating more western holidays such as the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas (Chance 1966:55).

Shamans were very important figures in most Eskimo tribes. The shamans participated in rituals to cure the sick, influence the weather, predict the future, and promote the general welfare by helping to make animals amenable to capture (Oswalt 1967:223). This individual held great authority due to his supernatural powers. Usually this position was passed down from father to son. Eskimos had many ceremonies for multiple reasons, such as hunting and pleasing the dead. Eskimos also believed that all animals and humans had a spirit god that Shamans could communicate with (Oswalt 1967:223).

Although Inuit life has changed significantly over the past century, many traditions continue. “Traditional storytelling, mythology, and dancing remain important parts of the culture. Family and community are very important” (Gardiner 2007).
Childhood

The traditional views of a child within the Inuit community differ from western views of a child. A child born into the Inuit community is usually named four days after the initial birth has taken place. The name given to the child is from a recently deceased individual (Park 2008). It is believed that the newborn will acquire the same characteristics as the individual that retained the name previously. The “name spirit” is responsible for the transfer in characteristics (Park 2008). For the first year of the child’s life, the mother carries the baby within her hood. Should the mother have many tasks to complete, the younger girls become responsible with the act of carrying the child. Disciplinary action taken toward children, involves embarrassing the child to keep them from doing it again (Park 2008). The children learn how to do various tasks by observing and through trial-and-error situations.

Law within the Inuit Society

The Inuit people live by a very basic set of guidelines within their communities. Though they enjoy the satisfaction of hunting, they are generally a peaceful society (Hata). Every member of that community has a job or basic function that must be fulfilled. To ensure that everyone of the community is fed as well as possible, each and every person must make a contribution. Hunting is traditionally the job of all mature males present. In a society such as this, it would be frowned upon if a mature male chose not to participate in hunting activities. This would decrease the ability of the other hunters to effectively hunt enough game to provide for the people within the community or household. Though a male may decide that he does not want to hunt, it does not mean that he will go without food (Hata). In the eyes of the Inuit people, land is considered to be communal property due to hunting purposes. Within the Inuit society there is no central figure of authority. The eldest male of each family becomes the authority figure for that family unit, only. Disputes are settled by contests in which verbal insults are used to demean one another (Hata).

Recent Changes during the 20th Century

As you have seen the Inuit culture has been constantly evolving since the inception of this culture. “The Arctic had always been seen as inaccessible, but the invention of airplanes made it easier for non-Artic dwellers to get there” (Gardiner 2007). Some say that this influence by “non-Artic dwellers” has improved Inuit culture but some argue otherwise. For instance, anthropologist Margaret Lantis says, “Eskimos are trying just as hard today to adapt as they did 500 or 900 years ago; the difficulty is that they are adapting not to the Arctic but to the Temperate Zone way of living. The new people with their new standards have nearly overwhelmed the Eskimo, not in numbers but in wishes and wants” (Chance 1966:47). On the other hand, some argue that the only change that Inuits make is for their benefit. For example; hunting with a gun as opposed to hunting with a spear. This was a traditional old technique that is not progressive in society today, yet many younger Inuit hunters have also started using newer technology such as GPS units which many older Inuit hunters disapprove of because they claim that it takes away from the whole “experience of the land, people, and local knowledge” (Aporta 2005). Therefore you can see that Inuit culture has been influenced by western civilization in many ways and some find it useful while others may differ.

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