

# THE INUIT

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The Inuit, or Eskimo, of the far North of America and Greenland, are a semi-nomadic people whose culture has enabled them to survive the harshness of the Arctic environment. Not only does their hunting subsistence pattern match the landscape, but social structures, child rearing and values are all determined by the land.

Although most people still think of the people of the North as “Eskimos”, there is considerable controversy over that name. Many of the Canadian Eskimos think of the term as “demeaning”, having negative connotations, and choose to use Inuit. Anthropologists tend to refer to specific groups – either geographic or of a particular

The Inuit live in the Far North of the Americas, from North Alaska in the West to the island of Greenland to the East (Figure 1). All but the Labrador Eskimo live above latitude 60°N, and most live within the Arctic Circle.



Figure 1: Distribution of Western Arctic people, from *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

The land where the Inuit live is an incredibly harsh environment. In the Winter months, the temperatures can drop to below -60°F, although normal temperatures may be closer to -35°F with low snowfall (EB Online 3). In the Summer, the temperatures rise to a mean of 50°F and can even rise as high as 80°F but the weather is extremely unpredictable and a warm clear day can be immediately followed by a storm with temperatures dropping over 30°F. Even in the Summer, little of the region can be said to be frost free, as night time temperatures dip below freezing.

dialect – as Eskimo, e.g. The Caribou Eskimo, while referring to the larger encompassing group as Inuit (EB Online 1)

The Inuit all speak dialects of a single language. The language family is known as Inuit, with mutually intelligible variants dialects such as Inuktitut (Eastern Canada), Inuktitun (Western Canada), Inupiaq (Northern Alaska) and Kalaallisut (Greenland) (EB Online 2). Inuit is a polysynthetic language, using many morphemes, in an irregular manner, to construct words that are often extremely long and containing a great deal of information.

As well as the extremes of temperature – especially the cold of Winter – the Inuit also had to adapt the long nights and short days of the Arctic Winter with the corresponding long days of the Summer. The climate, with its lack of frost-free days and extremely short growing seasons, has minimal vegetation. None of this vegetation is useful for human nutrition. Further to the south may be trees and bushy shrubs, but again nothing to provide food.

Although the Inuit are classified as a hunter-gatherer culture, they are peculiar in that they only hunt. Their environment has no viable food crop to gather and

all their food comes from animal sources through hunting. There are two hunting seasons: winter and spring/summer, and both prey and hunting method changes with the season.

The most important animals for many Inuit are seals (Boas 63). They form the majority of the catch in both seasons although the hunting method changes. During this Winter, the inuit hunt the seals through the seal holes in the ice, harpooning the prey with a light harpoon, known as a *unang* (Boas 67–70). In the Summer, the ice breaks and the hunters work from kayaks to hunt seals, walrus and occasionally, whales. In the summer season, the inuit also hunt deer, musk ox and bears (Boas 93). Although they have developed tools, such as the kayak and the dog sled teams to enable them to hunt, Richard Nelson suggests that instead the inuit's greatest advantage is a profound understanding of and affinity for the world around them. (75)

The inuit live in villages consisting of multiple extended families. Traditionally, families would live in a ice house – *iglu* – in the Winter, and when the ice began to melt in Spring, would move to the Summer hunting grounds where tents were used (Boas 131,143). Family is important to the Inuit, including extended family, and they trace ancestry through both the male and female lines – bilaterally – for at least three generations (Chance 48). While in the Winter, time not spent hunting is spent in the *iglus* preparing the meat from the kill, and for the men, chatting, gambling or playing games (Boas 150); in the Summer, the village meets and eats together, perhaps watching a mimic perform and then relaxing in gender groups (Boas 170).

Men and women have clearly defined roles in Inuit life. Men are responsible for the hunting, which takes up much of their time, especially in the winter months when the hours of daylight are short. They will also assist in some other tasks, such as erecting tents and other 'heavy' work and they are responsible for maintaining the kayaks and for caring for the dogs (Boas 156). Women are responsible for the home: they cook, manage the food supply, do housework, care for the children, butcher the

meat and sew the skins (Chance 51). Men and women, even husbands and wives, rarely spend a great deal of time with each other, preferring the company of those of their own gender. Although both genders do most socializing within family groups, men also meet in the *karigi*, a ceremonial dance house. They also form hunting groups, led by the *umialik*, which cross family lines (Chance 52).

Marriage is traditionally arranged when the betrothed are still children, although either side can break such betrothals once they reach adulthood (Boas 170). Boas and Chance are at odds when discussing marriage taboos. Chance states that unlike western societies, there is no taboo against marrying cousins, and indeed in some communities, marriage between cousins, parallel or cross, is preferred (49). Boas claims that marriage between relatives is strictly forbidden (171). It could well be that these are regional variations. When the betrothed couple reach adulthood – and if the marriage is still approved by all parties, including the parents – then the young man moves in with his wife and her parents. Once a household is established, a man may take additional wives, although one is always considered the chief wife. This polygamy is extremely rare; monogamy being the standard (Boas 171). In addition to polygamy, wife swapping used to be part of the inuit culture. Friends would swap their wives for a season or more and the result would be a close bonding between the two families (Chance 49, Boas 171). However, if the wives objected too much, they had recourse, as divorce is simple in inuit culture and requires no pretext or period of separation expected in Western societies (Boas 171).

Inuit childrearing is somewhat different from that standard in the US, and, like much else, it reflects the perilous environment in which the Inuit live. Children are encouraged from early childhood to constantly experiment, pushing the boundaries to improve both of their physical strength and their problem-solving capabilities (Nanda 125). Children are not pressured to learn and are rarely physically restrained or reprimanded: it is believed that they will all learn in time and that it is preferable to exert more indirect forms of influence. They are encouraged to

copy adults, to learn from example and reasoning rather than questioning. They are expected to learn empathy for others, and to learn the emotional control needed in the often-close environment of iglus of the Inuit villages (Nanda 127).

In Inuit tribes, there is no formalized “class” structure or leadership. Within the extended family – by far the most important group in the life of any Inuit – the eldest male usually holds sway, but any influence comes only with the consent and agreement of the family. A foolish, weak or indecisive elder will hold little influence or power. For men, another influential figure is the *umialik*, the hunting group leader, but his influence extends little beyond the hunting group. The shamans and other elders hold some influence in the village, as long as they have the confidence of the villagers for, like family groups, weak leaders or those that have little respect have little influence (Chance 64). Law is unwritten and based on common agreement (Boas 174). The family or community will ostracize a minor troublemaker until he adjusts his behavior. Given the necessity for cooperation in the dangerous environment, such troublemaking is uncommon and soon stopped (Chance 65). If the transgressor does not stop, or if a serious crime takes place there is no formal law or means of punishment. The family of the victim would declare blood feud and seek vengeance against the aggressor often resulting in death (Boas 174).

The Inuit are strong believers in animalistic spirits and the supernatural (Chance 58). Although these forces are normally neutral towards the Inuit, specially trained shamans known as *angakoks* can control them. The shaman was believed to have power over illness – to cure it or to cause it – as well as predictive abilities, the ability to speak to the dead and some control over the forces of

nature. Although it is believed that all Inuit have access to supernatural powers, only the shaman had a guardian spirit or *tunraq*, and the subsequent ability to shapeshift into the animal form of the *tunraq*. The *angakoks* have sacred language and speech, frequently use singing and shouting and they, along with most Inuit, will carry amulets for protection and luck (Boas 184).

The Inuit also believe in a protecting god or goddess, although there is considerable regional variation in belief (Boas 175). A common deity is a female supreme being – often known as *Sedna* – who is said to have created all the things on the earth and to be the protector of the Inuit, and it is to her house that the dead may travel after death (Boas 180). Although there is some differences between tribes on the exact nature of the afterlife, there is a broad agreement that the dead either go to the “good land” or heaven, if they have died in childbirth, by accident or by violence and have led good lives, or to some bad place, analogous with hell, where there is only cold and famine, for those who have broken *Sedna*’s rules or human laws (Boas 182).

Ordinary Inuit take part in religious observations, led by the shaman. In the Singing House, they will feast, sing and play games (Boas 193). The most important festivals include the Messenger Feast, the Whale Feast, the Bladder Festival (Nakaciuq) and the Festival for the Dead (Fair 464). All are annual, and usually in the Autumn or Winter months except the Festival of the Dead, which usually only occurs every decade. Births and deaths are strongly guided by custom, dictated by custom, the spirits and the shaman. Pregnant women and new mothers are particularly effected, with a great number of restrictive customs for her to follow or risk bad luck or even the death of her infant (Boas 203).

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