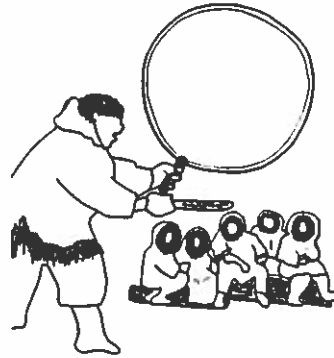


## Northern Eskimos: Inupiat



For most people, Alaska is the home of the Eskimo—hard, ruddy-faced Natives who live in isolated igloos, wear warm fur clothing, use dogs and sleds to constantly travel in pursuit of polar bear while barely surviving on the edge of starvation.

As with any stereotype, there is a kernel of truth to this image but only a very small one. That kernel consists of hardy, fur clothes, dogs and sleds. After that, serious revisions are in order. For the north Alaskan Eskimos (Inupiat), there were no igloos (except in extreme emergencies); many lived nearly year round in the

largest Alaskan Native communities at the time of contact; seal, bowhead whale, caribou and fish were their main foods, and starvation, although not unknown, was rare.

The Inupiat, which means “the people” in the Inupiaq language, can be divided into four main units: Bering Straits people, Kotzebue Sound people, North Alaska Coast people and Interior North Alaska people (Damas, 1985). The latter two groups have sometimes been termed the *Tareumiut* (people of the sea) and *Nunamiut* (people of the land). These regional groupings are based on patterns of social interaction between groups that arose out of proximity, intermarriage and kinship.

The Inupiat recognized smaller unit which might be termed bands that consisted of closely-related families of between 20 and 200 people who occupied and used a certain area. Each of these units had the suffix *miut* which means “people of.” The larger coastal communities such as Wales, Pt. Hope and Barrow with 400-600 people actually consisted of a number of extended family units.

### Population distribution

The population of the Inupiat is estimated to have been around 10,000 people at the time of contact with Euroamericans in the 19th century.

#### Inupiat Eskimo Groups and Estimated Population at the Time of Contact

Bering Straits	2,250
Kotzebue Sound	4,000
Interior North Alaska	1,500
North Alaska Coast	1,850
Total	9,600

### Food and diet

Three major ways of surviving were pursued by the Inupiat at the time of contact indicating their ability to adjust to different circumstances. These were large marine mammal hunting, mixed hunting, and fishing and caribou hunting.

The North Alaska Inupiat and the Bering Straits Inupiat of Wales, King Island, Sledge Island and Diomedede Island depended heavily on large marine mammals such as bowhead whales, beluga whales and walrus. The Inupiat pursued this species when they migrated north in the late spring and summer. If the hunt was successful, they would not have to spend long hours on the winter ice, fishing or hunting seal.

Kotzebue Sound people and the remainder of the Bering Straits people harvested small sea mammals, land mammals, fish and migratory waterfowl. Pink and chum salmon were available to many groups in Norton and Kotzebue sounds. Other fish such as inconnu and whitefish were also important to virtually all groups. Herring and crab were used by the people of Norton Sound. Seals were a critical resource to all coastal groups while groups in the river valleys used caribou. Caribou provided about 90 percent of the Nunamiut diet (Hall 1985). During the spring and fall migrations, caribou herds would mass together making it easier to kill large numbers. People took a variety of other foods including mountain sheep, whitefish, hares, moose, bear, ground squirrel and ptarmigan.



The Tareumiut, or "people of the sea," developed ingenious tools and methods for hunting seals, whales and other marine mammals. During the late 19th century, their resourcefulness and generosity saved many Yankee whalers whose vessels were trapped in the grip of the Arctic ice. (Lomen Family Collection, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska, Fairbanks)

#### Tools and technology

Eskimos are rightfully regarded as ingenious technologists whose inventions made it possible to survive the harsh living conditions of the arctic. The Inupiat tool kit consisted of a variety of stone and ivory tools made for butchering, tanning, carving, drilling, inscribing, sharpening and flaking. One of the most important tools was the bow drill, used for starting fires and drilling holes in wood, bone, and ivory. With this relatively simple

tool kit, the entire technological inventory could be made.

The most sophisticated technology was developed for the bowhead whale hunt and included *toggle-headed harpoons*, lances and lines. Floats made from seal bladders had special plugs for inflation. Other implements included scratching boards for attracting seals to breathing holes, bows, arrows, spears, spearthrowers, bolas for taking birds, and a variety of snares. Fishing gear included nets, traps made of branches and roots, spears and hooks. The Nunamiut constructed long funnel-shaped rock and wood fences to divert caribou into lakes or a corral where waiting hunters would kill them.

#### Transportation

Another key item in the successful adaptation of the coastal peoples was the *umiak*, or large open skin boat. Most boats were 15-20 feet long, but Burch (1985) reports some nearly 50 feet from the Kotzebue area. Six to eight bearded seal skins were stitched together and carefully lashed to a wooden frame. Umiaks were used for hunting whale and walrus, and for travel and trading voyages. Large models could carry up to 15 people and a ton of cargo comfortably.

Better known is the *kayak*, or closed skin boat, used typically by one man among Eskimo groups. These were constructed by attaching stitched seal skins to wooden frames leaving only a circular opening in the top for entry.

For travel on land, the basket sled was used for general transport and the flat sled for hauling the large skin boats across the ice to the sea. Dogs were not used with sleds until after 1500 A.D. Snowshoes were used in interior regions with deeper snowfall such as the Kobuk River valley.

#### Clothing and decoration

Special clothing designs were developed to overcome the severe Arctic living conditions. Men's and women's clothing consisted of outer and inner pullover tops, (the outer being called *parkas* or *kuspuks*), outer and inner pants, socks and boots. Tops and pants were made of caribou skin; the fur faced inward on the inner garments and outward on the outer garments. Hoods with drawstring were attached to the pullover tops which varied in length from mid-thigh to knee length. The woman's pullover had a larger hood for carrying small children. Pants, both inner and outer, went from the waist to the knee or ankle

and were stuffed into boots which came up to just below the knee. Skin socks were worn and boots (*kamiks*) were constructed in a variety of fashions and materials in order to meet different weather conditions. Gloves were made from various skins with the fur turned inside; usually they were connected with a leather strip which ran around the neck for quick, sure retrieval if it was necessary to take them off. Sea-mammal intestines were sown together to create waterproof outer garments in the Norton Sound area for fishing and kayaking.

Eskimo clothing was eminently suited for cold weather. The bulky, layered garments provided for maximum insulation from the air trapped between them. The drawstrings allowed ventilation to prevent under garments from becoming damp from sweat.

#### *House types*

The design of Eskimo houses was also well-suited for the Arctic. Although a variety of internal designs and materials were found in the Inupiat area, two key features were common. The first is the underground tunnel entrance which was constructed below the level of the living area within the house itself. This passage served as a cold trap insuring that cold air would not enter the living area. The second feature was that houses were semi-subterranean, capitalizing on the ground as insulation against winter wind and cold. In most areas, the distinctive seal-oil lamp, made from soapstone or pottery, was used for light and warmth. This shallow dish-like object used a moss wick for burning seal oil.

Sod blocks, sometimes laid over driftwood or whalebone frames, were the basic materials for Inupiat house construction. Houses were generally dome-shaped. A gut-covered opening let in what little winter light was available and was uncovered for a smoke hole. The Inupiat house was rectangular, about 12-15 feet long and eight to ten feet wide and normally housed 8-12 people comfortably. The entry ways opened onto a general living area with floors made from driftwood planks or whale bone. People slept against the back wall on a raised wood platform covered with polar bear and caribou skins.

Equipment and food was stored either below the house in a food cellar or in compartments in the entry tunnel.

In summer, many of these houses became flooded when the ground thawed. This was not a great problem since most people left for the different seasonal camps to hunt and fish.

Inupiat communities also had *qargis* or *kashims* which

served as men's houses or community houses. They were constructed by an extended family under the leadership of an elder male. The *qargi* was used primarily as a work area to make tools and repair equipment but also were ceremonial centers for dancing and feasting in the winter.

#### *Trade*

Trade was an important aspect of Inupiat life, particularly after establishment of Russian outposts in Siberia in the late 17th century made tobacco and other European goods available through exchange with the Chukchi. More traditional trade, such as that carried out in the trading partnerships, brought interior and coastal peoples together for the exchange of products. Seal oil and *muktuk* (whale skin) were prized by interior peoples who provided caribou and other fur skins in exchange for them. Trade fairs, attended by people from many areas, were conducted in mid-summer at several locations.



**Umiaks could be used for many purposes other than travel. This one is helping to dry laundry. When overturned, they could provide emergency shelter from storms which develop quickly over the Bering Sea. (Anchorage Museum of History and Art)**

### Social organization

Kinship was the most important principle of Inupiat society. Among most groups, strangers were treated as dangerous enemies who could be killed unless they could establish some kinship relationship with a member of the group into whose territory they entered. As in modern American society, Inupiat reckoned kinsmen *bilaterally*, that is, relatives on both the mother's and father's sides were equally important. In fact anthropologists label a kinship system which uses the same terms for relatives on either side (i.e. uncle, aunt, grandmother, grandfather, cousin) an "Eskimo" kinship system. In such a system, each individual has a *kindred*, a group of related individuals drawn equally from parents, siblings and their offspring on both mother's and father's sides. These would be the people that would occupy a home or homes close together and with whom most activities would be conducted.

Given the danger of not being related, a variety of mechanisms were developed in Inupiat society for establishing quasi-kinship relationships. One of these was the trading partnership which was used to link together men from different groups who could then exchange goods. These long-standing relationships

Eskimo women and children, Teller, 1906. (Anchorage Museum of History and Art.)



could include short-term exchanges of spouses as part of the generosity between the two families. Inupiat who had the same name also recognized a relationship between each other. Finally, adoption was quite common and also served to establish a special relationship between people.

Eskimo society has long been considered a model of egalitarianism in which all men were equal and judged solely by their achievements. Among the Inupiat, this stereotype must be seriously qualified. Although slavery and rigid classes did not exist, there was considerable property and wealth to be inherited in the form of boats and hunting equipment. The *umialik*, literally "captain of the umiak," was a substantial figure, responsible for many activities including the whale hunt, the qargi ceremonies, festivals, religious rituals and trading expeditions.

This unique and multifaceted role had both achieved and ascribed elements as powerful and successful whale hunters could attract a following from beyond their kinsmen. However those who inherited whaling equipment and training had a head start in attaining *umialik* status.

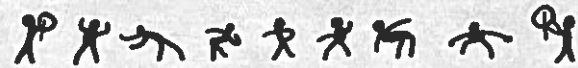
Male and female roles were complementary but strictly divided and hierarchical; males were dominant. Preferential female infanticide was practiced, but due to the many accidental deaths suffered by males, the number of adult men and women tended to be fairly balanced.

Women were trained in the skills of tanning, sewing and food preparation; wives observed many taboos and rituals to assist their husbands' hunting. These included a broad range of activities such as cutting skins at certain times, eating certain foods or looking in certain directions. It was thought that if those taboos were broken, then bad luck would befall the husband's hunting efforts.

Another stereotype about Eskimos is that they are cheerful, friendly and open. Burch, however, suggests that there was a high degree of competitiveness evident in Inupiat society and that stress was placed on competence as well as being better than one's peers. Certainly one of the great pastimes of the Inupiat was engaging in a wide variety of competitive games which tested the strength, stamina and pain thresholds of the participants.

Perhaps another indicator of the competitiveness of Inupiat society is the frequency of intersocietal warfare. Particularly for Bering Strait and Kotzebue Sound people, territorial boundaries were well known and defended from interlopers. Both engaged in serious conflict with the Chukchi and Siberian Eskimo even though they also traded with them.

## The Frozen Family of Utqiagvik



During the early morning hours of a winter night between 125 and 400 years ago, an *ivu*, a huge block of shorefast ice, toppled onto a house at Utqiagvik, near present day Barrow. The sod-covered wooden frame collapsed and crushed to death five occupants of the house. There were four females aged 42, 24, 15 and 8 1/2 and one male aged 20 sleeping in the house at the time. Both of the older females had recently given birth and the 42-year old had been nursing at the time of her death. Neither infant nor husband, however, were found. We know that the roof collapsed in the early morning because the occupants had empty stomachs but full bladders.

The frozen family probably consisted of two related families. The 25-year-old woman is thought to have been the eldest daughter of the 42-year old. Analysis of the male tool kits in the house revealed two different sets of property marks used by men to distinguish their harpoon points. One set of marks is still used by Point Hope hunters today. The younger woman's husband likely was living with his wife's family after their marriage which Inupiat elders indicate would have been a standard cultural practice.

The autopsy of the two older women revealed interesting information about their health. Lines on leg bones indicate that periods of food shortage, probably in late winter, occurred every three to five years. The older women suffered from a heart infection, arteriosclerosis and experienced pneumonia. Many of her teeth were gone and those which remained showed heavy evidence of wear. Both women suffered from osteoporosis, softening of the bones, probably due to a lack of vitamin D in the diet. Both also suffered from severely blackened lungs due to the soot given off from the seal oil lamp. This was probably exacerbated by sleeping by the lamp and tending it through the night.

The Inupiat elders have returned the frozen family to their graves, but the misfortune of those ancients has resulted in fascinating scientific findings concerning life in the high arctic several centuries ago.



Gambling was a favorite pastime of many Native men. These Inupiat men are gambling for walrus tusks in the shadow of an umiak. (Anchorage Museum of History and Art)

Within the local group, tensions between men could be controlled through the *song duel*. In this event, a man who felt wronged by another would challenge him to an exchange of belittling songs. The entire group would gather to witness the duel. The men would take turns singing songs which through wit and derision identified the wrongdoing or falsity of the other person. The group would respond with laughter to each song and the duel would continue until one man withdrew in shame. The matter was expected to be closed with the ending of the duel.

### Ceremonies

Several ceremonies were important to the Inupiat. Among all groups, the *Messenger Feast*, the practice of inviting a group from another area to one's home community, was common. The feast occurred in the fall or winter and was sponsored by an umialik who invited his partner from another group. The visitors were presented gifts when they arrived followed by several days of dances, feasts and games.



Several additional special ceremonies were conducted by the north Alaska coastal Inupiat to whom the bowhead whale hunt was critical. In the spring, a preparatory feast was held in which umialiks distributed all remaining whale meat from the previous year which had not yet been eaten. This was to meet the requirement that one should only take when one was in need and was a means of displaying the people's worthiness to the whale. New clothes and equipment were brought out because this was a festival of renewal, of insuring the continuation of life.

#### *Beliefs*

The Inupiat belief system appears to have been based on the principle of reincarnation and the recycling of spirit forms from one life to the next. This was true of both the human and animal worlds. Names of those who had recently died would be given to newborn infants. Animal spirits were seen as critical for only if they were released could the animal be regenerated and return for future human harvest. Consequently a great number of special behaviors were accorded various animals including offering marine mammals a drink of freshwater, cutting the throats or skull to release the spirit, and taking care to make maximum use of the products. If the special behaviors were not faithfully carried out, the animals might not make themselves available again. Shamans had a special place in Inupiat society as curers and forecasters of weather and future events.

#### *Contact with Europeans*

The isolation of the Inupiat made them one of the last groups of Alaska Natives to encounter Europeans and Americans. Several voyages of exploration made incidental contact in the early 19th century. But it was not until the Yankee whalers followed the bowhead whale through the Bering Straits in the 1850s, that the era of sustained and substantial interaction with Euroamericans began for the Inupiat.

Several devastating epidemics swept through the coastal villages in the 1870s and 1880s. After the decline of the market for whale products in the 1890s, the remaining Inupiat were left virtually to themselves until the second half of the 20th century.



Waterproof outerwear, probably made from walrus intestines and decorated with cormorant feathers. ( M. Z. Virokouroff Collection, Alaska State Library)