

Introduction

The Eskimo of Canada inhabit areas north of the treeline, including some of the islands of the Arctic Archipelago. The aboriginal population has been estimated at between 6,000 and 8,000 while today there are about 15,000 Eskimo in Canada.

The dialects of the Eskimo languages are closely linked with one another but so far have not been convincingly related to any other language family either in the New World or in Asia.

Physically, the Eskimo resemble the natives of northern Asia more closely than they do the Indians of North America, although all of the New World people, together with the inhabitants of northern and eastern Asia, can be classed as Mongoloid.

There is little doubt that the Eskimo reached the New World from north-eastern Asia. Archaeologists believe that characteristics of Eskimo culture took form in the Bering Strait area and that the movement of Eskimo peoples across the northern part of the continent took place after all other New World people had established themselves to the south.

Two great movements appear to have taken place in the Arctic with the earliest Eskimo spreading eastward across the North probably between 4000 and 2000 B.C. The fate of these people (carriers of the Pre-Dorset and Dorset cultures) is not known. Later there appears to have been a second movement from western and northern Alaska during the early part of the Christian era. This people, who carried with them the Thule culture, had spread as far east as Greenland by about A.D. 1100 or 1200. Thule culture was based to a large extent on whale hunting, though seal and caribou were hunted as well. The modern Eskimo in Canada are

assumed to be the descendents of Thule people.

Eskimo history since the Thule culture period can be divided into three main phases. The first was the *aboriginal* phase during which traditional culture and the hunting economy remained largely unaffected. In some parts of Arctic Canada this phase lasted into the 1920's. During the second stage, the *contact-traditional*, life was still centred in the all-native community but the hunting economy was supplemented by fur-trapping. The third or *centralized* phase developed about 1955 when the all-native village began to be abandoned; settlement concentrated around focal points of outside agencies, and dramatic cultural and economic changes took place.

In the body of this paper I shall deal first with the *aboriginal* phase and then move on to the later phases of history.

The map indicates the major divisions of "tribes" or "nations" of the Canadian Eskimo as they were in about 1900. It should be noted that these divisions were not political groupings; rather, they were groups within which most marriages took place. Each such group shared a common dialect and many features of social life and culture that distinguished them to some extent from neighbouring "nations."



Plate 2. Hunting caribou and other land and sea mammals was a primary occupation.
Plate 3. Muskoxen were important to the Eskimo in some localities.