

Material Culture

Eskimo subsisted chiefly by fishing through the ice until breathing-hole sealing commenced again.

The only Canadian Eskimo groups whose cycle of occupations differed much from what has been described above were the Caribou Eskimo, who hunted caribou at every season with only small segments going to Hudson Bay for a period of sealing in the spring, and the Mackenzie Eskimo, who hunted the white whale in spring and fall and spent winter in relative idleness.

Much of the meat that was taken was eaten raw (indeed, the term Eskimo comes from a Cree word meaning "eater of raw meat"). Fish was eaten fresh raw, sun dried, or frozen raw, though it was occasionally eaten boiled as well. Seal meat was usually boiled, and soup was made by mixing hot water and seal's blood. Caribou meat was eaten either raw or boiled. Although the Eskimo have often been described as prodigious eaters, they generally ate a number of small meals during the day and also conserved their food in hard times, carefully rationing it among themselves.

The Eskimo were able to live under rather severe circumstances requiring special ways of getting a living mainly because they had developed a large inventory of tools, clothing, and specially adapted techniques for survival.

Those Eskimo who were able to secure wood in reasonable quantity from accessible forested areas or who found wood drifting in the sea had the best material for lances, harpoons, shafts, sledge runners, bows, arrows, tent poles, etc. For other Eskimo groups, such as the Netsilik and Iglulik nations, bone had to be substituted for wood in many of these items. Indeed, sledge runners were often fashioned from frozen skins or whale jaws.

The Copper Eskimo were set off from other groups by the use they made of native copper for arrow heads, knives, and a variety of other tools. Elsewhere these artifacts were made from antler, slate, and later iron that was traded from tribe to tribe, originating from distant points of trade with Europeans.

One of the best-known features of Eskimo material culture was the winter house (*iglu* or *igluliaq*) built of blocks of wind-packed snow. Through an ingenious application of the principle of the unsupported dome, a windproof shelter could be constructed in the course of an hour or two with most of the blocks being cut from the floor area. These shelters were good protection from storms, but even with the help of seal oil lamps, inner suits of fur clothing were usually worn inside.

The sleeping platforms were covered with caribou skin blankets. A sizable number of household utensils, including stone lamps and pots, meat skewers, sewing equipment, buckets, drying racks, etc. were in use.



Plate 6. During winter the village was shifted as a body at intervals of about a month.
Plate 7. Tents of caribou or seal skins were used in summer.



Plate 8. The snowhouse, one of the supreme Eskimo inventions.

The Eskimo of the extreme east (Labrador) and the extreme west (Mackenzie) used wood, sod, and stone to build permanent structures that were occupied during the winter period.

Various styles of sealskin or caribou skin tents were used in the area and were occupied from late May until mid-October. In the late spring a *qarmat* or snowhouse with skin roof was used after the period when the roofs of the snowhouses began to melt and before the period when tents would be comfortable.

The winter costume of the Eskimo was one of the supreme achievements in Eskimo adaptation to a cold climate. A double layer of loosely tailored caribou skin clothing was worn with the fur of the outer garment turned outward and that of the inner garment worn next to the skin. These clothes provided ample protection even at times of highest winds and lowest temperature.

Watercraft are known to the Eskimo people. Around the Mackenzie Delta and in Hudson Strait, Labrador, and southern Baffin Island the large open skin boat (*umiaq*) was used mainly for travel and also for whaling. Two types of kayak (*qayaq*) were used, a light model for caribou hunting in lakes and streams and a heavy model for transportation in the sea. Among the Copper and Netsilik tribes only the former type was known while Iglulik and possibly most eastern nations used both kinds. The Caribou Eskimo used a single kayak frame, covering it with sealskin for sealing in Hudson Bay and with caribou skins for use in hunting in the lakes and streams of the Keewatin interior.

Dog travel was an important part of Eskimo life. In the Canadian Eskimo area, dogs were invariably hitched in the "fan,"

each dog having an individual trace. The Iglulik Eskimo and those to the east possessed fairly large dog teams even before the introduction of the rifle helped provide more feed, whereas Netsilik, Copper and Caribou Eskimo families generally had fewer than three dogs. Dogs were useful as pack animals throughout most of the Eskimo area, but in regions where winter breathing-hole sealing was important the dog's primary use was to locate holes. Dogs were also used for holding polar bears at bay while hunters approached with harpoons and lances.



Plate 9. The umiak or open skin boat was used in the extreme eastern and western parts of the Eskimo area.



Plate 10. In order to facilitate sledge travel mudding was applied to the runners to form a base for icing which drastically reduced friction against the granular snows of winter.