

Eskimos



An Eskimo family on sea ice in Pond Inlet, Baffin Island.

(Excerpts from *What Are Eskimos?* by G.W. Rowley.)

So much has been written about the Eskimos it is difficult to retain a sense of proportion. In fact there are only about 100,000 Eskimos in the whole world—and fewer than 23,000 of these are in Canada.

They are the only native people who live in both Asia and America. They live on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and form part of four nations, Russia, the United States, Canada and Denmark.

Most Eskimos call themselves "Inuit," which simply means "people." The word "Eskimo" to describe a member of this race appears to be Algonquin Indian for "raw-meat eater." They have their own language, spoken by themselves and by nobody else; they are a distinctive physical type; and they have a culture which is uniquely their own.

The most remarkable thing about the Eskimo language is its uniformity over a wide area—an Eskimo from Greenland in the east can make himself understood, though with some difficulty, all the way to Bering Strait, three or four thousand miles away. From Greenland to Norton Sound in Alaska there are only comparatively minor differences in the language. South of Norton Sound and in Siberia, however, a very different situation exists. There are several distinct dialects, and an Eskimo living there cannot be understood by those who live north of Norton Sound. Aleut, the language spoken by the Aleuts of the Aleutian Islands, is now recognized to be an Eskimo language, but it is so different that it was once considered to be a completely separate language.

Physical Type

The physical type of the Eskimos is distinctive.

They have straight black hair, high cheekbones, and wide faces. Their skin is yellowish-brown, but it is surprisingly light, lighter than one would expect from their faces, which are usually sunburnt from the sun on the snow and ice. The babies often have a well defined blue patch at the base of the spine which disappears after a year or two. The Eskimos have shorter arms and legs than the North American Indians, and are therefore rather smaller in stature, but they are not, in fact, a short race by anthropological standards, and they are as tall as people in many places in western Europe. They are muscular and well-covered and this, together with their bulky and loose-fitted clothes and rather short legs, makes them appear to be stout, but this is a false impression.

Culture

There have been many changes in the North in recent years, affecting almost every aspect of the lives of the Eskimos.

[But] before these changes began the Eskimos had evolved a remarkable and distinctive culture that enabled them to survive under more extreme conditions than any other race. The typical form of the culture was the arctic form which was found among the majority of the Canadian Eskimos. Except in the summer, it was an ice-hunting culture, based on hunting sea mammals either through the ice at their breathing holes, from the ice at the floe-edge, or on the ice when the seals lay enjoying the sunshine in the spring. The sea mammals provided the Eskimos with meat for food, oil for heat and light, and skins for many purposes. For this hunting the Eskimos had dogs and sleds, and since there was little else to use in the way of building materials, they lived in snow houses in winter and skin tents in summer.