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978-1-108-07097-3 - Tales and Traditions of the Eskimo: With a Sketch of their Habits,
Religion, Language and Other Peculiarities

Hinrich Rink Edited by Robert Brown

Excerpt

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THE ESKIMO.



INTRODUCTORY · REMARKS.

WITH the exception of a few small and scattered tribes who may be considered as the only link between the coast people and the inlanders, the Eskimo always have their habitations close to the sea, or on the banks of rivers in the immediate vicinity of their outlets into the sea. Even on their hunting and trading expeditions they seldom withdraw more than twenty, and only in very rare cases more than eighty miles, from the sea-shore. Save a slight intermixture of European settlers, the Eskimo are the only inhabitants of the shores of Arctic America, and of both sides of Davis Strait and Baffin Bay, including Greenland, as well as a tract of about four hundred miles on the Behring Strait coast of Asia. Southward they extend as far as about 50° N.L. on the eastern side, and 60° on the western side of America, and from 55° to 60° on the shores of Hudson Bay. Only on the west the Eskimo near their frontier are interrupted on two small spots of the coast by the Indians, named Kennayans and Ugalenzes, who have there advanced to the sea-shore for the sake of fishing. These coasts of Arctic America, of course, also comprise all the surrounding islands. Of these the Aleutian

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Islands form an exceptional group ; the inhabitants of these on the one hand distinctly differing from the coast people here mentioned, while on the other they show a closer relationship to the Eskimo than any other nation. The Aleutians, therefore, may be considered as only an abnormal branch of the Eskimo nation. The Aleutian language, though differing completely from the Eskimo with regard to the sound of the words, shows a great similarity to it in structure ; and otherwise the Aleutians only seem to differ from the Eskimo inasmuch as some institutions have been slightly more developed among them. On the other hand, all over the eastern and widest parts of their territories the Eskimo are very distinctly severed from the adjoining nations. In the western part some slight transitions may be traced : namely, in the case of the inland Eskimo by the different situation of their dwelling-places ; in that of the Aleutians by their language and social institutions. Finally, it may be mentioned that a few small Indian tribes have adopted somewhat of the Eskimo mode of life, which has also been the case with some of their neighbours on the Asiatic side.

As regards their northern limits, the Eskimo people, or at least remains of their habitations, have been found nearly as far north as any Arctic explorers have hitherto advanced ; and very possibly bands of them may live still farther to the north, as yet quite unknown to us.

From the north-western to the southernmost point the Eskimo territories in a straight line measure about 3200 miles. If we consider their extreme western range to be Behring Strait, and their extreme eastern one to be Labrador and Greenland, the natives from either of these points would have to travel about 5000 miles along the coast in order to reach the others. Strictly speaking, these journeys might still be performed by the natives with their own means of conveyance ; but there are certain boundaries which, in our days at least,

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are scarcely ever passed—partly on account of natural obstacles, partly because the nation at those points has been broken up into tribes, whose mutual intercourse for the purpose of barter has been frequently interrupted by hostilities. For these reasons the Eskimo might now be divided into many smaller tribes. But from our point of view the following principal divisions will be sufficient :—

1. *The East Greenlanders*, along the whole of the east coast of Greenland down to Cape Farewell, the southernmost of whom every year make bartering excursions to the Danish settlement nearest the Cape, and have intercourse with the next section.

2. *The West Greenlanders*, or inhabitants of the Danish trading districts from the Cape upwards to 74° N.L. In conformity with the administrative division of the colonies, they are generally divided into North and South Greenlanders—only the latter are not to be confounded with the next, with whom they seem to have had no intercourse whatever since these regions have been known to Europeans.

3. *The Northernmost Greenlanders*, or inhabitants of the west coast to the north of Melville Bay, or what Sir John Ross called the “Arctic Highlanders.”

4. *The Labrador Eskimo*.

5. *The Eskimo of the middle regions*, occupying all the coasts from Baffin and Hudson Bays to Barter Island near Mackenzie River. This division is the most widely spread of them all—its territories representing an extent of land, traversed and intercepted in many directions by the sea, measuring 2000 miles in length and 800 miles in breadth. Perhaps there may be reasons for establishing subdivisions of this section, but they do not appear anywhere to exhibit such mutual differences as those separating them from the next tribe, with whom they have regular meetings on Barter Island.

6. *The Western Eskimo*, inhabiting the remaining

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coast of America from Barter Island to the west and south. They seem to deviate from all the former in respect of certain habits, such as the labial ornaments of the men and the head-dress of the women. They must also be considered as the nearest akin to the Aleutians and the inland Eskimo, and in the vicinity of Alaska they show traces of intermingled Indian blood. This may be owing to the Indian women captured in war with the Eskimo having been married into the nation.

7. *The Asiatic Eskimo.*

As regards their development when they first became known to modern Europeans, the Eskimo may be classed with the prehistoric races of the age of the ground stone tools with the exceptional use of metals. It has been usual to designate all nations of this kind as "savages;" some authors have even described them as being totally destitute of those mental qualities through which any kind of culture is manifested, such as social order, laws, sciences, arts, and even religion. That those opinions find utterance can scarcely be wondered at when we observe the carelessness with which such important questions are discussed, and see travellers who merely go on shore from a ship and spend a couple of hours with the inhabitants proceed to make inquiries as to their ideas of God and the origin of the world; and also how European settlers among natives whose language they are quite unacquainted with pretend to have found them altogether without religion. Such views, however, resting upon the prejudice of race and on superficial observation, are now being abandoned. We have gradually been finding out that manifestations of culture must be supposed to exist in every nation, although they may not assume the same form as those we observe among more advanced races. We think it a great mistake to suppose any people devoid of religion; and it seems to us equally unreason-

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able to fancy a community of men living altogether without laws, if by laws we understand bonds or restrictions by which the community voluntarily limits the free actions of its members. In the lower stages of development, the laws, being principally represented by habits and customs, leave the individual perhaps even less free than in a more civilised state, inasmuch as they dictate his mode of life, and not even in his most private and domestic affairs is he left to act at liberty. These habits and customs are closely allied to the religious opinions, by which they are still more powerfully influenced. When laws and religion were asserted to be wanting, there was still less likelihood of art and science being observed. In these introductory remarks we shall endeavour to explain how these utterances of culture are for the most part embodied in the traditional tales.

It is in accordance with the views here stated that the author has been guided in attempting to divide and arrange the subject-matter of the following remarks. It has already been mentioned, and will, moreover, become evident from the traditions, that the Eskimo exhibit great conformity and similarity, notwithstanding their being spread over such vast territories. An examination of one of the principal divisions or tribes named above will therefore more or less illustrate the others. For this reason the Greenlanders, who are by far the best known of all, may here be considered to represent the Eskimo in general; though it must not be forgotten that, as there can scarcely have existed any absolute stability with regard to culture lasting for many centuries, there is also no absolute or actual identity between the different tribes. It must therefore be kept in mind that wherever no other particulars are specially brought forward, the following descriptions refer to the West Greenlanders, such as their state is supposed to have been when Europeans came to settle among them during last century—viz., in 1721.

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I.—SUBSISTENCE AND MODE OF LIFE.

The sustenance of the Eskimo is entirely derived from the capture of seals and cetaceous animals, which has made them inhabitants of the sea-shore. Both kinds of animals enable them, especially by means of their blubber, and the seals also by their skins, to brave the severity of climate, and, independent of any vegetable resources, to settle and procure the means of life as far north as any explorers have hitherto found human inhabitants. The seals are sufficient, and at the same time indispensable, for this purpose. They are caught partly from kayaks, or shuttle-shaped boats, and partly from the ice and the shore. Among their more or less peculiar hunting contrivances we may mention: (1) *Their kayaks, or boats, which consist of a framework of wood, joined together principally by strings, and provided with a cover of skins impenetrable to the water.* (2) *The adjustment of the kayak itself and the kayak-coverings, with a view to provide an entire shelter for the kayaker, or seal-hunter, with the exception only of the face, to protect him against the water.* Only a small number of Eskimo have kayaks fitted for more than a single man;¹ and still more exceptionally, in the farthest north some are found who have no kayaks at all, from the sea being almost constantly frozen. (3) *The adaptation of a bladder filled with air to the harpoons or javelins, in order, by retarding the animals, to prevent them escaping after being struck, and to prevent the harpoon sinking, should the hunter miss his aim.* (4) *The very ingenious way in which the point of these weapons, and of the spears with which the animals are finally killed, are fitted into the shaft, so that having penetrated*

¹ Such kayaks, suited for two people—one sitting behind the other—are the “baidars” of the Eskimo of Behring Strait.

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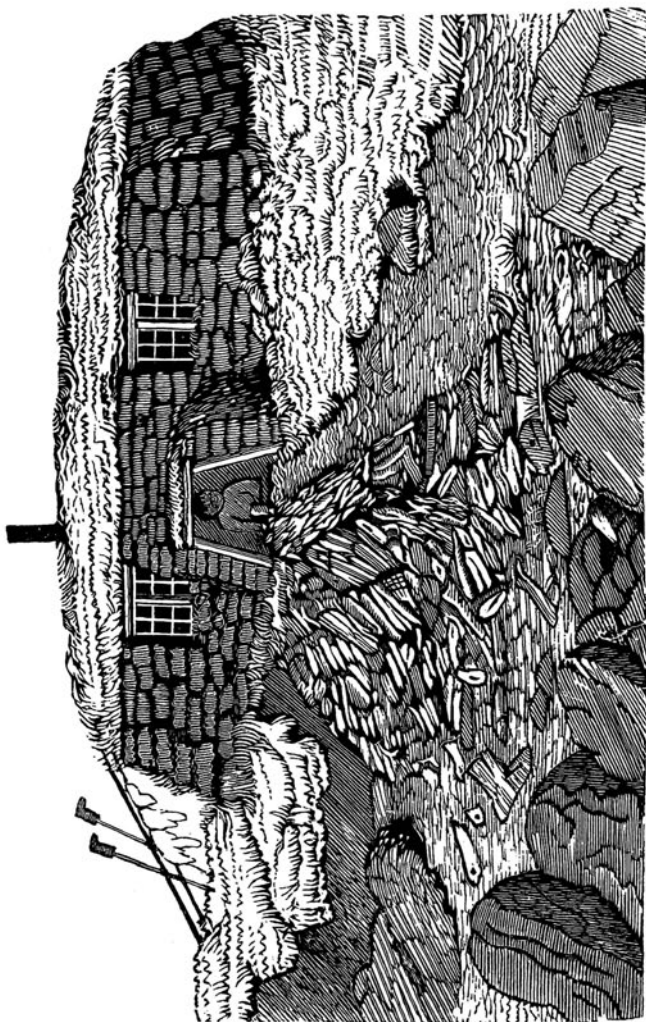
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Winter house.

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the skin of the animal, the point is bent out of the shaft, which is either entirely loosened, while only the point with the line and the bladder remains attached to the animal, or keeps hanging at the point. Without this precaution, the animal in its struggles would break the shaft or make the barbs slip out of its body again.

(5) *The sledge with the dogs* trained for drawing it. In speaking of these complex contrivances as characteristic of the Eskimo, we do not claim any of them as their exclusive property or invention, or as having been unknown among other nations now or in former ages. It would, however, be perhaps difficult to find anything at all like their kayaks in any other part of the globe.

Their dwellings are always of two kinds—namely, tents for the summer, and houses or huts for winter use. The tents, generally adapted for less than ten and rarely for more than twenty individuals, consist of from ten to fourteen poles, with one end raised high and leaning on the frame which forms the entrance, and the whole covered over with a double layer of skins. The tents seem to be constructed in the same way everywhere, and to differ from those of neighbouring nations in having their highest point at the entrance in front, from which the roof inclines towards the sides, resting all round upon a low wall of stones and turf; while the neighbouring tribes generally construct their tents of a conical form, with the top in the centre. The winter-houses are far more varied in structure. Generally they are built of stones and turf, the roof-spars and the pillars which support the middle of the roof being of wood. Only the Eskimo of the middle regions have vaults of snow for their habitations; whilst the western Eskimo build their houses chiefly of planks, merely covered on the outside with green turf. Some of the very far northern Eskimo are obliged to use bones or stones instead of wood. As to the form of the houses, the passage leading into them is long and very narrow, and

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elevated towards both ends—viz., the outer and the inner entrances; so that on entering the house one has first to descend, and afterwards again to ascend before reaching the interior. This consists of a single apartment, only the ledge or bench for resting and sleeping on is divided into separate portions for the different families. In Greenland the ledge or bench—the “brix,” as the Danes call it—only occupies one side of the house, its length being proportioned to the number of the families, whose rooms or stalls are separated by low screens, each of these rooms having its lamp standing on the floor in front of it. The snow-huts, from their circular form, are of course arranged differently; and this is also the case with the plank-houses in western Eskimo-Land, which have a cooking-place in the centre of the floor, with a smoke-hole in the roof, like the houses of the neighbouring Indians. But the house-passage has generally everywhere a small side-room with a cooking-place. The provisions are sometimes kept in rooms connected with the house or house-passage; in other places in separate storehouses, or in caves or holes of the rocks covered with stones. In former times it seems to have been the custom at the more populous places to have a public building for meetings, especially for solemn occasions. Such buildings are still in common use among the western Eskimo: they are also spoken of in Labrador; and in Greenland they are well known by tradition, and were called *kagsse*; while in other districts they are termed *kagge*, *karrigi*, and *kashim*. Though the dwelling-houses are nearly always built for more than one family, the number of these is seldom found to exceed three or four. In south Greenland, however, houses have been met with more than sixty feet in length, and containing stalls for ten families. At Point Barrow, Simpson found nearly fifty houses with two *karrigi*, for 309 inhabitants.

The dress for men and women is much alike, consist-