

Group 1: geography

⇒ read the text, highlight the important information and get ready to share it with the other groups.

The Inuit are a group of culturally similar indigenous peoples inhabiting the Arctic regions of Canada (Northwest Territories, Nunatsiavut, Nunavik, Nunavut, Nunatukavut), Denmark (Greenland), Russia (Siberia) and the United States (Alaska). Inuit means "the people" in the Inuktitut language. An Inuk is singular for Inuit person, whereas Inuit is plural. The Inuit language is grouped under Eskimo-Aleut languages.

The Inuit live throughout most of the Canadian Arctic and subarctic: in the territory of Nunavut ("our land"); the northern third of Quebec, in an area called Nunavik ("place to live"); the coastal region of Labrador, in areas called Nunatsiavut ("our beautiful land") and Nunatukavut ("Our Ancient Land"); in various parts of the Northwest Territories, mainly on the coast of the Arctic Ocean and formerly in the Yukon. Collectively these areas are known as Inuit Nunangat.

In the U.S., Alaskan Inupiat live on the North Slope of Alaska and Siberian Coast, Little Diomed Island. In Russia, they live on Big Diomed Island. Greenland's Kalaallit are citizens of Denmark.

In Alaska, the term Eskimo is commonly used, because it includes both Yupik and Inupiat, while Inuit is not accepted as a collective term or even specifically used for Inupiat. No universal term other than Eskimo, inclusive of all Inupiat and Yupik people, exists for the Inupiat and Yupik peoples.

In Canada and Greenland, the Natives prefer the word Inuit. As they consider "Eskimo" pejorative, it has fallen out of favor. In Canada, the Constitution Act of 1982, sections 25 and 35 recognized the Inuit as a distinctive group of Canadian aboriginals, who are neither First Nations nor Metis.



Group 2: society, marriage

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The division of labor in traditional Inuit society had a strong gender component, but it was not absolute. The men were traditionally hunters and fishermen and the women took care of the children, cleaned the home, sewed, processed food, and cooked. However, there are numerous examples of women who hunted, out of necessity or as a personal choice. At the same time men, who could be away from camp for several days at a time, would be expected to know how to sew and cook.

The marital customs among the Inuit were not strictly monogamous: many Inuit relationships were implicitly or explicitly sexual. Open marriages, polygamy, divorce, and remarriage were known. Among some Inuit groups, if there were children, divorce required the approval of the community and particularly the agreement of the elders. Marriages were often arranged, sometimes in infancy, and occasionally forced on the couple by the community.

Marriage was common for women at puberty and for men when they became productive hunters. Family structure was flexible: a household might consist of a man and his wife (or wives) and children; it might include his parents or his wife's parents as well as adopted children; it might be a larger formation of several siblings with their parents, wives and children; or even more than one family sharing dwellings and resources. Every household had its head, an elder or a particularly respected man.

There was also a larger notion of community as, generally, several families shared a place where they wintered. Goods were shared within a household, and also, to a significant extent, within a whole community.

The Inuit were hunter-gatherers, and have been referred to as nomadic. One of the customs following the birth of an infant was for an Angakkuq (shaman) to place a tiny ivory carving of a whale into the baby's mouth, in hopes this would make the child good at hunting. Loud singing and drumming were also customary after a birth.

Group 3: diet

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Inuit choose their diet based on four concepts: "the relationship between animals and humans, the relationship between the body and soul and life and health, the relationship between seal blood and Inuit blood, and diet choice." Inuit are especially spiritual when it comes to the customs of hunting, cooking, and eating. The Inuit belief is that the combination of animal and human blood in one's bloodstream creates a healthy human body and soul.

The Inuit have traditionally been fishers and hunters. They still hunt whales (esp. bowhead whale), walrus, caribou, seal, polar bears, muskoxen, birds, and at times other less commonly eaten animals such as the Arctic Fox. While it is not possible to cultivate plants for food in the Arctic, the Inuit have traditionally gathered those that are naturally available. Grasses, tubers, roots, stems, berries, and seaweed (kuanniq or edible seaweed) were collected and preserved depending on the season and the location. There is a vast array of different hunting technologies that the Inuit used to gather their food.

According to Inuit hunters and elders, hunters and seals have an agreement that allows the hunter to capture and feed from the seal if only for the hunger of the hunter's family. This alliance "both hunter and seal are believed to benefit: the hunter is able to sustain the life of his people by having a reliable source of food, and the seal, through its sacrifice, agrees to become part of the body of the Inuit." Inuit are under the belief that if they do not follow the alliances that their ancestors have laid out, the animals will disappear because they have been offended and will cease to reproduce.

Inuit are known for their practice of food sharing, a form of food distribution where one person catches the food and shares with the entire community. Food sharing was first documented among the Inuit in 1910 when a little girl decided to take a platter around to four neighboring families who had no food of their own.

Inuit consume a diet of foods that are fished, hunted, and gathered locally. This may include walrus, Ringed Seal, Bearded Seal, beluga whale, caribou, polar bear, muskoxen, birds (including their eggs) and fish.

Group 4: hunting

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Seal meat is the most important aspect of an Inuit diet and is often the largest part of an Inuit hunter's diet.. Because air-breathing seals need to break through the ice to reach air, they form breathing holes with their claws. Through these, Inuit hunters are able to capture seals. When a hunter arrives at these holes, they set up a seal indicator that alerts the hunter when a seal is coming up for a breath of air. When the seal comes up, the hunter notices movement in the indicator and uses his harpoon to capture the seal in the water. Seals, as saltwater animals, are always considered to be thirsty and therefore are offered a drink of fresh water as it is dying. This is shown as a sign of respect and gratitude toward the seal and its sacrifice. This offering is also done to please the spirit Sedna to ensure food supply.

Walrus are often hunted during the winter and spring since hunting them in summer is much more dangerous. A walrus is too large to be controlled by one man, so it cannot be hunted alone. In Uqalurai: An Oral History of Nunavut, an Inuit elder describes the hunt of a walrus in these words: "When a walrus was sighted, the two hunters would run to get close to it and at a short distance it is necessary to stop when the walrus's head was submergedÉthe walrus would hear you approach. They then tried to get in front of the walrus and it was harpooned while its head was submerged. In the meantime, the other person would drive the harpoon into the ice through the harpoon loop to secure it."

As one of the largest animals in the world, the bowhead whale is able to feed an entire community for nearly a year from its meat, blubber, and skin. Inuit hunters most often hunt juvenile whales which, compared to adults, are safer to hunt and have tastier skin. Similar to walrus, bowhead whales are captured by harpoon. The hunters use active pursuit to harpoon the whale and follow it during attack. At times, Inuit were known for using a more passive approach when hunting whales. According to John Bennett and Susan Rowley, they would harpoon the whale and instead of pursuing it, would "wait patiently for the winds, currents, and spirits to aid him in bringing the whale to shore."

During the majority of the year caribou roam the tundra in small herds, but twice a year large herds of caribou cross the inland regions. Caribou have excellent senses of smell and hearing so that the hunters must be very careful when in pursuit. Often, Inuit hunters set up camp miles away from the caribou crossing and wait until they are in full view to attack.

There are many ways in which the caribou can be captured, including spearing, forcing caribou into the river, using blinders, scaring the caribou, and stalking the caribou. When spearing caribou, hunters put the string of the spear in their mouths and the other end they use to gently spear the animal.

Group 5: traditional belief

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The environment in which the Inuit lived inspired a mythology filled with adventure tales of whale and walrus hunts. Long winter months of waiting for caribou herds or sitting near breathing holes hunting seals gave birth to stories of mysterious and sudden appearance of ghosts and fantastic creatures. Some Inuit looked into the aurora borealis, or northern lights, to find images of their family and friends dancing in the next life.

However, some Inuit believed that the lights were more sinister and if you whistled at them, they would come down and cut off your head. This tale is still told to children today. For others they were invisible giants, the souls of animals, a guide to hunting and as a spirit for the angakkuq to help with healing. They relied upon the angakkuq (shaman) for spiritual interpretation. The nearest thing to a central deity was the Old Woman (Sedna), who lived beneath the sea. The waters, a central food source, were believed to contain great gods.

The Inuit practiced a form of shamanism based on animist principles. They believed that all things had a form of spirit, including humans, and that to some extent these spirits could be influenced by a pantheon of supernatural entities that could be appeased when one required some animal or inanimate thing to act in a certain way. The angakkuq of a community of Inuit was not the leader, but rather a sort of healer and psychotherapist, who tended wounds and offered advice, as well as invoking the spirits to assist people in their lives. His or her role was to see, interpret and exhort the subtle and unseen. Angakkuit were not trained; they were held to be born with the ability and recognized by the community as they approached adulthood.

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