

The Inuit or Eskimos lived in one of the coldest regions of the world. Their homeland stretched more than 3,500 miles from Greenland to the tip of Alaska. The region is called the “Land of the Midnight Sun” because the sun shines all day and all night for part of each summer. Thick sheets of ice cover parts of the region, and the rivers, lakes and sea remain frozen for much of the year.

In the summer, the Inuit lived in wood-framed tents covered with animal skins. They built two types of winter homes. One was a hole dug in the ground with walls made of wood or whalebone covered with sod. The other was a snow house or **igloo** often used when hunting or traveling.

There were few plants for food. The Inuit men hunted large sea mammals such as whale, walrus or seal. A walrus could supply meat for food, fur and skins for clothing and boats, and ivory for tools and ornaments. On land, the Inuit hunted caribou, polar bears, wolves, foxes and hares. They used harpoons, poisoned darts, spears, bows and arrows, and stone traps. The women butchered and cleaned the animals using the **ulu**, a knife shaped like a half moon.

The Inuit hunted and traveled in two types of boats. The **kayak** could hold one or two people. It had a wooden frame covered with oiled animal skins, making it lightweight and waterproof. Paddles were used to move the kayak. The larger **umiak** could carry up to 10 people. It was stronger than the kayak. Umiaks were used to hunt large sea animals. The umiak was rowed, and sometimes a single sail was attached. On land the Inuit used dogsleds in the winter.

The Inuit lived in groups, ranging from a single family to several hundred people. The groups governed themselves by traditional rules of conduct. The most important rule was that each person in the group helped with daily activities so that all could survive in the harsh region. Any problems were settled by contests of strength or other peaceful ways.

The Inuit believed that all people, animals, things, and natural happenings had spirits. One of the most important spirits was **Sedna**. She was a goddess who ruled the sea. The Inuit held festivals and performed ceremonial dances to please the spirits. Each Inuit group included one person known as the **angekok**. The Inuit believed the angekok had special powers to heal the sick or communicate with the spirits to bring good weather or a good supply of animals to hunt.

The Inuit made everything they needed. They made needle cases, combs and pins. They also made snow goggles that protected their eyes from the strong glare of the sun reflected off the snow. These were carved from whalebone or walrus tusks.

The Norse were the first Europeans to arrive, in about 1000. They stayed for a short time. In the 1500s, European whalers and explorers met the Inuit along the coast of Labrador. Many Inuit converted to Christianity. European diseases such as smallpox and measles killed many Inuit. Their way of life changed as they became dependent upon European goods. However, some continue to follow their traditional ways even today.