

**AN  
ANTHROPOGEOGRAPHICAL  
STUDY OF THE ORIGIN OF THE  
ESKIMO CULTURE; PP. 39-231**

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**H. P. STEENSBY**

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*for mig og  
H. Lindow*

*medtaget  
for  
Fry*

AN ANTHROPOGEOGRAPHICAL STUDY  
OF THE  
ORIGIN OF  
THE ESKIMO CULTURE

BY  
H. P. STEENSBY

SÆRTRYK AF MEDDELELSER OM GRØNLAND, LIII

KØBENHAVN  
BIANCO LUNOS BOGTRYKKERI

1916

## PREFACE

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**I**N this work, which I have called an Anthropogeographical Study, I have further carried out the scientific method and the considerations which I had already set forth in my preliminary paper on the subject "Om Eskimokulturens Oprindelse" which was published in Danish in 1905. The present work, however, must not be regarded as a mere translation of the named paper. The three introductory chapters have been revised, but their contents are otherwise mainly the same. As regards the following descriptions of the types of Eskimo culture, some of the chapters have been rewritten, and in regard to all the chapters I have as far as possible taken into consideration the results of the later expeditions and explorations. As regards the Polar Eskimo and the Greenlanders, I must in this connection mention my own observations and studies, made in the intervening time. The chapters following the description of types are, on the other hand, quite new, it having been possible for me to give a more elaborate argumentation for my results and to carry them somewhat further than I was able to do in 1905. Among the various things which have made this possible may be mentioned the important results brought home during the last 10 years by the Danish expeditions to the east and north coasts of Greenland, which have enriched our knowledge as regards an important and hitherto missing link in the chain of distribution of the Eskimo.

I wish to call attention to the fact that in citing authors I give only the name of the author and the Roman figures which in the Bibliography are prefixed to the titles of their works, when these number more than one. "Meddelelser om Grönland" is in most cases abbreviated to M. o. G.

*H. P. Steensby.*



## Introductory Sections.

### The Eskimo Culture and Theories on its Origin.

**T**HE Eskimo have never played a great rôle in the world's history, and it is scarcely likely that they ever will have the chance of doing so. Since early times their part in history has consisted only in the small, but dramatic, episode of the destruction of the Scandinavian Colonies in South Greenland.

Their later contact with the Europeans has been distinctly marked by peacefulness, and by the absolute impotency in a general martial and political sense, of this small population. On the other hand they have gained a certain respect from the Europeans with whom they established a connection, by producing a culture which has overcome the difficult conditions of subsistence in the Arctic North, and also, because, as regards certain dexterities, they really furnish an example of the utmost effort of human ability.

As regards popularity, the small, badly groomed, Eskimo have always been outshone by the Indians in their traditional form. Scientifically, also, a strong diversity has been conceived. As regards the purely physical appearance it seemed even to CRANZ that there was more similarity between Eskimo and Tunguses and Kalmucks than there was between Eskimo and Indians; and when RINK, in 1871, read a paper in the Anthropological Institute in London, where he maintained the American origin of the Eskimo, it was refuted by CHARNOCK, who emphasized the gulf between the Eskimo and the Northern Indians, in linguistic, physical and other respects.

In this way there are two continents in which the dispute as to the primeval home of the Eskimo is contested: America and Asia. The dispute is old, and can still be said to be far from being finally decided.

Along what paths the knowledge of the Eskimo has passed into European literature is witnessed in the name of the tribe itself. The term Eskimo (Esquimaux) is, so to say, the French form for an Algonquin word, which means something like "those who eat raw meat." The Frenchmen in Newfoundland and Canada heard it from the Abnakis who lived on the north side of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, in unceasing hostility to their Eskimo neighbours on the coast of Labrador;



but, by the Cree-Indians the name is also used for the Eskimo west of Hudson Bay. From French and English literature the name passed to all other languages.

Another name used for the Eskimo is *innuit* (plural of *inuk*, human being), which originates from the Eskimo themselves. In the middle ages, except in Scandinavia, there was little use for the old Scandinavian term *Skræling* (plural *Skrælinger*); nor did the term *Orarians*, or coast inhabitants, as proposed by DALL, become current.

The home of the Eskimo is the Arctic north coast of the American Continent and the Arctic Archipelago situated in front of it, together with the large island of Greenland. Consequently, they are what FR. RATZEL has designated a "border people," or a people which lives along one of the outer edges of the inhabited world.

Such a people is, as a rule, at a low stage of culture. In the literature on the subject the low cultural standpoint of the Eskimo is also frequently emphasized. And it cannot be denied that in certain directions, for instance as regards social organisation, the Eskimo display somewhat inferior development. But it is a question whether this inferior social differentiation is due to primitiveness, or whether it is not rather a result of the natural conditions under which the Eskimo have lived from time immemorial.

No deep knowledge of the Eskimo culture is needed to see that it is a culture which has been obliged to employ an immensely large part of its force simply to develop the means wherewith to gain a livelihood, or the mode of procedure by which each individual man or bread-winner may secure his own and his family's supply of food and clothes, and a dwelling — three things which are equally necessary in the polar regions.

When we take into consideration the high development reached by the Eskimo hunters as regards skill in the making of a livelihood we must, without doubt, rank Eskimo culture high within this class of culture — viz., hunting culture — to which it belongs in the system of historical culture. The special development of hunting ability in the way of enduring fatigue, suffering hardships, showing courage, and especially as regards the adroitness in the use of the implements, naturally results in the more individual qualities being specially brought under cultivation, while the more social side of the culture in question has, as a rule, been allowed to lag behind, or perhaps, in certain cases, may even be regarded as having fallen into decay compared with the more differentiated conditions of former times. These are all questions, however, which are not going to be investigated here.

The economic culture of the Eskimo has often awakened the admiration of travellers by the cleverness with which it is adapted to the natural conditions, and, considering they are a primitive people,

by the unusually large number of implements which are in use. It has been described so often, however, and is so well-known, that here only the principal forms of implements, articles for use, dwelling-houses, and lastly a few specially important hunting methods will be called to mind. Some other hunting methods of importance will be mentioned and described in the following chapters.

These are the kayak, umiak (woman's boat), harpoon, and bird-dart with throwing board, the three-pronged salmon-spear, the compound bow, strengthened by a backing of sinew, the dog sledge, the snow shoe, the winter house and snow house with the lamps for burning blubber oil, and the platform, the summer tent, and lastly the skin-garments. The nearer description of these various contrivances as adapted to one another must here be taken as known.

Among the various methods of hunting, the hunting of seals from a kayak is well known, while the Maupok method has been less noticed. The word "Maupok" signifies "he waits" and refers to the fact that the hunter stations himself at the hole which the seal keeps open in the ice during winter, and waits until the seal comes up to blow. The hunter stands motionless, or he sits upon a small three-legged stool, sometimes for hours, before the seal comes up to the breathing hole, when he instantly thrusts the harpoon into the animal, which disappears into the water as quick as lightning, pulling off the harpoon head and disengaging the detachable foreshaft. It soon gets exhausted, however, so that it can be hauled up and killed; the hole is then widened and the prey drawn up.

This method of hunting is practised throughout the winter. In the spring, on the other hand, the seal creeps up onto the ice to sun itself and is hunted as follows: the hunter lies down and, imitating the movements of a seal, approaches his prey. If he succeeds in getting within a convenient distance of the seal, he rushes up to it and thrusts the harpoon into it. The point is to be quick, as the seal never goes far from its hole in the ice, but lies ready to plunge into the water. This method of hunting is called the "Utok method" from the Greenland expression for a seal that has come up upon the ice to sun itself. Besides these, there are other methods of hunting which are connected with ice, and are of ethnographical importance. For the present, I shall only call to mind the hunting at cracks in the ice, which is carried on during the latter part of spring and early summer, when the ice begins to break up.

It has been said that scarcely anywhere else on earth does there exist a people living in groups scattered over so extensive an area which at the same time shows such remarkable homogeneity both in culture and language as the Eskimo do, and there can be no doubt as to the correctness of this.

As regards culture, in particular, the congruity has been obvious

enough. With its characteristic skin-boats, its individual missile-weapons, and its whole coastal character, the Eskimo culture was easily distinguishable, whether met with in the most north-west parts of the Atlantic Ocean or the northernmost part of the Pacific: and its aloofness from that of the neighbouring folk is marked by an equally distinct stamp of individuality. As will be seen from the following description of types, there are, however, several cultural nuances within the Eskimo culture, and some of these present themselves under conditions which only an anthropogeographical treatment can satisfactorily explain.

As regards language the Eskimo are conspicuous among their surroundings by a similar stamp of individuality and a similar homogeneity. The philologist, G. KLEINSCHMIDT, pointed out that the languages in Greenland and Labrador were "less different than, for instance, Danish and Swedish or Dutch and Hamburg Low-German." It is to be regretted that no actual philologist has had occasion personally to compare the Eskimo languages in Greenland and Labrador with those spoken furthest west in Alaska, but there is sufficient evidence that the differences are not so great that the Eskimo from the easternmost regions would not quickly learn to understand those from the westernmost regions.

The Danish philologist, W. THALBITZER, who is one of those who have most recently treated these questions, writing about the languages from two places so far apart as the east coast of Greenland (Angmagssalik) and the Asiatic side of Bering Strait says "there exists a difference of dialect about equivalent to the difference between two related languages (like English and German). The transitions from dialect to dialect seem to take place on the whole steadily and gradually in the interjacent districts,..."<sup>1</sup> As regards the independence of the Eskimo language, he writes in the same place that it "constitutes an independent family of languages. No one has as yet succeeded in finding any language either in Asia or among the American Indians which might possibly have been originally related to it."

In this connection, however, it should be remarked even here that there are two peoples which, while culturally exhibiting the Eskimo characteristics, differ linguistically. They are the so-called coast Chukches in northern Asia (who should not be confused with the Asiatic Eskimo). These coast Chukches speak Chukche, and are a branch of the Chukches, but have adopted the Eskimo economic culture. Then there are the Aleuts, called after the islands on which they live, or, strictly speaking, the original inhabitants of the Aleutian Islands, who live in the same way as their neighbours, the Eskimo of South Alaska, but who, linguistically, are decidedly apart from them.

<sup>1</sup> M. o. G., Vol. 31, p. 45.