

The history of the inuit people



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The name “ Inuit” means “ the people”. The Inuit have lived in the Arctic regions for thousands of years. These are the only people who have made the Arctic their permanent home. The Arctic is located near North America, where many Inuit communities also live. The main areas would be Canada, Alaska, Greenland and Siberia.

Main features of their culture prior to colonisation

The Inuit lived in groups that varied in size from a single family to several hundred people. The number of people in each family depended on the amount of food which was available in different seasons.

Over the years, the Inuit have been able to adapt to the cold and harsh Arctic climate, allowing them to have a unique lifestyle. Most of the Arctic land consists of huge frozen plains, which the Inuit call tundra. Here on the tundra, the Inuit were able to hunt animals such as caribou, musk oxen, polar bears, Arctic foxes and wolves. Those that chose to hunt animals in the sea were able to hunt seals, whales, walrus and fish. They used the skin of an animal to build tents. Using the antlers, bones and horns, they were able to carve weapons such as a harpoon.

The Inuit also used animal skin to create clothing. Some styles were different in each area, but the men, women and children had the same basic outfit. This outfit consisted of a hooded jacket (parka), trousers or leggings, socks, boots and mittens. Sometimes they wore goggles, which were made out of wood, bone or ivory, to help reduce the glare of the sun.

In summer, the Inuit normally travelled by foot or boat. However during winter, they used sleds, which were always pulled by dogs. In Canada and

Greenland, they built a plank sled, which resembled a long ladder. The plank sled had two long runners, with cross-pieces lashed between them. They generally used wood to build it out of. In Alaska and Siberia, they made frame sleds which had a basketlike frame built onto the runners.

Timeline

9000 B. C – Ice Age came to an end and the Arctic climate warmed up.

7000 B. C – Dogsleds used by Palaeo- Eskimo in Siberia.

3000 B. C – Inuit ancestors came to North America from Siberia.

1700 B. C – An ivory maskette, which is the oldest known, was found on Devon Island.

700 B. C – The Dorset culture evolved.

500 B. C – The earliest Dorset Tyara maskette found at Hudson Strait.

A. D. 985 – The Vikings arrived.

A Map of where they lived
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During Contact and Comparison to Aboriginal Contact

The non-indigenous people who colonised the land

The first non-indigenous people who came in contact with the Inuit people in Greenland were the Norsemen, more commonly known as the Vikings. The Vikings arrived around A. D. 985, when Erik Thorvaldsson (Erik the Red) convinced those in Iceland to help him establish a permanent settlement in Greenland.

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Reasons behind the colonisation of this land

The Norsemen found Greenland only because they were blown off course while sailing from Norway to Iceland. Originally, they had no intention on colonising Greenland.

Erik the Red was exiled from Iceland for three years due to murder which he was found guilty of. He then sailed to Greenland, where he explored the coastline and then claiming the land as his own. When he met the Inuit, initially he thought that they were “ skraelings” which meant “ rough people” or “ savages”.

Once the Vikings colonised Greenland, they soon realised that the Inuit were friendly and not the savages they thought they were. As Greenland’s climate was harsh, the Inuit had to explain to the Vikings their culture; things such as the clothes to wear, how to built their houses and how to protect themselves from the cold.

Later in the 1700’s, the Inuit that lived in Alaska faced the arrival of the Russians and a few Europeans. The nature of their arrival was not documented, but their main purpose for colonising Alaska was to hunt for whales.

3. The Nature of the arrival of the non-indigenous people

The nature of the Viking’s arrival wasn’t fierce and there was no combat between the Inuit and the Norsemen. This was because the Norsemen needed the Inuit to teach them how to survive in the harsh climate. They had to rely on the Inuit as guides and trappers, and because the Inuit were too spread out, there weren’t enough to threaten the Norsemen.

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However, Martin Frobisher was a different story. Martin Frobisher was an Englishman who was the first person to land on Baffin Island in 1576.

However he did not colonise the land. His purpose of the voyage was to search for the Northwest Passage, which is a water route across the Arctic to Asia. However he stopped on Baffin Island as he thought he had found gold. He soon found the Inuit community, but wasn't very friendly. Instead, he kidnapped some Inuit men and took them back to England. He left five of his own men behind on the island.

Because of the way Frobisher had treated the kidnapped Inuit, you would expect the Inuit which remained on the island refused to help the five abandoned men. However traditional Inuit tales recount the natives offering their assistance to Frobisher's men. Another story that told was of how these men tried to build a boat and sail home but ended up starving and freezing to death. The Inuit had known this would happen eventually, as they knew no outsider would be able to survive in the icy weather which the Inuit had adapted to.

4. The response of the indigenous people

The European explorers, who treated the Inuit in a friendly way, would receive help and guidance from the Inuit. The Inuit saw no harm in these people meaning there was no reason for them to act in a violent manner. Whilst some sources claim that the Inuit community was aggressive and hostile to early French and English explorers, fishers and whalers, recent research suggests that the early contact with whaling stations across the Labrador coast was based on mutual interest in trade. This was mainly

because both sides had needed something from each other, and they knew that if one side acted rudely, they would not benefit from the deal.

Moses Norton, governor in the late 1700s of Fort Churchill on Hudson Bay believes that the native Inuit would rather assist a man in distress than to do otherwise by him. Many believe this fact as records show that the natives have always helped the non-indigenous people when they arrived on the treacherous and frozen landscape.

Despite these facts, there are still people who considered the Inuit as savages. This opinion was based around the fact that the natives carried around their traditional weapons, the harpoon and spears, almost all the time. The harpoon heads were made from bone or ivory and tipped the heads with a stone or iron point.

5. Comparison of the Inuit to the Aboriginals

The colonisation experience which the Inuit faced isn't very similar to the experience Aboriginals faced when the Europeans colonised their land. The Inuit originally lived in the Arctic, where the conditions were tough. It is one of the coldest regions on earth and the Inuit were the only known people who could survive there. The Norsemen didn't have any particular reason why they colonised the Inuit land. They only stumbled upon it when they were blown off course. However, the Europeans had their reason for colonising Australia. They needed a new place to house the growing numbers of convicts.

Also, the Aboriginals weren't seen as a threat to the Europeans. They thought that the indigenous Australians had no rights to the land; therefore

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the Europeans assumed that they were able to destroy the homes in order to secure the land. This was the complete opposite to what happened with the Inuit. The explorers who arrived on the Arctic shores relied on the Inuit to help them survive.

However, something which was similar in both experiences was that the Aboriginals and the Inuit both suffered from foreign diseases which the Europeans brought along with them. Both populations decreased as none of them had any immunity against them.

Despite having many differences between their culture and colonisation experience, the Aboriginals and the Inuit have both been dramatically influenced by the European culture. Their present day lives are much different to the traditional lives all because of colonisation.

Consequences of Colonisation and Comparison to Aboriginal Experience

The results of colonisation for the Inuit

When English traders came, they brought along diseases such as smallpox, measles and tuberculosis. This was something that affected the community almost instantly. The Inuit had no immunity against these white diseases, thus killing many Inuit people. But it wasn't until the 1900s when the actual Inuit culture was being influenced by the Europeans. As the Inuit were spread out across Russia, Alaska, Canada and Greenland, the changes were different in each place.

The traditional life of an Inuit has changed dramatically. Instead of living in snow houses, they prefer to live in wooden houses. Also, they have grown

accustom to hunting with rifles and other trapping devices, rather than the usual harpoons and spears. And because the number of animals decreased, this meant that the Inuit couldn't survive independently like they once have.

Many Inuit families across Alaska and Canada had to relocate to areas which were developed around trading posts, government administrative offices, radar sites and mission churches. Some Inuit were lucky to obtain jobs in commercial fishing and construction. But the majority of the Inuit community weren't as fortunate. Despite the governments providing them with housing, health care, education and other assistance, they still lived in poverty.

The results of colonisation for the non-indigenous people

Due to the changes of the Inuit lifestyle, which are the results of colonisations, the non-indigenous people have benefited. One benefit which has tipped in favour of the white people is that they have been able to establish trading companies. The Inuit and the traders met at trading posts, where they exchanged whales and other fish meat and also the lush fur of the Arctic fox for European goods such as tea, flour, woollen clothing and tobacco. Because the Inuit hunted by trapping now, the animals they hunted became scarce. This meant that they had to trade more often, as the Inuit had become dependent on these European goods. The Europeans used this to their advantage.

Because of this successful trading business, the Europeans have grown wealthier. Also, the European explorers of the Arctic left their names on the land and water of the north. Such places that were named after these explorers are Hudson Bay, Frobisher Bay, Baffin Island and Baffin Bay, Davis

Strait, Mackenzie River, McClure Strait, Franklin Strait and Bering Strait. The traditional Inuit names for these places are long forgotten and none of these places are named in honour of those Inuit guides, whom many explorers owe them their fame and lives. The Arctic conditions would be ruthless to survive in for any outsider. But the Inuit were kind enough to assist the explorers in teaching them their lifestyle and how they survived. Without their help, it is highly doubted that the explorers would have been able to live long enough to leave their name on the native land.

Comparison of the results of colonisation for the indigenous people of Australia and the Inuit.

The results of colonisation for the indigenous people of Australia and the Inuit are incredibly similar. As both cultures have been influenced by the European culture, it's no surprise that the present day Aboriginals and Inuit have much more things in common than before colonisation.

The Aboriginals and the Inuit now wear modern day European clothing. Not many wear their traditional clothing but there are still some families that live in remote areas who still stick to the traditional life.

Also, many Aboriginal and Inuit families have had to relocate to places with employment opportunities in order to keep up with the modern economic world. And although there are some lucky Aboriginals and Inuit who have been able to get employed, there is a vast majority who stay unemployed and are not able to provide for their new ways of life.

Language and culture has changed over the time. Aboriginals were banned from speaking their languages and were forced to learn English. Although

there aren't any sources which say that the Inuit were not able to speak their dialect, they too were made to learn English in order to communicate with traders. Culture gives people identity. It also shows the physical and spiritual wellbeing of a person's way of living. Both Aboriginals and Inuit have been able to channel their cultural ways to help their economic survival through arts and crafts.

Not only that, the population of the Aborigines and the Inuit has recovered and is increasing at a stable rate. The indigenous population of Australia has recovered to about 500, 000 again- 220 years after settlement. The Inuit population doubled in 1950 and 1970 and it continues to grow rapidly. Improved health care and better living conditions are factors of the Inuit population growth.