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THE ALASKAN ESKIMO

INTRODUCTION

THE Eskimo, a marginal people, who number somewhat fewer than thirty thousand, inhabit the coast and many islands of North America approximately from the Aleutian islands to eastern Greenland. The extent of the territory occupied by the Eskimo, with some exceptions, from the coast to the interior, is but a few hundred miles. When this vast territory is considered in connection with the relatively small population, it might be expected that many differences will be found in the culture of the various groups. Although such is the case, the similarities in the culture of the Eskimo as a whole are perhaps more uniform than are those of the people of any other American culture area.[1]

The population of the Eskimo dwelling in Alaska is officially given as 12,405. Their territory includes the coast and adjacent islands from the Canadian border on the Arctic ocean to the Aleutian islands. Many dialectic differences occur in the Eskimo language spoken in this territory. The inhabitants of Nunivak island and St. Lawrence island, groups in the region of the Yukon mouth from Nelson island to Cape Smith, and some in the vicinity of East Cape, Siberia, speak a common dialect; the dialects of those who dwell in the coastal territory drained by the Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers, including part of the Norton Bay region, are barely intelligible to the people of the first group; a third dialect is spoken in the areas comprising the western half of Seward peninsula and including Little Diomede and King islands, and Cape Prince of Wales; the great expanse of territory from Unalakleet on Norton sound, embracing the eastern part of Seward peninsula and spreading wedge-like northward to Point Barrow, is inhabited by a number of groups speaking a still different tongue.[2]

1 See Clark Wissler, The American Indian, 2d ed., page 229, New York, 1922.

2 The linguistic information was obtained partly from the expedition's research and partly from Paul Ivanoff, of Russian and Eskimo parentage, a man widely travelled throughout Alaska and thoroughly conversant with the dia-

In culture, the groups treated in this volume, namely the peoples of Nunivak island, King island, Little Diomede island, Cape Prince of Wales, and those in the vicinity of Kotzebue sound — the Kotzebue, Noatak, Kobuk, and Selawik — are broadly similar. The mode of life of the Eskimo depends on the distribution and migration of game, whether it be mammal, bird, or fish, or all three; hence when different groups are dependent on different game foods, variations in culture occur. This is well illustrated by comparing the most important food products of Nunivak and King islands with those of Little Diomede island and Cape Prince of Wales. The former islands lie directly in the path of seal and walrus migrations, both north and south, hence their inhabitants may be characterized as having a distinctive seal culture. Walrus and whales are deemed most important by the Diomede and Cape Prince of Wales Eskimo, being more numerous than seal within the range of their villages: whaling indeed is the prime occupation of the latter. These groups, in turn, differ from those of Kotzebue sound, who hunt beluga and seal on the coast and caribou (now reindeer) along the streams. This variance is reflected strongly in their ceremonies and in certain phases of their social customs.

While it is desirable to outline the extent and number of the Eskimo as a whole, and to comment on the Alaskan Eskimo with respect to language, population, and similarity and differences of culture, nevertheless it is the detailed descriptions of the various groups herein presented that must furnish the basis for such general observations.

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lects extant. For the linguistic distribution of the Eskimo of the Alaskan coast, see the accompanying map.