

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Ten thousand years ago, the ancestors of the Arctic peoples crossed the land bridge from Siberia to Alaska that today is known as the Bering Strait. Calling themselves the Inuit (the human beings), they remained in Alaska for about five thousand years and then began to move east across the Arctic, finally establishing themselves across a twelve-thousand-mile area that extends from eastern Siberia to lands east of Greenland. It was the neighboring Abnaki people who first called the Inuit by the name of Eskimo, an Algonquian term that means "eater of raw meat."

Although the Inuit have lived in Alaska for thousands of years, the Thule culture that identifies them is only about one thousand years old. It includes the use of dogsleds and boats made of animal skins. The Thule culture offered such great advantages over the previous way of life that, in less than four hundred years, it spread to all the Inuit communities from Alaska to Greenland.

The Inuit, now numbering about one hundred thousand, continue to live along the coasts of harsh lands, where the waterways are solid ice for all but the two summer months of each year. Those who live in small, isolated communities continue to live a traditional Inuit life as a society of hunters, and their life continues to focus on the annual cycle of procuring food. They hunt land animals, such as the caribou, and sea animals, such as the seal, and continue to rely upon these animals for food, clothing, and materials for their tents. However, today, supply boats bring modern food, clothing, building materials, rifles, outboard motors, and videotapes to large and small Inuit communities in the Canadian Arctic and Greenland. Many Inuit families use motor boats and snowmobiles, although dogsleds continue to be of major importance in Greenland because of its mountainous terrain.

Some Inuit peoples no longer live in the traditional manner. In Alaska, members of the Inuit community have taken leading roles in the state's economic and political organizations. In Greenland, good Inuit students may choose to pursue higher education in Denmark. Many Inuit work in the radar warning stations and air bases that span the Arctic from Alaska to Greenland.

## APPEAL AND VALUE

The myth of Sedna (She Down There) has been found among Inuit peoples across the Arctic. It is part of the oral tradition of a hunting people and thus reveals values that are important in the traditional Inuit culture. The Sedna myth reveals Inuit attitudes toward the relationship between men and women and reflects the harsh world in which the Inuit live. It also reflects the Inuit peoples' intense focus on the need to acquire food, the importance of land and sea animals to this hardy people, and their preoccupation with the need for balance and harmony as they interact with the natural world.

Sedna is one of the most powerful deities in mythology. She is the sole focus of Inuit myth and religious ritual and the supreme ruler of the Inuit supernatural world. She functions as the divine intermediary between the Inuit people and the animals (Sedna's children) that the Inuit need in order to survive.

Because she has been mistreated, Sedna is a hostile goddess, and she needs to be ritually appeased in order for the society to thrive. Sedna punishes her people by withholding their food supply whenever she feels that she has been insulted. Consequently, the Sedna myth reflects the Inuit need for taboos and, equally important, it sets forth rituals designed to appease Sedna and restore order whenever those taboos have been violated. These taboos and rituals enabled the traditional Inuit society to operate in an orderly and productive manner.

The Sedna myth also reveals the importance of the shaman, or medicine man, in Inuit society. In the eastern Arctic regions, the shaman must go into a trance that permits him, symbolically, to visit the goddess in her home beneath the sea in order to convince her to release her children—the animals on which the Inuit depend for food—for the well-being of the Inuit community. This ritual reflects the confidence of the Inuit people in their shaman's ability to increase their food supply when land and sea animals are scarce.

Today, some Inuit peoples continue to perform their traditional winter dances in which masked dancers enact their society's major myths. One such dance involves a woman named Ooyalu (the flinty-hearted, or the contrary woman}, who rejects the many men who attempt to court her and is punished by being carried off by a monster.

Inuit myths were recorded by Franz Boas in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and by Knud Rasmussen in the early 1920s. The most famous version of the Sedna myth was originally told to Franz Boas in 1884-1885 by the Oqomiut and the Akudnirmiut people of southern Baffin Island, in Canada, shortly before Anglican missionaries converted those communities to Christianity. Franz Boas recorded this material in *The Central Eskimo*, published in 1888. The myth is repurposed here from the Internet Sacred Text Archive.