



April and Ben Akeegok Aujittuug June 1996

# Sewing for survival

ASTOUNDING HUMAN INGENUITY

The ability to adapt, survive, live and prosper in a hostile environment is based on instinct and centuries of acquired environmental knowledge. The Canadian Arctic houses a population of approximately 33,000 in some 746,000 square miles of rock, mountains, ice and tundra, abstractly patterned with small lakes and rivers draining into the waters of Hudson Bay and the Arctic Ocean. Winter temperatures can plummet to 58° degrees Fahrenheit while brief summer temperatures of +54° encourage tiny patches of miniature moss, lichens, small berries and grasses. During the long winter months the snowy landscape is completely monochromatic, its white and grey hues accentuated by the sharp and shifting sunlight; and from the caribou to the snow-shoe hare, coats of camouflage are changed accordingly.

It is thought that the 'Paleoeskimos' came across the Bering Straights approximately 40,000 years ago in search of food and were followed by further migrations of the Pre-Dorset, Dorset and Thule. With each group, further hunting and survival skills were developed. Inuit life remained relatively unchanged until approximately 100 years ago when contact increased as Europeans searched for the Northwest Passage, hunted for whales and traded for furs. The 20th century brought social and health services, permanent dwellings, Christianity and schools devoid of traditional learning – European contact has taken a grim toll. Today, the ties to the land remain; hunting continues to provide food for family and community as meat still forms the bulk of the diet. The official language is 'Inuktitut' but in reality the spoken language is comprised of innumerable community dialects.

In the midst of a monochromatic landscape colourful stories of mythological figures of land and sea are set to the beat of the drum and the resonance of traditional throat singing. Inuit life is about essence. "My wife, our child and I live on the Tundra 100 kilometres from Ikpiarjuk. This is a good place for hunting caribou, seal and for fishing. We choose to live this way because we couldn't endure the restrictions and agitation of community life. My family needs to live on the land: to live free," explained Isaac Shooyook.

Clothing is critical to Inuit life and an extensive vocabulary differentiates stylistic details and places of origin. Every item serves a practical purpose and is equally important. The most unexpected thing about Inuit clothing is that it is so hi-tech. Parts of the animal – such as the back of the neck where skin is thickest – are strategically placed at points where the body requires protection; supple, flexible parts are placed where the body requires softness and greater mobility. Nature has solved the problem of generating and maintaining warmth: the peoples of the North followed her lead.



*Mark Eetak and son Abraham Eetak*

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