



Dene hunting at a brush corral.



TRADITIONAL USE

BY CHUCK ARNOLD

*The land before me here, it alone
Abounds with food
Abounds with reindeer moss
On the land before me here
You will want to set your footprints
My reindeer moss you will want to
come to!*



These magic words used to lure caribou were revealed to the explorer-anthropologist Knud Rasmussen in 1923 by Nakasuk, an Inuk of the Netsilik (Seal) tribe. The verse conveys reverence, even in translation. For the Netsilik Inuit, as indeed for most of the native peoples of the Northwest Territories (NWT), life before the arrival of the Europeans was closely tied to the caribou.

The major environmental divisions of the NWT have long been occupied by two very different cultures. The coniferous forest of the subarctic is the traditional homeland of the northern Athapaskans, the Dene. To

their north, in the tundra plains and along the seasonally frozen coasts of the arctic, are the Inuit. Although these vast regions with their long and bitterly cold winters might appear austere and inhospitable to outsiders, the Dene and Inuit possess knowledge and skills which have permitted them to flourish for thousands of years.

Prior to feeling the influence of white society, the Dene and Inuit lived almost exclusively by hunting and fishing, and for those who dwelled within the range of the caribou it became the focus of many of their activities. The meat, blood, and stomach contents of the caribou provided them with a balanced diet. Antler, bone, and sinew were fashioned into tools, weapons, and ornaments; and caribou pelts were used for tents, bedding, and warm clothing. The nomadic movements of many of the tribes were harmonized to the seasonal cycle of the caribou, and caribou were important figures in Inuit and Dene religion

and mythology. In effect, the lives of people of the north merged with those of the caribou and the other animals which sustained them.

THE DENE

Archaeologists working in northern Canada have traced dependency on caribou far into the past. The first inhabitants of what is now the NWT entered the southern fringes of the region between 7,000 and 8,000 years ago, before the glaciers of the Ice Age had fully disappeared and before the forests had become established. Their origins remain a mystery. It is clear, however, that those ancient pioneers came following the caribou. The archaeological sites of the earliest time periods usually are found at locations where migrating caribou can be intercepted. The bones of game animals are seldom preserved for more than a few centuries, but artifacts excavated from those sites include spear points for killing large animals, knives for butchering carcasses, and scraping tools for working hides.

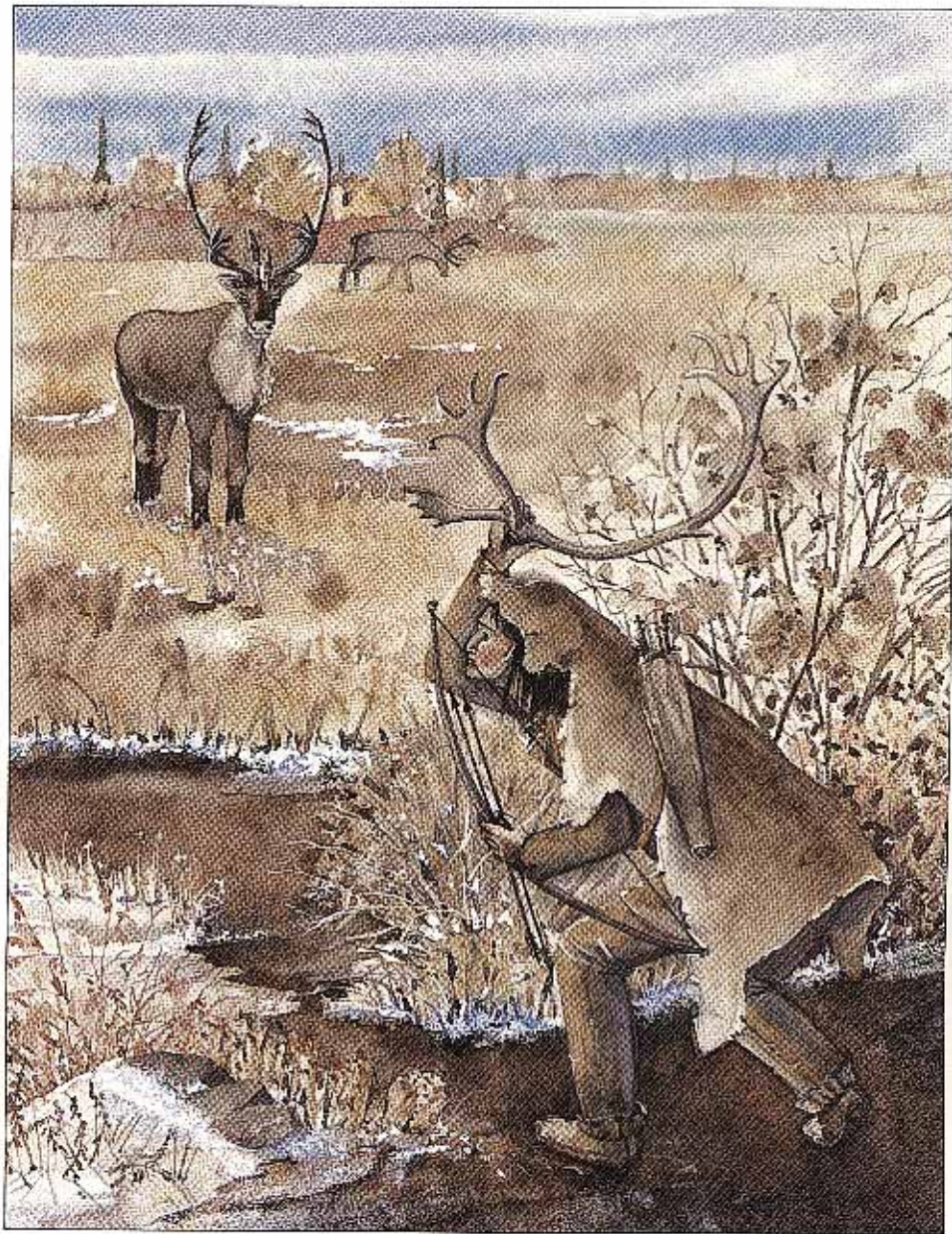
With time came changes. The coniferous forest became established in what was formerly a tundra zone, and the need to adapt to changing conditions brought about developments in culture. Despite these changes, dependence on caribou persisted over broad areas within the subarctic. This is particularly evident along the northern fringe of the forest from the lower Coppermine River drainage east to the Hudson Bay, where archaeological sites of the Taltheilei culture, which came into existence about 2,500 years ago, are found. This distribution of archaeological sites corresponds to the territory occupied in historic times by the branch of the Dene known as the Chipewyans, and the Taltheilei people quite likely were their direct ancestors. Indeed, it is possible that the cultural roots of the Chipewyan and other northern Athapaskan Indians extend back to the period of first human occupation in the NWT, making theirs one of the longest-

lasting hunting traditions in all of North America.

The Chipewyan (including a closely related group, the Yellowknife) Indians were the most numerous and widely distributed of the Dene at the time Europeans first entered the NWT. In addition to occupying the broad arc along the northern edge of the forest, the Chipewyans extended into northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan and, more recently, into Alberta. Several divisions of the Chipewyan can be recognized. Members of one of these groups, the Ethen-eldeli or "Caribou eaters," lived within the forest edge west of Hudson Bay. They were so-named because the game animal upon which they depended most was the barren-ground caribou. The Ethen-eldeli also fished and hunted other game, but those resources were of secondary importance. As more information is available on the traditional culture of the Ethen-eldeli than for any of the other caribou-dependent Dene, they are the focus of the following discussion.

The ebb and flow of the migratory barren-ground caribou had a strong influence on the Ethen-eldeli. Caribou gather in large numbers during the spring migration from the winter range to the calving ground and in mid-summer. At other times they are usually scattered in small groups. This behaviour of the caribou dictated the movements of the Ethen-eldeli, and also the manner in which the caribou were hunted. These aspects of their culture can best be described in terms of a cycle of movements and activities which was repeated year after year.

In winter, most barren-ground caribou inhabit the fringe of the forest. They were hunted individually and in small groups for part of that time. Several techniques were used, one of the most common being for a hunter on snowshoes to chase caribou through deep snow. The hunter had the advantage, and could usually tire a caribou to the point where he could approach within bow and arrow range. Another individual hunting



Dene hunter stalking caribou.

strategy involved setting snares of babiche — strips of tough, untanned skin — at antler level along game trails. The snares would be attached to sturdy trees, if available; otherwise they were tied to poles which would get tangled in brush when pulled along by the ensnared animal.

Although these kinds of hunting strategies were important for survival, by and large they were employed while awaiting opportunities for a community hunt involving a large number of people who built and employed a corral-like enclosure

known as an impoundment. Traces of impoundments may still be seen throughout the subarctic, and a few elders remember the days when they were used. Perhaps the best source of written information regarding the impoundment is the journal of Samuel Hearne, a Hudson's Bay Company employee who travelled through the northern forests and tundra with Chipewyan guides between the years 1770 and 1772.

Hearne noted that impoundments were constructed in clearings or on frozen lakes or rivers. The corral

portion of the impoundment was built of brush, and ranged upwards to one-and-a-half kilometres around, and sometimes even larger. Inside were shorter brush fences, which were set up to resemble a maze, with babiche snares in the openings. A narrow entrance was flanked on either side by a row of brush opening into a wide "V." The wings of some impoundments extended outwards for several kilometres. This type of construction took considerable energy to build and maintain, and was most economically done by a large number of people working together. The hunt itself was also a community affair. When caribou were spotted, almost everyone in the camp positioned themselves to drive the caribou first into the gathering lane and then into the corral. While the women and children circled the fence, shouting to prevent the caribou from breaking through, the men speared the animals which had become entangled in snares and shot those still loose using bow and arrows. In March of 1771, Hearne visited an impoundment camp which had been used since the beginning of winter, which shows just how good a hunting method this was.

With the lengthening days of spring the caribou entered the next phase of their cycle and moved north onto the tundra. The Ethen-eldeli followed them on the first part of this journey, although they seldom moved far beyond the trees. Because of the lack of brush on the tundra, impoundments could not be built for communal hunts. Instead, sticks topped with strips of hide which fluttered in the wind were placed in converging rows leading to low, stone-walled blinds. Again the women and children took part, routing the caribou to hunters concealed behind the blinds. Some solitary hunting strategies were used on the summer ranges as well. These often involved tricking the caribou. A hunter draped with caribou skins and holding antlers above his head could approach within arrow range, and during the rut caribou bulls were lured by rattling pieces of antler together.

Upon hearing that sound, the bulls apparently think that a female is being fought over and go to investigate.

The most important of the summer caribou hunts took place toward the end of the season, when the caribou came together in large numbers and moved towards the winter ranges in the forest. Communal hunting was once again practised, this time when caribou swam rivers and lakes which lay across their migration routes. Hunters with canoes would lie in wait on the bank where they reckoned that the caribou would come on shore. When the herd was part of the way across they would launch their canoes, encircling the animals and spearing them.

Virtually all edible parts of the caribou were consumed. Even the bones were used, breaking them into small pieces which were boiled to release their grease. Meat eaten immediately following a kill usually was boiled or roasted. In winter, surpluses of meat could be kept frozen for later consumption. In summer the meat was cut into strips, which were dried and then smoked in a teepee-like structure. Some of the dried meat was pounded between two stones to turn it into powder, mixed with caribou back fat and berries, and stored in skin bags. This "pemmican" had a lower volume than an equivalent amount of dried meat and was more easily transported as the Ethen-eldeli moved across the landscape, playing out the seasonal pursuits of their annual cycle.

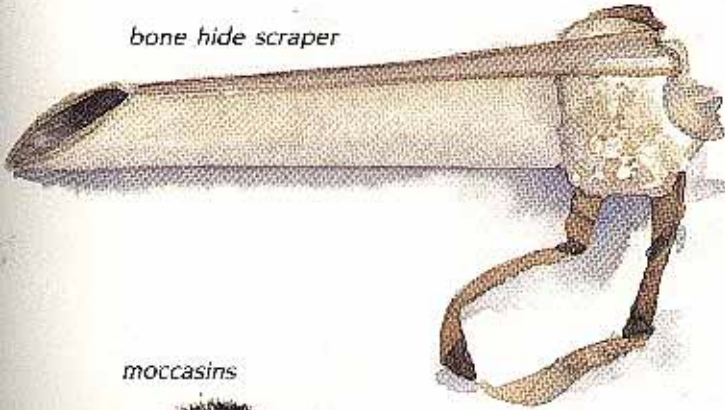
Besides being the single most important source of food to the Ethen-eldeli, caribou were vital for their hides. These were used for a wide variety of purposes, including thongs, containers, tent coverings, sleeping robes, and clothing. It has been estimated that for clothing alone each individual needed as many as twenty skins a year. A minimum of two suits was required. The robe, shirt, leggings, breechcloth, cap, mittens, and moccasins worn in winter were made from hides obtained in late fall, when they were in prime condition.

Traditional Dene uses of caribou.

antler arrow point



bone hide scraper



bone knife



bone awl



moccasins



bone needle

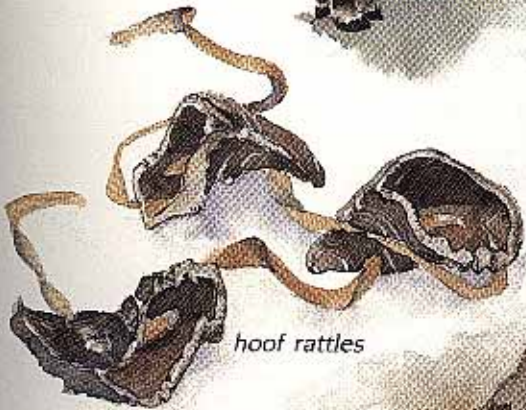


sinew thread

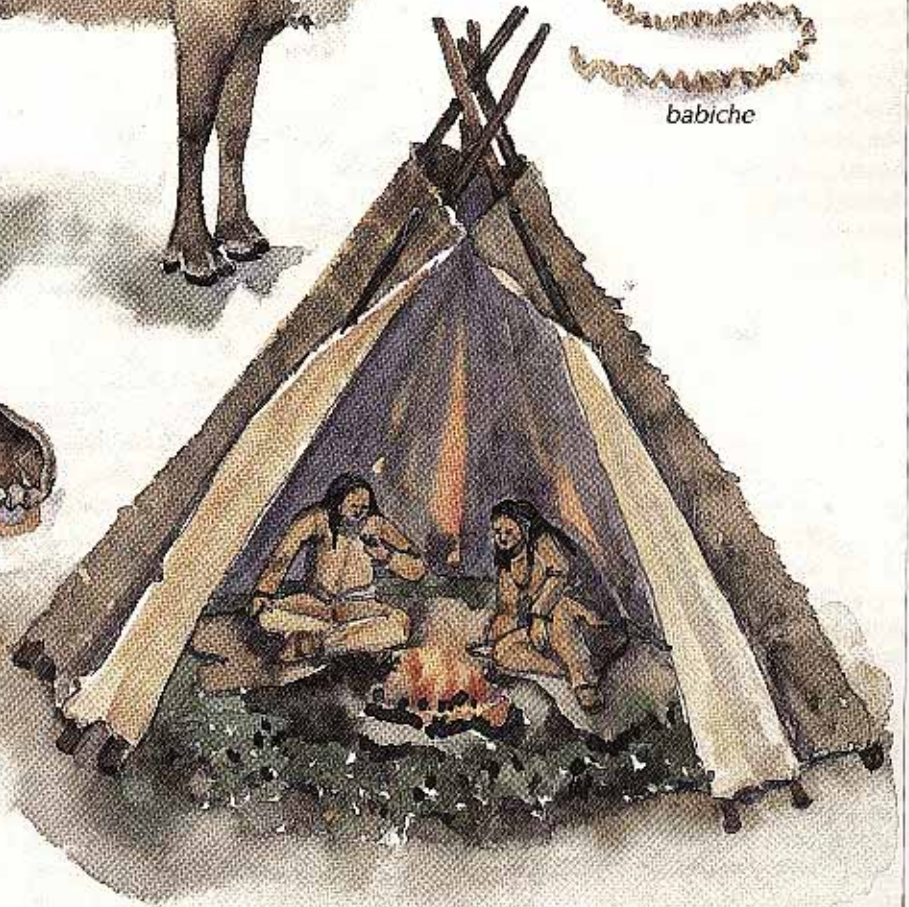
babiche



hoof rattles



tents,
clothing,
food



By that time, the holes of the warble fly larvae which perforate the skin earlier in the season have healed, and the animals have grown thick coats of hollow hair which provide excellent insulation, but which, unlike winter skins, are not too thick for clothing or susceptible to shedding. Hides used for winter clothing had the hair left on, and were simply scraped on the inside to remove the fat and inner membrane, and softened by creasing and rolling. Hides for summer clothing were tanned, which required more preparation. The steps involved in tanning a hide include scraping both sides (often using tools made from the leg bones of the caribou) to remove the hair and soft tissues, soaking in an oily substance such as caribou brains, and smoking. The tailored garments were sewn with threads of caribou sinew using needles made from caribou bone.

In addition to dominating the economic pursuits and strongly influencing the material culture of the Ethen-eldeli, caribou had a major effect on the less tangible aspects of their society. This included the manner in which people related to each other. The main social unit was the "local band," which consisted of closely related families. It had to be flexible, since there was variation not only in the size of the camp throughout the year, but also in its composition, as individual families from time to time would move into different hunting grounds. For most, these irregular shifts in locale usually took place within the confines of a broader hunting range occupied by the regional band with which they were affiliated. The people comprising the regional band were usually related by blood or through marriage, although the ties were not as strong as within the local band.

The hunting grounds of the various regional bands coincided closely with the winter foraging ranges and migration routes of the barren-ground caribou herds. The eastern Ethen-eldeli hunted the Kaminuriak herd, the western regional bands relied upon the Beverly herd, and the

Yellowknives were associated with the Bathurst herd. Within these ranges, families would hunt alone or would come together with others of their local or even regional band, depending upon the distribution of the caribou at the time. There was less interaction between members of different regional bands, as they hunted different caribou herds, or at least different segments of the same herd. As a result, some cultural and linguistic differences arose between the regional bands. This is not meant to imply that the various regional bands were isolated from one another. They were not, since social isolation could result in starvation for people depending on caribou, whose habits are erratic. For that reason, marriages and other alliances between members of different regional bands often were encouraged to facilitate movements between hunting ranges.

As might be expected, caribou are central figures in the traditional belief structure of the Ethen-eldeli. A pervasive element of traditional Dene religion is animism, the concept that animals have souls which live on after death. Care must be taken not to offend the spirits of caribou which are killed, as they could then become dangerous. Rules to prevent this from happening are expressed as prohibitions, or "taboos," such as the strictures that caribou meat and fish are to be kept apart, and that dogs must never gnaw caribou heads. It is an important tradition, too, to show respect to the first caribou of the season caught in a snare by hanging its tongue and fat from a tree. Legends give further insights to the relationship between the Ethen-eldeli and the caribou. Some of the most revealing are those in which the people identify with the wolf — who, like the Ethen-eldeli, hunt the caribou to survive. The subject of other legends is Bedzi-aze, the "little caribou calf," who is the son of a woman and a caribou bull. Bedzi-aze is said to be the ruler of all the herds, and it is believed that as long as men continue to talk about him there will be caribou.

Other Dene in the NWT also relied on barren-ground caribou, although few did so to the same degree as the Ethen-eldeli. For the most part, the Dene of the aboriginal period were opportunists, hunting what was available. Most similar to the Ethen-eldeli, both in terms of dependence upon caribou and specific hunting strategies, were the Dogribs. Some bands of the Hare also moved out onto the tundra in summer to hunt caribou. Loucheux (also known as Kutchin) in the far northwest hunted both the barren-ground and the less gregarious woodland caribou. Caribou also were important to the Mountain Indians, but in their territory the barren-ground caribou was completely replaced by the woodland subspecies. The distribution of the Slavey also corresponded to that of the woodland caribou, but they are known to have travelled east of the Mackenzie River to hunt on those occasions when the barren-ground caribou came close. These differences in resource base resulted in some differences in the material and social culture of the various Dene groups, but the essential fabric of life described here was common to them all.

THE INUIT

The first people to become established along the frozen coasts of arctic Canada came from the west, from the Siberian and Alaskan shores bordering Bering Strait where Inuit cultures underwent their early stages of development. Their migrations eastward into the far northern latitudes of Canada began about 4,000 years ago. The Inuit of today, however, trace their ancestry to a later wave of people who moved from the west approximately 1,000 years ago. These people are known as the Thule (pronounced "too-lee").

One of the most spectacular aspects of the Thule pioneers was their reliance on large bowhead whales, which they hunted from fragile skin-covered boats. The Thule expanded from Alaska at a time when

the northern climate was somewhat milder than today. This decreased the duration and extent of sea ice, permitting bowhead whales to expand their range into the now ice-choked straits which separate the islands of the high arctic, far north of the mainland. It is along the coasts of those high arctic islands that the earliest Thule occupations in the central Canadian arctic are found, consisting of the remains of small clusters of houses made of rock, sod, and whalebone. These winter dwellings typically have deep middens which are rich in broken, lost, and discarded tools and the bones of the animals which they hunted to supplement whales. Caribou bones, when found, are not usually very numerous — perhaps because the early Thule had moved into the range of the Peary caribou, whose small scattered groups were harder to hunt than the seals, walrus, and whales which abounded in the sea.

Dramatic changes are noted in the archaeological record of the Thule culture a few generations after they settled in the far north, when the warming trend which encouraged their territorial expansion came to an end. We can speculate that sea ice became more prevalent, curtailing the distribution of whales in the central regions of the Canadian arctic and forcing the Thule to seek new hunting territories and to develop new adaptive patterns in order to survive. Most of the high arctic was abandoned, and the population shifted south. In many areas there was also a shift from settlement on shore in winter to residence in snow-house camps on the sea ice where seals were harpooned. And, instead of hunting sea mammals in the open water in summer, many now trekked to the interior to fish and to hunt caribou, for their southward retreat had brought them to the summer feeding grounds of the migratory barren-ground caribou. These were the same animals which were hunted elsewhere on their migration routes by the Ethen-eldeli and other aboriginal Dene.

It was in this manner that the

culture of the Netsilik Inuit, one of the several groups of central arctic Inuit, developed. Like the Dene, they were nomadic wanderers, but instead of travelling between forest and tundra the Netsilik moved between tundra and frozen ocean.

The trek inland began soon after the sea ice had rotted to the point that it no longer was safe to venture out on it in pursuit of seals. Caribou begin to appear north of the treeline by mid-April — cows with calves first, and later the bulls. However, they were not actively pursued until later in the season. During the first part of summer the meat of caribou is lean and their hides are poor, and in addition the animals are shy and difficult to approach. For most of the summer the Netsilik subsisted on fish. Lake trout were taken through holes in the frozen lakes, and later the upstream run of char was fished at stone weirs built across streams.

Caribou were not completely neglected during this period, and were hunted when the opportunity presented itself. Usually, these were individualistic endeavours, or involved only a few hunters at most. The primary hunting implement at this time was the bow and arrow. The Netsilik had only rare access to wood, so their bow was a composite affair made of antler and muskox horn spliced together. Since these materials were not by themselves elastic, braided strings of sinew were attached along the front of the bow to give it the required elasticity. The sinew and the reflex shape of the bow made it an effective weapon, lethal at ranges even beyond 20 metres. In some situations it was possible to stalk caribou and so get within bow range, but this was not always necessary as certain tricks could be used to attract the animals. One such strategy involved two hunters, walking one behind the other imitating the movements of caribou, who with luck would follow after the men. Once the caribou were lured, one of the men would hide and await an opportunity to shoot while the other continued to

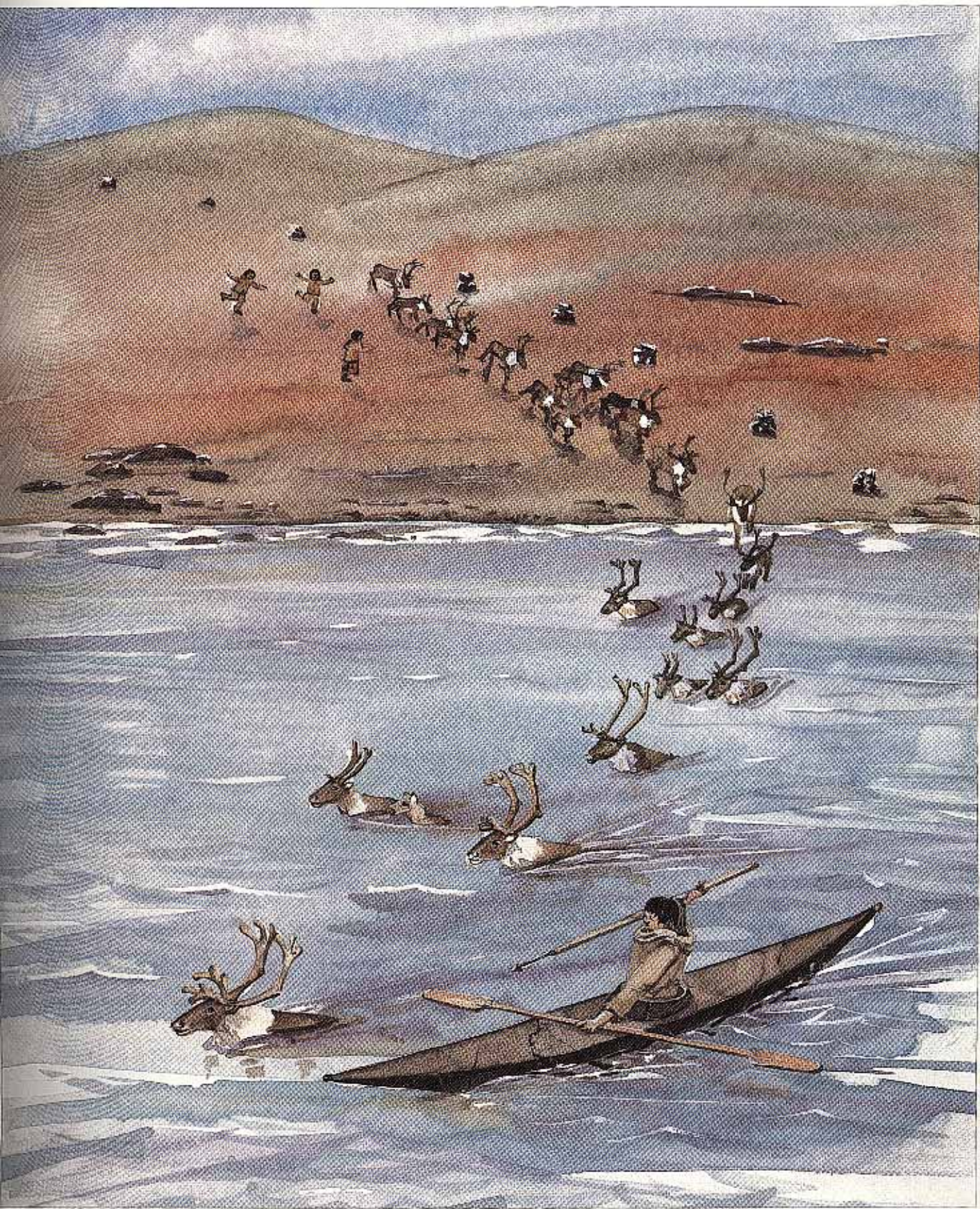
lead the animals. Caribou bulls also were attracted during the rut by hunters holding antlers above their heads and imitating the grunting sounds of the animals. Bulls are on the look-out for cows at that time, and would come to investigate.

Like their neighbours to the south, the Netsilik hunted caribou most intensively in autumn when the animals amassed in large herds and began the migration south to the winter feeding grounds. Their numbers and purposeful movements rendered them vulnerable at precisely the time that they were fat and with prime pelts. The preferred technique was to hunt the migrating caribou from kayaks, spearing the animals while they swam across rivers. The kayak is a portable form of water transportation, consisting of a light wooden frame covered with sealskins. It is fast and maneuverable, and could easily bring the hunter alongside the swimming caribou. In fact, almost the only time the Netsilik employed their kayaks was during the caribou hunts.

At some of the hunting spots, rows of boulders piled several high were built at intervals along a route which converged on a river or lake. These *inukshuit* (singular, *inukshuk*) are taken by the caribou to be men, or at least something to be avoided. Women and children acted as beaters when the caribou appeared, chasing them towards the *inukshuit* and thence toward the river where the hunters waited with their kayaks. The beaters also made sounds to imitate wolves, triggering a defensive reaction in the caribou to enter the water, at which point the hunt began.

Along some rivers are areas where the terrain forms a natural caribou crossing. These crossings usually occur where rivers enter and exit large bodies of water along the caribou migration routes, or are adjacent to islands which break up the breadth of a river that the caribou must swim. Many of these locations are regarded as holy places, as neither *inukshuit* nor beaters normally are required to direct the caribou.

Inuit hunting at a caribou crossing.





An Inuit archer.

In early winter, following the large-scale hunts, the Netsilik switched to individualistic or small-scale hunting of the stragglers who had not joined the migrations. Some of the neighbouring groups of Inuit are known to have used pitfalls dug into snowbanks with upturned knives planted at the bottom. The pits were then covered over with sticks and snow, and baited with urine which attracts caribou because of its salt content. A particularly dangerous technique involved chasing caribou out onto the thin ice of newly-frozen lakes,

causing them to break through. The hunters attempted to spear the animals from the edge of the ice, but this technique is known to have taken a high toll from the hunters as well.

The Netsilik required caribou for many of the same reasons as noted for the Ethen-eldeh. Caribou meat was important, and usually was eaten raw. The stomach contents were a delicacy, and one of the few sources of vegetation in the diet. Vital too were the hides, which were used for tents, sleeping robes, winter clothing (waterproof sealskin was preferred for sum-

mer garments), containers, and on occasion even for sled runners. Sleds with runners of skin were built in winter, as freezing temperatures were essential for their construction. A hole was first chopped through ice covering a lake or river, and the hides were dipped into the water below. When they were thoroughly soaked the hides were removed and spread out. A row of frozen fish was laid along one side of each skin, which was then rolled up. Any additional shaping was done quickly, and the skins were left to freeze solid. Antler cross-pieces were lashed to the top of two runners that were formed in this manner, and a layer of mud or moss was frozen to the bottom of the runners to prevent the skins from wearing.

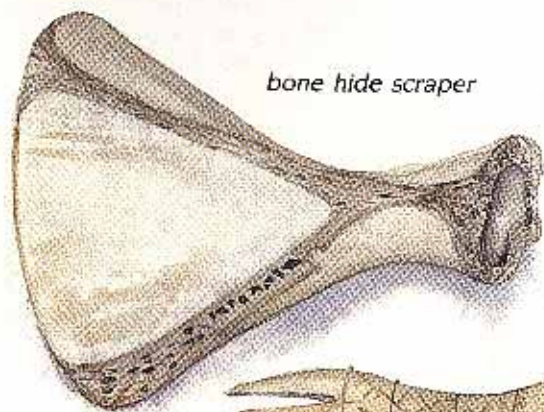
The typical winter clothing of the Inuit consisted of fur coat, trousers, leggings, and boots, each with two layers. The outer layer of clothing was made using caribou skins that were air-dried and scraped on the inside only, leaving the hair on, facing out. The inner garments also had the hair left on, facing in, but these had to be softened. If temperatures were below freezing, the skins were first used as bed robes so that body heat would soften them, making them easier to scrape and stretch. This process had to be repeated several times before they were ready to be sewn.

Due to the habits of the caribou and the other game which they pursued, the Netsilik maintained a nomadic existence which required variability in the size and composition of their camps. Like the Ethen-eldell, households of a local band came together at various times of the year for communal activities, including the caribou hunt at the crossing places. Also like their neighbours to the south, they devised ways to promote cohesiveness between the members of the camps and also with people elsewhere who might have to be relied upon in times of need. Blood and marriage ties were important, but so too were "partnerships" which were commonly established between unrelated or only distantly related individuals. Unrelated

hunters could camp and hunt together at a caribou crossing and would share their game on the basis of these partnerships. A hunter would also share the caribou which he had killed with his relatives in the camp. So well-defined were the rules about sharing that the hunter who procured an animal often would be left with the smallest share. This did, however, put emphasis on cooperation during the hunt by ensuring that all would benefit from the success of any one individual.

The traditional belief system of the Inuit included the concept that animals have souls, and those of caribou in particular were considered to be quick to take offense. Therefore, the animals had to be treated in strict accordance with a system of taboos if continued hunting success were to be ensured. Furthermore, the souls of caribou could become dangerous if any of the taboos connected with them were violated. Women were forbidden to skin and butcher caribou. It was essential not to mix the resources of the sea with those of the land; for instance, seal and caribou meat could not be eaten on the same day. This prohibition was extended to cooking caribou meat over a driftwood fire, since driftwood was considered by the Netsilik to be a product of the sea. Caribou skin clothing was not to be made until the autumn hunt was over, but on the other hand, caribou skins could not be worked during the dark months of winter. These and other prohibitions might seem to be overly restrictive to an outsider, but for the Netsilik they lent security in an unpredictable environment by precisely defining the behaviour of man with respect to the animals which he relied upon. Specific adaptive values were attached to some of the taboos as well, as in the case of the prohibitions against cooking caribou, which would destroy the vitamin C in raw meat.

The Netsilik attempted to increase their chances of success during the hunt by the use of magical devices known as amulets. The front teeth of caribou, sewn to the breast of the in-



bone hide scraper



antler arrow point



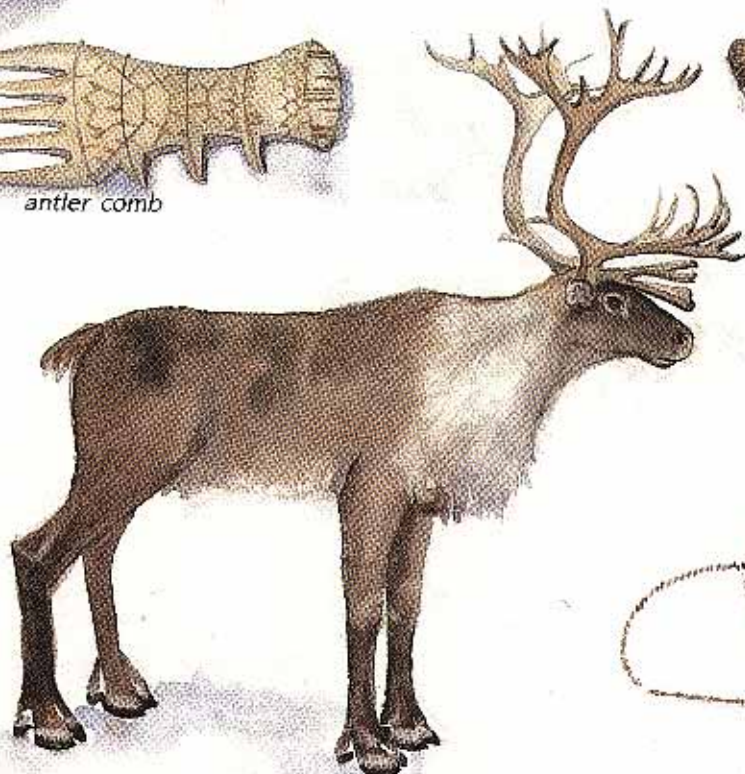
antler harpoon head



antler comb



bone fish hook



kamiks

mitts



sinew thread

tooth amulet

clothing,
bedrobes,
food



ner coat, gave good luck to the hunters, and wolf hair was worn by beaters to make them effective in scaring caribou toward the hunters. Magical words also were used, such as those uttered by Nakasuk which introduce this chapter.

Not all Inuit had the same degree of reliance upon caribou as did the Netsilik. Their neighbours along the mainland coast and in the low arctic islands exhibited similar patterns, but farther north, where the barren-ground caribou were replaced by the less numerous Peary subspecies, caribou usually were not as important. On the other hand, the Caribou Inuit of the central Keewatin exhibited a year-round dependence on caribou, to the point of spending the winters in the barrens hunting those animals which did not migrate south below the treeline. Regardless of the degree of their dependence, life would have been very difficult for the majority of the Inuit without the caribou.

CARIBOU AND NATIVE PEOPLE TODAY

The nomadic way of life is a thing of the past for the Inuit and Dene. The Netsilik now live mainly in the settlements of Gjoa Haven, Pelly Bay, and Spence Bay, while the Ethon-eldeli who reside in the NWT have their homes in places like Fort Smith, Fort Resolution, and Snowdrift. Across northern Canada, schools, jobs, and other aspects of modern life have concentrated the population and drastically altered lifestyles. Still, caribou remain very important.

A majority of the native people hunt and fish, although metal boats with outboard motors and rifles with telescopic sights have replaced the bows and arrows, canoes, kayaks, and spears of earlier days. In those communities which are close to the caribou ranges, hunters can now commute to the herds using snowmobiles. Some families in settlements which are more distant maintain outpost camps and bush camps as hunting bases, and in other cases hunters band together and charter aircraft to take them to the caribou.

It is often difficult to adjust the reality of community life to the preference for living off the land. Increasingly, however, progressive northern employers recognize the importance of hunting and provide their workers with time-off for that activity. For many northern people, caribou are an important source of "country food" which is cheaper to obtain, more nutritious, and better-tasting than store-bought meat. Although caribou skins no longer are essential for tents, bedding, and clothing, craft industries have developed which rely upon hides and antlers. Most important, however, is the fact that caribou hunting helps people to maintain their cultural identity. Sharing country food still helps to structure and maintain social alliances, and the hunt often assumes the form of a band activity. Above all, the pursuit of caribou is a tie to the land in the midst of profound changes.