Western Bering Strait: Asiatic Eskimo

The Inuit (formerly known as Eskimo) people and culture are generally associated with the American continent that their vast majority inhabits. From a historical perspective as well, the archaeologically reconstructed cultural sequences trace their origins to southwestern Alaska. Hence, the Inuit culture is generally classified as a representative of the North American Arctic culture area and is not included in the Northeast Asian category (Schrenk and several others who classified the Eskimo as Paleoasiatics are exceptions). Three reasons warrant an inclusion of the Asiatic Eskimo in this study. First, the earliest stages of Inuit/Eskimo (along with Unangan/Aleut) ethnogenesis and cultural development are derived from a migration from the Asian continent, which is evidenced linguistically by weak but tangible relations to the Yukagir-Chuwan and Uralic languages, and archaeologically traceable eastward progression of the Aldan River culture (in America called the Arctic Small Tool tradition) which is in part associated by many archaeologists with Eskaleut ancestors. Second, while the Inuit as an ethnic group originated on the American continent (specifically in southwestern Alaska) by separating themselves from the ancestral Unangan, those who subsequently migrated to the Asian continent merged their original Alaskan culture with local Northeast Asian continental traditions eventually producing a distinct Asiatic Eskimo culture of the Old Bering Sea-Okvik-Punuk complex. Third, this Old Bering Sea-Okvik-Punuk culture complex strongly contributed to the development of other coastal Northeast Asian cultures which played important roles in the cultural evolution and ethnogenesis of all the coastal peoples of the Sea of Okhotsk region, including the members of the Northeastern Paleoasiatic complex (Chukchi, Kerek, Alutor, Koryak), coastal Tungus (Ewen, Ewenki), Itelmen, Nivkh, Ainu, and the peoples of the Amur complex (especially Orochi, Ulcha and Ulta).

Since the Bering Strait became a busy crossing point during the 1st millennium AD, a continuous inflow of Alaskan Yupik gradually diluted the unique Asiatic Eskimo culture. However, various cultural characteristics distinguish the Asiatic Eskimo, such as their patrilineal descent as opposed to the matrilineal descent of the Alutiiq and the bilateral descent of the Yupik and Inupik (Inupiat). Also, the Sirenik dialect which until recently was spoken in southern Chukotka was distinct from both Yupik and Inupiat.

The term Asiatic Eskimo used below appears to be more precise than Asiatic (or Siberian) Yupik because they are culturally (and for the Sirenik com-
munity also linguistically) distinct from the Alaskan Yupik. The term Inuit is not used by the Asiatic Eskimo in self-reference.

a Ethnographic Synopsis

Background
Ethnographic literature on the Asiatic Eskimo is inadequate and fragmentary. The Jesup North Pacific Expedition paid little attention to the Asiatic Eskimo (as it did to the Eskimo/Inuit in general), having produced only a modest monograph (Bogoraz 1913). Likewise, research during the Soviet era never produced any compact ethnography.

Except for the Sirenik group (also referred to as, Sirhenik, Sirinegmiit, and Sirinykhmit in addition to several Russified forms) that is now confined to a single settlement on the Chukotka peninsula, most Asiatic Eskimo belong to the Yupik ethno-linguistic group whose majority inhabits southwestern Alaska. Although their area of inhabitance during recorded history (since the 17th century) has been limited to the coasts of Chukotka where their settlements have increasingly become interspersed with coastal Chukchi communities, there is much archaeological, ethnological and linguistic evidence that their habitat once stretched as far west as the estuary of the Kolyma River along the Arctic Ocean coast and southwest to the Kamchatka isthmus along the Bering Sea coast. This evidence also indicates a continuous Eskimo presence in coastal Northeast Asia for at least 2,000 years, and the direct descent of the Asiatic Eskimo from the Old Bering Sea culture, including its Okvik and Punuk branches, and its predecessors. This development was parallel with but followed an independent line from that of the American Eskimo groups. Through their history the Asiatic Eskimo interacted with both the prehistoric continental Aldan River and its outposts of Ust-Belaya and North Chukotka cultures, and the ethnographic-present Northern and Northeastern Paleoasiatic culture complexes, which have given rise to many specific Asiatic Eskimo cultural features comparable to Northeast Asia but not found in America. Hence no historical or ethnological analysis of Northeast Asia would be complete without the inclusion of the Asiatic Eskimo.

Nevertheless, the Asiatic Eskimo ethnic and cultural essence during the ethnographic present has been closely tied to the American Eskimo despite its specific cultural development and influences from Paleoasiatic peoples. Due to pressures from Paleoasiatic groups steadily acquiring coastal lands, the Eskimos drifted toward Chukotka where the interaction with American Yupik Eskimos was the most intense due to their proximity to Alaska across the Bering