

THE ESKIMO AND THEIR WRITTEN LANGUAGE

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The name Eskimo, which is applied to the Innuït of the circumpolar region, is the Danish way of spelling a word of the Abnaki Indians of Lower Canada, which, in the language of that tribe, signifies "Eaters of raw meat." The early French explorers spelled it *Esquimaux*, as first given by Father Charlevoix, a pioneer missionary, who emigrated to Canada, which was then called New France, in the seventeenth century, but the Danish orthography has gradually supplanted it and will hereafter stand, as it is phonetic, simpler, and quicker to write. Besides, the Danish civilization has been dominant for many years in those regions, with which traders and travelers are most familiar.

It would appear that some Abnaki Indians, among whom the Reverend Charlevoix had settled, chanced to wander as far north as upper Labrador, and upon their return they reported to the father the finding of a new race of people, whose distinctive characteristic was, as has been stated, that they ate their meat raw. This is the origin of the appellation, according to Father Barnum, an eminent linguist and missionary, who has been engaged during the last five years among the Innuïts of western Alaska in the important and stupendous work of reducing the Innuït tongue to a written language, a work which, in the reverend gentleman's own words, is scarcely begun. His vocabulary, so far as he has prepared it, already embraces upward of 7,000 words, and his grammar covers 250 closely written pages of foolscap. He declares that the language of the Innuïts is distinctly *sui generis*, and has not the slightest resemblance to any other known language in the world. He says:

"In reducing it to a written tongue we have adopted the Latin alphabet as far as possible, but there are certain sounds which are next to impossible to produce with any combination of vowels and consonants, either in Latin or English. One peculiarity of the language is the marvelous regularity of its verbs; there is but one form of them, and an irregular verb is something we have yet to find. Their favorite letter is 'k,' and the most used syllable is 'ok.'" A glance over any of the books we have recently had printed in their tongue will show either one or the other,

and frequently both, entering into the orthography of almost every word. The formation of the negative in verbs is a marked peculiarity of the language, consisting of the insertion of the syllable 'nra' between the verbal stem and its termination. There is no gender, but the dual number exists and is strictly used. All nouns are inflected and there are seven cases to bewilder the brain of the student. Relative pronouns are never used except in one or two instances. Instead of saying 'the person who went away,' we say in Innuity 'the went person away.' The language is very figurative and fairly abounds in metaphorical expressions, making it extremely beautiful and capable of expressing much sentiment. In their songs the subject is invariably of nature, rather than of the chase. The tunes are a weird sort of chant, and possess a peculiar melody I have never heard in any other country. I can scarcely hope to finish the work for many years to come, but trust when it is completed it will take rank alongside the other languages of the world and be of use to the generations as yet unborn."

Doubtless it will prove of equal value with the invention of the Arabic type by Rev. Dr Eli and Homan Hallock, missionary printer to Smyrna in the early part of this century.

During Mr Barnum's residence at Akularak inlet on the Yukon delta, which is only two hours' journey from Bering sea, he has labored unceasingly to better the condition of those among whom he lives and for whom he seems to have a far higher respect than whalers, sealers, traders, and chance explorers have been accustomed to accord to them—a people, he says, who are a race as distinctively as are the English or French, possessing a language of their own and abounding in traditional legends and folklore. It is commonly believed that the Innuits were originally from Japan, but Reverend Barnum insists that this theory can be easily exploded, and that they are beyond all reasonable doubt one of the oldest races in the world, and as such should be entitled to the respectful consideration of every ethnological student. Evidently he is much impressed. At all events, he is likely in the course of his deep philological research to be able to establish some of his postulates as facts, if they can be established at all, for the father speaks not only the language of the country, but Greek, Latin, English, French, German, Spanish, Polish, and Russian, and it was through his facility in learning languages that he has been prompted to undertake what will probably prove a life-work. He has an ecclesiastical commission from the head of the Greek Church.