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Subarctic People

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The Subarctic people occupied a majority of Canada from the Yukon to Newfoundland, including parts of seven provinces and two territories.

Family

- The family unit was highly valued among the subarctic peoples.
- Each family was independent, but usually grouped with another family for hunting and ceremony purposes.
- Gwich'in households housed two same-sex siblings (two sisters, two brothers) who lived together with their immediate families (spouse, children).
- In the Han's social unit the elders were included as part of the nuclear family.
- Han society also encouraged cross-cousins to marry.
- A young man usually lived at first with his wife's parents then established his own residence and then wealth permitting, he obtained additional wives.
- Descent for the Athapascans or Dene is connected to the female line; groups were organized into matrilineal bands or clans called moieties, like the Crow and Wolf, meaning bands based on female heredity.
- Along the Mackenzie River, these ties between bands were connected through both females and males.
- For the Algonquian groups, some were connected only by males, but there were also bands tied to each other by both the female and male lines.
- These groupings provided each other with extra hospitality and defense, and together they fulfilled ceremonial obligations for each other (e.g. cremation and/or burial of the dead and reciprocal feasts) and regulated marriage, as band members could not marry each other (promoting exogamy).
- Kinship names were widely used, but their application was more general (e.g. all the elders were grandfather or grandmother).
- Children were taught to be self-reliant and learned the habits of game animals and the layout of territory early on.
- They listened to practical narrative accounts and mythological tales and learned special trapping and hunting songs and riddles.
- If a child was successful at hunting, he or she had gained the trust of the animals.



Northern Cree Family



Family beside their Pit house

Social Structure / Leadership

- The Subarctic nations were divided by semi-nomadic bands.
- There was no formal tribe organization.
- People who had leadership abilities and took the initiative for trading, war or communal hunting were followed because they were good at what they did, or they had wisdom, or spiritual power.
- Most adult men and women had a part in making

decisions that affected the band.

- However, some leaders were forceful, such as those who led Chilcotin bands.
- Band membership carried responsibilities such as hospitality and protection to other members, and ceremonial obligations to those in opposite family groups, such as cremating their dead.
- Families or individuals who did not agree with a particular decision were free to join another band or camp, or to act on their own for a time.
- Each band in the Dene nations, like the Gwich'in, were divided into several households all relating to a Chief or senior person.
- Each household usually included two families who were related or worked closely with one another.
- The band worked together to build caribou surrounds and large fish traps.
- Several bands working together formed regional bands and regional bands would get together to hunt.
- Regional bands were maintained through intermarriage and other interactions between constituent families within a single geographic area.
- Regional bands assembled for annual festivities and ceremonies.



Innu Man

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