

# The Labrador Eskimo

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## THE KAYAK

The shape of the kayak stem and stern, particularly the stem, varies much more than that of the *umiak*, from one section of the Eskimo world to another. The Labrador and southern Baffin Island kayak is very long and heavy, with a broad level stern and long peaked stem (Plate XIV A b). Some of the older models have the stern slightly turned up. The Mackenzie River Eskimo kayak turns up in a half moon shape at stem and stern (Plate XV a). This feature is said to have been also characteristic of the old type of East Greenland kayak.<sup>1</sup>

The Alaskan kayak turns up at the stem, but slopes down a little at the stern (Plate XIV A a). The top rail projects at the stem and stern, forming a grip by which the hunter is hauled ashore when he lands. In certain sections, this is merely a hole sewn in the skin cover where the upper and lower rails meet in the stem.

A model, in the Museum, of a three hole Aleutian *bidarka* exhibits the same variation. The Alaskan kayak is wider and shorter than the Labrador type, and exhibits considerable variation in different sections of the coast. The entrance hole is round, and not raised in front as among the eastern types. The accompanying photographs (Plates XIV and XV), of models in the Museum, illustrate the most important variations.

The frame of the kayak is made of driftwood, and the cover of Big seal (*u'djuk*) hide, or when this is not available, of the skins of the Harp seal (*hi'golik*).<sup>2</sup> The instruments used in construction are the adze (*u'-limot*), the drill, and the crooked knife.

The two long sticks forming the upper rims or rail (*apu-ma'-k*) of the kayak are the first made. They are chipped and smoothed out with the adze and knife, and holes are bored in them with the drill where the ribs fit in and lashings are necessary. Then the other side pieces (*qiya'teutuk*) and the ribs (*tulimauyúk*, from *tulima'q*, rib) are shaped and fitted in, the ribs being let into the side pieces about 1 1/2 inches and secured with wooden pins.

The ribs are placed quite close together, from 2 to 6 inches apart. The two rim pieces (rails) are then placed under heavy stones to retain their shape. The so called keel or center piece (*tu'nigak*) is fitted in along with the side pieces. Strictly speaking, the kayak has no keel, and any one of the six or seven side pieces is as important as the other. Cross pieces (*a'yá-t*) hold the rails apart on top, and an extra lengthwise strip runs from the entrance hole (*pa-k*) to the stern (*itirbi'n*) and another to the stem (*ma-si'n*). The upper section is usually built before the bottom. It is placed upside down with heavy stones holding the upper rails in place, which gives the shape to the kayak. The ribs and side pieces are then added. Space is left at the top center of the frame for the entrance hole.

The skin covering (*ame'qsuk*) is then sewn and placed on the kayak wet, and it draws tight on drying and shrinking. The sewing has to be completed at one sitting before the skins dry, so several women help. Double water proof stitching, similar to that used in the *umiak* cover, makes the boat watertight. In Labrador, the kayaker has an entire suit (coat and trousers) of, gut skin (Plate VI). A draw string (*o'ngi-gut*) is used to draw the waterproof coat around the rim of the hole (*pa-k*), as in other parts, and the upward slant of the frame of the kayak in front of the hole tends to divert the water. Why gut skin trousers are needed as well as a frock is not evident. It may be that on account of the protection of the upturned front of the hole, the draw string is not much used, and a complete waterproof suit is worn instead.

The Labrador paddle (*pau'tik*), is double bladed, like the Greenland type. It is quite long 10 to 12 feet. It is made of hardwood, when it is obtainable, otherwise of spruce, and tipped with ivory or bone, which is fastened to the wood with pegs of the same material. The paddle is used alternately on either side of the kayak, thus having a distinct advantage over the single bladed Alaskan paddle, as far as economy of motion is concerned. Great speed is maintained by the Eskimo in their frail kayaks. It is said that a single Eskimo in a kayak will propel it as fast as two white men will a canoe. The Eskimo ventures out in a sea that an Indian would not dare attempt in his canoe, and appears none the worse for it. The Labrador Eskimo handle their long, heavy kayaks easily, but do not attain the expertness recorded of the Greenlanders, although their kayaks are of the same type as in southwest Greenland. Neither do they attempt the long coastal voyages which the Greenlanders take in summer in their kayaks. For long trips the *umiak*, and more recently the whaleboat, are used.

Two thongs are sewn into the kayak in front to hold the harpoon rack and harpoon on one side, and the bird spear on the other; and behind the hole, two small loops are sewn to hold

the seal hook and killing lance. The position of these weapons on the kayak is regulated by their use, the chief weapon to be used being at the right hand front of the hunter.

Ordinarily, the harpoon occupies this position, and the bird spear and throwing stick are placed on the left front, the seal hook on the right back, and the lance on the left back. The line of the harpoon lies in the rack in front of the hunter; the harpoon is held in the right hand and the coil in the left when the harpoon is thrown from the kayak. If the harpoon line has a float attached, it rests on the boat just back of the hunter and is thrown into the water after the harpoon is launched. In northern Labrador, a circular hoop like float, called the *nau'la-taq* (Labrador) or *nau'la-tang* (Baffin island), is attached to the float, and being dragged at right angles through the water, soon lessens the pace of the fleeing game. This attachment is found in Baffin island, from whence it is perhaps derived.<sup>3</sup>

On the left hand side of the hole (*pa-k*) of the kayak is a seal thong loop, to which game is attached and towed home, after it has been brought alongside with the seal hook.

## NOTES

1. Thalbitzer, *The Ammassalik Eskimo*, Copenhagen, 1914.
2. Hudson Bay, Ki'rolik. Northern Labrador, Nj'rolik.
3. See Boas, *The Central Eskimo*, p. 500.