

# THE CONTACT-TRADITIONAL HORIZON OF THE CENTRAL ARCTIC: REASSESSMENT OF A CONCEPT AND REEXAMINATION OF AN ERA

DAVID DAMAS

*Abstract.* Establishment of the arctic fox trade throughout the Central Arctic introduced technological changes which strongly affected extractive practices and seasonal economic cycles, and brought a generally enhanced level of subsistence. The contact-traditional era spanned a period of about 40 years. Relations with the chief agents of the outside world, the traders, missionaries, and police, quickly reached and maintained a prescribed and regularized character. The all-native hunting-trapping camp was the chief settlement type and one which implied a high degree of local autonomy. While social, cultural, and economic changes from an earlier aboriginal base were significant, changes attendant to later centralization were of more drastic nature, and the degree of dependency was much more highly developed than that of the contact-traditional phase of history.

## INTRODUCTION

In seeking to develop a scheme for analyzing the effects of contact in the Upper Mackenzie region of the Subarctic and the Iglulik region of the Central Arctic, Helm and Damas (1963) introduced the concept of the "Contact-Traditional All-Native Community of the Canadian North." The use of the contact-traditional framework for the Subarctic has been expanded by Helm and Leacock (1971), Taylor (1972), Rogers and J. G. E. Smith (1973), Helm et al. (1975), Rogers and Black (1976), Helm, Rogers, and J. G. E. Smith (1981), and criticized by Yerbury (1986). For the Canadian Arctic, the original formulation was restricted to the Iglulingmiut of Melville Peninsula and adjoining parts of Baffin Island, but Balikci (1959) described similar stages for Inuit<sup>1</sup> of the east coast of

Hudson Bay, and later, for that region and for the Pelly Bay Netsilik (Balikci 1964). I have also applied the concept to the Inuit of the Circum-Hudson Bay area (Damas 1968), to the Copper Eskimo (Damas 1972), and to the Central Eskimo in general (Damas 1984b). W. G. Ross (1975) and Krech (1986) have criticized usages of the contact-traditional concept for the Central Eskimo, especially the notion of stabilization as a distinguishing characteristic.

In view of the archival research which now supplements the field data upon which my earlier characterizations for the Arctic were based, and in view of the recent criticisms, the time appears ripe to re-examine the *contact-traditional* of the Central Arctic as a concept and as an era. I am doing so, however, with full awareness that the relevant research is far from complete at this time. My procedure will be as follows: (1) to explore the immediately preceding period of Central Eskimo history in order to establish a baseline for the contact-traditional era; (2) to reassess criteria set forth in the original formulation for the inception of the contact-traditional orientation, and to sharpen and expand upon its definition, especially with regard to the role of the fur trade and of characteristics of settlement, community, and leadership organization; (3) to address the question of stabilization; and finally, (4) to document

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<sup>1</sup>I have followed usages for "Inuit" and "Eskimo" as outlined in my Introduction to the *Arctic* volume (Damas 1984a:4). That is, while Inuit is linguistically correct for all ethnographic era Canadian Arctic groups, I have continued to use designations such as Central Eskimo or Iglulik Eskimo, rather than adopt such questionable neologisms as "Central Inuit" or "Iglulik Inuit," in order to be consistent with earlier anthropological usages.