

HISTORY

The paddles that have non-symmetrical blades are flat or slightly convex on one side and ridged on the other. The ridging strengthens the blade and prevents blade "chatter".

Paddle length was partly determined by kayak size -- a deep wide kayak needed a single-bladed paddle or an extremely long double. Because the elbows had to be held high to clear the cockpit, the double-bladed paddle was very tiring to use. It became too heavy and cumbersome and was only used when speed was important. But whatever paddle type was adopted by a community of paddlers, most paddle lengths were rather uniform because they were commonly based on anthropometric measurements, and most men in the same village had similar arm and hand sizes.

One possible misconception should be cleared up now. Since most kayak paddles have rather narrow blades, many people have concluded that this was caused by a scarcity of good wide wood to make a "decent" width paddle. Nothing could be further from reality; the Eskimo were fantastic joiners and could scarf together pieces of wood so skillfully that joints were often not visible. Glues were also available (powdered seal blood mixed in the mouth with saliva was a favorite), and were waterproof. But the number one use of the kayak was as a hunting craft for sea mammals where stealth, not speed, was important. Paddles had to be quiet and strong with little windage, and they had to hold up under extreme conditions. A narrow-bladed paddle fit the bill better than others and, over thousands of years of development, it became the general standard paddle of the Arctic, with a few notable exceptions.

Specialized Paddles

Specialized paddles that more closely resembled ping-pong paddles than kayak paddles were developed by the Siberian Koryak (fig. 2). While the Koryak were reported to have double-bladed paddles, I have only seen the small lanyard-attached paddles as in the illustration.

The Siberian Chukchi used single-bladed paddles for use in the sea and double-bladed ones for use in reindeer hunting in inland lakes and rivers. The doubles (fig. 3) had short wide blades with a knife or lance head lashed to the tip of one blade. While pursuing fast-swimming (up to 6 knots) reindeer, a Chukchi hunter could quickly change from paddling to thrusting his paddle/lance into the rib cage of the fleeing animal.

Another specialized paddle was developed by Bering Sea kayakers. Symmetrically-bladed, it was just over 2' in length and 3.5" in width and included a small hand grip. It was used to

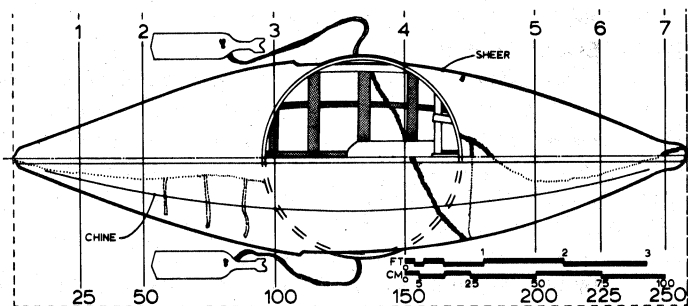


Figure 2: Siberian Koryak kayak and paddles

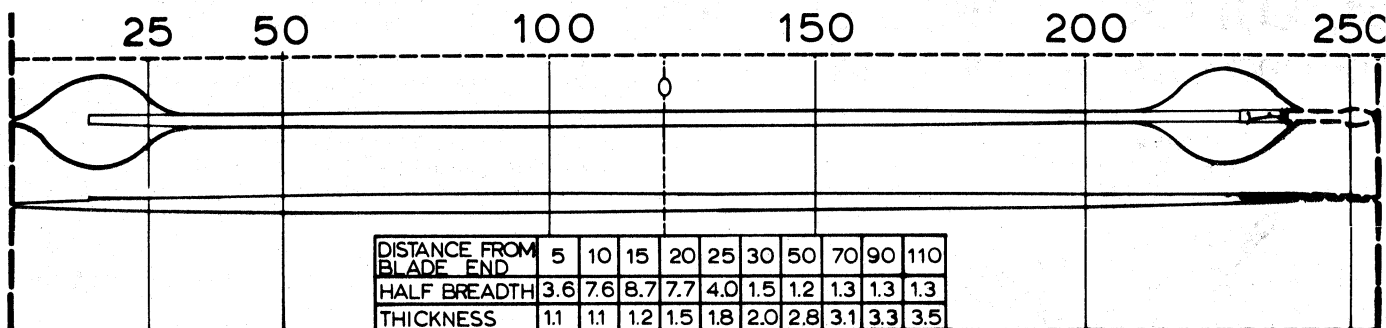


Figure 3: Inland Siberian Chukchi paddle with spar on end for lancing swimming caribou; measurements in cm.

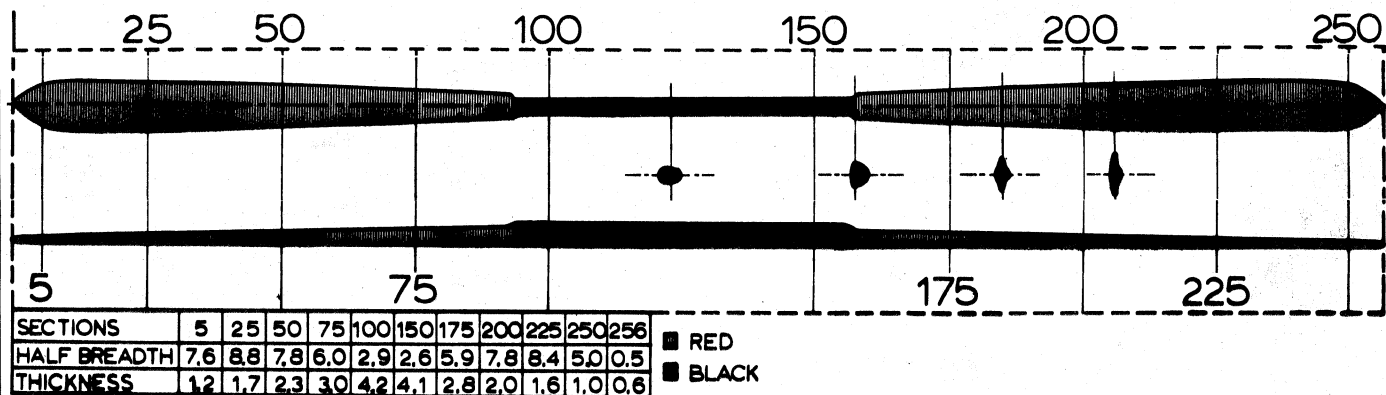


Figure 4: Typical Aleut double-bladed paddle; measurements in cm.