

## ON THE DISTRIBUTION AND TERRITORIES OF THE WESTERN KUTCHIN TRIBES

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A number of years ago, Robert McKennan (1935, p. 369) brought to light the existence of a ninth tribe of the Kutchin-speakers of northeastern Alaska and adjacent Canada. These were the Dihai Kutchin the remnants of whom, he said, had "two generations" previous to his writing deserted their former territory about the north fork of the Chandalar and the headwaters of the Koyukuk, and had moved in among, and been assimilated by, the neighboring NEdse [*sic*] Kutchin.

In the course of study among another of the Kutchin groups more information of the Dihai Kutchin has been brought to notice which may help supplement that of McKennan. First, the name as heard by this writer was rendered Dihain Kutchin, with the second syllable of the locational prefix strongly nasalized. Secondly, the Dihain Kutchin have not quite passed completely out of the ethnic picture. There are yet living at the village of Venetie on the Chandalar River at least two individuals who claim this tribal affiliation. There are also one or two in Fort Yukon. Moreover, these individuals retain the ability to speak at least some of that language, which, in fact, one did in my presence. Even to one possessing but little of the western Kutchin tongue, the language sounded rather foreign. My interpreter, a Tranjik Kutchin, professed to find it almost as difficult as the non-Kutchin Han. However, on the basis of what I was told by the speaker as well as the interpreter, there is little doubt that it is rightly included in the Kutchin language. It may be that the apparent aberrance represents a dialect level of differentiation. This question will have to be decided by a competent linguist. Fortunately, there are now present in the area representatives of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. It is greatly to be hoped that in the course of their work they will record this speech and clarify its position in Kutchin. Otherwise, in a very few years it will, indeed, have become extinct.

A word may now be said regarding the former territory of the Dihain Kutchin. My informant specifically mentioned the village of Wiseman (the Arctic Village of Robert Marshall [1933]) as being within their area, which, of course, tallies with the information given McKennan. My informant seemed to feel that place lay squarely in the country of the Dihain Kutchin. There are said to be no Indians now living at Wiseman. It is most unfortunate that Marshall in his work on that settlement did not record at least the designation of the few Indians who were there in 1929. It was further stated that the middle fork of the Chandalar and the Chandalar proper to some little distance below the present village of Venetie were also within their country. There is, in any case, the very good possibility that elsewhere in their traditional area there yet remain other individuals of the Dihain Kutchin.

Accompanying this note is a map portraying the distributions of the nine Kutchin tribes. For the most part this follows Osgood

(1936), but it embodies also the data presented here and by McKennan. Pending future investigation and confirmation, the boundaries shown for the Dihain Kutchin should be viewed with some skepticism. The core of the area should, however, be correct. It is of some interest that Driver and Massey (1957, end map) in their recent work fail to show the Dihain Kutchin along with the rest of the Kutchin tribes. Swanton (1952, map 2) has erred in that he has placed the Natsit [sic] Kutchin, if not certainly within the territory of the Dihain Kutchin, at least without their own area. The same error may be observed in the distribution shown by Cadzow (1925, Pl. 11) and later by Osgood (1936, Fig. 1). This, then constitutes a rather important revision of the foregoing.

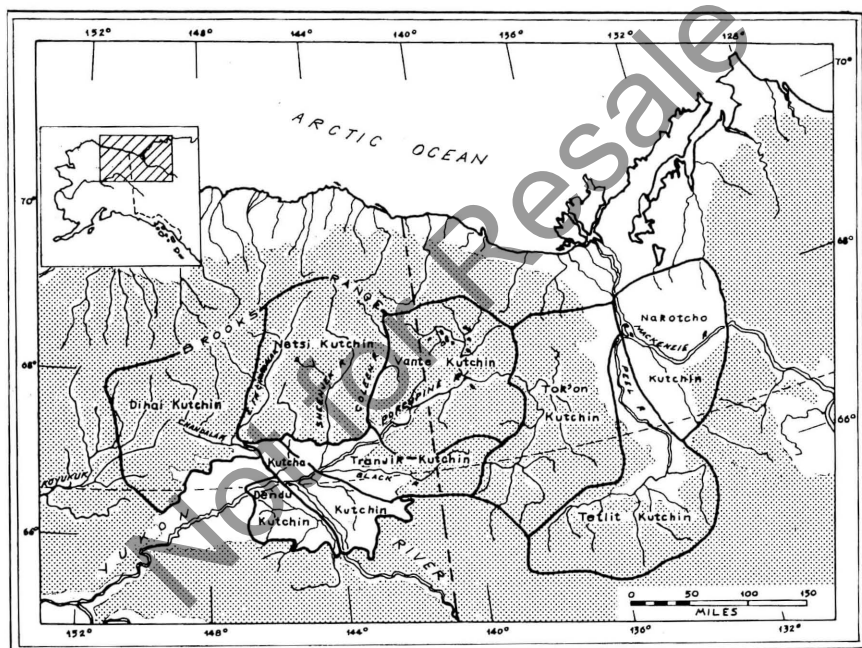


FIGURE 1.

Distribution of Kutchin tribes. Shaded areas are highlands of 1,000 feet, and higher, elevation. Except for revisions indicated in the text and those consequent thereto affecting neighboring groups, the distributions shown follow Osgood (1936).

The proper placement of the Netsi (Natsit, NEdse, Natche, etc.) Kutchin<sup>1</sup> is only fully appreciated when seen in relation to the

<sup>1</sup>This was recorded from the speech of people of this tribe as Netsi<sup>1</sup> Kut<sup>1</sup>ch(n. Kutchin is sufficiently close to the latter. In the former, the glottal stop is frequently barely audible and hence, in the interests of an easier orthography, has been left out.

topography of northern Alaska. Unfortunately, this raises again the vexing question of Kutchin tribal terminology. The Netsi Kutchin have never lived on the Chandalar River proper. As their name implies they are hill folk, traditionally shunning as somewhat unwholesome the flat lands to the south of them. Their southern boundary, and they are most specific on this point, coincides with the edge of the piedmont that marks the beginning of this segment of the Brooks Range. They did not even make any very great use of the southern part of their own country. They considered it "too brushy" and much preferred the more open country to the north. (Not tundra as is implied by Osgood's [1936, p. 16] use of the word "barrens".) Their northern boundary may be conveniently drawn along the crest line of the Brooks Range, although they were not, in the past, averse to making some use of the north slopes. To the east, their traditional range extended, apparently, to about the Coleen River — which accounts for another modification of the Osgood map. The situation here, however, is not too clear; perhaps this line should be drawn somewhere between the Sheenjek and Coleen rivers. The Sheenjek, at any rate, must be included. Osgood's western boundary for the Netsi Kutchin should be moved eastward. A more correct placement would find it just west of, and roughly paralleling, the East Fork of the Chandalar River.

The terminological problem raised by this turns about the propriety of referring to a people as the "Chandalar" or "Chandalar River tribe" when they have no connection with that river other than (formerly) an occasional occupancy of one of its major tributaries, the ill-named East Fork of the Chandalar. One becomes involved here in an almost inextricable difficulty. The name "Chandalar", which occurs now in at least six place-name connections, is apparently derived from the term *gens du large*, applied to the Netsi Kutchin by the French Canadians of the Hudson's Bay Company. Therefore, it would appear the name must have been applied at least once to commemorate the proximity of the Netsi Kutchin. Beyond this presumed point the name appears to have reproduced itself parthenogenetically. Today, and for some time in the past, the phrase "Chandalar country" has been used to describe an area generally west of the traditional country of the Netsi Kutchin. The Chandalar mining district centers about Chandalar Lake on the North Fork of the Chandalar River. As indicated above, this is the old territory of the Dihai<sup>n</sup> Kutchin. Thus, although the priority of usage of that dubious term must be awarded the Netsi Kutchin, its primary connections now and for some time past have been with *places* outside the traditional territory of the Netsi Kutchin. It is suggested that in recognition of the place-name associations of the term Chandalar, their own designation, Netsi Kutchin, be employed in future references to those people. The literature pertaining to these people is too sparse and the terminology too variable for any one term to be considered entrenched beyond recall. The fact, too, that this is their own term surely commends its usage.

Finally, a very tentative suggestion may be made concerning the origin of the confusion over the Dihai<sup>n</sup> Kutchin-Netsi Kutchin territories in relation to the term Chandalar. McKennan (1935, p. 369) surmised that the reason the Dihai<sup>n</sup> Kutchin apparently never came to the attention of the early writers was that they seldom came down to Fort Yukon to trade. This must certainly be correct. It may be further suggested that when they did come in they were confused with the more numerous and better-known Netsi Kutchin and were awarded, with them, the appellation *gens du large*. The territories of both lay generally north and west of Fort Yukon in country that remained largely unexplored until well after the time of Alaska's purchase. In other words, this was *terra incognita* to most, if not all, of the individuals who wrote the early accounts of the Kutchin peoples in Alaska. As such it would not be surprising that the two groups should have been comprehended under the one term. There is abundant precedent for this kind of confusion, as witness the chaos that formerly existed in the improper extension of the suffix Kutchin itself (cf. Osgood, 1934). While admittedly speculative, this would seem to offer a plausible explanation for the confusion of names.

It is hoped these notes will be of some aid in clarifying the question of distributions and nomenclature of these westernmost representatives of the Kutchin-speakers. The familiar pattern has already set in: tribal distinctions are often to be found existing only in the minds of older people. It will not be too many years before these will have been completely obliterated and entirely beyond collecting. Let us hope our ethnographic houses will be in order before that time.

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