The Athabaskan Peoples

Athabaskan Indians are the most culturally varied Native people in Alaska, and they speak the largest number of different languages. There are eleven separate Athabaskan languages in the state, plus a distant relative called Eyak. About twenty other Athabaskan groups live in Canada, inhabiting a great swath of territory from central British Columbia north to the Mackenzie delta and east to the shore of Hudson Bay. The homeland of northern Athabaskans stretches over a thousand miles north to south and two thousand miles east to west. Other Athabaskan groups, such as the Navajo and Apache, live in the American southwest; and still others are scattered along the Pacific Coast from Washington to northern California.

The word Athabaskan comes from a Canadian Cree place name (for Lake Athabasca), which was adopted by early explorers and linguists to designate the related Indian groups of northwestern North America. Some people, especially in Canada, prefer the term Dene, which is derived from an Athabaskan word meaning “people.” In recent times, linguists and anthropologists have developed names like Tanaina, Han, Ahtna, and Kutchin as ways of distinguishing the various Athabaskan groups in Alaska. These are mainly derived from Native words like Gwich’in (Kutchin), meaning “people of a certain place,” or Han, a Kutchin word meaning “river.” Or they may be of less direct origin, such as Koyukon, which combines the names of the Koyukuk and Yukon Rivers, along which these people live.
Very little is known about the origin and development of Athabaskan cultures. Ancient habitations are extremely difficult to find in the boreal forest, where fragile artifacts vanish quickly beneath the moss, and meandering rivers often carry away the less perishable remains. Speech provides the most durable evidence of Athabaskan prehistory. The diversity of languages in eastern Alaska indicates that the Athabaskans originated in this area, emerging as a distinctive group some 3,000 years ago and gradually spreading outward. Incidentally, Athabaskan peoples are completely distinct from the Eskimos — their origins are separate, their cultures are fundamentally different, and their languages are no more alike than English and Japanese.

The Athabaskan languages, like all human languages, are extremely complex and highly ordered. English speakers find Athabaskan languages very difficult to learn, because their structure is so completely unfamiliar. The grammatical structure of Athabaskan verbs is very complicated. For example, a single verb may have as many as eleven prefixes strung out in front to modify its meaning. The Koyukon word *adaghoyineeghaaleedineek*, “take care of yourself,” illustrates this structuring:

```
  ada / gho / yinee / ghaa / one's own / toward / mind / prefix related / self
to shape
  1 / ee / di / neek
right / you / one's own / care
now self
```

Athabaskan languages also have a large number of meaningful sounds (phonemes), averaging about 40 consonants and 7 vowels, as compared to about 24 consonants and 9 vowels in English dialects. Inglik (Deg xit' an) has the most complex consonant system of any Alaskan Athabaskan language, with 52 consonants. In addition, the Athabaskan languages have developed very large vocabularies in subjects of particular importance, such as environmental phenomena. For instance,

There are eleven Athabaskan languages in Alaska that are closely related. None of the Alaska Native languages were written before the coming of the Russians. Today, writing systems have been developed for all Native languages.
they have far more terms than English to designate different kinds and conditions of snow, ice, wind, and water movement.

**Land and Livelihood**

Boreal forest environments like those of interior Alaska stretch clear across Canada and extend southward into some of the northern states. Alaska’s boreal forest is fairly uniform in appearance. Nearly everywhere, the lowlands are timbered by spruce, aspen, and birch intermingling with open muskegs and brushy willow or alder thickets. Here live the major game animals: moose, black and brown bear, snowshoe hare, grouse, and ptarmigan. Lakes and rivers provide habitat for other important species, including fish, waterfowl, beavers, and muskrats. In the mountain country, caribou frequent the open tundra, and dall sheep cling to the slopes. Furbearers like the wolf, wolverine, lynx, otter, marten, and mink are also widely distributed Interior animals.

Subsistence patterns among Athabaskan peoples show the same kind of uniformity as the environment in which they exist. All Athabaskan economies are based on hunting and trapping of game animals, fishing, and gathering whatever plant foods and products are available. Nowadays these natural resources are supplemented with goods from community stores, but subsistence remains the focus of village economic life.

Summer is often the richest season, when the rivers run heavily with salmon, whitefish, and other fish species. People also hunt by traveling along the rivers in boats or (formerly) by trekking overland. Fall is the most intense hunting season, when moose congregate near the rivers in search of mates, caribou begin their migrations, and summer-fattened bears prepare to enter their dens. It is also a time for people to ready themselves for winter by laying in piles of cordwood and harvesting the late runs of fish.

The long months of winter are devoted to trapping, often done along far-flung traplines distant from any settlements. Cold season hunting brings in hares, grouse, ptarmigan, and the occasional moose. Hunting and trapping activities carry on until the snow melts in spring. Fishnets are set in the rivers as soon as the ice begins to thaw, and not long afterward the first skeins of geese appear on the southern horizon. Once again, people can feel secure as the flood of life returns, and the biting cold is vanquished.

*At midday
That is when
the water begins to drip
from the snow on the trees
but we are provided for,
we will have food
while we travel.*

Chief Henry, Koyukon Athabaskan

The upper Nenana River Valley has a typical landscape of the boreal forest in Interior Alaska and Canada.
Although the Interior environment often provides well, its resources are subject to constant change, sometimes leading to scarcity. Anticipating lean months ahead, Koyukon people sometimes call out to the flocks of birds that migrate overhead in the fall: “I hope that you will return again, and that we will be here to see you.” This is like a prayer, requesting that both people and birds will survive until the next spring. But for some Athabaskans, life is more secure because they are favored with richer surroundings. This is especially true for those who live on the lower reaches of great rivers — the Yukon River (Ingalik) and Copper River (Ahtna). In these areas, abundant and reliable runs of fish have fostered a more secure livelihood, a larger human population, and more permanent settlements (as opposed to the nomadism of other groups in traditional times).

Equally fortunate, if not more so, are the coastal Tanaina who live along both shores of Cook Inlet. Access to rich salt water resources (fish, shellfish, waterfowl, and sea mammals) adds a rich element to their subsistence harvest. Perhaps this is what drew the Tanaina coastward from their interior homeland centuries ago and gave them impetus to displace the Eskimos who lived there before they arrived. In the process, they adopted many elements of Eskimo culture and technology, such as harpoons and kayak-style boats.
Bands and Neighbors

Maps indicating the boundaries of different Athabaskan groups are based on language; but people living within these areas are not politically united, nor do they have a tradition of "tribal" identification that correlates with these lines. The Kutchin or Tanana, for example, did not originally define themselves as a unified cultural or political group. Life was too harsh, and the people were too scattered for that kind of organization to exist. Only in recent years have wider contacts and outside political events (such as the Alaska Native Land Claims Act) led people to identify more strongly with these larger divisions based on language.

In the old days, Athabaskan people regarded themselves as members of small local groups or bands. Each band included 25 to 100 people, perhaps as many as 200 in richer areas, such as the coastal Tanaina or lower Yukon Ingilik. Band members lived together whenever the food supply in one part of the territory could support them all, especially when they worked cooperatively in activities like caribou drives or fish weir construction.

During the lean periods — winter and spring especially — the band usually split into smaller groups. Two families might go off to hunt together for a few weeks or months. Even single families would hunt alone if scarce times came upon them. Scattered this way, moving

Trapping for wolf, lynx, fox, and marten is done during the winter months when the furs are at their prime. Trappers display their catch in Ruby, ca. 1915.
regularly from place to place, their chances of finding game were much better.

And wherever we camped
some of them went out ahead and broke trail,
and we hauled some of the load ahead there.
And by the time we had gotten back to Oldman Creek,
we didn't have to haul sleds ahead any more
because we had used up most of the food.
...And when we got back, all the...people
who had also been out on a nomadic hunt
had returned and were there.
And now finally, there was so much happiness because
everyone was so glad to be back together again...

Chief Henry, Koyukon Athabaskan

Strangers

Because the traditional Athabaskans were great wanderers, they had contacts with people from beyond what they considered familiar territory. Some groups like the Kutchin were clever and inveterate traders, who acquired goods that had moved over great distances from hand to hand. For example, decorative dentalium shells came from as far away as the Pacific Northwest. The Kutchin also made very long trips for trading, even north to the Arctic Ocean, where they regularly met with Eskimos. Long before they saw a white man, they were trading with the Eskimos for manufactured items like iron pots, which came from Siberia or from the earliest ships to reach Alaska's northern coast. One man, well remembered by the Kutchin, walked more than 150 miles overland from Barter Island to Arctic Village, packing a bulky hand-operated sewing machine to give to his wife.

Trade with Eskimos and other Athabaskans was also a social event, accompanied by feasting, dancing, and playing games. Enemies included other Athabaskan groups, and in certain areas the Eskimos as well. Wars usually consisted of small raids. For each attack there was usually another in retaliation; and so the cycle might go on and on. The influence of Western culture brought these wars to an end before 1900, and now they are recalled only in the old people's stories.

I know of only one fight the Klondike people had. One of our young men was off hunting by himself in the mountains, and he met a bunch of strangers. No, first he saw their tracks and noticed it was a different kind of snowshoe. He wanted to find out about them. He followed up the tracks and came to where they camped. He sat down in their circle and tried to talk to them. He wanted them to come with him to see his people, so they could all be friends and maybe do some trading.

But while he was sitting there, one of them got behind him and shot him
in the back with a muzzle loader
...After the boy was missed, our people went to look for him and found his remains...finally our people caught up with them near Ross River, and killed eight of their men. Then it was finished.

Charlie Isaac, Han Athabaskan

Kinship and Society

Athabaskan societies, traditional and modern, are tightly woven with the strands of kinship. Non-Natives often have difficulty appreciating the power of kin relationships in the lives of Athabaskan people because Euro-American societies are organized on different principles. Villagers often comment that everyone in their community is related somehow, “just like it’s a big family.” The young people sometimes add a complaint that they have few eligible marriage partners in their own area, again because everyone is too closely related. One woman reported her nephew’s comment after returning from another community: “Auntie, I met the nearest girl in Tanana. Now don’t you tell me that she’s my cousin!”

The traditional kinship system includes many relationships unfamiliar to outsiders. For example, among groups like the Koyukon, a child has two kinds of uncles and aunts. His mother’s sisters and father’s brothers (note parallel sexes) are like extended parents to him, while his mother’s brothers and father’s sisters (note crossed sexes) are less closely related to him. Carrying this further, he also has parallel cousins (children of his mother’s sisters or father’s brothers) and cross cousins (children of his mother’s brothers or father’s sisters). Traditionally, he would call his parallel cousins “brother” or “sister,” and he could not marry such a cousin. Cross cousins were called by a different term and were considered good marriage partners.

Kin groups beyond the immediate family are also important among all Athabaskan peoples. An essential element of traditional social life is the clan, a very large extended family whose members are related through the female line. Most interior Alaskan peoples are divided into three clans, and children automatically belong to that of their mother. When these groups were still functioning, no one was

Kinship Diagram

Grandparents

Uncles, Aunts

Cousins

△ Male

△, ● Joe’s parents

△, ○ Joe’s parallel uncle, aunt

△, ○ Joe’s parallel cousins

O Female

△ Joe

△, ○ Joe’s cross uncle, aunt

△, ○ Joe’s cross cousins

= Marriage
allowed to marry a member of his or her own clan because the relationship was considered too close. Each clan was widespread, even including different language groups, so a person had relatives wherever he or she went. People related as clan brothers or sisters, for example, could count on each other for support or hospitality, although they might otherwise be strangers, perhaps even speaking different languages.

In the past, clan groups were important for organizing the society and assuring cooperation among people. Because there was no formal government beyond the band leader, this was a way of getting groups together for activities like potlatches, funerals, and warfare. Nowadays, the clans are largely gone, although most adults and elders know which group is theirs by inheritance. Modern villages have formal government through elected councils, and they have other voluntary organizations not based on kinship. But kin relations are still deeply imbedded in the flow of village life, and the ties of blood still bind people together far more powerfully than most outsiders would understand from their own family experience.

We got together there. Then the Kenai chief met us and said to us, “Is it good?” (greeting) Then we all addressed each other: “These people, my parents, and these, my older brothers and older sisters. These too, my younger brothers and younger sisters. And this one, my maternal uncle, and those, their children. And this one, my paternal uncle, maternal aunt’s husband. And those, the children, and some of those.” All our friends. Then they potlatched together there, and afterwards, when we were about to return, they sang a love song to us...

Peter Kalifornsky, Tanaina Athabaskan

Villagers

Over the past century, Athabaskan lifeways have been greatly changed. The old pattern of widely scattered bands, seasonal nomadism, and identity with small local groups has faded away. People continue to hunt, trap, and fish much as before, but now they have settled in permanent villages. Instead of families or bands moving to where the resources are, individuals or partners travel to outlying areas, hunt or trap, and then return home with their catch. Dog teams, motorized boats, and snow machines make this new method practical in spite of the distances people must cover. The only seasonal movement still followed by many families is to fish camps during the summer months.

The men came home
and sometimes they’d shot something,
and sometimes not.
Doing that,
they constantly moved around and never
stayed in one place.
Summer and winter they did the same.
But now
people are just like animals sleeping
in their dens.

Belle Herbert, Kutchin Athabaskan

Most villages in existence today have grown up since the turn of the century, often around
the sites of missions, schools, or trading posts. People were first attracted to these settlements by the advantages that they offered; but they were also forced to come together when introduced European diseases ravaged their population. Thousands of Alaskan Natives died from illnesses like whooping cough, measles, influenza, and tuberculosis. Epidemics continued well into this century and are still vividly recalled by the survivors.

With the passage of time, villagers have developed a strong sense of identity as members of their particular community. A person who says, “I am from Venetie,” or “My village is Rampart,” has made an important statement about who he or she is. This usually carries with it a sense of pride, association with a small and tightly-knit group, and separateness from all other communities regardless of how close their location might be.

For many Athabaskans, village residence or origin is, therefore, a focus of social orientation and individual identity. Beyond this circle, people tend to share fairly strong feelings of association with residents of neighboring villages, especially the nearest ones and those located along the same river. Athabaskans often define their larger social group in terms of the river, or stretch of river, that they live along. It is a physical connection that brings them together, binds them to a common environment, and defines the limits of their territory.

Beyond the river and beyond the neighboring villages are people with whom a person feels less and less communality — first those who speak the same language, then other Athabaskans whose language is different, and finally other Natives who are not Athabaskans. But the occasional hostilities of times past are largely gone, and even distant peoples are linked by bonds of friendliness and common interest.

Athabaskans seem to have a strong natural curiosity and openness toward differing cultures or customs. Rather than judging other people’s traditions as right or wrong, they usually regard them with fascination and easy acceptance. During a conversation about traditional Eskimo customs, an Athabaskan man said: “You know, they do lots of stuff really different from us. It’s just their way. Our way works for us and their way works for them.” This willingness to look at other peoples without prejudice is called cultural relativism. It is a basic principle of Western anthropology and a fundamental guideline for human understanding in the modern world where contact
between different cultures has become commonplace.

Wherever Athabaskans have lived near other Native groups in Alaska, they have shown this same kind of open curiosity and receptiveness. The Cook Inlet Tanaina adopted many items of Eskimo technology, and the Ingalik culture along the lower Yukon River is thoroughly blended with elements of Yupik Eskimo technology, ceremonialism, and thought. This kind of adaptability has surely contributed to the success of Athabaskan cultures throughout their long history, as they met other peoples and borrowed useful new ideas from them. In some areas they have also influenced other groups who lived nearby. For example, the Kobuk River Eskimos have adopted many ideas and customs from their Koyukon Athabaskan neighbors, with whom they have long interacted.

The Life Cycle

Another important aspect of Athabaskan life is the way that individuals are socialized, trained, and given the traditional knowledge on which their culture is founded. Children are the vital link between past and future, and Athabaskan people welcome them as an enrichment of their personal lives. Many villagers have fairly large families, and in later years they may be given additional children to raise. There is no discomfort or stigma associated with adoption, and the child usually enjoys a close, lasting relationship with both sets of parents.

Before a child is born, traditional Athabaskans observe certain customs to assure its well-being and influence its future. For example, Kutchin women used to drop an unborn porcupine through an infant girl’s shirt, so that when she grew up she would have easy childbirth (as the porcupine does). This could be very important, especially if a woman gave birth out in the woods or along the trail while her people were traveling. Under these circumstances, she might rest alone for a day and then walk to catch up with the others. Frequently, however, the birth took place in a special shelter, with other women in attendance:

\[\text{Ah! Grandchild, there were a lot of women that took care of each other, you see; when they were in labor some women would be there sitting in front of them holding their bodies; and they would also hold onto us. Meanwhile, with both arms we would hold her firmly up off the ground. Then the child would be born... The women all took turns, and really they all took care of her, and it was a comfort to her... That’s the way I had my babies. When nobody helps us, we just lie on our backs, and I think the labor is harder... Grandchild, really, when they lie on their backs they suffer a lot, and since I found that out, I don’t approve of what they do.}\]

Belle Herbert, Kutchin Athabaskan

Athabaskans treat their children well and rarely give them sharp discipline; but children are expected to take on certain jobs and responsibilities while still quite small. This was especially true in earlier years, when life was difficult and everyone had to do their share. Before the age of ten, children used to begin learning practical skills, not by formal instruction, but by watching and imitating adults, and by listening quietly to their conversations. In the old days it was education by practice, not by the verbal instruction emphasized in village schools today.
Grandma was cutting big fish in camp. I was fishing for little whitefishes with a pin needle hook. Really enjoying catching those little fish with the hook Grandma made for me. I thought I was catching something big you know...

Well, I see my grandmother cut fish so I use my little knife. Pretend that I'm cutting and drying it. Maybe I took a few backbones out but not every one. I just copy her. Put the fish on my little-bitty drying rack...She didn't help me. I just watch and get the idea to follow...

I started going out with (my) old man in the winter when I was nine years old. He didn't have me walk in front of the dogs very often. He was easy going on me. When there's deep snow I walk behind...and he would break trail.

Henry Beatus, Sr., Koyukon Athabaskan

Children used to learn many skills by the time of adolescence, and they took on adult responsibilities quite early. This is less true today because much of their time is spent in school rather than at home or outdoors with their parents. In some families the children still begin learning subsistence skills from an early age. In many other families, the children only acquire these skills after they finish high school, or after they have children of their own to support.

A major transition in times past was puberty, especially for girls. When a girl reached womanhood she was secluded, either in a separate hut by herself or in a partitioned section of the family house. Here she was severely restricted by taboos on all aspects of her behavior. Among some Athabaskans she was isolated for several months or more. Above all, she had to avoid contact with men because her menstrual flow contained spiritual power that could alienate animals and bring on scarcity. Throughout her adult life, a woman followed monthly taboos and seclusion until menopause brought her the freedoms of girlhood again.

These customs have been partly or completely given up today, although in some areas
women observe certain monthly taboos. Many adult women can remember “going behind the curtain” in a corner of the house when they reached puberty. And among traditionalists like the Koyukon, women are still subject at all times to numerous taboos which show respect for the animals and protect the children. Men are also bound by many rules of respect toward animal spirits, but far less than women. In traditional Athabaskan culture, male puberty was not regarded as a particularly important event.

When I was going to get married, 
I was still very young; 
my mother got a man for me even before 
I had my first period... 
I had seen him only once, 
and after that my mother got him. 
When 
that was happening, 
I hadn’t even had my first period yet. 
So he went back upriver with his older brother and stayed there 
until I became a woman, and after that he came and lived here.

Belle Herbert, Kutchin Athabaskan

In the old days, the women usually married shortly after puberty, and the union was typically arranged by parents. After a young man was chosen he would move in with the girl’s family and work for them over a period of several months to a year. If this time of service went well and the man showed himself to be a good provider, the couple was considered married. In modern Athabaskan villages, couples do their own choosing, courtship is much like that familiar elsewhere, and marriage takes place in a formal church ceremony.

After marriage nowadays, the couple usually lives in their own house, which is often located near the bride’s or groom’s family. Typically, the man spends much of his time hunting, trapping, cutting wood, and doing whatever wage employment is available. The woman cares for their children, prepares game and skins, sews, catches and cuts fish, and does varying amounts of hunting. Of course, when the man is away for hunting or wage work, the woman of the household does literally everything necessary to maintain it, sometimes for several months each year. Today, couples may also do many activities together, such as wood cutting, trapping, and hunting.

When they reach old age, the men and women gradually become less active. Elders are generally respected for their wisdom and experience, and family members are expected to care for them. Many villagers remain quite active into their seventies, especially with less strenuous jobs like fishing and small game hunting. Older Athabaskans have the good fortune to remain close to their families, and they can contribute by tending children, sharing their wisdom, and passing along their knowledge.

In the Koyukon village of Huslia, people attending a town meeting were asked if they favored construction of an old people’s home at a distant community. Their response was unanimous: “We need no such thing. We want to keep our old people here, where we can take care of them ourselves, and learn from them. No one is going to take them away from us.”

Notes from Huslia, Richard Nelson