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Land Claims*

Alaska Native Land Claims

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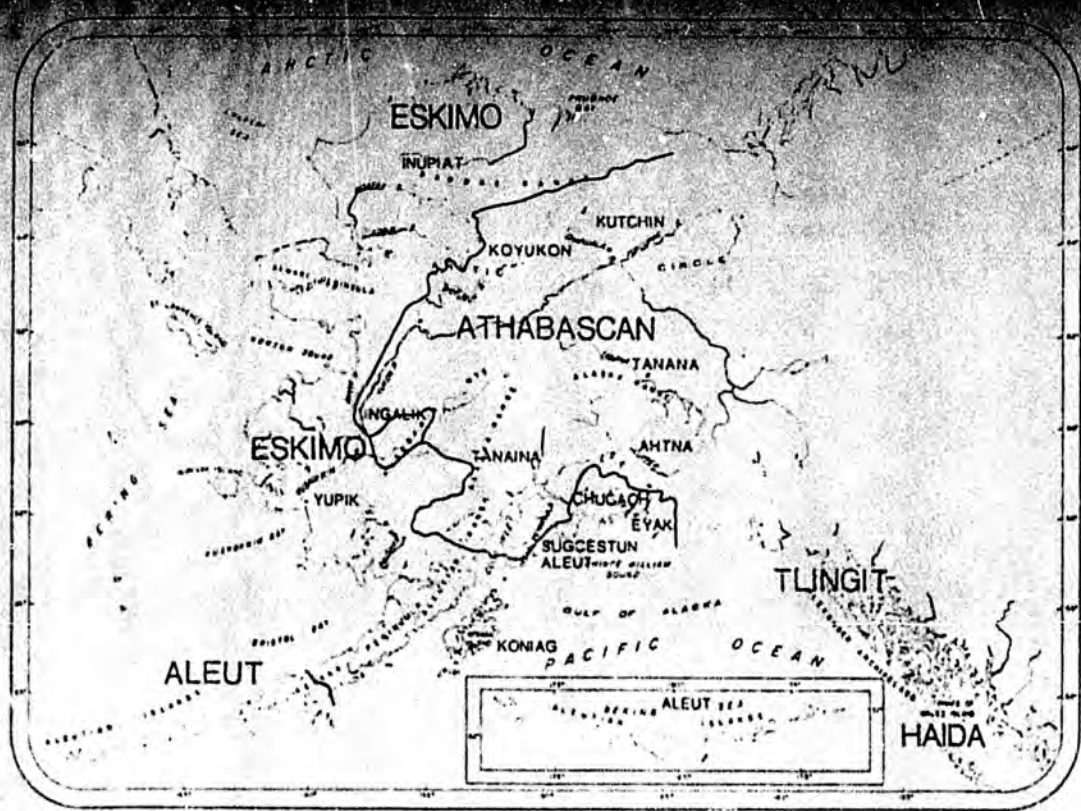
the alaska native  foundation

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Wendell Oswalt, Alaskan Eskimos, 1967

MAP 2 GENERALIZED GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF ESKIMOS, INDIANS AND ALEUTS IN ALASKA

Most Aleuts lived in coastal villages on islands named after them stretching 1,000 miles across the North Pacific. Some few lived at the lower end of the Alaska Peninsula.

Aleuts

The population of about 15,000 Aleuts lived in numerous small villages, most of which were located on the Bering Sea side of the islands. One island, Umnak, once had 16 villages. A typical village was made up of six or seven houses; each household consisted of 20 to 30 people who were related to one another. Their houses were half underground and covered with a warm dome of sod.

Every village with its cluster of houses had its own sea hunting areas, which had to be respected by other villages. Use of these areas without permission meant war.

Adult men hunted seals, sea lions, and whales in the open sea from kayaks, perhaps the most seaworthy of watercraft. Roots, berries, birds, and eggs were available on the land. The food resources of the Aleuts were so abundant that anyone who could walk, young or old, could survive by gathering food from the beaches and the reefs.

The material culture of the Aleuts included 30 kinds of different harpoon heads and a great variety of nets and darts. Rainproof clothes made of sea mammal gut and wooden hats (often highly decorated) were useful in this rainy and foggy territory. Baskets of finely woven grasses were used for many purposes.

Dentalium and amber were so highly prized for ornamental purposes the Aleuts used them in trade. Their trade took them great distances — and there was always risk, for they might run into enemies on the way.

The Aleuts also had considerable knowledge of the human body. They had surgeons who could perform operations, and they skillfully embalmed the dead before respectfully burying them in caves.



Sarychev's Voyages

Man and woman of Unalaska, 1780's

Aleuts spoke three distinct dialects which were remotely related to the Eskimo language. Aleuts and Eskimos may have spoken the same language a few thousand years earlier but isolation from one another led to differences in languages and cultures over time.

According to anthropologist J. Ellis Ransom, the Aleut word "Alaxaxaq" is the origin of the word "Alaska." Its meaning was the mainland — "the object toward which the action of the sea is directed."

Koniags and others

The people of Kodiak Island, the southern Kenai Peninsula, and the Prince William Sound area were similar to Aleuts in their general lifeways and in their reliance upon sea mammals. These people — the Koniag, the Sugcestun, and the Chugach — were to consider themselves in the 20th century as Aleuts. In language and physical type they showed a clear relationship to Eskimos.



Alaska State Museum, Juneau (Sarychev's Voyages)

Russian portraits of Koniag man and woman, 1780's

By far the largest of these groups was the Koniag. According to anthropologist Wendell Oswalt, most of the 6,500 Koniag people lived on Kodiak Island, but some lived opposite the island on the Alaska Peninsula. Their population density may have been the greatest of any group in Alaska. Both the Chugach of Prince William Sound and the Sugcestun Aleuts on the Kenai Peninsula appear to have been far fewer in number.

Two major groups of Indians lived along the Gulf of Alaska, on the islands of the Alexander Archipelago, and on the mainland bordering Canada. Most of this territory — from Controller Bay southward — was the home of the Tlingits. Haidas lived principally on Prince of Wales Island (and on Canada's Queen Charlotte Island to the south).

Tlingits and Haidas

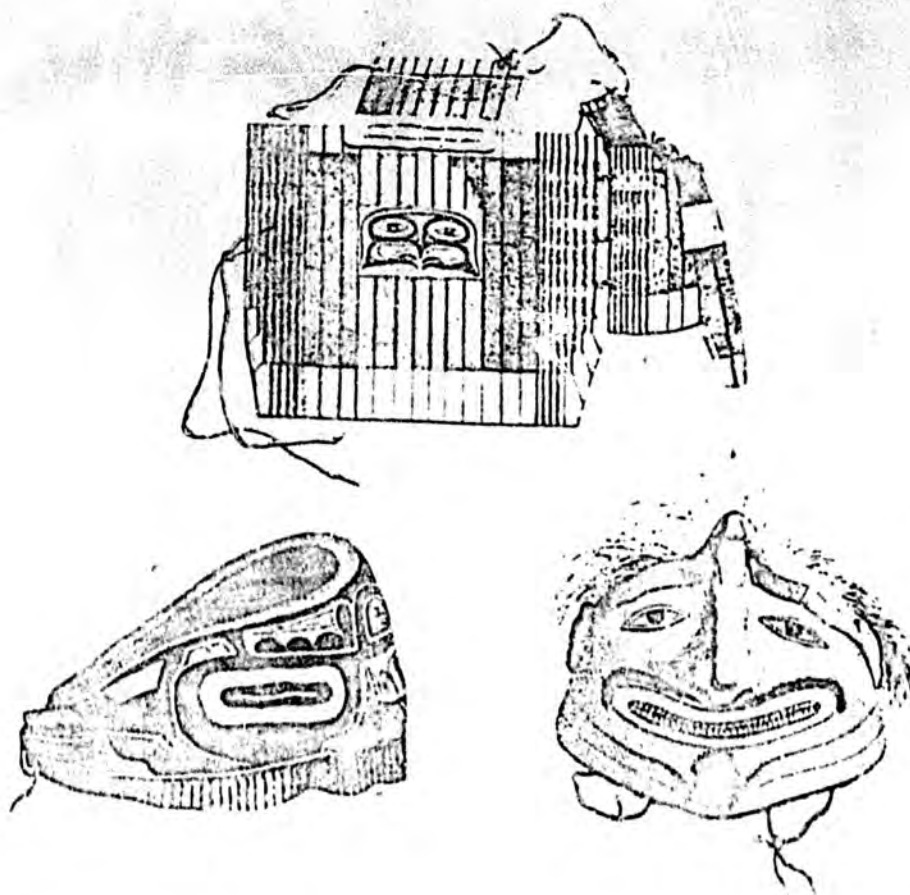
Tlingits and Haidas spoke different languages and each culture had unique features, but there were many similarities. The economy of both was based primarily on the harvesting of fish. At least a dozen species of saltwater fish were caught, including salmon, halibut, cod, and candle fish. Shellfish and sea mammals were also harvested. Unlike Aleuts, they did not pursue the whale. Many species of land plants were named and utilized. No famines are known to have existed in this richly endowed, wooded, warm and rainy area.

Because of the abundant resources available, large villages were possible. An estimated 10,000 Tlingits lived in 14 major territories. Winter villages sometimes included as many as 700 persons.

Because their area was so rich in resources which could readily be obtained, a surplus could be acquired. This allowed

time for extensive art work, large competitive potlatches, and long trading expeditions.

Their material culture included much wood working, large houses, fish traps, and wrap-around clothing. Their art style included the display of both sides of an animal figure on a flat surface. The head and face of the animal were often emphasized in size.



Tlingit armor and masks, 1805

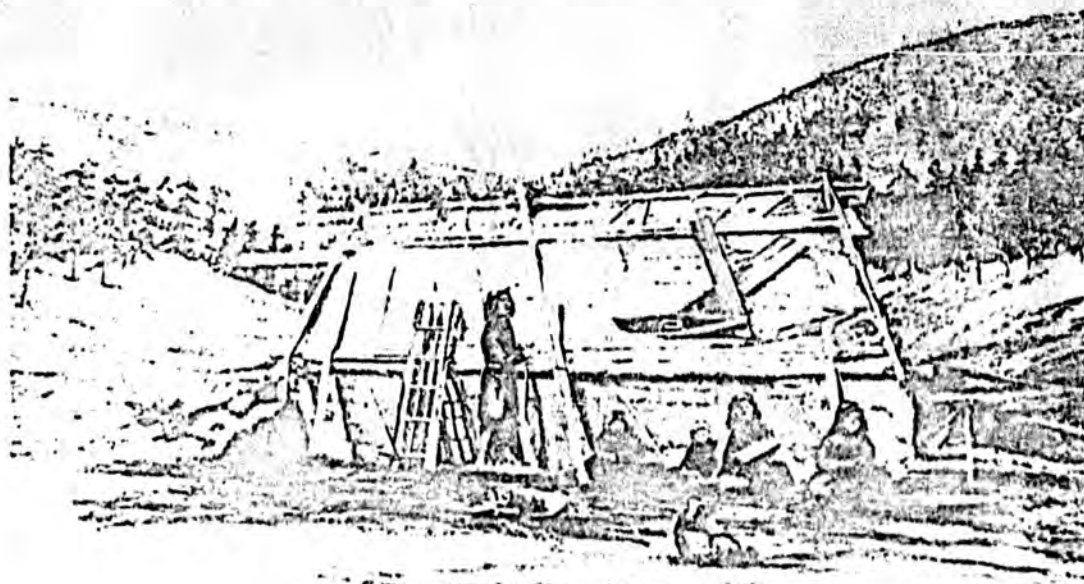
Lisianski's Voyages

Trading occurred up and down the coast as far south as California and through passes into the interior of Alaska and Canada. Some of the goods obtained on these expeditions and much of the stored surplus food were given away at potlatches -- competitive festive occasions given for many purposes such as honoring the dead, establishing prestige and reputation, changing a name, absolving an insult, avoiding open conflict, or completing a house.

Both groups of Indians had many subdivisions. Within Tlingit villages there were clans and these were further subdivided. Generally speaking, clans owned names, songs, crests, berry patches, clam beaches, fishing areas, and trade routes. Violation of these rights could and did lead to warfare.

The east interior of Alaska in the 18th century was the home of several thousand Athabascans. They lived along the rivers, generally in or near wooded areas, but their territories included a variety of landscape and terrain. Only three were located near and along the coast.

Among the major groups of Athabascans were the Kutchin, Tanana, Koyukon, Ingalik, Ahtna, and Tanaina. The Kutchin lived in the northeastern interior along the Yukon, Chandalar, and Porcupine rivers and their tributaries. To their south lived the Tanana, principally along the river of the same name. To the west lived the Koyukon, along the Yukon and Koyukuk rivers, and the Ingalik, in a small area along the Yukon and Anvik rivers. The Ahtna lived along the Copper River, including at its mouth. The Tanaina lived in the area surrounding Cook Inlet north of Kachemak Bay.



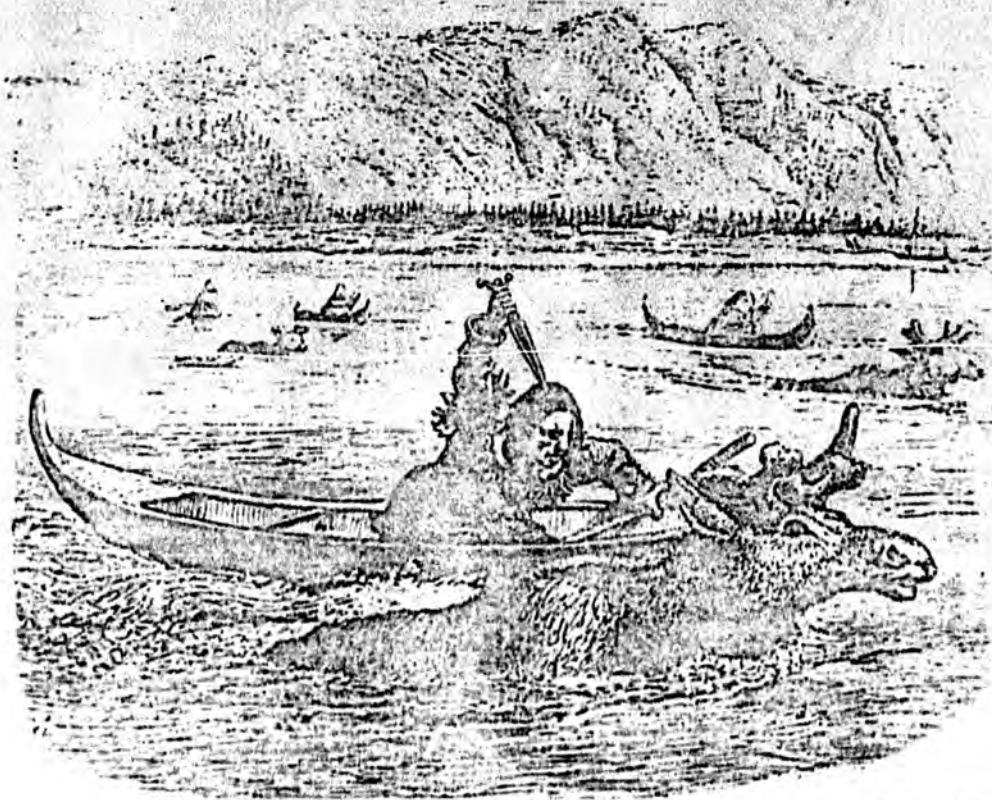
Copper River Athabascans at Tatal, 1885

Allen's Explorations

One very small group of Athabascan-related peoples lived on the coast between the territory of the Chugach and the Tlingit. These were the Eyak. Their culture was a blend of Chugach and interior Athabascan.

Each of these groups was made up of people who spoke one or another of several Athabascan languages and who occupied a common territory. The groups were not organized as tribes.

For most Athabascans the village was the basic social unit. This was often only a winter village. In the summer, bands of people who were related to one another would separate to move to fishing camps. Depending upon the game resources available, they might also separate into smaller groups for hunting.



Whymper's Travels

Athabascans hunting moose, Yukon River, 1867

All Athabascans hunted, fished, and gathered, but there was variety among the groups depending upon their locations. The Ingalik, for instance, relied heavily for subsistence upon the seasonal run of salmon in their rivers; hunting moose and small game animals was supplementary. The Kutchin, on the other hand, depended principally upon moose, caribou, bear, goats, and sheep; fishing, for them, was supplementary. The Tanaina, the only Athabascans along the coast, were hunters of the beluga whale and seal, as well as land animals. They were also fishermen.

To the extent that Athabascans depended upon large land animals, they faced an uncertainty of subsistence. There were periods of serious shortage of food and even famine. Generally speaking, the food resources of the interior were far less abundant than along the coastal areas.

Athabascans had many kinds of tools for river fishing — nets, traps, lures, and hooks. They had a variety of techniques for obtaining game animals including construction of snares and pits.

Some fishing sites and hunting areas were owned by individuals, but sometimes they were owned by the band. For example, among the Kutchin, hunting territories and fishing sites were common property of the bands, but caribou fences were individually owned. Boundaries between groups were understood and protected.

Western and northern Alaska was the home of most Eskimos. Lands they inhabited stretched from the Bristol Bay region around the coast and across northern Canada. In addition, as noted earlier, there were the Koniag, Sugcestun, and Chugach along the northern Gulf of Alaska.

Most of the estimated 40,000 Eskimos spoke one of two languages — Inupiat or Yupik (or a dialect of Yupik). The linguistic boundary was in the Norton Sound area. Inupiat speakers lived to the north; Yupik speakers lived to the south.

Eskimos



Alaska State Museum, Juneau (Beechey's Voyages)

Eskimos of the Cape Thompson area, 1826

Permanent winter villages were the pattern among both northern and southern Eskimos. The larger villages were generally in the north, and of these, the largest was Wales with 500 persons.

Although the village was the basic unit of organization, villagers identified themselves with other villagers as part of a larger group. According to Oswalt, there were 21 groups (including those of the Gulf of Alaska) each of which occupied a recognized area, and each of which had a sense of shared identity.

Describing northwest Alaska, anthropologist Dorothy Jean Ray wrote:

The Eskimos were extremely conscious of their tribal affiliations, extent of their territory, and relations with foreign groups. Inhabitants of the smaller villages felt a strong tie with members of the larger capital. Wherever they went they identified themselves as belonging to the specific larger group and were acutely aware of their crossing over into other tribal territory.

There was much similarity in the material culture of Eskimos, insofar as they depended upon the same resources — the use of kayaks, harpoons, and spears by seal hunters, for example. But because there was much variety in resources available, there was also much diversity.

Eskimos engaged extensively in trade, especially the Inupiat speakers from the coast, who traded with those who

lived inland. Coastal Eskimos exchanged seal oil, walrus and seal skins, ivory, and other products for caribou and wolverine skins. Coastal Eskimos also traded with the Chukchi of Siberia. There was some trade between northern Eskimos and Athabascans but it was very limited, partly because of hostility that existed between them. Less extensive trading took place among Yupik Eskimos, but there was some; seal oil from the coast was an important commodity to inland Eskimos. There was also some trade between Yupik Eskimos and neighboring Athabascan groups.

Northern Eskimos

Northern Eskimos lived on the Seward Peninsula and on the lands bordering the Chukchi Sea and the Arctic Ocean. If they were not on the coast, they typically lived along rivers, including the Kobuk, Noatak, and Kuzitrin rivers. Only one group — the Nunamiut — lived almost entirely inland.

The Inupiat Eskimos living along the northern coasts were hunters of the enormous bowhead whale, walrus and seal. They supplemented their sea-based activities by hunting on land, fishing in inland waters, and gathering plants and berries.



Alaska State Museum, Juneau (Kotzebue's Voyages)

Kotzebue Sound Eskimos, 1820's

Along the rivers flowing into the area of Kotzebue Sound, Eskimos relied less on sea mammals and more upon land animals and river fishing. At the northwestern tip of the Seward Peninsula lived Eskimos who — like those of the northern coast — were principally whalers. Others on the Seward Peninsula depended largely upon caribou, as did the people of the upper Noatak and Kobuk rivers, and of the Brooks Range.

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Most southern Eskimos lived along the Bering Sea coast from Norton Sound to the Bristol Bay region and along the rivers flowing into the Bering Sea. These Yupik-speaking people were primarily hunters of the bearded seal along the southwestern coast, and salmon fishermen along the Yukon, Kuskokwim, Nushagak, and other rivers. Over a wide area they were also hunters of caribou and small game animals.

The other speakers of a Yupik dialect were on St. Lawrence Island, where they pursued the great whale and walrus; on Nunivak Island where they were seal and beluga whale hunters and fishermen; and in the earlier-noted Gulf of Alaska areas, where they were sea mammal hunters.



Whympier's Travels

Eskimo from the Unalakleet area, 1867

Alaska was a populated country thousands of years before Russians were to claim it on the basis of Bering's voyage. The native inhabitants extensively used and occupied the land. The intensity of use of any specific area depended upon the availability of resources. Though boundaries were not constant or precisely fixed, recognizable boundaries did exist among groups of Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts.

Summary