



Native Alaskan Cultures IN PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

When we think of Native American cultures, a variety of tribes instantly come to mind. The Navajo, Cherokee, and Sioux are just a few Native peoples that have been part of the United States since even before the United States itself existed. Some parts of Native American cultures have become so ingrained in the daily lives of Americans that they may not even realize their origin. For example, the words *chipmunk*, *hickory*, and *persimmon* all came from Native American languages. But many Americans forget that Native American tribes stretch as far north as the northernmost US state—Alaska.

This remote part of the United States is home to numerous Native American cultures, each one at least a little different from the rest. Because of the challenges the Alaskan climate and terrain present, some of these tribes have limited contact with the others—and with the tribes in the lower states. Harsh winters and long distances led many Native Alaskan tribes to become fiercely resourceful and independent. But each tribe is still a part of American history and Native American culture as a whole.






Chapter One

The Athabascans



 Traditional Athabascans lived in small groups that fished, hunted, and trapped together. This group relied heavily on sharing. The hunters' job was to find the food and to share it with nearby hunters and their tribes. Sharing was a basic way of life. The practice has been passed down to modern Athabascans. *Anchorage Daily News* columnist Julia O'Malley has written about her Aunt Barbara who still follows the old custom. "One filet of the first salmon of the season must be given away as a matter of custom," she explains.¹

Ricky Gease, executive director of the Kenai River Sportfishing Association, urges people to be respectful of the Native tradition. “It’s a two-way, not a one-way street,” he insists.² He points out that a person who receives fish doesn’t have to give fish in return. But another gift—like homemade jam or jelly, for instance—is considered a polite gesture.

Aunt Barbara sees sharing as a positive thing. “Fish is best fresh and shared,” she states. “There is nothing like fish to bring people together.”³

The Athabascan people once occupied a large region of Alaska. Members of this group, who call themselves Dena (meaning “the people”), could be found in the Brooks Mountains, the northernmost section of the Rocky Mountains. They extended all the way down to the Kenai Peninsula, just south of Anchorage. Groups of twenty to forty Athabascans made their homes along the rivers running through this region. They moved with the seasons in search of food.

Like many Native Alaskans, Athabascans used a variety of natural resources to make the tools they needed for daily life. They used wood and stone, as well as animal antlers and bones to make these tools, with which they then built houses and boats, and made clothing, cooking utensils, and snowshoes. They used birch trees, cottonwood trees, and moose hides for making canoes.



An Athabascan fish trap looks a bit different from traps found elsewhere in the United States. The people designed this and other important tools based on the available natural resources.

The Athabascans made warm moccasins and boots from the hides of caribou and moose. Both men and women knew how to sew these items, but women did most of this work.

One of the most interesting things about Athabascan culture is that women determine the structure of the clans. Children belong to the mothers' clans instead of the fathers'. There are only two exceptions, the Holikachuk and the Deg Hit'an. Traditionally, the center of most Athabascan clans was a woman, her brother, and their two families. In many cases the woman's husband and her brother would become hunting partners. This arrangement would begin with the woman's marriage and last for the rest of their lives. In many clans the brother also plays a key role in raising his sister's children. Since he knows more about the clan's history and customs than their own father, it is their uncle's job to teach them about life as an Athabascan.



Staying warm during the winter months was a big priority for early Native American tribes. They relied heavily on the pelts of animals such as wolves and foxes for this purpose.

Little by little, the ways of the Athabascan people have been replaced with modern methods. Although change can sometimes be seen as progress, in some cases it can wipe out much of a group's culture. The Athabascans' languages are in danger of being lost without the help of those who can still speak them. The problem is that so few people still do.

The Siletz Dee-ni language, also known as Coastal Athabascan, was once so common that it was spoken from Alaska all the way south to the west coast of the United States. Today, only five people are known to speak Siletz Dee-ni fluently. One of them is Bud Lane,

who is creating an online dictionary with the help of the Living Tongues Institute. The resource includes more than 10,000 audio recordings, which have taken Lane seven years to log. And it still isn't finished.

Lane has heard from many people who want to help him with his project. "We don't know where it's going to go," he admits. But for now, the goal is to hold on to what still exists, "creating a pool of speakers large enough that it won't go away," he explains.⁴

The language isn't always an easy one for new learners. Sonya Moody-Jurado attends classes taught by Lane. She said, "There are a couple of sounds that are nowhere in the English language, like you're going to spit, almost. Learning along with her grandson, she notes, "kids seem much more open to that."⁵

David Harrison is an associate professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. He has helped the Siletz tribe with the dictionary. Harrison hopes that other Native American tribes take similar steps to preserve their languages with a project like the Siletz dictionary. "It's become a model of how you do it," he states.⁶

The Last Great Race on Earth

Athabascans traveled through snow on sleds. You have probably seen dog sled races in movies and on television. Known as mushing, this sport can be traced back to the Thule culture (the ancestors of the Inuit) in the middle of the 12th century. Like the Thule, the Athabascans were known for keeping packs of dogs to pull their sleds. Today mushing is the state sport of Alaska.

The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race has been held each year in Alaska since 1973. The word Iditarod means “a far and distant place” in the Athabascan language. This definition is fitting, as the brutal race takes the competing mushers and their dogs from Anchorage all the way to Nome—more than 1,000 miles (about 1,600 kilometers). Of the thirty-five men who took part in the very first event, only twenty-two of them finished. And it took the winner twenty days to reach the end of the trail. Modern mushers have completed the course in less than half that time. Dallas Seavey holds the record of finishing the fastest. In 2014, he managed the feat in just eight days, thirteen hours.⁷

Originally, the trail was used to deliver mail and other supplies to the Alaskan people. But in 1925, a group of sick children in Nome became very ill. That year, the mushers who traveled the route were racing to their destination to save lives. The Iditarod was created as a way to honor their success in getting the medication to the sick children who needed it. Today, many people call the Iditarod “The Last Great Race on Earth.”



The 2014 winner of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race was Dallas Seavey. He is seen here in Nome with two of his canine companions—Beatle and Reef—who helped him make it to the finish line.

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