



ALASKA  
NATIVE  
HERITAGE  
CENTER

# CULTURAL DESCRIPTIONS OF ALASKA'S NATIVE PEOPLES





## Introduction

**Alaska** is a land of many Native peoples. The Athabascan, Inupiaq, St. Lawrence Island Yupik, Central Yup'ik, Cup'ik, Aleut, Alutiiq, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people of Alaska live in cities, towns, and villages separated by vast differences, each in a unique geographical region. Although there are many languages, creeds, and philosophies, Alaska Natives share many common goals and values.

For thousands of years and to this day, the basic tenets of Native traditions have sustained Alaska Native people. A wealth of history, wisdom, and knowledge passes from generation to generation, ensuring survival through the challenges of every age. Today Native people face rapid change through technological advances, a mixed cash and subsistence economy system, and a dominant

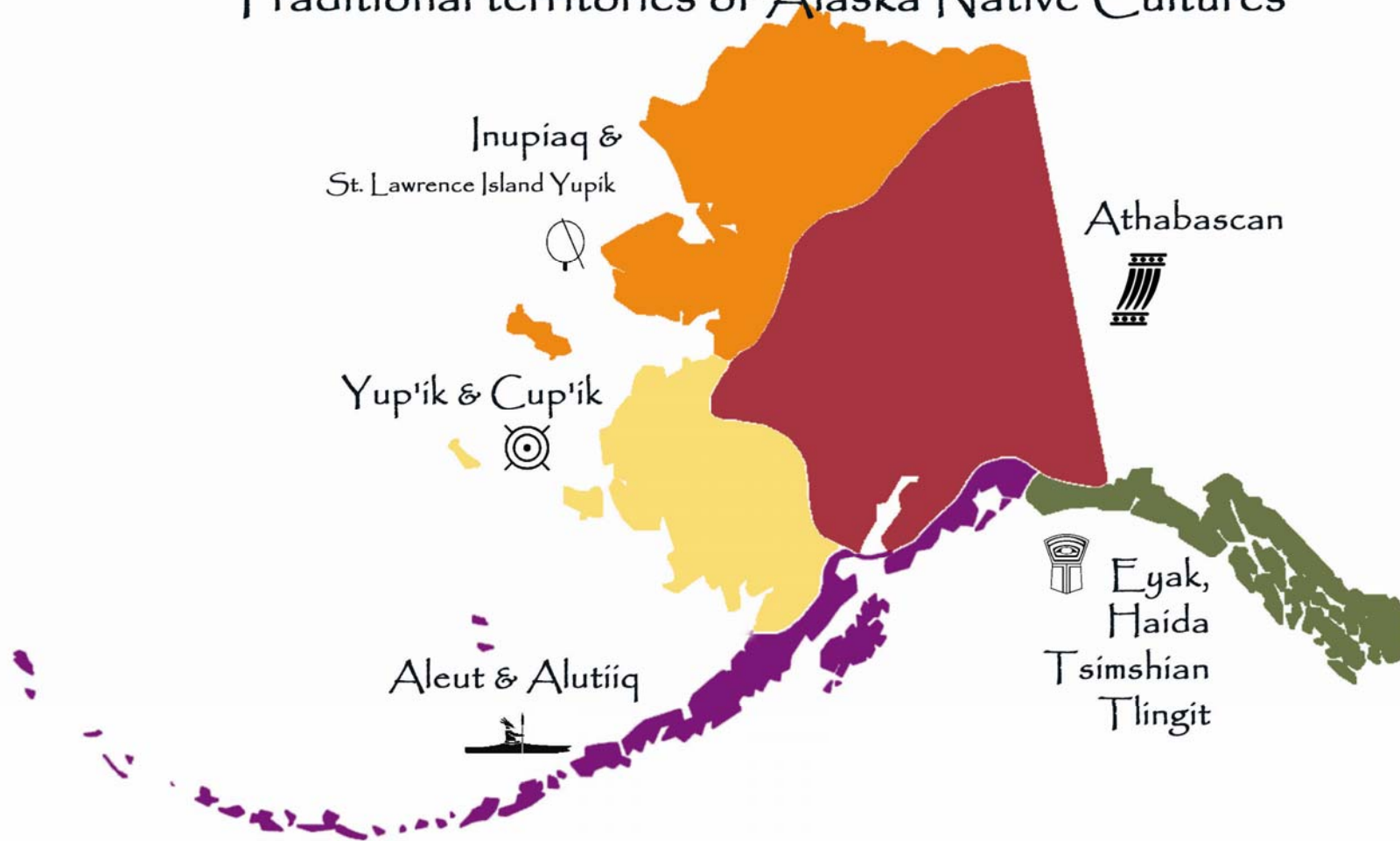
popular culture imported from the Lower 48. In the past we have dealt with issues such as disease, rapid loss of cultural identity, substance abuse, and criminal activity. However, one of the basic strengths of all indigenous peoples is adaptability. The strength of traditions and the determination of today's Alaska Natives will overcome these obstacles.

The Alaska Native Heritage Center was created to be a place where these philosophies and traditions can be preserved and shared with all who visit.

For purposes of exhibits and programs at the Alaska Native Heritage Center, Alaska's cultures and languages have been consolidated into five major cultural groups. The cultures within each group have certain lifestyle and tradition similarities, but each has a unique language and customs.

Following are brief descriptions of Alaska's five major cultures. Keep in mind that these are general overviews of cultures that are complex and rich with knowledge and detail.

# Traditional territories of Alaska Native Cultures



Inupiaq &  
St. Lawrence Island Yupik



Athabaskan



Yup'ik & Cup'ik



Eyak,  
Haida  
Tsimshian  
Tlingit

Aleut & Alutiiq



## Key



Aleut/Alutiiq



Yup'ik/Cup'ik



Inupiaq/St. Lawrence  
Island Yupik



Athabaskan



Eyak/Tlingit/Haida/  
Tsimshian

# Language Groups of Alaska

Approximate boundaries of Alaska Native language groups at the time of first contact with European explorers, following the Alaska Native Language Center's *Native Peoples and Languages of Alaska* map (1982).



## ATHABASCAN LANGUAGES INCLUDE:

- Ahtna
- Deg Hit'an
- Dena'ina
- Gwich'in
- Han
- Holikachuk
- Koyukon
- Tanacross
- Tanana
- Upper Kuskokwim
- Upper Tanana

## Athabascan



A large part of Interior Alaska is the traditional territory of the Athabascan people. The Yukon, Tanana, Kuskokwim, Susitna, Copper, and Kenai River drainages provided the seasonal resources for a highly mobile people, who lived in widely scattered settlements and camps. The people traveled in small groups to hunt, fish, and trap along the banks of the Interior's many waterways.

In each of the 11 different languages spoken by Alaskan Athabascans, the word *Den*, in one form or another, means "The People", and is what Athabascans called themselves. This reference also occurs among Athabascan language speakers in Canada and some places in the Lower 48.

While the seasonal lifestyle has given way to settled villages and larger communities, in both traditional and contemporary practices Athabascans learn respect for all living things. Sharing is the most important aspect of Athabascan subsistence living. All hunters are part of a kin-based network through which they are expected to follow traditional customs for sharing in the community.

The most important resources in the Athabascan culture are the moose, caribou, salmon, and the birch tree.

These provided food, clothing, and shelter. Traditional tools were made from stone, antlers, wood, and bone. Birch trees and their bark were an essential part of the traditional lifestyle, used to make canoes, containers, and baskets.

Throughout most of the Athabascan culture, the mother's clan raised the children. Some Athabascan families still practice the tradition of an uncle training and socializing his sister's children.

The settlement by Russians during the fur trade era, Canadian explorers, American gold seekers, and missionaries brought profound changes to the Athabascan culture. Teachers and missionaries discouraged Native languages and ancient spiritual traditions. Children were sent to boarding schools, far away from their families and homes. Disease and alcohol devastated the traditional way of life.

Today, Athabascans carry on the subsistence patterns rooted deep in their culture. This includes hunting for moose, caribou, mountain goats and sheep, and other mammals. Salmon and other freshwater fish are also important to subsistence. Migratory waterfowl and game birds play a part in the resource mosaic that sustains and enriches the people.

## Inupiaq/St. Lawrence Island Yupik



A seemingly barren landscape and an extreme ocean environment are the realm of the Inupiaq and St. Lawrence Island Yupik Eskimo cultures. These hunter/gatherer societies revolve around the whale, walrus, seal, polar bear, caribou, fish, and birds.

The Inupiaq and St. Lawrence Island Yupik Eskimo call themselves “*The Real People*”, and live in a region that stretches from St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea along the coastal area to the northern Canadian border and beyond. Their traditional territory also extends inland to the Brooks Range.

In this severe Arctic climate, cooperation was critical to survival. People worked together in groups related by kinship and marriage. A senior hunter and his wife led each family group of three or four generations. It was his responsibility to distribute the food that his crew harvested.

Traditional subsistence patterns depend upon season and location. Spring and fall whale hunts occur as coastal and inland villagers respond to seasonal migration patterns. The hunters also take seals during this time. For the people further from the coast, the *Nunamiut*, caribou is a dietary mainstay. Other land mammals and migratory waterfowl are also hunted.

The rivers and the sea also provide fish and crab. A spring herring harvest is followed by pink and chum salmon runs in late summer and early fall. Crab is harvested in the fall and winter and sheefish and whitefish are caught through the ice.

These traditional subsistence patterns led to the development of a complex tool kit. A variety of stone, wood, bone, and ivory tools were important to the traditional way of life for the Inupiaq and St. Lawrence Island Yupik. The tools were used for butchering, tanning, carving, drilling, inscribing, sharpening, and flaking. The bow drill was an important tool for starting fires and drilling holes in wood, bone, and ivory.

A sophisticated system of weapons and tools was developed for hunting the bowhead whale. The system included harpoons with toggle heads, lances, lines and seal bladder, and seal skin floats. The *umiaq/angyapik*, a large, open skin-covered boat, was used for hunting whale and walrus and for travel and barter. Large versions of the *umiaq/angyapik* were nearly 50 feet long and could carry up to 15 people and a ton of cargo.

The Inupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yupit were some of the last groups to encounter Europeans, with no sustained contact until the arrival of Yankee whalers in the 1850's. The adaptability and competitive spirit of these cultures carried them through change while helping them retain traditional values.



A lifestyle driven by seasonal change and the availability of subsistence resources defined the Yup'ik and Cup'ik Eskimo cultures of southwest Alaska. Subsistence patterns were centered on both the coastal and inland regions stretching from Bristol Bay along the Bering Sea coast to Norton Sound. Inland, life was closely tied to the major rivers of Bristol Bay, and the Yukon and Kuskokwim river deltas.

The availability of fish, game, and plants determined the location of seasonal camps and villages. These widely scattered settlements were small and primarily occupied by extended families.

Sea mammals, many species of fish, shellfish, and seaweed sustain the Yup'ik and Cup'ik people living along the coastal area. People hunt beluga whales, seals, sea lions, and walrus. They also harvest salmon, herring, halibut, flounder, trout, burbot, whitefish, blackfish, and crabs.

The inland settlements rely more heavily on salmon and freshwater fish. Moose and caribou are hunted as well as muskrats, mink, and other fur-bearing animals. Migratory waterfowl, bird eggs, and a variety of seasonal berries, greens, and roots help sustain people throughout the region.

In the past, the summer and fall activities centered on nomadic hunting, fishing, and gathering food, while the “wintering” settlements were the places for ceremonies and festive events. The traditional houses for men and women were semi-subterranean structures constructed with driftwood posts and beams and covered with sod and grass.

The *qasgiq*, or men's house, also served as a community center. Boys old enough to leave their mothers joined the male relatives where they worked, ate, and slept. The older males taught the younger ones how to be men. The *ena* was the women's and girls' dwelling and was usually smaller than the men's house. This structure also provided space for the preparation of meals. Mothers and wives brought food to the *qasgiq* where they would join in an evening of ceremonial singing and dancing.

Dancing plays an important role in both the social and spiritual life of the community. There are dances for fun, social gatherings, exchange of goods, and thanksgiving. Round drums cover with seal stomach and played with wooden sticks of driftwood provide a rhythmic beat. Both men and women choreograph the dances and sing in accompaniment. Yup'ik and Cup'ik people use dance fans to emphasize and exaggerate arm motions.

Many of the traditions of these cultures are maintained to this day. Some of the ancient sites, used for thousands of years by the Yup'ik and Cup'ik people, are locations of today's villages. Traditional subsistence foods are mixed with what is commercially available.

## Aleut/Alutiiq



The territory stretching from Prince William Sound west along the Gulf of Alaska to the end of the Aleutian Islands is home to the Aleut and Alutiiq peoples. This natural marine environment defines subsistence lifestyles and cultures that date back more than 8,000 years.

The Alutiiq peoples live in the coastal regions of Prince William Sound, the southern Kenai Peninsula, the Kodiak Island archipelago, and much of the Alaska Peninsula. Their language, called *Sugtestun* or Alutiiq, is one of the Yupik branches of the Esk-Aleut language family.

Aleuts, who called themselves Unangan or Unangas in pre-contact days, live in an area that reaches from the tip of the Alaska Peninsula to the end of the Aleutian archipelago, a chain of volcanic islands that extends 1,200 miles to the west. Aleuts also inhabit the Shumagin and Pribilof islands. The Aleut language, *Unanga* also derives from the Esk-Aleut family.

While languages and cultures of these two groups differ, the maritime traditions and first contact with the Russians in the 18<sup>th</sup> century produced common cultural elements. The subsistence lifestyles of both relied heavily on the resources of the ocean.

Seals, sea lions, halibut, cod, birds, and ocean and coastal plants were mainstays in the traditional diet. Waterproof parkas, called *chigdan/chigdas* (or *kamleikas* in Russian), were sewn of skin and intestine. Other products of the traditional way of life included line or cord of sinew, tools made of bone, fishhooks made of teeth, and boots fashioned from sea lion flippers and throats.

The *iqya* or kayak was also made of animal skins. The Aleut and Alutiiq peoples are known around the world for their skill in building and handling the kayak or *baidarka*, as the Russians called it.

First contact with Russian fur traders in quest of sea otter pelts changed these cultures forever. Warfare, disease, starvation, and forced relocation wiped out entire villages. An estimated population of between 15,000 and 18,000 people at the time of contact was reduced by as much as 80 percent by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Russia's influence on the Aleut and Alutiiq cultures is visible to this day. A majority of the people from both cultures are members of the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian words are part of vocabularies, Russian surnames are common in the villages, and Russian foods are mixed into subsistence diets. Some elders are trilingual, speaking their first language, *Unanga* or *Sugtestun*, as well as Russian and English.

## Eyak/Tlingit/Haida/Tsimshian



**F**our Northwest Coast cultures share a geographic region, but have different languages and clan systems. The Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples of Alaska share a common environment of temperate rain forest of large trees and a bountiful food supply. The territory stretches from the Copper River Delta to the Southeast Panhandle along the Gulf of Alaska coastline.

In this setting, wood is an important commodity. The array of items the people produced from wood and its byproducts included houses, daily utensils, cooking boxes, canoes, and clothing. Wood was essential to crafting ceremonial objects, including the distinctive totem poles that mark the cultures of this region. Fish, game, wild fruits, and vegetables are plentiful in this natural environment, accounting for similarities in subsistence patterns and ceremonies along the four cultures as well as settlements, patterns, tools, clothing, transportation, and trade.

Common ingredients in the four cultures include the rich art and oral traditions, and complex legal and social systems based upon matrilineal clans. The differences are in distinct languages, details of clan systems, trading, partners, and time of first contact with Western culture.

The Eyak occupied the territory at the northernmost range of this culture area, from the Copper River Delta to

Icy Bay. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Eyak were closely associated with their Athabascan neighbors to the north. According to oral tradition, their move to the coastal area occurred via the Copper River and over the Bering Glacier. In 1783, at time of first contact with Europeans, there were an estimated 1,500 Eyaks in four main settlements. Today, fewer than 200 people identify themselves as Eyak, and they live primarily in “Old Town” Cordova. The Eyak language, while classified with the Tlingit language within the Na-Dene super family, is singular and distinct and can claim only one living speaker today.

At first contact, the Tsimshian lived in British Columbia, but during the 19<sup>th</sup> century a small group moved to villages at Hyder and Halibut Bay in the Portland Canal area of Alaska and Metlakatla on Annette Island. The Tsimshian speak a unique language known as *Sm'algyax*, which has four dialects.

The Tlingit population of 8,000 to 10,000 was the largest in Southeast Alaska at first contact early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They lived in approximately 21 permanent winter village sites called *kwáans*, with the population speaking two Tlingit dialects, northern and southern.

At the same time, there were approximately 1,800 Haidas in Alaska, living on the islands of Long, Sukwan, Dall, and Prince of Wales. Some Haidas migrated to Alaska from the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia before first contact. The Haida peoples speak a language with three different dialects; one called, *Kaigani*, is spoken in Alaska.



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