

2.4 Eyak

General Residence

Cordova area between Aleut and Tlingit territories.

Population

1880 – 400

1900 – 60*

1997 – 120

* Reduced mainly by epidemics and poverty

Social and Political Organization (Pre-European Contact)

Historically related to the Athabascan people, the Eyak occupied the Gulf of Alaska coast between present-day Cordova and Yakutat. They were “raided and squeezed” by the Chugach Alutiiq of Prince William Sound and the Tlingit who claimed some of the same territory. Inter-marriage with the Tlingit people contributed much to the near disappearance of the Eyak.

Based on the choice of the men, Eyak people lived in single and/or communal dwelling houses, in three main villages – Eyak, Alaganik, and Old Town. The village chief and his family occupied the rear of the communal house. There were two potlatch houses in each village, one for each moiety (tribal subdivision). The shaman and any attendants occupied a small house, in the middle of the village. Although there were fish camps, there were no family, moiety, or village rights over them.

The social structure of the Eyak was similar to the Tlingit. Within each village there were two moieties, the Eagles and the Ravens. Each moiety had a chief, one of which was also the chief of the entire tribe, and a subchief. The chief was usually the richest and strongest man in the village. His role included leading war and hunting parties, performing duties at potlatches, and giving to the poor. The oldest son in a family had authority over, and responsibility for, his brothers and sisters; discipline was very strict and complete ostracism was practiced whenever rules were broken. Disputes resulted in singing “contests” by the two men involved, or related to those involved; or, by the village peacemaker. The Eyak kept Eskimo slaves, who were war captives.

Social and Political Organization (Post-European contact)

The Eyak was a small tribe, recognized by the Russians as a separate and distinct culture. Americans did not recognize the Eyak as a distinct Native group until recently. The last Eyak chief died in 1930 and was not replaced until recently.

Social and Political Organizations (Current)

The Eyak are trying to revive their language and cultural practices and to gain back usage of their ancestral lands in Cordova.

Language

Eyak has distant links to Athabascan and Tlingit languages. Today, Eyak is spoken more widely, due to the efforts of the late Marie Smith Jones.

Other Significant Things of Interest:

Like the Tlingit, the Eyak are known for their wood-carved totem poles.

2.5 Inupiat (the “real people”)

General Residence

Bering Straits, Northern and Arctic Areas

Population

At contact – 6,000

1990 – 12,650

Social and Political Organization (Pre-European Contact)

There were at least twenty-five distinct Inupiat societies; each occupied a territory with well-defined boundaries. Each unit was referred to as a *munatqatigiit*, meaning “people who are related to one another through their common ownership of land.” Each group, made up of large extended families, had a major settlement with permanent dwellings and a *qarigi* or “men’s house” used for men’s activities and meetings. Each group had seasonal fishing, hunting, and trapping areas. They were self-sufficient economic and political units, each with a chief who worked with elders to establish social obligations, resolve disputes, receive visitors, decide penalties for theft, crimes, and lead ceremonial events. The chief usually attained this position through inheritance.

The societies were distinguished by differences in dialect and clothing styles. Each group had a group identity that emphasized its superiority over others. The boundaries between these groups were either geographic or areas of low resource potential.

During times of peace, Alaska Natives and Siberians were involved in trade activities.

Social and Political Organization (Post-European Contact)

A loss in population occurred from diseases such as measles, small pox, and flu epidemics, alcohol, and a heavy depletion of resources by whaling crews and miners.

1732-1867 Russian Period

History shows that Russians actually discovered portions of the Bering Straits region in 1732, and that relations with the Inupiat were not friendly. The Russians raided and took prisoners. Trading among the Natives and the English, and other foreigners, began in the late 1770s. Beginning around 1848, hundreds of commercial whaling ships sailed through the Arctic Ocean and Bering Straits, taking whales for their oil. There were also many independent trading ships with all sorts of goods, including firearms and liquor.

1867-1910 Early American Period

From 1866 to the late 1870s, commercial whalers killed thousands of walrus each year for oil and ivory after whales became scarce. From 1883 to 1890, galena ore was mined on the Seward Peninsula, and the mine was patented in 1894. The gold rush (1898-1900), mission schools (1890), missionaries, and the reindeer industry (1892) brought about the most changes in Alaska Natives’ lives in the Bering Straits area. Subsistence areas were disturbed and patented to non-Natives; they faced a new authoritarian government; they began their journey into civilization, speaking a new language, learning various religious beliefs. In the late nineteenth century, village councils were established and were composed of teachers, missionaries, and

representatives of the federal government (BIA employees). The councils acted as a rule-making and law-enforcing body. The qarigi ceased to be used; however, traditional leadership patterns prevailed.

Social and Political Organization (Current)

There is a mix of traditional governments and elected councils throughout the Inupiat areas; also, some villages are organized as municipalities under state law.

Language

Inupiaq, however most speak English.

Other Significant Things of Interest:

Inupiat people are known for their elaborate ivory carvings and engraving.

2.6 Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian

Tlingit – Cape Fox to Yakutat Bay

Haida – migrated from Queen Charlotte Islands in Canada to the southern portion of Prince of Wales Island; today they live mainly in Hydaburg, Craig, Ketchikan, and Klawock.

Tsimshian – migrated from British Columbia to Annette Island in 1887, establishing Metlakatla; Congress created the Metlakatla reservation in 1891.

General Residence

Southeastern Alaska

Populations (in Alaska)

At contact last quarter of 18th century (Tlingit) –10,000

Tlingit in 1996 – 9,800

Haida – 1,100

Tsimshian living in Metlakatla – 1,500

Social and Political Organization (Pre-European Contact)

The Tlingit belonged to one of two moieties (Tribal subdivisions), the Raven or the Wolf (later changed to Eagle), which were broken down into numerous naa (clans) named for characteristic animals. Membership in a moiety and clan was matrilineal, or determined by ancestry through a person's mother. Clans were made up of one or more housegroups or houses (also referred to as hits). A housegroup was composed of ten to forty related individuals sharing a large house. Housegroup members owned and shared large canoes, ceremonial objects, and utensils; they harvested resources together and provided food and goods that were consumed communally. The men had rights to specific portions of land.

Each Tlingit also belonged to one of about twenty kwaans, which are large territorial groups. Examples: Chilkat Kwaan (Haines and Klukwan) and Auke Kwaan (Juneau). Within each kwaan, the clans and houses lawfully owned specific sites for hunting, fishing, ceremonial objects, and slaves (prisoners of war or purchased). They sold lands and resources with the consent of clan members. Other clan members were expected to ask permission to use kwaan lands.

The social groupings functioned to formally regulate marriages, distribute inheritance, resolve disputes, and to define ceremonial activities. Under Tlingit custom or law, the ultimate source of political power was in the clan. Marriage could occur only outside of a person's specific clan. Dispute resolutions within a clan and between clans were the prerogative of clan leaders, usually the eldest males, and their decisions were final. The Tlingit did have a "peacemaker" who possessed a ceremonial canoe paddle, and whose role was to settle disputes.

Social ranking of clans and houses according to wealth was very important among the Tlingit people. Those members of the highest ranked clans were considered "noble" so competition was very prevalent.

Note: The Haida and Tsimshian had a similar social and political organization as the Tlingit, except that the Tsimshian leader in some villages was the village chief.

Social and Political Organization (Post-European Contact)

A significant population loss occurred between 1836 and 1840 due to a smallpox epidemic.

1744-1867 Russian Period

The Tlingit resisted colonization by Russians and destroyed the Russian forts at Yakutat and Sitka. Later, the Russians made Sitka the capital of Russian America but failed in establishing political control over the people. The Tlingit traded profitably with English, Spanish, American, and Russian explorers and became “middlemen” in fur trading between the Europeans and Athabascans.

1867-1920 Early American Period

Contact with Americans was unfriendly; the Americans destroyed Indian houses, canoes and forts in 1869 as a reprisal for the alleged murder of two white men. Americans also destroyed the village of Angoon in 1882 because of a disagreement over the death of two Indians in an explosion at a fish cannery. New settlements, an increased non-Native population, missionary schools, the development of commercial fisheries, mining and timber industries, and the establishment of the Tongass National Forest brought rapid changes to the Indians’ lives between 1870 and 1890. The Indian clan leaders then saw change as inevitable, and that education would help them survive; therefore, they cooperated with the Americans.

Social and Political Organization (Current)

The Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian have retained the same clan organizations established prior to European contact. However, the laws of traditional marriages between people of opposite moieties are not as strictly observed today.

Language

Languages of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian are all different. The Tlingits share definite linguistic similarities in verb structure with the Athabascans.

Other Significant Things of Interest:

The Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian are widely known for their woodcarving of massive totem poles and canoes as well as for their huge clan houses with carved panels, bold crests, and intricate weavings.

2.7 Yup'ik (the “real people”)

Central Yup'ik

Cup'ik – Chevak, Hooper Bay, and Mekoryuk

Saint Lawrence Island Yupik – also known as Siberian Yup'ik

General Residence

Southwest Alaska

Calista, Bristol Bay, and Bering Straits areas

Population

At contact – 20,000

1996 – 20,000

Note: the population at the time of contact included the people now known as Alutiiq

Social and Political Organization (Pre-European contact)

Yup'ik societies were organized very much like those of the Inupiat. There were a large number of distinct Yup'ik societies distinguished by differences in dialect, clothing styles, and ceremonial life. Each unit occupied a territory with well-defined boundaries and was referred to as nunakutellriit, meaning “those that share an area.”

Each group, made up of large, extended families, had a major settlement with permanent dwellings and a qasgiq or men's house where men lived, worked, taught, and directed the community's political, social, and ceremonial life. They were self-sufficient economic and political units, each with a leader or leaders, and had seasonal fishing, hunting, and trapping areas. In a smaller community, the oldest male was the leader; in larger communities, several men functioned as leaders and decision-makers. Yup'ik leaders didn't have the power of dispute resolution between local families, which were responsible for managing their own affairs. Families had considerable power over the behavior of their members. Social control was maintained partly by community gossip, ridicule songs, joking, and ostracism.

Social and Political Organization (Post-European Contact)

1744-1867 Russian Period

Russians established a trading post on the Nushagak River in 1818, “discovered” Nunivak Island and the Yukon River in 1821, and established a trading post on the Kuskokwim River in 1832. They founded Fort Saint Michael in 1833. Most of the Yup'ik people were not contacted until the late 1800s. The Russians had little effect on Yup'ik culture and political organization; they did recruit some traditional leaders for employment in fur trading.

1867-1920 Early American Period

The Yup'ik population was reduced by about one-fourth in 1901 due to severe measles and influenza epidemics. This resulted in considerable reorganization of sociopolitical units. Also, Moravian and Catholic missions and schools were established along the Kuskokwim and lower Yukon rivers, respectively. Qasgiqs disappeared due to missionary coercion.

In the late nineteenth century, village councils were established; the chief and council members were elected. The councils acted as rule-making and law-enforcing bodies; however, this

resulted in confusion among village members concerning the duties of the various leaders. Later, traditional leadership patterns prevailed, including traditional control through the elders.

Social and Political Organization (Current)

There is a mix of traditional governments and elected councils throughout the Yup'ik areas; also, some villages are organized as municipalities under state law. Changes in type of governments are occurring in some areas.

Language

Central Yup'ik – There are many dialects in this Yup'ik language which is the most widely spoken; it is taught to children as their first language.

Siberian Yup'ik – Saint Lawrence Island people speak Siberian Yup'ik; this is mostly unintelligible to speakers of Central Yup'ik. Siberian Yup'ik is also spoken by a small group of Natives on the southern tip of the Chukotsk Peninsula in Russia.

Cup'ik – The Cup'ik people of Chevak are the Qissunamiut tribe, whose main historic village was on the Kashunak River. There is one other Cup'ik tribe—the Cup'ik people of Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island. The Qissunamiut Cup'ik dialect differs from the more widespread Yup'ik dialects, but it is understood throughout the Yup'ik region.

Other Significant Things of Interest:

Yup'ik people are known for their mask making, grass baskets, and dance fans.