



NANUTSET ch'u Q'udi Gu
BEFORE OUR TIME AND NOW
AN ETHNOHISTORY OF LAKE CLARK NATIONAL PARK & PRESERVE

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Front Cover: Katherine Constantine at Qeghnilen Village in 1930. Photo courtesy of Nickoli Balluta. George Koktelash Sr.'s fishcamp at Nondalton. Salmon drying on rack for smoked fish, 2006. Photo taken by Judy Putera.

CHAPTER THREE

Historical Overview

Dena'ina Origins and Prehistory

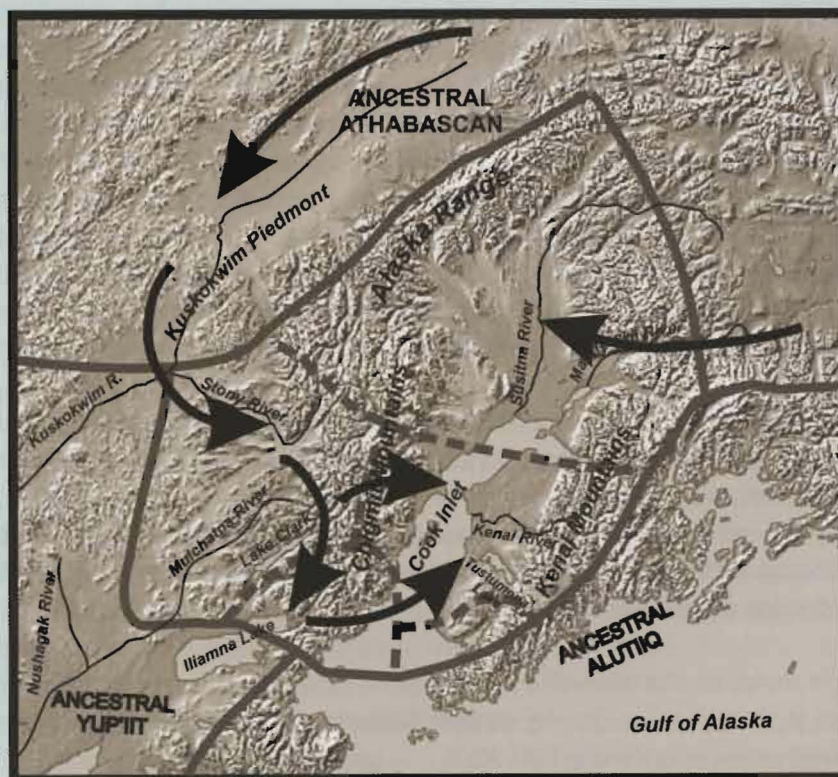
By Alan Boraas

This section covers two important events during the time before European contact: Dena'ina origins in South-Central and Southwestern Alaska, and the advent of intensive salmon fishing that led to sedentary Dena'ina villages in most parts of their territory. While much has been learned about Dena'ina prehistory, the time before a written record, future research by Native and non-Native scholars will clarify the picture even more.

Dena'ina Origins

There are a number of types of evidence that bear on Dena'ina origins including oral tradition,¹¹ cosmology, linguistics, and archaeology. In some cases the evidence or points-of-view are contradictory and consequently there are several general scenarios or hypotheses about Dena'ina origins. There is evidence suggesting Siberian origins for the Dené while there is other evidence to suggest a southern origin of the Dené people. Both points of view will be presented in this section without judgment. Future evidence will support one or the other migration scenarios and likely add to the complexity of the story.

Figure 4. Probable movements into Dena'ina territory based on oral tradition, mythology and linguistic information.



¹¹ Unless otherwise cited, information on origins from oral tradition is primarily derived from Dena'ina elders Peter Kalifornsky and Nellie Chickalusion, and from Ahtna elder Katie Wade. Kalifornsky, Chickalusion and Wade recounted these stories to Donita Peter who explained this perspective to Alan Boraas. Peter Kalifornsky also relayed some of this information to Alan Boraas.

Evidence from Dena'ina Oral Tradition

One version of Dené oral tradition holds that the Dené arrived in the north from the south and are culturally, linguistically, genetically, and spiritually related to the Navaho and Apache of the Southwestern United States (Donita Peter, personal communication 2003). According to this oral tradition, at a point in the distant past a group of Southwestern Dené occupied Pleistocene margins and followed the retreat of glacial ice north making their way into present-day subarctic Canada eventually arriving in Alaska. This version generally conforms to Kari's (1996) linguistic hypothesis in which Dené occupy Alaska from the east moving down the major river systems as discussed below. Neither Kari, nor other linguists, however, see evidence for the proposition that the Southwestern Dené are ancestral to all Athabascans.

Once in Alaska, the oral traditions of how Dena'ina moved into their present territory are much clearer; the movement came from two directions as indicated in Figure 4. One migration came from the east moving into Dena'ina territory via Chickaloon Pass from the Copper River area becoming the Upper Inlet Dena'ina. Shem Pete stated that Upper Inlet occupation was of long duration and that Dena'ina never jointly occupied the Susitna Valley with anyone (Kari 1988:333; 2003:14).

The other migration was from the north via the Kuskokwim drainage. The Stony River/Telaquana band of Dena'ina are known as *Htsaht'ana* meaning "First People" (Kari 1996:60) and a story recorded by Pete Bobby of Lime Village opens with the phrase *K'qizaghetnu qet hdghinih natuda naguna*, "They say our ancestors were from K'qizaghetnu" (Bobby 1978:1). *K'qizaghetnu* refers to Stony River (Kari and Kari 1982:16), and is the furthest west point in current Dena'ina. Kari (1988:328) points out the people call the piedmont in this area *Htsaynenq'* "west of the Alaska Range," an area perceived to be the Inland Dena'ina homeland (Kari 1988:328).

One of the most important Dena'ina origin stories occurs in three written versions: one told by Alexi Evan to Anna Rooth (1971:68-70), the second transcribed by James Kari from a recording by Alexi Evan, and the third titled "Imagination" written by Peter Kalifornsky (1991:72). These are part of an as yet unrecorded story cycle that will, perhaps, further define Dena'ina origins. In the story hungry, starving Dena'ina from the north move to the mountains where a spiritually powerful person, perhaps a *dghili dnayi* or mountain spirit that has taken the form of an old man in the Kalifornsky version, magically opens a mountain using a stick allowing the people to enter the mountain where they find great quantities of game animals and become prosperous.¹²

The mountain is almost certainly Telaquana Mountain or *Nduk'eyux Dghil'u* "Mountain Which Game Enters" (Kari 1988:328) east of Lime Village at the headwaters of the Stony River. Symbolically, starvation indicates some problem--perhaps literally starvation or perhaps something else--which caused a movement south and then east from the Kuskokwim plateau, and the solution to the problem is found in the abundance of game in the mountains of western Dena'ina territory where the people thrive.

Clan origin stories are also informative about Dena'ina movements although not necessarily movement of the original Dena'ina. For example, Kalifornsky's "The Dena'ina Clans" contains the following passage (Kalifornsky 1991:205):

¹² A spiritually endowed stick such as used in the Telaquana Mountain Story exists in the Mellick Collection (Nick Mellick, personal communication, 2001).

Nulchina, The Sky Clan people, they say, stayed in the sky on a frozen cloud; and they drifted over this way to a little warmer place, and the frost melted away from under them, and they landed on top of Mount Susitna, they say. And they went down the Inlet, and they came to Iliamna. And they called the people already living there *Dudna*...

The movement of the people from a colder place "to a little warmer place" suggests movement from beyond the Alaska Range to Cook Inlet. The Dena'ina name for Yup'it is *Dudna*, and the story thus defines the southeastern boundary of Dena'ina territory in the Iliamna Lake area. Upper Inlet clan origin stories depict the close relationship between the Upper Inlet Dena'ina and Ahtna with several clans entering Cook Inlet from Ahtna territory (Kari 1988: 333). De Laguna and McClellan (1981:653) indicate Ahtna origin stories describe movement from Copper River to Cook Inlet.

War stories have the effect of defining "us" and "them." Kari (1988) and Tenenbaum (1984:232-268) identify a significant genre of war stories between Dena'ina and Yup'it centering in the Iliamna Lake and Mulchatna River areas suggesting that this borderlands was contested territory.¹³ A Dena'ina culture hero *Ts'anhghulyat* figures prominently in the stories. Other stories set in the Stony River area also portray conflict (Kari 2003:144-147), but they do not contain agents like culture heroes and other symbols of identity as do the Dena'ina/Yup'it conflicts suggesting mutual use with Deg Hit'an and Upper Kuskokwim people (Kari 1988:329). Kari suggests this is further evidence that the plateau area northwest of the Stony River (*Htsaynenq'* "west of the Alaska Range") was part of a long established Dena'ina or ancestral Dena'ina homeland and not contested allegorically or otherwise.

A similar set of war stories occur in Cook Inlet with Alutiiq (*Utchena*) usually coming up the Inlet to attack Dena'ina villages. The tone of these stories is less allegorical and more historical, however, and may not reflect territorial conflict but Alutiiq attempts to force bilateral trade. Osgood (1976:109-110) has pointed out that maritime Alutiiq territory contained few resources the Dena'ina needed, but the Dena'ina controlled subarctic resources mostly in the form of furs the Alutiiq needed. Consequently, the Alutiiq desired to trade with the Dena'ina, but the Dena'ina did not need to trade with the Alutiiq. To attempt to coerce bilateral trade, Alutiiq raided Dena'ina villages taking women hostages who were then held in ransom to force trade. Sometimes the Dena'ina would repel the attackers, sometimes they would acquiesce to the trade, and sometimes they would counter-attack in retaliation. However it played out, the Dena'ina controlled the trade because they controlled the desired resources.

Evidence from Cosmology

Traditional Dena'ina cosmology rested on the premise there are at least six dimensions operating in parallel time and space (Boraas and Peter 2005). These dimensions consisted of humans, ancestors, animals, animal spirits, spirits, and *Nageltani*, a state of purity or pure love. One concept--that there were mechanisms of communication between the dimensions, one form of which expressed by the concept of *beggesh*-- is potentially reflected in the prehistoric artifact record, or, rather, lack of an artifact record.

Beggesh is a form of negative energy, often described as being like a scent that permeated an artifact. If an artifact were used by a person with ill will such as in a murder or other heinous act,

¹³ Yup'iq refers to one person or to the language spoken by this group; Yup'it refers to several people or the group as a whole.

it was believed to permanently take on information of that act. Acts of lesser evil, even thoughts of ill will, could likewise leave their scent on an owner's artifact. *Beggesh* could be detected by a shaman or a spiritually powerful person who had achieved a state of true belief and become a *K'ech Eltanen* (Boraas and Peter 1996), but it could also pass into the other dimensions and be detected by animals, ancestors, or spirits. If an animal sensed an artifact's *beggesh* it would likely withdraw from the area and thus *beggesh* was believed to have implications for survival. Likewise artifact *beggesh* was offensive to ancestor spirits and the other spirits such as *dghili dnayi*, 'mountain people' or *ch'wala dnayi* "tree people" who might then haunt the village, house, or person that did not control his or her artifacts. Artifacts could also absorb "good" information in which case it was called *beggesha*, but this was of less concern than *beggesh* because it had no negative impact on the ancestor spirits, spirits and animals.

Because of *beggesh* artifacts potentially carried threatening information and were carefully accounted for and not casually discarded (Boraas and Peter 2005). Upon death, one's personal effects were burned (Osgood 1976:165-168) and therefore purified in the funeral cremation, which was practiced before Russian Orthodox influence, both to prevent negative messages from being transmitted to animals and to provide tools for use by the deceased in the ancestor dimension (Donita Peter, personal communication, 2004). Since there are few sites that we can attribute to the prehistoric Dena'ina which contain abundant artifacts, the concept of *beggesh* may be very old and the Dena'ina multi-dimensional cosmology may extend well back into prehistoric time with lack of artifact refuse a defining trait of Dena'ina sites.

Lack of bone refuse from eating hunted animals is another characteristic of Dena'ina sites that has spiritual implications (Boraas and Kalifornsky 1991). Pre-contact Dena'ina believed that it was necessary to send hunted and subsequently consumed animals back to a "reincarnation place" presided over by *K'unkda Jelen*, 'The Mother of Everything Over and Over' (Kalifornsky 1991:40-45). This was done by an informal ritual of burning bones in the fire or distributing them in the water. At the reincarnation place they would "put their clothes on" meaning they would become alive again and return to the human land to again become an animal. Thus concepts of ecology are encoded in the cosmology and, unlike archaeological sites from other non-Dené cultures in Alaska in which huge piles of animal bone refuse called middens are found, it is rare to find even small middens in Dena'ina archaeological sites.

Evidence from Linguistics

A number of linguists have attempted to identify the ancestral Athabascan homeland and hence the place from which the Northern Dené diaspora emanated. Krauss and Golla (1981:68) place ancestral NaDené territorial homeland in the Upper Yukon River drainage in the vicinity of the Alaska, Yukon, and British Columbia borders, the general area where Northern Athabascan, Eyak and Tlingit meet. Kari (1996) places the Northern Athabascan nucleus further to the southeast at the continental divide where the Yukon, Mackenzie, and Stikine watersheds meet near Dease Lake in Northern British Columbia Kaska territory. Dumond (1969) and Greenberg (1996:530-531) proposed the same Na-Dene homeland, British Columbia interior from Southeast Alaska, on the basis of the distribution of Athabascan, Eyak, Tlingit and Haida languages. Thus there is general agreement the most likely ancestral Northern Athabascan homeland, and therefore the point from which prehistoric Athabascan diaspora must have proceeded, is interior northern British Columbia.

Greenberg (1996; Greenberg, et al.1986) is one of the primary proponents of the Three Wave Theory of Native American origins which combines linguistic, archaeological and genetic

information to compose a theory that the peopling of North America came in three waves called Amerindian, Na-Dené, and Eskimo/Aleut respectively.¹⁴ To Greenberg the Amerindian language family (including all Native Americans except Na-Dené and Eskimos) shows the greatest amount of language variation hence has had the longest time to evolve and is further from Asia and, therefore, comprises the first wave of migration; Na-Dené languages exhibit the next highest degree of variation and are of intermediate position from Asia, between Amerindian and Eskimo/Aleut and comprise the next wave;¹⁵ and Eskimo/Aleut languages have the least amount of variation and are closest to Asia and, therefore, are the last wave. It is likely the situation is more complicated than the three wave hypothesis suggests and some linguists question the validity of the "Amerindian" language area entirely (cf. Nichols 1990).¹⁶

One of the Siberian Yenesean languages, Ket, has been identified by Vajda (1999) as having a grammatical structure similar to American Athabaskan languages and is the most compelling evidence to date of Asian and North American connections because the intricate grammatical structure of Athabaskan verbs is so unique and complex that the likelihood of independent invention is virtually impossible. However, whether the movement implied by this Siberian/Alaskan connection was west to east or east to west, remains to be determined. Assuming the movement was from Siberia to Alaska, ancestral Ket may be related to the appearance of Dené in Alaska and the archaeological culture of these first Athabascans was likely the Paleo-Arctic culture which, unlike other early archaeological cultures in Alaska, has antecedents in Siberia. Timing, of course, is a major part of the origins issue. On the basis of a method of estimating the time when two similar languages diverged (glottochronology), Krauss (1980:11-12) makes the following interpretations:

1. Ancestral Athabascans were present in Alaska and Yukon before 4000 B.C. the point at which ancestral Athabaskan and Tlingit differentiate.
2. Eyak was the first to differentiate from ancestral Athabaskan and that split occurred around 1500 B.C.
3. Differentiation into the rest of the Northern Athabaskan languages, including Dena'ina, occurred by 500 B.C.

While subject to further refinement, these dates provide good evidence of the minimal date of the antiquity of Dené in Alaska. With improved methodology these dates will probably turn out to be much older.

Kari (1996) has developed the most complete hypothesis of Dena'ina origins which is part of his overall theory of Northern Athabaskan expansion. He proposes that Athabaskan groups expanded in five stages from the Northern ancestral Athabaskan homeland in Northern British Columbia described above. In Alaska, Athabascans expanded by moving down the Yukon, Tanana, Kuskokwim and Copper river systems in the process differentiating into various linguistic groups. Kari bases his hypothesis on the distribution of river stem terms which change as one proceeds downstream from the Upper Yukon from **-tu'* in the core Northern British Columbia area, to **-niq'ə* in the Gwich'in, Tanana, Han area, to **-na'* in the Ahtna, Deg

¹⁴ Na-Dené is a language family that includes Athabaskan languages, Eyak, and Tlingit, with speakers in Alaska, Northwest Canada, Oregon and California as well as in the Southwest of the United States.

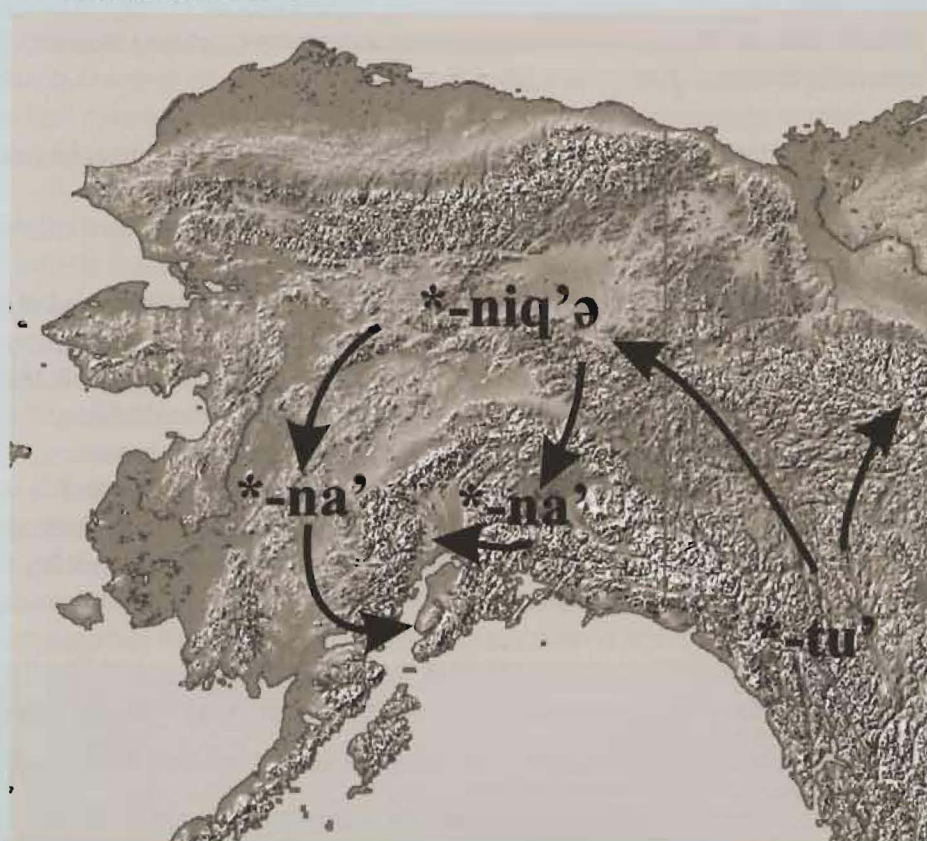
¹⁵ Greenberg and Dumond followed Edward Sapir's original assertion that Na-Dené included Haida. Kari and Krauss do not consider Haida as Na-Dené. For the latter scholars, therefore, the language center shifts north.

¹⁶ Many linguists (e.g., Nichols 1990) dispute the view that Amerindian represents one language family. They interpret the high degree of phonological and structural diversity within Amerindian to mean that there are multiple language families, perhaps reflecting multiple migrations rather than a single *in situ* evolution in North America.

Hit'an, Upper Kuskokwim, and Dena'ina area (Kari 1996:260). River stem terminology is not trivial. Rivers are integral to subsistence and transportation and form the basis of the intricate Athabascan directional system. Moreover, rivers are part of Athabascan identity particularly in Alaska where they are so closely tied to salmon harvesting. Hence, a linguistic change in river stem terminology is a significant boundary marker between groups and, as Kari has proposed, reflects prehistoric movements and the differentiation of one Athabascan language group from another.

The group that eventually became the Dena'ina had been part of this ancestral Athabascan core that moved down the Yukon River and eventually became established in the Upper Kuskokwim piedmont known as *Htsaynenq'* recognized as the ancestral Inland Dena'ina home as mentioned above. At that point in time the people might be considered ancestral Dena'ina and not yet differentiated from ancestral Upper Kuskokwim (whose word for themselves is also Dena'ina) and Deg Hit'an and would have occurred before about 500 B.C. according to Krauss's age estimate. Kari's hypothesis has ancestral Dena'ina differentiating from the Upper Kuskokwim as they moved into their present Inland and Iliamna territory (Kari 2003:144-147). About the same time ancestral Athabascans moving down the Copper River established what became Ahtna territory with a portion moving into the Susitna drainage contributing to the close language similarity between the Upper Inlet dialect and Ahtna language. The similarity of Upper Inlet Dena'ina to Ahtna and the dissimilarity of Outer Inlet Dena'ina to Ahtna and Upper Inlet Dena'ina indicates upper Cook Inlet was occupied by Athabascans coming from the east while Outer Cook Inlet was occupied by Dena'ina coming from the west, either Iliamna dialect speakers or Inland dialect speakers (Kari 2003:13). The close similarity of Outer Inlet Dena'ina to Iliamna Dena'ina (James Kari, personal communication, June, 2004) suggests the Dena'ina

Figure 5. Athabascan stem words for streams showing possible prehistoric movements. Adapted from Kari (1996).



occupation of Cook Inlet may have come from the low pass connecting Iliamna Lake to Tuxedni Bay although, as Kari points out movement could also have been through Lake Clark Pass or Merrill Pass (See Figure 5).

Throughout Dena'ina territory, even on the Kenai Peninsula where a known presumed Yup'ik or Alutiiq speaking culture represented in the Kachemak tradition predates the Dena'ina, there is little evidence for archaic Eskimo or non-Athabaskan place names (Kari 1988:327). This may attest to the incompatibility of the very distinctive Dena'ina language to accommodate non-Athabaskan words or, more likely, to the long duration of Dena'ina in their territory. Dené may have occupied south-central and southwestern Alaska from the beginning and Kari's two-directional occupation of Cook Inlet is the basis from which further research of Dena'ina origins should proceed. Stated a different way, some elders, such as the late Albert Baktuit, say the Dena'ina have been here "forever."

Evidence from Archaeology

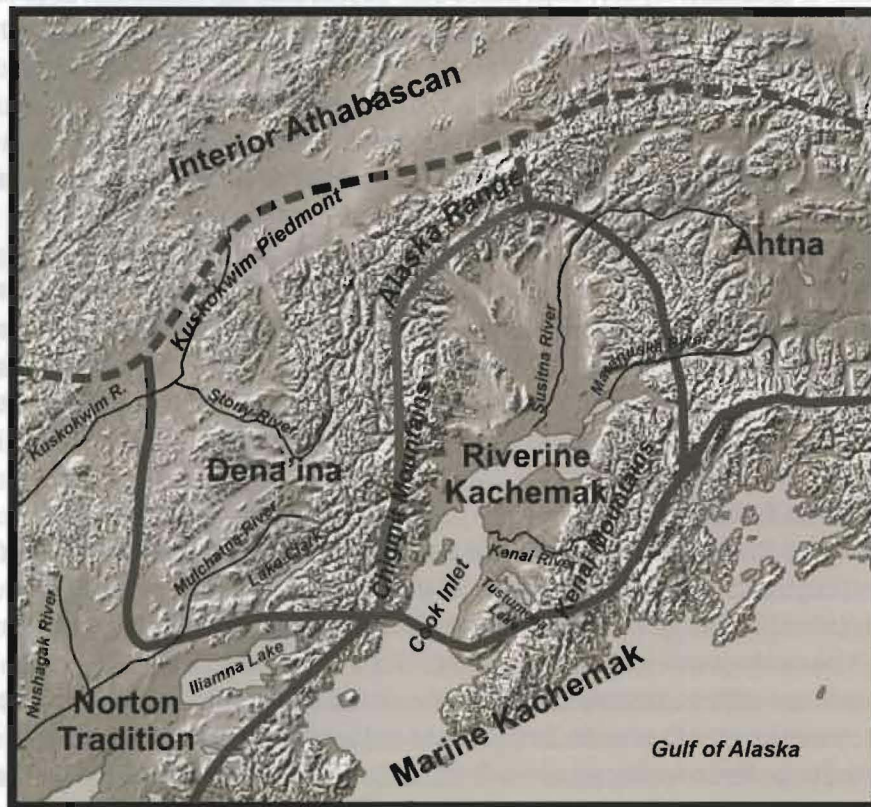
By 8000 BC post-Pleistocene warming caused glacial retreat and made occupation of Dena'ina territory possible although it was not until about 4000 BC that all habitable areas became ice-free and substantial ice field remnants of the Ice Age remain to this day (Reger and Pinney 1996). A reasonable archaeological scenario holds that a Paleoarctic culture distinguished by microblade/core artifacts, possibly brought by an ancestral Ket-speaking population mentioned above, crossed from the Russian Far East to Alaska and became the ancestral Athabaskan population in the North. Another possibility is that these pre-Dené interacted with indigenous peoples already established in Alaska represented by the Chindahdin complex of artifacts.

Cook and McKennan (1971) thought the 8,000 BC Chindahdin sites represented the original Athabascans but the artifacts have no apparent connections to Siberia and at least one interpretation is they have similarities to artifacts to the south (cf. Bever 2001) suggesting the Dené oral tradition that Northern Athabascans migrated from south to north may have archaeological support. Either way we can assume that these early Athabascans hunted caribou and small game, trapped, fished, and gathered plant foods in a nomadic movement around their territories. A 7000 BC Paleoarctic site in the Lime Hills in western Dena'ina territory is evidence of this event (Ackerman 1996:473).

The southcentral Alaska the Paleoarctic culture gave way in certain areas to a poorly known Northern Archaic influenced culture distinguished by stone points with side notches. In some cases, Marine-oriented slate tools—known to archeologists as Ocean Bay technology—were adopted by Athabascans in interior areas such as Iliamna Lake and the Sustina Valley where they were used in non-marine hunting and fishing (Reger and Townsend 2004; Dixon 2003).

Beginning in 1500 BC, Yu'piq speakers with Norton-style artifacts (such as harpoons and kayaks typical of coastal Southwest Alaska) expanded probably via Iliamna Lake into Cook Inlet becoming the sedentary Riverine Kachemak tradition (Reger 1998:169) with major sites in the Kasilof, Kenai and Susitna drainages and displaced the resident Dené nomadic hunters (or pushed them to the mountains). Riverine peoples fished for salmon in the main channels of large rivers using spruce root drift nets held down by stone net weights (Boraas 2002a). Although the archaeological record is not as developed, a similar Yup'it style culture probably existed in the middle Kuskokwim, Nusagak, and lower Mulchatna drainages during the same time period. Dena'ina peoples maintained a nomadic caribou hunting pattern in the Inland area.

Figure 6A. Prehistoric Cultures in South-Central Alaska 1000 B.C. to A.D. 1000. The Dashed lines are approximate boundaries.



Shifts in Dena'ina Technology and Social Structure 1000 Years Ago

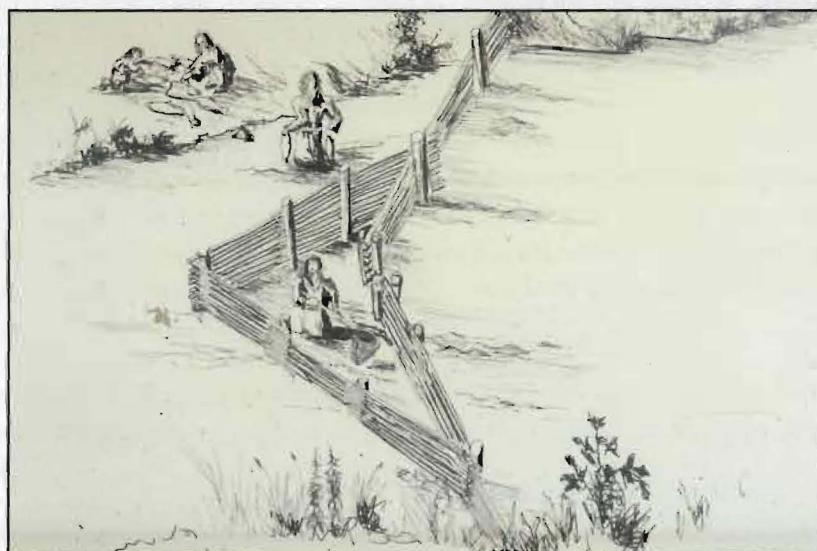
Though the Riverine people primarily fished for salmon, they lacked the ability to store fish on a large scale. Because of limited storage technology, the harvest of salmon and hence the population size would have been limited not by the number of fish they could catch and process, but by the number of fish they could store.

About 1000 AD the Dena'ina of the Lake Clark area developed a method to catch and store salmon using weirs and store them in underground cold storage pits called *ethen tugh* (Kenai dialect) and the idea spread and led to the withdrawal of the Riverine culture from Cook Inlet where they were replaced by the now sedentary Dena'ina. Rather than drift fishing in the major rivers, weir fishing focused on fishing tributary streams and side channels. A stout pole and wicker dam was built that blocked fish movement but permitted water to pass through. The damned fish were then picked, cleaned, dried, and stored. When not fishing, a gate was opened and spawning salmon proceed upstream. In this way large numbers of salmon could be harvested. Underground cold storage pits provided the means to store fish for consumption leading to larger populations and to provide a surplus becoming the basis of the emergence of Dena'ina political and social complexity—along with the Ahtna the most complex in pre-contact Northern Athabascan territory. They consisted of a pit lined with birch bark and moss and layered with dried fish and grass during fall freeze-up. The fresh frozen fish were eaten throughout the winter and spring until the next summer's salmon run. In the event of spoilage or loss of stores to predators, surplus frozen fish could be acquired from partner villages through the *Qeshqa's* (chief's) formal partner the *selden*, or from villages allied by marriage.

Two places in Alaska where underground cold storage technology evolved and proved beneficial were Dena'ina territory and Ahtna territory. The technology required 1) large numbers of salmon moving into tributary creeks or side channels (weirs cannot be used in the main channel of large, swift flowing rivers) creating a concentrated biomass, and 2) frozen ground but not permafrost. Only in pockets of southcentral Alaska, notably the middle to upper Mulchatna River drainage, Lake Clark, the Upper and Outer Inlet territory as well as the middle Copper River is there winter frozen ground without permafrost and substantial fish runs easily collected from small tributary streams and side-channels. The Slikok Creek site on the Kenai Peninsula has 91 underground cold storage pits surrounding five prehistoric houses.

Weir technology and the surplus of stored fish probably triggered the shift to a strong clan-based structure to organize labor for intensive fishing. A village consisted of men of a matrilineal clan and their wives from opposite clans (called moieties). The village people were called *nakilaqa* or clan helpers and the stored food resources were controlled by the *Qeshqa* who then redistributed the stored food back to the clan helpers as needed throughout the winter or shunted surplus food to his or her partner should an emergency arise. Unlike their nomadic ancestors, the people lived in sedentary villages consisting of substantial log houses, *nichit*, near tributary streams. When not fishing, they hunted, gathered plants, and trapped furs.

Figure 6B. "Working at the Weir," an interpretation of a precontact Dena'ina weir based on Osgood 1976, drawn by Bill Thomas.



Radiocarbon dates from *nichit* and related structures indicate sedentism spread through Dena'ina territory starting around A.D. 1000 (Reger and Boraas 1996). Sedentism probably originated in the Lake Clark area (see Lynch 1982 for a discussion of the important Kijik Site) where radiocarbon dates of sedentary houses are slightly earlier than other places in Dena'ina territory. The Inland area lacked a resident Riverine Kachemak occupation and intensive weir fishing probably emerged from greater reliance on increasing salmon and a relative decrease in reliance on caribou and coincides with climatic/ecological changes associated with the Medieval Warm Period (Mann et al. 1998). The successful technology then spread to Cook Inlet where Dena'ina replaced the 2000 year incursion of the Riverine Kachemak people who had not developed large-scale storage capability.

The first salmon ceremony recorded by Osgood (1976:148-9) and a salmon ceremony recorded by Shem Pete (Kari and Fall 2003:184-190) both depict the origin of intensive salmon fishing. In both instances the stories indicate the Dena'ina already occupy their territory and thus these are not a mythology of migration but a mythology of cultural adaptation. In Osgood's story a chief admonishes his daughter not to go near the salmon weir; she does, slips into the water, and disappears. A few years later the chief sees his grandson in the form of a salmon in the weir and initiates the first salmon ceremony done each year in recognition of the Dena'ina becoming salmon people.

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