

Dena'ina Social Structure and Political Organization

Kenai Peninsula College

Anthropology 325: Cook Inlet Anthropology

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1. Overview of an anthropological/ethnographic view of culture
 - 1.1. Ethnographic description of a culture
 - 1.1.1. Ethnographic description of Franz Boas
 - 1.1.1.1. Technology (material culture), Social Structure, Subsistence, Politics, Religion
 - 1.1.1.1.1. Edward Sapir was a student of Franz Boas, Cornelius Osgood was a student of Edward Sapir. Hence, *Ethnography of the Tanaina* uses this strategy ethnographic strategy.
 - 1.1.2. Other classifications:
 - 1.1.2.1. Infrastructure, Structure, Superstructure (M. Harris)
 - 1.1.2.2. Energy ↔ Structure ↔ Ideology (chart, this document)
 - 1.1.3. Emic view may be quite different
 - 1.2. Definitions
 - 1.2.1. Social Structure (Social Organization) Definition: The relationships of groups within a society which hold it together.
 - 1.2.1.1. typical categories of social structure
 - 1.2.1.1.1. Kinship (bilateral, patrilineal, matrilineal)
 - 1.2.1.1.2. Non-Kinship Associations (age grades, voluntary associations, etc)
 - 1.2.1.1.3. Class Structure
 - 1.2.2. themes:
 - 1.2.2.1. social structure reflects a cultural adaptation
 - 1.2.2.2. social structure forms an ideation of how relations between people are structured
 - 1.2.3. Anthropological theories
 - 1.2.3.1. Descent theory
 - 1.2.3.2. Alliance theory
 - 1.2.4. Political Structure, Definition - Group decision making and the maintenance of social order
 - 1.2.4.1.1. Themes: sovereignty, legitimacy, law and order
2. Dena'ina Kinship and Descent
 - 2.1. Dena'ina society is based on a corporate kin structure and classificatory kin definitions.
 - 2.1.1. Corporate = economic organization based on roles filled by kin members

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- 2.1.2. Classificatory Kin = roles are determined by birth or marriage and "determined" by kin terminology
 - 2.2. Dena'ina reckoned kinship matrilineally
 - 2.3. Dena'ina Moieties and Clans
 - 2.3.1. Clan: group of related individuals who trace their origin to a mythical ancestor (totemic representation)
 - 2.3.2. Moiety: Two sets of clans
 - 2.3.2.1. Dena'ina Moieties and Clans
- | | |
|---|---|
| <u>Moiety A</u>
<i>Chixyi</i> - Ochre
<i>Nuhzhi</i> - Overland
<i>Kaliyi</i> - Fishtail
<i>Ggahyi</i> - Raven
(possibly others, see Osgood 1976; Wrangel 1839) | <u>Moiety B</u>
<i>Nulchina</i> - Sky
<i>Tulchina</i> - Water |
|---|---|
- 2.3.3. Clan crests (totems)
 - 2.3.3.1. Moiety A
 - 2.3.3.1.1. Ochre: 3 or 4 lateral lines across the cheeks alternating red and black
 - 2.3.3.1.2. Overland: 1 lateral line, either red or black, across the cheeks, and dots below near the corners of the mouth
 - 2.3.3.1.3. Raven: One red line from the bottom of the ears to the corners of the mouth, with vertical lines of red, black or both, below the line
 - 2.3.3.2. Moiety B
 - 2.3.3.2.1. Sky: Right side of the face has various red marks while the left side has various black marks
 - 2.3.3.2.2. Water: The right side of the face is painted red and scratched with fingernails to make streaks, while spots are put on the left side of the face.
- 3. Pre-Contact Dena'ina Marriage and Family
 - 3.1. Exogamy (required marriage outside of a specific group) applied among clans; The Dena'ina required a marriage partner be from the opposite moiety.
 - 3.2. Mate selection: generally arranged by couple's parents
 - 3.3. Cross-cousin marriage preferred; especially a boy to his father's sister's daughter.
 - 3.3.1. Cross-cousin: adult generation of different gender father's sister's children, or mother's brother's children
 - 3.3.2. Parallel cousin: adult generation of same gender: father's brother's children, mother's sister's children
 - 3.4. Bride Service, Bride Price & Avunculocal Residence
 - 3.4.1. Bride Service: Upon marriage a husband was required to spend a year working (hunting, trapping etc.) for the bride's parents as "payment" for the privilege of marrying their daughter. Couple lived with bride's parents during this time
 - 3.4.2. Alternately a wealthy man could pay a fee (bride price) for the same privilege. In some cases a potlatch (see potlatch) was also required.

3.5. After bride service residence was avunculocal i.e. couple generally lived in the same village as the husband's mother's brother. Neolocal residence (anywhere they wished) was also permitted but rare.

3.5.1. After bride service the husband received gifts from the bride's parents. These were repaid if the marriage was later dissolved.

3.6. Sororal Polygyny & Sororate

3.6.1. Sororal Polygyny: Man was permitted multiple wives usually sisters. Practiced by those men wealthy enough to support multiple wives.

3.6.2. Sororate: Upon death of a wife a man was expected to marry her sister, if available.

4. Life Cycle

4.1. Birth and Childhood

4.1.1. Children were born into the clan of their mother (matrilineal)

4.1.2. Midwives assisted the birth in a special birch bark shelter. Men were excluded unless a shaman's services were required. Osgood reports child bearing was generally not difficult (probably mother was squatting during birth). Mother and child were secluded in this shelter for about 40 days.

4.1.3. Infant was placed in a moss lined birch bark cradle or in a moss lined skin bag. Women were said to give birth of 6-8 children. Children were nursed for 1-5 years.

4.1.4. Child was named sometime during the first two years often for a dead relative. Names were given for life. Teknonymous names were also used i.e. addressing a parent as the mother or father of the eldest child.

4.1.5. Children were highly prized, girls tended to be preferred over boys because they were "less trouble." Infanticide was not practiced

4.1.6. Orphans were readily adopted by a close relative usually of the same clan as the child. If there was no close relatives the "chief" was obligated to adopt the child. In either case the child retained his/her clan membership.

4.2. Puberty and Adulthood

4.2.1. Young boys were usually sent to live with their mother's brother to learn the ways of manhood. About age 6. This included hunting/fishing skills and endurance of hardships such as cold, hunger. Training was rigorous.

4.2.2. Male ceremony practiced at age 15 recognizing transition to adulthood. Usually consisted of a prolonged fast. No other details are known.

4.2.3. Girl's coming-of-age ceremony: At first menstruation a girl was confined to an attached hut. She lived in that hut for up to a year during which she was visited only by her mother who taught her the skills and ways of womanhood. During that year she was not to look at anyone. When she went outside she had to cover her face and look at the ground. In some cases she wore a special mask which diverted her gaze toward the ground. After the year she was free to marry.

4.3. Homosexuality was recognized and considered normal

4.3.1. Although Alutiiq had the berdache, it is not clear whether the Dena'ina did

4.4. Adults functioned as part of an avunculocal group

4.5. Daily life

4.5.1. virtue to arise early, fires built by commoners, boys bring in the wood and water,

4.5.2. main meal in evening, elderly and children “graze” during the day; some villages ate communally rotating each evening from house to house according to social rank, others ate by household; women make meal: men eat first, women second, children third, dogs last; hospitality a virtue

4.6. Death

4.6.1. funeral was a prominent ceremony and consists of

4.6.1.1.1. cremation

4.6.1.1.2. Big potlatch

4.6.2. Cremation (within a week or so of death)

4.6.3. Body is washed dressed and drawn into a sitting position; family stayed with the body;

4.6.4. several miles away a pyre is built of logs where the body is cremated; the body is pierced to allow spirits to escape; after the fire,

4.6.5. the remains are gathered and buried or hung in a bag on a pole; after the cremation;

4.6.6. Mourning: extreme grief: widow will burn her hair and skin at the funeral pyre, skewer her flesh. Sometimes the widow commits suicide by spear or hanging or becomes insane. Less often a man will do the same. Sometimes the death of a child elicits the same. Sometimes people gather to sing mourning songs all night

4.6.7. chiefs and shamans have more elaborate funerals.

4.6.7.1. Big Potlatch, given 1-2 years after death, (see potlatch below for details)

4.6.7.1.1. Dena'ina believed that the shadow spirit (soul) of a deceased individual returned periodically to the village

4.6.7.1.2. shadow spirits were aware of one's thoughts

4.6.7.1.3. potlatch ceremony, given by the opposite moiety, i.e. a boy for his deceased father, etc. propitiated spirits of deceased relatives

5. Social Organization and Subsistence

5.1. The avunculocal group formed the basic economic (subsistence) unit for procuring and distributing food. Among the Dena'ina the avunculocal group consisted of the males of the same clan and their wives and children.

5.2. Levels of organization

5.2.1. *Nichil*- Household composed of parents, their offspring and possibly his unmarried brothers. Generally lived in the same *Nichil* (house)

- 5.2.2. Village - Several households linked by the fact that the males tend to be of the same clan
 - 5.2.3. Village organization – households formed the *ukilqa* or "clan helpers" who cooperated in hunting and fishing.
 - 5.3. *Ukilqa* were led by a *Qeshqa* (toyon) or hunting chief. (see below)
 - 5.4. Bands. Dena'ina people thought of themselves as belonging to various "bands" corresponding to geographic territory. (emic view) (See Kari and Fall 1987 p. 26) Each were distinct groups but there was much interaction between bands through an extensive trail system (see Kari and Kari p. 46) and across Cook Inlet by boat travel
6. Stratification and Rank
- 6.1. Dena'ina was a stratified society
 - 6.1.1. Two types of societies
 - 6.1.2. Egalitarian: no social stratification or hierarchy, usually occur only in societies where there the only division of labor is based on sex (i.e. male and female roles).
 - 6.1.3. Stratified: Hierarchy based on ranking of individual roles; occurs where there are multiple economic roles (occupations)
 - 6.2. Dena'ina Social Classes--Stratification
 - 6.2.1. Nobles or *Qeshqa*: wealthy individuals, the oldest and richest in a village (sometimes a group of villages) would be considered chief or qeshqa. The qeshqa was the hunting chief (called toyon by the Russians) who controlled the food and furs obtained by the *ukilqa* who were commoners and most generally male members of his own clan. Wealthy *qeshqa* were permitted several wives.
 - 6.2.2. Commoners or *Ukilqa*: Most Dena'ina were *ukilqa*. The males and their families were associated with a qeshqa who was the male head of their village (avunculocal group) The produce of their hunting and fishing was controlled by the qeshqa.
 - 6.2.3. "Legal Aliens" (Slaves): Pacific Alutiiq or other non-Athabaskan cultures, captured in war were referred to as "slaves." However, they were treated fairly, sometimes were given their freedom, and upon being given freedom may elect to stay with their owner as a commoner. Women were captured as wives and apparently had full rights (clan affiliation, however, was unclear)
 - 6.3. Gender Relations
 - 6.3.1. Men and women were considered equal in terms of access to wealth, prestige and influence. However, historically, most positions of leadership (*Qeshqa*, hunting chief, shaman etc.) were held by males.
7. Partnerships
- 7.1. *Slocin*: Partnership established between qeshqa of opposite moieties. Partnership sealed with a potlatch or gifts and was lifelong. Relationship involved sexual access to one another's wives, the only case of sexual relations between members of the same moiety.
 - 7.2. *Selden*: Partnership between male hunters. It is unclear whether or not they were of opposite moiety. A deep, lifelong bond based on mutual self-help.

8. Social Structure and the Redistributive Economy of the Dena'ina
 - 8.1. Basic unit was the avunculocal group (village) headed by the qeshqa. The qeshqa was the key position in a redistributive economy based on seasonally abundant resources
 - 8.2. *Qeshqa* attracted "followers" called *Ukilqa*
 - 8.3. mostly male members of his clan and their wives (and children)
 - 8.4. *Ukilqa* fished, hunted and gathered food resources for the *Qeshqa*. In this way he accumulated wealth, prestige and power
 - 8.5. *Qeshqa* validated their position of authority by generously redistributing back to his *ukilqa* food and other resources through feasts and potlatches
 - 8.6. *Qeshqa* seldom left the village and made "rounds" looking after people
9. Potlatch
 - 9.1. Five components of the potlatch feast
 - 9.1.1. Redistribution of wealth
 - 9.1.2. Achievement and validation of prestige
 - 9.1.3. creation of reciprocal obligations through generalized reciprocity
 - 9.1.4. Ceremony of social unity
 - 9.1.5. Propitiate spirits of deceased relatives
 - 9.2. Big Potlatch Ceremony: Kenai variation see Osgood p. 157)
 - 9.2.1. When the potlatch giver (X) has accumulated sufficient wealth he announces his attention to give a potlatch. Often given to commemorate the dead, but always given for the opposite moiety.
 - 9.2.2. Between the time of the announcement and the potlatch members of the opposite moiety "loan" X valuable items. X takes a sweat bath every day
 - 9.2.3. On the appointed day all involved gather for feasting, games and dancing. Taking sweat baths are a regular part of the activities. Guests have "license" to be demanding at feasts. But if they are too demanding they are reprimanded by their own kin.
 - 9.2.4. On the last day X sings a potlatch song specially composed for the occasion and eulogizes the dead. Later potlatch songs were sung. Moieties seemed to own potlatch songs which could be sold for use by an opposite moiety.
 - 9.2.5. The material "loaned" by the opposite moiety is distributed by X to members of his moiety.
 - 9.2.6. X repays the opposite moiety for the items "loaned" at 100% interest (i.e. if they loan him 1 beaver pelt, he repays them with 2).
 - 9.2.7. The mortuary workers are paid for their services
 - 9.3. Kachemak Bay variation (p. 149 Osgood)
 - 9.3.1. When X decides to give a potlatch to commemorate a dead relative, he informs the *Qeshqa* of the date. The deceased is a member of the opposite moiety (e.g. a father potlatched by his son)
 - 9.3.2. the *Qeshqa* announces the date
 - 9.3.3. The invited men and wives gather at the house of X. They are given an elaborate feast

- 9.3.4. After the feast the women go home or look on. Young men sit on one side, old men on the other, Qeshqas at the back
- 9.3.5. X makes a speech including a eulogy
- 9.3.6. At the end of the speech he invites those present to join in a potlatch. Among those who consent X asks for what he chooses from them. If an individual does not have the requested item he can borrow it from his Qeshqa. These "loaned" goods are then piled in the center.
- 9.3.7. Special potlatch songs are sung. X sings a song composed for the occasion. Drummers are paid performers.
- 9.3.8. X's brother or Qeshqa pay those who helped in the funeral from items in the pile.
- 9.3.9. The rest of the pile is distributed among the most needy, especially the old.
- 9.3.10. X goes to his cache and repays those who "loaned" him items earlier at 100%. He then pays the potlatch helpers and the drummers.
- 9.3.11. Following games someone from the opposite moiety announces his intent to potlatch and the whole process repeats. A potlatch can last weeks.

10. Maintenance of the Social Order

- 10.1. Dispute resolution, Qeshqa
 - 10.1.1. influence but not authority
 - 10.1.2. position of the Qeshqa "tended" to be inherited, legitimized by consensus
- 10.2. Little Potlatch
 - 10.2.1. used to resolve disputes the Qeshqa could not resolve
- 10.3. informal sanctions: gossip, avoidance
- 10.4. formal sanctions: blood-revenge
- 10.5. supernatural sanctions: retribution for "improper" behavior, Nantina stories

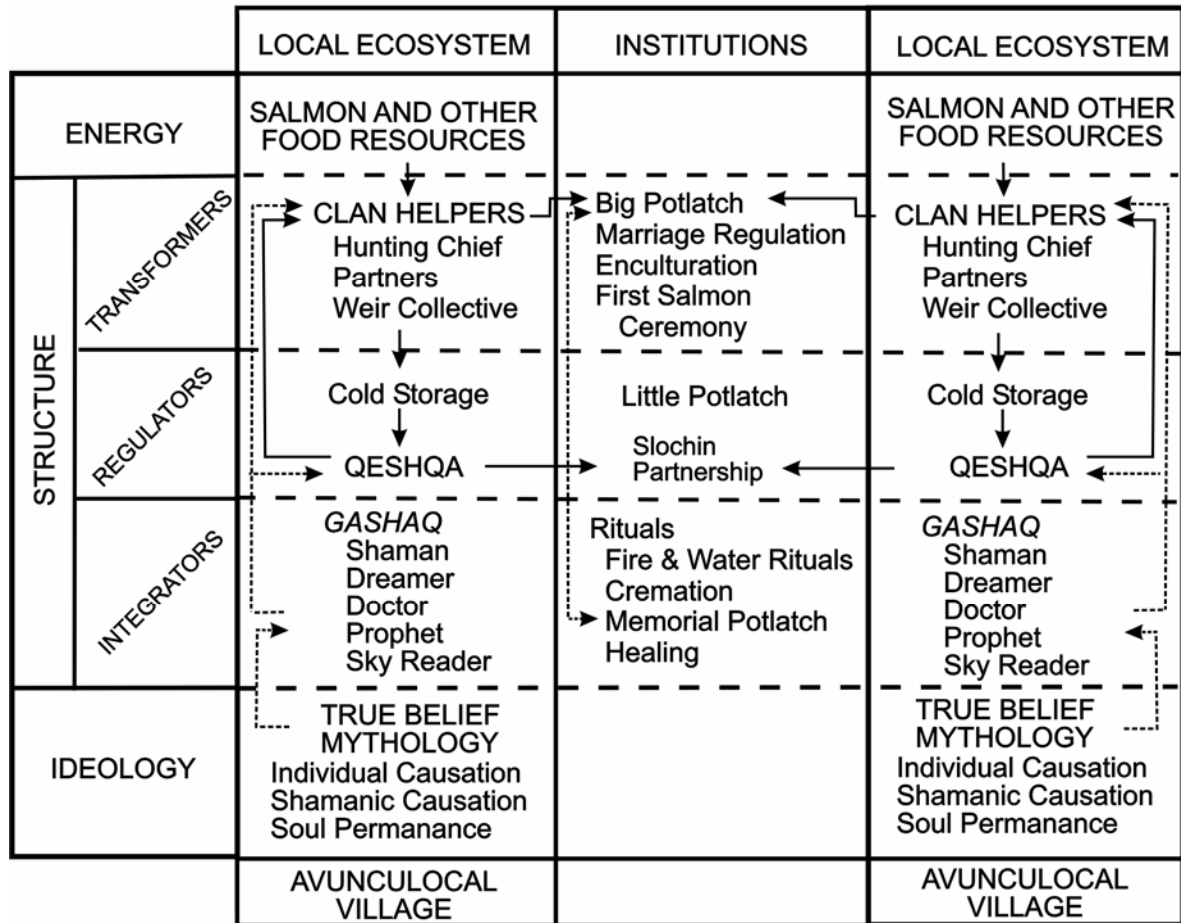


Figure 1: Structural Depiction of Dena'ina Culture (Boraas 2004)