

The Kolchan: Delineation of a New Northern Athapaskan Indian Group

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ABSTRACT. Archeological and ethnographic research in the region of the upper Kuskokwim River, interior Alaska, defines the territory and culture of a previously unstudied Alaskan Athapaskan Indian group. Cultural reconstruction indicates that the occupants of this region, earlier thought to be a subdivision of the Ingalik, are an independent geographical, cultural, and linguistic entity.

RÉSUMÉ. *Les Kolchan : définition d'un nouveau groupe d'Athapaskan septentrionaux.* Des recherches archéologiques et ethnographiques dans la région de la haute Kuskokwim, dans l'Alaska intérieur, ont permis de définir le territoire et la culture d'un groupe Athapaskan de l'Alaska qui n'avait jamais été étudié auparavant. La reconstruction culturelle indique que les habitants de la région, considérés jusqu'ici comme un sous-groupe des Ingalik, forment une entité géographique, culturelle et linguistique indépendante.

РЕЗЮМЕ. *Колчаны — новая группа северных индейцев Атапасков.* Археологические и этнографические исследования в верховьях реки Кускоквим в центральной Аляске определили территорию и культуру ранее неизученной группы индейцев атапасков Аляски. В прошлом считалось, что жители данного района принадлежат к группе индейцев ингаликов. Однако реконструкция культуры указывает на то, что они представляют собой независимую географическую, культурную и лингвистическую единицу.

The area of the upper Kuskokwim River (see Oswalt 1963, pp. viii-ix) has long represented a lacuna in Alaskan anthropology, both archeologically and ethnographically. From the mouth of the Stony River north to the vicinity of Lake Minchumina, the Kuskokwim drains an area of more than 22,000 square miles to the west of the Alaska Range. An isolated region even today, this is the territory of what was until recently one of the least-known Northern Athapaskan Indian groups in Alaska (Fig. 1). Since 1960, I have had the opportunity to conduct both ethnographic and archeological studies in this region, the results of which indicate that it is a crucial area in the understanding of the nature and distribution of the Alaskan Athapaskans (Hosley 1961, 1965).

In his pioneering studies of the Athapaskans of the lower Yukon and central Kuskokwim rivers, Osgood (1936, p. 13) considered the occupants of the upper Kuskokwim a subdivision of the Ingalik Indians, referring to them as the McGrath Ingalik, on the basis of evidence available to him at that time. He cautioned, however, that further study might show them to be independent (Osgood 1940, p. 31). Zagoskin, who in 1844 explored the upper Kuskokwim River as far north as the present community of McGrath, referred to the inhabitants of the area as the *Goltsan*, and clearly distinguished between them and the downstream occupants. Zagoskin placed the southern limits of their territory at the Swift River, a tributary entering the upper Kuskokwim from the east (Michael 1967, pp. 267-68). Variations of this name, such as *Kolchanes* (Oswalt 1960, p. 109), and *Kyltschanes* (VanStone 1959, p. 43), occur repeatedly in the early literature.

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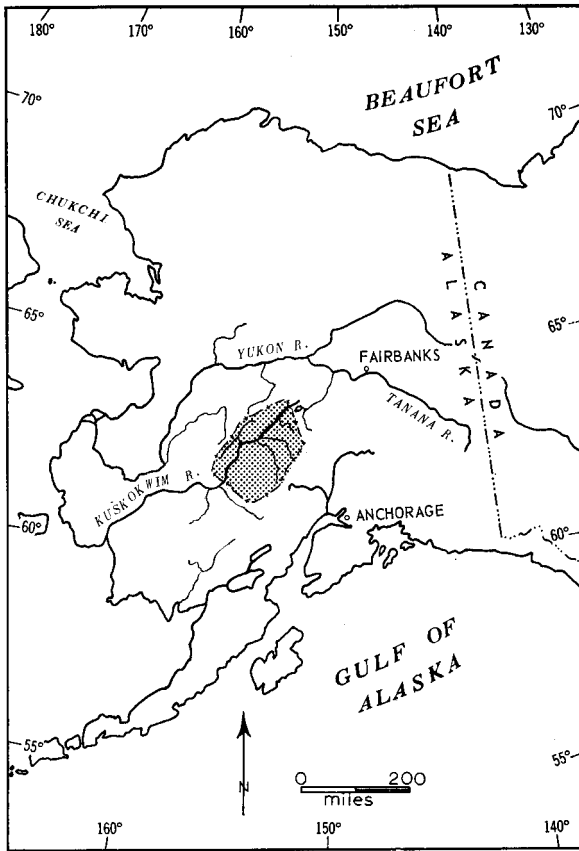


FIG. 1. Alaska and the territory of the Kolchan.

Because of such prior use, the term *Kolchan* is here proposed to designate the inhabitants of the upper Kuskokwim River, marking them as an independent group of Northern Athapaskans. The term used by the Kolchan themselves is *Tenaynah*, but this is too similar to the adjacent Tanana and Tanaina for introduction into the literature. By referring to the Kolchan as an independent group, I am implying that they constitute a geographical unit, that they share a culture and a history which separates them from adjacent groups, and that they are at least dialectally distinct from other Alaskan Athapaskan Indians. Ethnohistorical reconstruction shows the Kolchan to have been a complex of localized, intermarrying, and economically co-operating adjoining bands.

I have examined a number of archeological sites in the upper Kuskokwim drainage, which appear to be predominantly of two types. On an earlier horizon, they consist of both small groups of semisubterranean houses which probably reflect winter encampments, and large numbers of summer fishing camps, many of them of respectable time depth and thus indicating repeated occupation over long periods of time. On a more recent time level, probably subsequent to the mid-nineteenth century, are several larger communities, some with log dwellings and graveyards. These have all been abandoned, and point towards a decrease in nomadism in recent times, as well as a formerly larger population for the region.

The territory of the Kolchan prior to the Russian period, on the basis of both archeological and ethnographic evidence, extended from the western foothills of the Alaska Range to the eastern slope of the Kuskokwim Mountains, and from the Swift River on the southwest to the divide between the Kuskokwim and Kantishna drainages, west of Lake Minchumina (Fig. 2). Although the Kolchan extended their territory northeastward to include Lake Minchumina and the upper Kantishna River in late prehistoric and early historic times, this region appears to have been inhabited earlier by Koyukon from the lower Tanana River. Acting as middlemen in the fur trade out of Fort St. Nicholas on Cook Inlet, the Tanaina, the Athapaskan group to the east of the Kolchan, expanded west across the Alaska Range via Rainy Pass and briefly occupied a portion of the Kolchan region during the early Russian Period (Hosley 1965, pp. 46, 72; Michael 1967, p. 269). Although at present concentrated primarily in one community, Nikolai Village on the South Fork of the Kuskokwim, the Kolchan in aboriginal times were scattered in small, autonomous, seminomadic bands throughout the upper

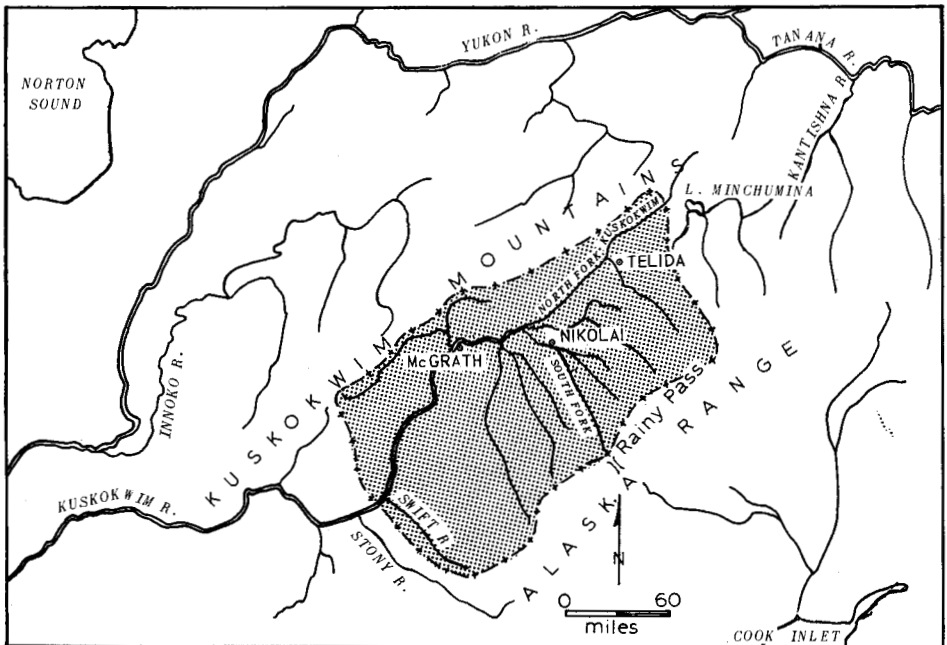


FIG. 2. Central Alaska and the upper Kuskokwim River region, showing the limits of aboriginal Kolchan occupation.

Kuskokwim basin, each band exploiting a given territory along one or more tributaries of the main river. Occupation then centred on the clear-water streams on the eastern side of the Kolchan territory; the movement west to the larger, silt-laden rivers came much later as a consequence of the fur trade and more recently the introduction of the fishwheel. Permanent villages are clearly a new development among the Kolchan.

While Osgood (1936, pp. 20-22) characterizes the Pacific Drainage Culture of the Northern Athapaskans, of which the Kolchan are a part, as economically

dependent upon salmon fishing, the cultural focus of the Kolchan in aboriginal times was upon hunting, particularly of caribou; fishing was of only subsidiary importance. McKennan (1964, p. 2) has also raised this point with regard to the Athapaskans of central Alaska. Fishing is doubtless of major significance in the subsistence pattern of the more riverine Indians and Eskimos of the lower Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers, but has become a major factor in the Kolchan economy only in recent decades.

It is in the realm of social organization, however, that the Kolchan differ most markedly from the Ingalik on the Yukon River as described by Osgood (1940, 1959), and most closely resemble the Athapaskan groups to the north and east, such as the Tanana and Tanaina (McKennan, personal communications, and 1959, p. 124; Osgood 1937, p. 128). For the Anvik or Yukon Ingalik, Osgood states that they lack matrilineal sibs or clans (1940, p. 456), and an analysis of his kinship terms (Osgood 1959, p. 185) yields an Eskimo form of social organization as defined by Murdock (1949, pp. 226-28). This type of kinship structure is a bilateral one and not conducive to the formation of common descent groups such as clans, sibs, or phratries. I consider that this could have been a consequence of contact between Athapaskan and Eskimo groups on the lower Yukon River, and that the Ingalik were formerly matrilineal. The aboriginal Kolchan, on the other hand, had a Normal Iroquois social system, as defined by Murdock (1949, pp. 243-45), characterized by unilineal descent and a division into 3 named, matrilineal, common descent or clan-like groups. (The term *clan* is here used as defined by Lowie, 1948, p. 9, to mean an exogamous kin group consisting of a larger group of people than can usually be traced to a common ancestor, yet which possesses a unity similar to a lineage.) These groups were: *St'chelayu*, "fish people"; *Tonay'tlil'tsitnah*, "middle kind" or "people in the middle"; and *Medzish't'hut'anah*, "caribou people". (It is of interest to note that Osgood, 1940, p. 471, lists in his vocabulary for the Yukon Ingalik the term *bedzish'tawat'tana*, translated as "people among the caribou.") The second category seems to have been reserved for people whose parents had failed to adhere to the rule of exogamy in the selection of marriage partners, and hence may be an outgrowth of what was once a moiety system. A tripartite system of exogamous matrilineal clan-like groupings, often with complexities transforming them into phratries, is a widespread pattern among Alaskan Athapaskans, and is probably a very old cultural trait.

Linguistically, the Kolchan are not so easily classified. More than one dialect is in use in Nikolai Village, and the vocabulary includes a sprinkling of Koyukon, Tanaina, and Ingalik terms. I suspect, however, that a thorough study would reveal an underlying linguistic stratum more or less independent of the languages spoken by these adjacent Athapaskan Indian groups. The linguistic overlay appears to be the product of an influx of migrants in relatively recent times, a fact supported by native traditions (Hosley 1964).

From a total of 6 separate band groupings in the upper Kuskokwim River area in late prehistoric times, the Kolchan have coalesced into one community, Nikolai Village, with a population of approximately 125 persons. The satellite village of Telida, 50 miles to the north, is at present the residence of only one extended family. On archeological grounds, this figure is probably somewhat less than the

maximum population for the Kolchan in precontact times, and they are still increasing in numbers from a low point of less than 70 following epidemics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Following the decimation of the caribou herds in the 1920's, the Kolchan subsistence base has focused increasingly upon fishing, trapping, and wage labour, a trend which originated in the early contact period. The Kolchan are today strongly Russian Orthodox in faith, the result of missionary influence from the lower Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. As a group, they tend to be conservative in outlook, a trait often associated with Orthodoxy in Alaska, and although a school has been in existence at Nikolai since 1950, they remain one of the least acculturated groups in interior Alaska.

While I hesitate to add yet another group to an already complex situation in Alaska, I feel that inasmuch as the Kolchan constitute a separate geographical, cultural, historical, and probably linguistic entity, their delineation as an independent unit will contribute to the understanding of the anthropology of interior Alaska. Considering the cultural and linguistic continuum existing between adjacent groups, the designation of distinct "tribes," though serving a practical purpose, does not reflect the true situation in interior Alaska. For instance, on the basis of social structure, the Kolchan, Tanaina, and at least some of the Tanana can validly be looked upon as related subdivisions of a larger unit. Nevertheless, as a group possessing a history and a culture differing from those of its neighbours, the Kolchan deserve to be recognized as an independent group of Alaskan Athapaskans.

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