

1. Description

1.1 Name of society, language, and language family:

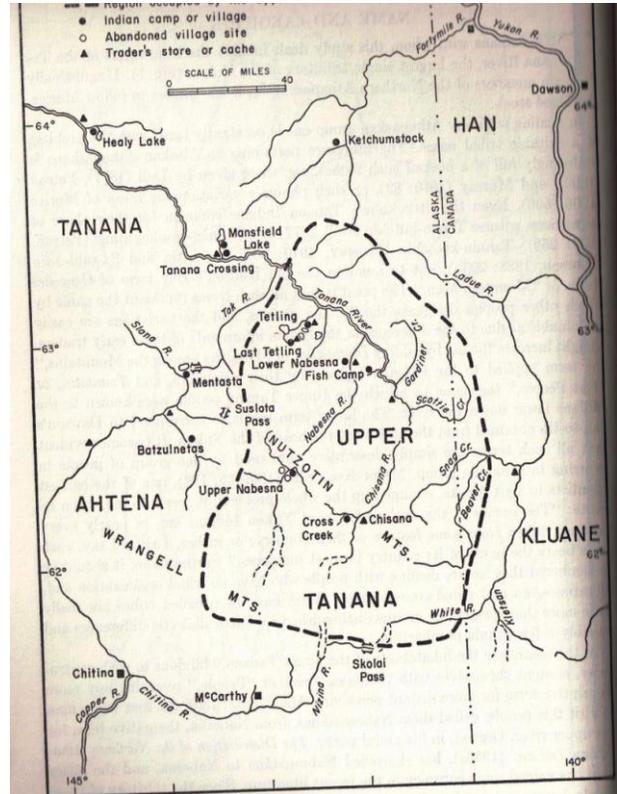
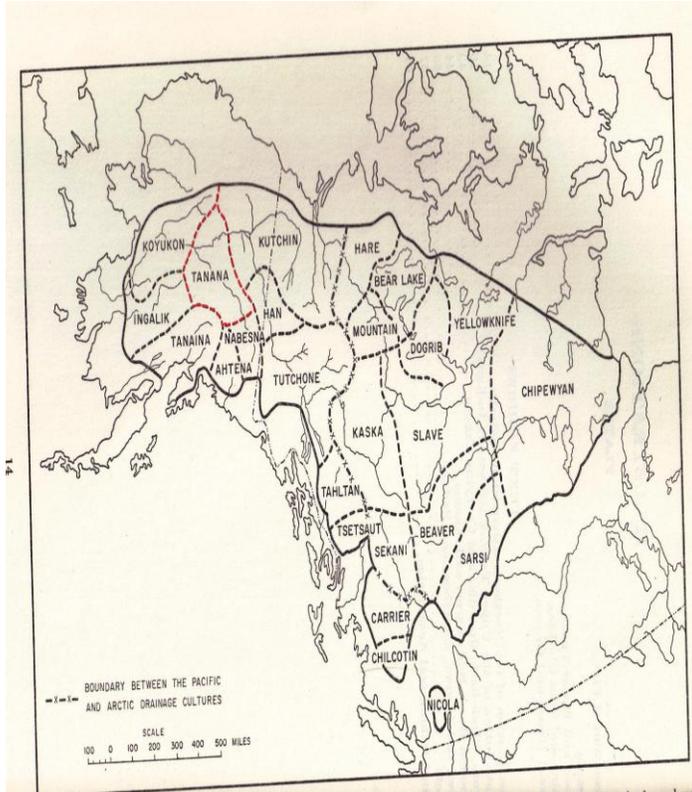
The Tanana are a Native Alaskan tribe of the Northern Athapaskan language family or more specifically Na-Dene, Nuclear Na-Dene, Athapaskan-Eyak, Athapaskan, Tanana-Upper Kuskokwim, Tanana (2). At various times they have been known by Upper, Middle and Lower Tanana, Nabesna, Tabesna, Minto, Dene, and Tananacross (1, 2, 6, & 7).

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

ISO 639-3: tau (2)

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

As the Tanana are nomadic hunters their exact location cannot be pinpointed with exacting detail, however, it roughly comprised the entire Nabesna and Chisana rivers, which come together, forming the Tanana River proper; the main Tanana and tributaries down as far as the Tok River; the White River as far east as the old mining camp in Canyon City at the mouth of the Klutan River; and the Beaver and Snag rivers, which would lay approximately within the 61° 30' and 63° 30' parallels and 140° 30' and 143° west meridians (1, pg. 14-17) (5).



1.4 Brief history:

Prehistoric evidence of human occupation in the area historically occupied by the Tanana extends as far back as eleven thousand years ago at one of the oldest radiocarbon-dated sites in North America. Elsewhere in the area, there have been few archaeological investigations, and little is known of prehistory of the area or the late prehistoric period that might shed light on the pre-contact culture and origin of the Tanana. The Tanana language reflects contact with neighboring groups to the west, south, and southeast where the Upper Koyukon, Upper Kuskokwim, and Tanacross Athapaskan languages, respectively, are spoken. Social contact with the Upper Koyukon and Tanacross speakers has persisted from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Direct contact with European-Americans dates from the mid-1800s, first with the Russians who established a network of trading stations to the south and west and the English to the north and northeast. Contact with Americans was later when, after the 1867 purchase of Alaska from Russia, Commercial activity, and exploration expanded. Continuous Contact among Tanana and European-Americans dates from the 1902 discovery of gold in the Fairbanks district and the subsequent intensification of mining at the core of the Tanana geographical area. Further complicating matters, the Tanana are nearly extinct with population numbers ranging from 24 – 300, with only approximately 30 – 100 still speaking the traditional language which it is not being actively taught to children, resulting in less than a handful of credible ethnographies having been done (2 & 4).

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

Christian missionaries of the Episcopal Church established churches and missions in the area beginning in the early 1900s. Several members of Tanana society, including one woman, have become ordained ministers of the Episcopal Church. Many traditional beliefs persist, however, and are particularly evident in ritual behavior surrounding death (4).

1.6 Ecology:

The geography of the Tanana people can be generally divided into four distinct sections. 1) the Yukon Tanana upland draining to the Tanana River, 2) the Northway-Tanacross Lowlands, 3) the Eastern Alaskan range draining into the Tanana river, and 4) the Northern foothills. No glacial masses are present in the Tanana lowlands however permafrost does occur. Precipitation is light averaging around 12" year, with moisture during the growing seasons beginning with light showers in May and peaking in August, declining rapidly until December, with snowfall reaching its peak in January. The spruce, both white and black, is the dominant tree, with its maximum tree-line being held at around 4,000 feet. Above this limit only stunted willows and alders are found. In the lowlands, several ferns such as the ostrich, wood, beech and oak fern are found. Prior to the turn of the 20th century, the Barren Ground Caribou was the most important animal in the Tanana range, however, with the encroachment of settlers and the advent of mining causing Caribou migration to become erratic and undependable the Moose gradually became the dominant fauna of the area inhabited by the Tanana. With regards to smaller animals the rabbit is/was by far the most important with it periodically reaching peak breeding cycles; also the muskrat and the porcupine are also common throughout the range (3, pg. 40-42).

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density

Exact population numbers vary in 1929-1930 their population was estimated at 152 (1, pg. 17). and today estimates range from 24 – 300 (2) needless to say they are nearly extinct. Band size traditionally ranged from about fifty to one hundred persons (4).

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

The most common weapon was the simple long bow, averaging from 5 to 6 feet in length, with a rectangular cross sections and measuring approximately one and half inches at it widest places. A bow guard is lashed to the inner surface to absorb the impact of the string when released. The bow string consisted of both three-ply twisted sinew and two-ply twisted babiche, the latter of which was used on big moose bows and when not in use the bow was unstrung with one end remaining permanently attached, The bow itself is hewn from birch and during manufacture is frequently heated in the fire to straighten it. When this is finished it is lashed to a form that gives it a recurved position and then while still in this form it is placed back over the fire until it is scorched and dried. It is then taken from its form, smoothed off, and rubbed with a mixture of grease and squirrel blood, which they believe toughens it. Knives were also common being fashioned out of the long bones from a lynx or moose or other such large animal and fitted with wooden handles or occasionally the ribs of the same animal used to make the blade. Less common was the spear which they employed generally for use against bears and was simply a six foot pole with a knife strapped to one end of it. The most important weapon used in times of war was the Adzes, which resembles a single bladed pickax and was used solely for war purposes. Its head was made either of native copper or stone with copper being preferred for it strength and was carried by sticking it down the back of the shirt (1, pg. 51-60 & 97).

2.4 Food storage:

During the winter months food storage is simple as it can be left outside, usually on a raised platform to prevent scavenging, as it will soon freeze given the winter temperatures. During the summer months, the meat is cut into long, thin strips which are then hung on racks approximately 8 feet from the ground, where they are left in direct sunlight to dry the meat, taking anywhere from 3-7 days. No salt is used nor is the meat smoked, although a small pile of punky wood is kept under the rack to ward off insects. Once dry the meat is stored in either an aerial cache, which is simply a miniature log cabin suspended 10 feet in the air by 4- 6 stilts or simply a platform resting in a tree or on scissor supports. Besides aerial caches underground caches were also used, which were simply a log pole floor, log pole sides, with logs covered with animal skin placed over the top then covered with earth and then covered again with heavy logs to ward off scavenging (1, pg. 32-33).

2.5 Sexual division of production:

Aboriginally, men were responsible for hunting, providing firewood, cooking food, and manufacturing tools, snowshoe frames, boats, and canoes. Women tanned skins from which they made clothing, footwear, and tents. They made birch bark utensils and collected water, edible plants, and berries. Women carried the heavy loads and pulled toboggans loaded with gear and equipment. Women, then as now, could and did hunt large and small game. They cut and dried fish and meat, although men often assisted as they do nowadays. Both men and women fished. Now, traditional cooking of food, particularly for ceremonial purposes and in camp is done by men, and European-American-style cooking is done by women. Earlier in the twentieth century both men and women trapped; however, this is virtually a male activity nowadays (4).

2.6 Land tenure:

Aboriginally, individuals, family groups, or bands did not own property in the Western legal sense. The use and occupancy of lands were guided by usufruct rights based upon kinship and group affiliation. Band territory was open to all members of the band for subsistence use. Members of neighboring bands asked permission to use certain areas. Trapping areas were used by and associated with particular families and were handed down along family lines from one generation to the next as they often are today (4).

2.7 Ceramics:

There is no evidence or knowledge of aboriginal pottery or ceramics in Tanana culture (1, pg. 45).

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

2.9 Food taboos:

There appears to have been taboos against eating the flesh of dogs, fox, wolverine or otter, however, the foundation behind these taboos are unclear (1, pg. 34).

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

The Tanana utilized canoes but much more common were “skin boats” which they used for crossing rivers and carrying heavy loads. The frame of these boats show similarities to the canoe however the “skin boat” utilizes a keel piece to which the ribs are lashed, it is also deeper, wider and much heavier and closely resembles the Eskimo umiak. Typically it measured 17x4x2 and was covered in either moose or caribou skin, that was un-tanned but with the hair removed. They were/are capable of transporting a dozen or more people and are propelled by several paddlers on each side with a helmsman steering the boat. Also used but less common were rafts, which simply consisted of six – ten logs lashed to a number of crosspieces with willow withes (1, pg. 93-94).

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

No exact ages exist for age of first marriage, traditionally the rule of thumb for girls were they were married shortly after emerging from the seclusion surrounding her first menstruation. Men on the other hand marry much later, for custom decrees that a man must have potlatched at least once and preferably three times to show that he is capable of supporting his wife (1, pg. 118).

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

No, exact calculation of marriages ending in divorce has been done to date however, both traditionally and in modern times divorce was/is rare (4).

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

No exact percentage is readily available, however in former times polygamy was frequent, with the number of wives depending on the man’s ability to obtain and support for them. The average seems to have been two wives but important men / leaders might have more (1, pg. 120).

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, and dowry?:

No, however, the future husbands often helped his future parents-in-law and provided them with gifts which often reflect his hunting ability and therefore do not necessarily constitute bride purchase, dowry, or service (4).

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

Inheritance traditionally held very little importance in Tanana society as there was very little property to pass on. When an individual died they were cremated, dressed in their best clothes and wearing all their ornamentation and in the case of men his knife sheath and tinder bag. Items such as tools were also destroyed and it was no uncommon to burn the man’s lodge after his death. If anything was left it was distributed among blood relatives and fellow clansmen, the widow and children received nothing (1, pg. 130).

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

Evidence for homosexual activity is unknown, with McKenna's informants appearing unable to grasp the concept of homosexuality, which generally seems to apply to all Northern Athapaskans societies with the exception of the Eyak (1, pg. 120).

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized?

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows")

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

4.22 Evidence for couvades:

The Tanana "practiced" limited couvade, consisting largely of taboos which are equally observed by both the man and women. Occasionally, during his wife pregnancy the husband may find that his legs and/ or eyes are sore and swollen. When this occurs the man sought the help of a shaman. Moreover, for the first 100 days immediately following child birth both husband and wife observed the same taboos such as not eating fresh meat, not eating heads or legs of animals and drinking only lukewarm water. In addition, during this period the man wears bands of sinew around his ankles, legs, elbows, wrists and the bases of his fingers (1, pg. 141).

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

4.24 Joking relationships?

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

There is no marriage ceremony. The man simply lives with the girl and hence forth is considered to be man and wife (1, pg. 119).

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?

While a child is very small they are given a name. There is no ceremony surrounding this event nor is there any concept of ownership in names. Rather the parents, or some relative, or occasionally shamans, give the child a name that appeals to them, i.e. "Born at the mouth of Porcupine Creek". In Tanana society kinship terms are of greater importance than names and more often than not are used in lieu of the individual's given name. Between old and young persons the vocatives grandfather (*tse*) and grandmother (ton) and grandchild (*thui* or *tcai*) are used regardless of actual relationship (1, pg. 142).

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

Generally, war was primarily a means of revenge often stemming from the death of a relative or clans men and occasionally from the abduction of women. Regardless of the cause it was incumbent upon the nearest relative to secure revenge by killing the guilty party, one of his family members, or one of his clans men, however, as this would lead to the a feud with a relative of the guilty party seeking revenge for his death, the Tanana preferred to wipe out the entire family, often doing so at night and indiscriminately killing women and children as well as the men to forestall any retaliation (1, pg. 95-96).

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

4.18 Cannibalism?

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

Band size ranged from about fifty to one hundred persons (4).

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

traditionally, Tanana Athapaskans traveled in small bands or extended family groups during the course of the year to harvest seasonally available fish and wildlife. Seasonal settlements were situated along salmon-bearing streams and at the mouths of major salmon-spawning streams during summer and early fall. Some bands occupied fishing settlements at the outlets of large lakes to harvest from the large migrations of whitefish during early summer and fall. During late fall and spring, families moved and set up seasonal camps from which they hunted caribou during their seasonal migrations. During winter families moved frequently, hunting moose and trapping fur animals. Some traveled to the foothills of the Alaska Range where they hunted sheep. The fishing stations were essentially semi-permanent villages where family groups returned and the band joined Together for ceremonial and religious activities. Around 1900 there were about eight semi-permanent villages of the Tanana; most were situated along the Tanana or at the mouth of major tributary streams. Numerous seasonal and temporary camps were dispersed throughout the area along lakes and smaller streams and in the flats and foothills (4).

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

The Tanana prior to contact were very individualistic and never formed tribes, if by tribe a sociopolitical group led by a chief is meant. Instead men of wealth and importance were recognized as quasi leaders, in that they had no real power or authority and instead acted more as advisors offering suggestions to the “tribe” as a whole, which tends to be an extended nuclear family unit (6, pg. 20-21).

5.4 Post marital residence:

Matrilocality (4)

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):

The Tanana distinguishes between the maternal and paternal lines. This distinction, however, is only carried through the first ascending generation, and in the grandparent class clan distinctions are omitted and relatives are differentiated only by sex. Kinship terminology is not carried beyond this second ascending generation; indeed the terms for grandfather/mother are applied indiscriminately to all distant relatives in older generations, who in turn reciprocate with the correct terminology depending on the gender of the speaker (1, pg. 121).

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

5.8 Village and house organization:

Traditionally, households were comprised of two nuclear families. There were several possibilities of the occupants sharing the house, i.e. grandparents / parents but generally male cross cousins or brothers-in-law shared the households (3, pg. 77).

5.9 Specialized village structures (men’s’ houses):

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc.:

The Tanana appears to have had many aspects of their lives affected by a phratries organization. For example, at birth the attending midwife was to be from an opposite phratry, marriage and the selection of hunting partners both required a member of the opposite phratry. An individual’s phratry is regarded as an enlarged family; from its members they expect to receive both hospitality and aid whenever a situation requires it (1, pg. 123-124).

5.12 Trade:

Little is known of aboriginal trading practices, although an interregional trail network was clearly well developed as evidenced in several historic accounts that reported the presence of imported manufactured items in advance of European-Americans in central Alaska. After contact, trading trips were made regularly by certain band members to posts along the Yukon River and near the mouth of the Copper River to the south. A native trade fair was held frequently at a site near the junction of the Tanana and Yukon rivers, although its antiquity is uncertain. Trading expeditions Declined in the twentieth century as goods and products became available at stations and stores in the Tanana Valley proper (4).

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6 Time allocation to RCR:

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

6.2 Stimulants:

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

6.4 Other rituals:

6.5 Myths (Creation):

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

Art – very few vestiges of pre-contact art remain, however what does clearly reveals a geometric art that is in marked contrast to the curvilinear and realistic art caused from the introduction of beads and bead embroidery. The early art was expressed by means of engraving on wood or bone with porcupine quills (1, pg. 114).

Music – the sole musical instrument of the Tanana is the drum, of the single head or tambourine variety used simply to accompany singing and had no ceremonial purpose (1, pg. 98).

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

It appears that there were no significant differentiating factors for determining who lead RCR's (4).

6.8 Missionary effect:

Christian missionaries of the Episcopal church established churches and missions in the area beginning in the early 1900s. Several members of Tanana society, including one woman, have become ordained ministers of the Episcopal church. Many traditional beliefs persist, however, and are particularly evident in ritual behavior surrounding death. Both ordained and lay ministers are central in religious practices today (4).

6.9 RCR revival:

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

The native attitude toward death is fatalistic, and death is faced with composure. Although there is no belief in an afterlife, appropriate ritualistic behavior by the survivors ensures that the soul of the deceased will be guided to the narrow trail that leads to the afterworld. The activities and behavior surrounding the death of an individual and the funeral potlatch are especially important in this regard (4).

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

No evidence found (1, pg. 143).

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

Aboriginally and in early historic times the shaman was the central figure of religious life. Magicoreligious practices included omens, charms, amulets, songs, taboos, and beliefs about the supernatural. Beliefs and practices were associated with certain animals, and many centered on hunting. Animal spirits appear to have predominated in Tanana spiritual life, although an evil spirit was manifested in a half-man, half-animal being. Spirits were influential in the activities of the living and in guiding the dead to their final resting place. As in other aspects of society, religious beliefs and practices were highly individualized and were a Personal matter (4).

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

On festive occasions Tanana men would paint their face with charcoal and red ocher. These decorations consisted of a few bars across the face and around the eyes or the whole face may be smeared with a solid color (1, pg. 85).

7.2 Piercings:

Both male and females had their ear lobes and noses pierced at a very young age, often performed with an awl, with the perforation being kept open during childhood by the insertion of a small stick and after reaching maturity an ornament could be worn, usually consisting of a number of dentalia shells for the more wealthy individuals or a simple feather for the less well off, materialistically speaking (1, pr. 85-86).

7.3 Haircut:

Traditionally hair was worn long except when singed as a sign of mourning. Men wore their hair in a single large queue down the back, while women wore their hair in two braids. The large braid worn by men was often bound at the back of the neck with a band of dentalia and occasionally both men and women bound their hair up on the back of their heads, greasing it with moose fat to stiffen it and holding it in place with a fillet of dentalia shells (1, pg. 84-85).

7.4 Scarification:

Among the Tanana scarification does not seem to have existed, however, women were frequently tattooed. These decorations were largely confined to the face, consisting of a series of vertical lines on the chin and one or two horizontal lines across the cheeks; occasionally a few bars were also put on the back of wrists. Both the needle and thread and the pricking method were used for the procedure, with powdered charcoal constituting the pigment (1, pg. 87).

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

7.8 Missionary effect:

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

Sororate and levirate were both practiced and with regards to levirate should the surviving brother be unable to support an additional wife, he would turn his sister-in-law over to a more affluent relative or clansmen, until which point he could obtain another husband her (1, pg. 120).

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

Numbered references

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