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Wáa sá iyatee?



A portrait of an Inuit man, October 29, 1970, Alaska. (AP Image)

“Cama-i”, “Quanuq itpich”, “Sán uu dǎng giidang?”, “Wáa sá iyatee?”, “Dzaanh nezoonh”, “Do’eent’aa?”
These are six greetings meaning “Hello, how are you?” in the indigenous languages of Alaska: **CENTRAL YUP’IK, INUPIAQ, HAIDA, TLINGIT, KOYUKON ATHABASCAN** and **TANANA ATHABASCAN**. In all Alaska is home to at least twenty distinct indigenous languages. Their common feature is that they are spoken by very few people; sometimes as few as 10 (!).

Native Alaskan Languages

Alaska's indigenous people are broadly called Alaska Natives. The name includes five major groups: Aleuts, Northern Eskimos (Inupiat), Southern Eskimos (Yuit), Interior Indians (Athabascans) and Southeast Coastal Indians (Tlingit and Haida). Naturally, this division is based on cultural and linguistic similarities of peoples who live in different regions of Alaska. The language families includes: Eskimo-Aleut, Tsimshianic, Haida and Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit, which are further divided into individual languages, whose number exceeds 20.

nanuq - 'polar bear' in Inupiaq

The language that is spoken throughout much of northern Alaska is INUPIAQ. It has several dialects which differ in vocabulary and sounds. For example tupiq means 'tent' in North Slope and 'house' in Malimiut while iglu is 'house' in North Slope. The name Inupiaq, meaning 'real person' (inuk 'person' and piaq 'real, genuine'), is often spelled "Inupiaq," particularly in the northern dialects. It can refer to a person of this group ("He is an Inupiaq") and can also be used as an adjective ("She is an Inupiaq woman"). The plural form of the noun is "Inupiat," referring to the people collectively ("the Inupiat of the North Slope"). About 13,500 Inupiat live in Alaska, of whom about 3,000 speak the language.

siku - 'ice' in Inupiaq

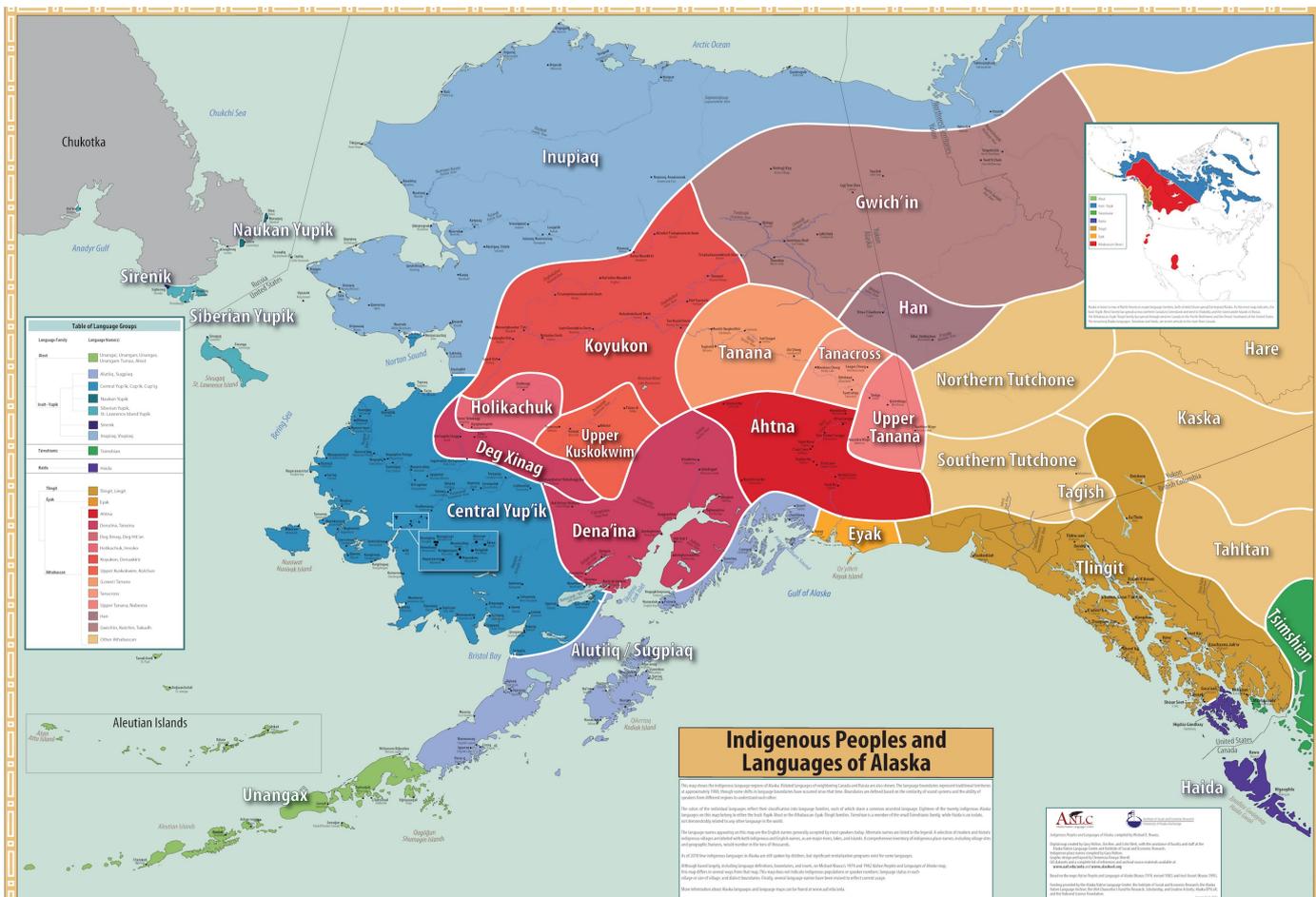
cikuq - 'ice' in Central Yup'ik

The ALEUT language, which is also called UNANGAN, belongs to Eskimo-Aleut family. Only about 100 people know and speak this language in Alaska. Aleut is a complicated language; many of its sounds do not exist in English. As an example, consider an easy Aleut word, "aang" (a friendly greeting) which rhymes with "long".

shtiya - 'my strength' in Dena'ina Athabaskan

Another language that belongs to Eskimo-Aleut family is SUGPIAQ, also called ALUTIIQ. Alutiiq people inhabit southern coast of Alaska -- from Prince William Sound to the Kenai Peninsula, the Alaska Peninsula, and Kodiak Island. Of a total population of about 3,000 Sugpiacs (suk 'person', piaq 'real'), about 400 can speak their native language.

way dankoo - 'thank you' in Tsimshian



Krauss, Michael, Gary Holton, Jim Kerr, and Colin T. West. 2011. *Indigenous Peoples and Languages of Alaska*. Fairbanks and Anchorage: Alaska Native Language Center and UAA Institute of Social and Economic Research.

CENTRAL YUPIK is yet another language that belongs to Eskimo-Aleut family. This language is the largest of the state's Native languages, both in the size of its population and the number of speakers. Of a total population of about 21,000 people, about 10,000 speak the language. Yup'ik is the first school language in 17 of 68 Yup'ik villages.

gganaa' - 'good luck, friend' in Koyukon Athabascan

There are several other Yup'ik languages including: NAUKANSKI YUPIK, SIBERIAN YUPIK and SIRENISKI. The last of them has been a dead language since the 1990s. Although the Yupik languages differ from each other, speakers of one may understand the general idea of a conversation of speakers of another.

sesi - 'snow' in Ahtna Athabascan

TLINGIT (pronounced ['kɪŋkɪt]) is the language of Southeastern coastal Alaska from Yakutat south to Ketchikan. It is a branch of the Na-Dené language family. There are 16 Tlingit communities with a total population of about 10,000 of which 500 people speak the language. Today, in an effort to revitalize and preserve the language and its culture, Tlingit has been recognized as an official language of Alaska, and Tlingit courses are available at the University of Alaska Southeast.

qimugta - 'dog' in Central Yup'ik

EYAK is now an extinct language. It was spoken in south-central Alaska. Even though it is represented by about 50 people, there are no fluent speakers of this language. The last remaining native speaker of Eyak died in 2008.

deniigi - 'moose' in Ahtna Athabascan

ATHABASCAN languages include the following languages: AHTNA, the language of the Copper River and the upper Susitna and Nenana drainage, with about 80 speakers; TANANA, now spoken only at Nenana and Minto on the Tanana River below Fairbanks, by about 30 people; DEG XINAG, used on the lower Yukon River by approximately 40 speakers; HOLIKACHUCK - the language spoken by only a dozen speakers on the Innoko River; UPPER KUSKOKWIM, in the Upper Kuskokwim River drainage is spoken by about 40 people; KOYUKON, spoken in three dialects -- Upper, Central, and Lower -- in 11 villages along the Koyukuk and middle Yukon rivers by about 300 speakers; TANANA, spoken by only about 30 speakers at Nenana and Minto on the Tanana River below Fairbanks; TANACROSS, the language of the Mansfield-Ketchumstock and Healy Lake-Joseph Village bands, with about 65 speakers; UPPER TANANA, used by a small population in the Alaska villages of Northway; HAN, which is spoken by a dozen speakers at the village of Eagle and in Yukon Territory at Dawson; and GWICH'N in the northeastern Alaska, where out of 1,100 Gwich'in population about 300 people still use it.



The glowering visage of a Kodiak bear captured in oil on canvas by artist Alvin Amason of the Alutiiq (Sugpiaq) people on Kodiak Island. (Photo AP)

TSIMISHIAN is spoken at Metlakatla on Annette Island in the southeastern tip of the Alaska Panhandle. Currently, of the 1,300 Tsimshian people living in Alaska, about 70 still speak the language.

qagaasakung - 'thank you' in Aleut

HAIDA is the language of the southern half of Prince of Wales Island. It has now about 15 speakers.

(Information about the speakers of the Native Alaskan languages come from the Alaska Native Language Center website: <http://www.uaf.edu/anlc/resources/>)

NATIVE ALASKAN SPORTS AND GAMES

Native people of the Arctic participate in games of strength, endurance, agility and concentration. Activities such as dancing, story-telling and cultural games are a central part of these events. The hosts supplies food and lodging and the guests bring news from surrounding villages.

Sport is ... more than sport

Games and sports are an important factor of life of Alaska Natives. Qualities such as strength, agility, concentration, endurance and speed were crucial to survival in a traditional lifestyle and they are no less important today for people who live in this climate zone. Another important point is reliance on others and team work. Survival did not only depend on individual skill, but also on the ability to work together. It is no wonder that

these skills have been taught to young Alaska Natives for centuries. A lot of them are rooted in ancestral strength tests. Today, promoting sports and games reveals care for young people's health and physical fitness as much as it is a way to preserve culture and traditions. In the December issue of Zoom in on America, we wrote about the Iditarod, which is one of the most demanding endurance sports in the world. This time we want to feature team games.



High kick. (Photos AP)

Annual Games

Many sports of Alaska Natives are team games. Events such as Native Youth Olympics NYO (<http://citci.org/event-programs/nyo-games/>) and the World Eskimo-Indian Olympics, WEIO (<http://www.weio.org/>) organized since 1961, are annual events. Frank Whaley, pilot of Wein Airways is credited as the organizer of the World Eskimo Olympics. He spent a few months in Point Hope in the 1960s and during his stay watched the traditional games, storytelling, dancing and feasting.

The High Kick

A contest called the high kick is one of the most popular ones. Preparing for the kick, athletes sit on the floor and balance on one foot while reaching across the torso to hold the other foot. Leaning on the opposite hand, athletes thrust the balancing foot up to kick a suspended ball, then land on the kicking foot. The ball is suspended at head level or even higher and it is raised in increments of four inches after each round. State records are: BOYS 93 inches, GIRLS, 83 inches.

Two Foot High Kick

Two Foot High Kick is a variation of the High Kick event in which athletes jump with both feet simultaneously. Records: BOYS 101 inches, GIRLS - 79 inches (All the above mentioned records may be broken soon at the coming Native Youth Olympics.)

One-Hand Reach

A similar event is One-Hand Reach in which athletes balance their weight on the palm of one hand, while reaching with their free hand to touch a suspended ball.



Arm Pull

Another NYO event is arm pull, where two athletes sit on the floor facing each other, lock arms inside of the elbow and pull until their opponent's arm straightens. In the second round, athletes alternate arm position.

Seal Hop

In Seal Hop contestants must hop across the floor on their hands and toes - like a seal - from the push-up position. After crossing a marker, athletes make a 180-degree turn and continue hopping.

Kneel Jump

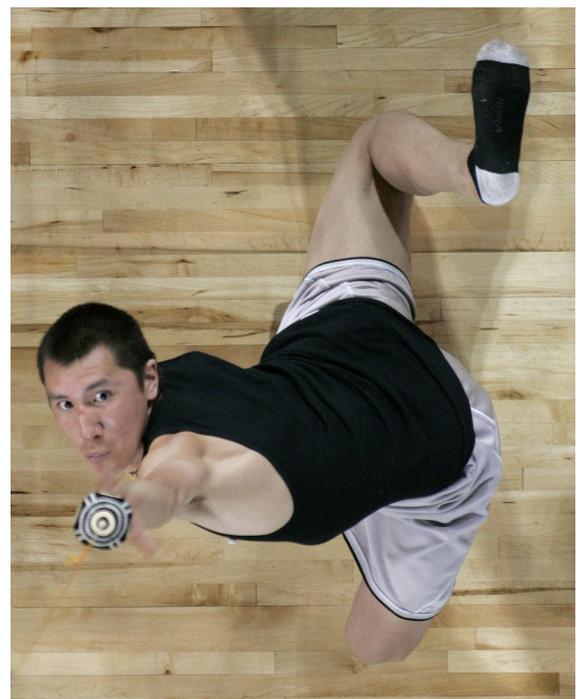
Kneel jump begins with athlete kneeling with the tops of their feet flat on the floor and then they must jump up and forward. Records: BOYS 67 inches, GIRLS: 55 1/2.

The Wrist Carry

In the Wrist Carry event athlete starts from a sitting position, hooks one wrist over the middle of a long pole which is held by two carriers. Without touching the pole or floor athletes suspend themselves off the pole and maintain the position while being carried over the course until they can no longer hold their own weight.

Other Sports and Games

There are also more conventional sports: basketball and cribbage or crib - a card game most often played by two players, but commonly played with three, four or more people. The game involves playing and grouping cards in combinations which gain points.



One-hand reach (left) and stick pull competition (above) (Photos AP)

Alaskan Culture

Even though there are typical activities among all Alaska Natives, such as festive gatherings, dances, story telling, which usually happen during the winter time when there are no other activities and when food and other necessary resources to survive the most severe and coldest time of the year have been prepared, Alaska Natives are divided into distinct cultures engaging in slightly different pastimes and speaking different languages and dialects. Culture groupings have been made that take into consideration cultural similarities and geographic proximity: Athabascan, Unangax and Alutiiq (Sugpiaq), Yup'ik and Cup'ik, Inupiaq and St. Lawrence Island Yupik, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian. The Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage is an educational and cultural institution which studies, helps and preserves the Alaska Native Heritage. Visit: <http://www.alaskanative.net/en/para-nav/home/>

The Athabascan culture is a matrilineal system in which children belong to the mother's clan, rather than to the father's clan. Often the core of the traditional culture was a woman and her brother, and their two families. Clothing was made of caribou and moose hide. Canoes made of birch bark, moose hide, and cottonwood were the means of transportation. Activities were marked by the passing moons, each named according to the changing conditions: e.g. "when the moose lose their antlers."

The Unangax and Alutiiq (Sugpiaq) cultures were influenced by the Russians at the beginning in the 18th century. The Orthodox Church is prominent in every village, Russian dishes are known and prepared using local ingredients, and Russian words are part of common vocabulary. Kinship and family relationships are still very important for the Unangax and Alutiiq.

It was no different for the Yup'ik and Cup'ik people. Family-village groups were extremely important for survival. Gender and individual skills played an important role in cultural roles and social rank. Successful hunters usually became group leaders while women's roles were child rearing, food preparation and sewing. There were good shamans who would heal or ask for good weather and evil shamans who placed curses on people and could even kill.

The Inupiaq and the St. Lawrence Island Yupik People are still hunting and gathering societies. They continue to subsist on the land and sea. Hunting the caribou, whale, walrus, seal, polar bear, and fish is still the basis of their livelihood.

In The Eyak, Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian no central government existed. Each village resolved its differences through traditional customs and practices.



A native dancer covers his face with an eagle feather fan during the Celebration 2008 parade, in Juneau, Alaska Saturday 7, 2008. (Photos AP)

Activity Page

EXERCISE WE HAVE A MANUAL AND ARTISTIC TASK FOR YOU THIS TIME:

MAKE YOUR OWN IGLOO VILLAGE OUT OF SUGAR CUBES

Materials (to make 3 igloos):

- 1/2 kg box of sugar cubes
- 400 gram of powdered sugar
- A bit of water (4-6 spoons)
- a spoon for spreading icing
- a plastic or heavy paper plate (around 20-15 cm in diameter)



In a bowl stir powdered sugar with 4-6 spoons of water to make the icing. You will glue the sugar cubes with the icing. Start with a ring of sugar cubes upright on a plate. Use about 40-43 sugar cubes for an igloo. The cubes should form a ring that is open on one end. Add 2 cubes, one on each side of the entryway. Keep working as per the photos to make a total of 5-6 rows, getting progressively smaller starting about row three as they form the dome.

Tips:

Do not use too much icing to “glue” sugar cubes as it will not harden. Let your igloo dry around layer 3 to let the construction harden. Don't move the igloos until they have dried completely.

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Joy John, 2, of Anchorage, Alaska, performs during the annual Alaska Federation of Natives conference in Anchorage, Alaska, Thursday, October 15, 2015. The convention is annually the largest gathering of Alaska Natives in the state every year. (Photo by [unreadable])