2.1 Aleut People, or Unanga (oo nung' ah)

General Residence
Aleutian Islands, Pribilof Islands, and Lower Third of Southern Alaska Peninsula

Population
At contact – 16,000
1996 – 4,000

Social and Political Organization (Pre-European Contact)
Eight tribes of Aleuts occupied permanent, named villages and had seasonal subsistence sites. They had large communal houses occupied by related families as well as smaller residences. Other Aleut groups needed permission to enter the village territory for use of resources.

Each village had a dominant family that provided the leader, or chief. The chief had the authority to organize economic activities, settle internal disputes, lead in time of war, and direct the protection of group boundaries. Social ranking was important in the Aleut culture; there were two classes which included "free" Aleuts and slaves (war captives).

Specific codes of behavior and social obligations were applied to categories of Aleuts based on age, sex, kinship, and prestige. Individual behavior was channeled toward cooperation, and disregard for valued benefits led to shame and public sanction in the form of loss of esteem or severe chastisement.

Communication patterns tended to avoid personal confrontations. Aleuts followed two rules:
1. If you have nothing worthwhile to say about someone or something, say nothing; and
2. If you have nothing to say, say nothing.

The Aleuts had considerable knowledge of the human body and had surgeons who could perform operations. They also embalmed the dead before burying them in caves.

Eastern Aleutians – A chief was chosen from among the leaders of individual eastern villages to declare war and establish peace. Dispute resolution was directed primarily at reestablishing harmony rather than imposing a punishment. The chief and other elders sometimes directed punishment by death for repeated crimes.

Western Aleutians – Dispute resolution was taken care of by family rather than the community.

Social and Political Organization (Post-European Contact)
The Aleut cultural, social and political organization was almost decimated by Russian and American actions. Ceremonies, storytelling, and dancing became almost nonexistent.

1744-1867 Russian Period
Population: 3,200 (reduction caused by infectious diseases and killing by Russians)

Aleuts from Atka and Unalaska were forced to resettle on the Pribilof Islands in 1786, to capitalize on the fur seal. Other settlements were consolidated and moved to the mouths of rivers. Households were reduced to single family dwellings.

Village chiefs kept their titles because the Russians needed cooperation in organizing local labor. Their families were taken as hostages until seal hunting was completed and later were taken to Russia for education. They returned as mediators between the Russians and Aleuts.

Creoles (mixture of Aleut and Russian) occupied managerial, decision-making positions. Several Aleuts became clergymen in the Russian Orthodox Church. Others became paramedics or assistant physicians.

1867-1910 Early American Period
In the first 23 years, the Americans harvested more otters and seals than the Russians did in 125 years. This led to the 1911 treaty among the United States, Canada, Russia, and Japan which regulated the fur harvest.

1942 – During World War II, most of the Aleuts were evacuated to southeastern Alaska and placed in relocation camps because of war concerns. Only one-half returned to their Aleutian homes after the war and most of their villages/homes/property destroyed. Forty-two Aleut residents from the island of Attu were taken prisoners by the Japanese. Then Attu was bombed by American forces to retake the village. Atka was burned to prevent occupation by the enemy. United States officials discouraged resettlement of remote islands because of administrative problems in delivering educational and other services.

1981 – Commercial slaughter of seals was outlawed

1988 – Reparation of Aleuts and acknowledgement of their situation by the United States government (combined with reparations to Japanese interred during WWII).

Social and Political Organization (Current)

Many villages contain a mix of descendants from formerly distinct Aleut island groups. Much of the traditional knowledge, values, and skills were impacted with the death and displacement of so many people during the war. Village elders now provide traditional authority and there has been a resurgence of traditional activities, practices, and languages.

Language – Aleuts speak two distinct dialects of the Unangam language which is remotely related to the Eskimo language. Eastern Aleut is spoken in Atka; Western Aleut is spoken in other villages. A written alphabet was developed in the 1800s by the Russian Orthodox Church, along with Aleut scholars. Some Aleuts speak English with a Norwegian accent.

Other Significant Points of Interest:

Russian surnames
Russian Orthodox religion
Finely woven grass baskets
Skin-covered kayak craft

2.2 Alutiiq

Also known as Sugpiaq (a real person) or Koniag for Kodiak Islanders, or Chugach for Prince William Sound

The Native people in this area were called Aleut by the Russians although they were not related to them. In 1985, they were informed by an anthropologist that they were related to Yupik people, rather than the Aleut.

General Residence

South Alaska, including Kodiak and surrounding islands, Prince William Sound, Lower Cook Inlet area, and portions of the Alaska Peninsula from Egegik south to Kamishak Bay (across from Kodiak Island).

Population

1796 – 6,206
1880 – 1,943 (Kodiak and surrounding islands)*
1996 – 3,000
*A decrease in the population was caused by disease, a measles epidemic in 1832, and extensive utilization of Alutiiq men for hunting by the Russians

Social and Political Organization (Pre-European Contact)

Each Alutiiq village in the Kodiak area had a communal house, the kazhim, for plays, dances, and meetings. Three, four, or more families lived together. Each village had a leader (by inheritance) whose power was limited to punishing slaves and family members. A chief did not have much authority, as the people followed a person who was either well-to-do or a good hunter/provider. The chief acted as a primary counselor or advisor in war and peace.

In the Alaska Peninsula area, each village had a community house, or qasiq, for storytelling.

In the Prince William Sound area, each group had a chief and an assistant chief; the chief represented the group and led in decision-making.

Families were responsible for managing their own affairs and resolving disputes. Social control was maintained partly by community gossip, ridicule songs, joking and ostracism.

Social and Political Organization (Post-European Contact)

1744-1867 Russian Period

The Alutiiqs fought the Russians unsuccessfully and were proclaimed Russian subjects in 1788. The Russians were impressed with Alutiiq hunting skills and, in 1818, the Alutiiqs were hired as hunters of waterfowl, sea otter and other furbearing animals. The Russian American Company nominated chiefs; prior to that they were inherited positions. Many of the customs and rites were abandoned with the introduction of Christianity.

Intermarriage between Alutiiqs and Russians produced another social class. Creoles were a mix of Russian and Alutiiq and received special treatment in education and employment.

1867-1940s Early American Period
Fur-trading between Alutiiqs and Americans occurred through the village chief who was chosen with great input from the Russian Orthodox priest. In 1912, Novarupta volcano erupted (known as the Katmai eruption) and many Alutiiq relocated from Katmai, Douglas, and Old Savonoski and founded the village of Perryville. Another group settled in the coastal village of Kanatak during the winter and moved to Egegik and Ugashik during the summer. In the late nineteenth century, village councils were established and were composed of teachers, missionaries, and representatives of the federal government (Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) employees) The councils acted as a rule-making and law-enforcing body; however, traditional leadership patterns prevailed, including traditional control through the elders.

Fish canneries replaced fur trading, which brought into the area many non-Natives, Filipino, Japanese, and Chinese laborers. Also, Scandinavian fishermen settled in this area and adopted Alutiiq customs. Native people were refused employment in the canneries and did not become involved in the commercial fishing industry until the early 1900s. The Alutiiqs continued fur trapping and fox farming until the 1940s.

The Alutiiqs were forbidden to speak their language because they were to be assimilated into western culture.

Creoles were no longer categorized as a separate class. They were called Russians by Alutiiqs but were considered "insiders" rather than foreigners.

Social and Political Organization (Current)
Since 1989, the Alutiiq people are actively rebuilding and reassembling their culture.

Language
Sugcestum – part of the Aleut-Eskimo linguistic family, closely related to Yup'ik. The Chugach dialect is spoken in the Prince William Sound area; the Koniag dialect is spoken on the Alaska Peninsula and Kodiak Island. English dominates.

Other Significant Points of Interest:
Alutiiq Culture Center and the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak were established and administered by the Alutiiq. The Sun'aq (Shoon'aq) Tribe received federal recognition in 2000.

2.3 Athabascan

Tanana – Tanana River area
Tanaina/Denaina – Cook Inlet area, north of Kachemak Bay
Koyukon – Yukon River and Koyukuk River areas
Ingalik – lower Yukon River and Anvik River areas
Athna – Copper River area
Kutchin – Yukon River, Porcupine River, and Chandalar River areas
Gwich'in – Yukon River and Yukon Flats areas

General Residence

Interior Alaska

Population

At contact – 13,000
1996 – 11,700

Social and Political Organization (Pre-European Contact)

The basic social and political unit was the band, made up primarily of persons related by blood and marriage; a band included several clans, members of which were related to clan members of other bands. The local band defined the boundaries of the subsistence-use areas which were closed to other groups unless permission was granted. In the Koyukon area, beaver houses and pond, muskrat swamps, and other subsistence-use areas were privately held; although if the sites were vacated, they were open to others.

While Athabascans migrated for subsistence activities, each band had a settlement for social and ceremonial activities. Each band had a recognized leader based on demonstrated ability. He was expected to be wise and generous and often had shamanistic powers. In some areas, leadership was associated with certain families.

Leadership was more formal and elaborate among the Ahtna and Denaina people. Chiefs maintained peace, commanded the labor of their followers and slaves, and redistributed resources within their society. The Ahtna chief was responsible for enforcing the traditional law and for defending his people. Among the Ingalik, both men and women elders participated in resolving disputes.

Ahtna clans defined reciprocal duties and obligations between different but cooperating social groups, defined one's relatives and which individuals a person could marry, and organized labor and duties at times of life crises.

Social control was primarily a family matter and was achieved subtly; leaders played a role in internal dispute resolution and acted as negotiators with chiefs from other societies. Deliberate murder and theft were punishable by death and carried out by members of the family group, except among the Ahtna. There, the chief could order execution unless the person escaped to relatives in another place.

The Ahtna taught their children that their words would travel far and that they should think carefully before speaking. Social avoidance acted to prevent confrontation or disharmony among closely related people. If there was a dispute between two people, their families simply moved until the problem was less important.

All Athabascans in Interior Alaska had a traditional governing body (Dena Hena' Henash) and a traditional chief.

Social and Political Organization (Post-European Contact)

1744-1867 Russian Period
Contact did not occur until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Traditional leaders were appointed as chiefs by trading company managers and Russian Orthodox priests in the Tanaina/Denaina area.

1867-1915 Early American Period
The population of the Athabascans was decimated by disease. Chiefs functioned as middlemen between the white traders and Athabascan trappers. Territorial officials and church representatives introduced election of chiefs and councils. The Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) succeeded the Dena Hena' Henash and is the nonprofit Native association that provides many services for its tribal members including health, education, employment, community needs, natural resource programs, and family services.

Social and Political Organizations (Current)
Chief Peter John of Minto was the Traditional Chief of all Interior Athabascans and it is a lifelong position. The chief is elected by the board of directors of the Tanana Chiefs Conference.

Before and after European contact, a successful traditional leader, or the chief, has much influence. In addition to having a traditional chief, some clans also have a "working chief" and a council elected to represent the community. This was done at the request of the white community.

Language
Athabascan languages extend from villages in the Doyon region, through Canada to the Mexican border, and include the Navajo and Apache Indians of the Southwest. There are eleven Athabascan languages:

Ahtna
Dena'ina
Deg Hit'an
Holikachuk
Koyukon
Upper Kuskokwim
Tanana
Tanacross
Upper Tanana
Han
Gwich'in

Other Significant Things of Interest:

Gwich'in and Koyukon have a distinct style of fiddle playing. Fiddles, along with French-Canadian and Scottish tunes, were introduced by Hudson Bay Company fur traders from Canada in 1847.

Athabascan people are well known for their elaborate beadwork.