

On the Kenai in Extreme Northwest America

Anonymous
Forward and translation by Richard L. Bland

This brief anonymous article titled only “Über die Kenai im äußersten Nordwesten Amerikas” was possibly written by the editor of *Globus*, an illustrated German journal devoted to geography and anthropology created by Karl Andree (1808–1875). The journal was published from 1862 to 1910, a period when Europeans, and to some extent Americans, were ravenous consumers of literature dealing with travel and with foreign peoples (Belgum 2013). It is possible that Andree himself wrote this article based on information he had received from travelers.

One individual who capitalized on the rush for knowledge of things foreign was the Hamburg animal collector/trainer Carl Hagenbeck (1844–1913). In the 1870s, when the animal trade was declining, Hagenbeck began to display peoples from around the world, such as the Sami (Lapp) with reindeer and Ceylonese with elephants. Included among these peoples were natives from North America, namely Inuit from Labrador (Hagenbeck 2021; see also Cartwright 1792) and the Bella Coola from the Pacific Northwest (Cole 1982). The Bella Coola group made a striking impression on Franz Boas after visiting them in Berlin. Subsequently, Boas traveled to the Northwest Coast, where he conducted research, publishing extensively in various journals, including *Globus* in 1888 (Boas 1888). Other travelers who visited northwestern America and published their descriptions of the Native Americans they encountered were Johan Adrian Jacobsen (1977), Alphonse Louis Pinart (Parmenter 1996), and of course Franz Boas (2006), to mention only a few.

Over the next decades, most research on the natives of Alaska was conducted in areas other than the Kenai Peninsula, for example, on the Tlingit of Southeast Alaska (Ivan Veniaminov, Frederica de Laguna, the Dauenhauers, and others) or

the Aleuts of the Aleutian Islands (Ivan Veniaminov, Roza Lyapunova, Knut Bergsland, and others). However, with few exceptions, the natives of the Kenai Peninsula, particularly the southern Kenai, were only superficially examined.

Though the Tanaina (Dena’ina) were encountered by Europeans at the beginning of the 19th century, the encounters were not accompanied by special studies of the Indigenous peoples, such as occurred with the Tlingit and Aleuts. The newcomers were primarily interested in exploiting the natural resources of the land and left little more than a record of their meetings (Townsend 1981). As a result, such pieces as the following shine a small light into the lives of a little-studied people.

I have left the text much as it is in the original. Words in brackets are those of the translator. All notes are those of the translator.

On the Kenai People in the Extreme Northwest of America¹

The tribes of people in the previously Russian part of America are notable in many respects, and now, on the group of so-called Kinai or Kenai, we receive an important contribution to their particular information through the efforts of famous linguist L. Schiefner in St. Petersburg. He published (in the *Mémoires de l’académie des sciences de St. Petersbourg*, VII. Serie, Tome XXI, Nro. 3) Leopold Radloff’s dictionary of the Kenai language. We are primarily interested in the foreword of Mr. Schiefner, whom we heartily thank for the gracious transmission of the appendix sheet.

Leopold Radloff’s health has been severely shaken through continuous studies; he went to seek recovery in Germany and died in Gotha on the 29th of October 1865 after finishing his 47th

Museum of Natural and Cultural History, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, USA; rbland@uoregon.edu

year. The languages of the tribes in Northwest America, on which he published valuable proceedings, occupied him ardently, primarily the Kenai language, on which he had collected word lists. A similar situation had been the case of the mining engineer Doroshin, and the latter had obligingly placed the material collected in the Kenai region at his disposal.² Thus, he was able to put together his dictionary, whose publication Schiefner had now directed. He could then use not only Doroshin's linguistic notes for the Kenai language but also those on the Ahtna on the Copper River and, in addition, copious ethnographic notes. From this, we want to give below some information but to note beforehand that the Kenai people call themselves *Thnaina*, that is, "people." To them belong the *Kinai-tana* on Cook's Sound [Cook Inlet]; the *Kaiyukho tana* (the Ingalik of the Russians) on both banks of the lower Yukon, in the valley of the upper Kukoswim [Kuskokwim], and the region between these two rivers; the *Unakho tana* or *Iunnacho-tana* on the Yukon up to the Koyukuk; and also the *Atnah* on the Copper River, etc.

Where did the Kenai come from, and who created them? They say their ancestors came from the north or northeast and the Raven, who created them. Even now, the children are told: "Why do you throw stones at the raven? He is indeed our father." Tradition points out the following. In the beginning, two sisters came from the Copper River. The family of the elder was called *Tschixgy*, from the red color she found on the way and that of the younger *Xkali* that is, "fish head." From these two tribes, the others branched off: *Kazgi*, so-called because a raven croaked as the ancestral woman bore her first child; *Tlaxdana* from the marsh grass, on which she was confined; and *Mintuxtana* from the front wall of the hut on which the shelves were usually located. The tribal mother was confined under one such compartment, because outside the hut it was very cold. *Nuxschi* from resin that flows down the tree and the pregnant woman had taken. *Tultschina* issued from water beings, who, through washing with urine, had turned into human beings; this washing of them was done by a Kenai who had caught them. *Kattungs tana* live on the point of the bay, are thus curved; *Tschifchlox tana*, from Raven; *Nitschxi*, from the color that came from the Copper River, etc.

Shamans play an important role among the Kenai. Each of them must have his own songs and is not permitted to repeat those of another shaman. After the shaman finely dresses up, has painted his face, and draped himself with ermines, he puts on a mask and passes around the fire. All present repeat his words in chorus. After he has brought a song to a conclusion, he repeats it and then sings a second, a third, according to the importance of the case and according to the occasion in which he is

active. In these songs, he tells what appears to him and sings about his dealings with the spirits who are his helpers. The shaman is called to the sick and the dead; he is supposed to return the former to health, to the deceased, however, to show the path people have to go so that they do not take the path of the dogs.

In the view of the shamans, people fall into three parts at death. The spirit (*biitsch*) flies in the air, the body remains behind, and the shadow (*biik*) goes under the ground and continues to live with its kind. However, the seasons of the year, there below, are exactly opposite those on earth. The shadows of dogs live alone and together with the shadows of evil people, that is, the avaricious, inhospitable, and thieves. But now and then, a good person gets on the dog's path, and the shaman can protect him in that he accompanies the deceased and shows him the right path. The underworld is identified as *Tuexna*.

The constellation of the Great Bear is called *Na tschiatka*, that is, "our grandfather"; he sends fish to those on earth; in the beginning, Raven stole these from him to give to humans. *Nakltane* is given in the dictionary as the designation for the God of the Christians and as synonymous with the constellation of the Great Bear. However, this term has come into use as the designation for the idea of God only since acquaintance with the Russians. In the lakes lives *Binnato-Xtenaia*, who takes to himself those who drown. In the sea there are sea people, a kind of mermaid, blond like the Russians, with long hair, who swim on the surface of the water. When one of these mermaids smiles, she draws the *baidara* (the boat) to her. Also, the rocks in the sea have their rulers.

There are mountain people called *tgilitenai*, whose chief is called *Kluesch*. The Kenai who go into the mountains to hunt present him with an offering: bone tablets, which they use for a game where one person must guess in which hand of another a tablet marked such and such is located; and then eagles' feathers and dried fish roe, oil, and dried fish. While they throw these objects into the fire, they say: "*Kluesch*, see, I give you this, give me in return some animal." Then one lies down to sleep; on the next morning, one paints the face red, powders the hair with feathers, and then goes out on the hunt. In the mountains, a dwelling is set up and a fire built; in the latter are thrown eagles' feathers, oil, graphite, dried fish, and dried fish roe; with this, one calls out: "Take, *Kluesch*, this as a guest's gift; I have come to you as a guest."

The hunter, who goes into the mountains, smokes himself with the roots of a mountain plant in order to get rid of the fish smell; he also colors himself so that it may be pleasant for the animal to encounter him. In despair, one draws a graphite stripe from the back of the nose to the middle of

the lower jaw; with this marking, everyone recognizes that life has absolutely no more meaning for him. The colors may be cooked [prepared?] only by a virgin; small girls may help with it. She [the virgin] has to put on a clean shirt and paint herself.

The entire life and doings of the hunter are connected with *Kluesch*. The Kenai are very quiet in the mountains and sing no other song there than the mountain song. The “master of the mountains” does not like it when common speech is spoken in his realm, and therefore, for many objects, entirely different terms are chosen than those used in daily life. Thus, in the lowlands the Russians are called *Kastana* but in the mountains they are designated as white people, *Kxikajá tenai*. Likewise, muskets, knives, fire, dishes, and other objects are named something different than usual in the mountains. To the question, where do they get this mountain language? The answer, a Kenai, who had lost everything, stayed with *Kluesch*, and he heard it there.

In the mountains every step, every movement, indeed almost every word is subject to traditional rules, and these all in consideration of *Kluesch*. Doroshin relates that a marksman who accompanied him into the mountains observed there all the traditional customs to the utmost. After he had set up his trap for catching the marmot, he went under a tree, under which a fire burned. Near this, he remained during the day; he stayed in the hut only at night. There he left to hang the flesh of the marmot caught in the trap and the skin to become dry. Those dispatched with a bullet or caught in a steel trap he immediately took home, those caught in the trap, however, [he took] only at the end of the hunting period. The Kenai do not consentingly speak of the traps they have set, either of the number of them or the marmots caught. Doroshin’s marksman carefully collected the eyes of marmots, for it was bad if they were eaten by the dogs. After the end of the hunt, he buried them or threw them into the water.

When the sun shows itself during a rainy period, one may not point his finger at it; otherwise it would become angry, and the rain would come again.

Evenings in the mountains, when the coals in the hut are only glimmering, the hunter intones the mountain song. At the end of this, he immediately throws wood chips onto the coals in order to suddenly brightly light the hut; through this, he hinders the souls of the mountain sheep from leaving the hut, which had approached rapidly to the singing of the mountain song. He believes that he then, on the next morning, will be able to take the mountain sheep themselves more easily. The mountain song is, however, composed in the common speech and runs: “Climb down from the mountains and come to me.”

Doroshin has some of the songs that the shamans sing. Here is one that is sung in the name of the fish that is controlled by him: “He gets larger, moves on, - together with the water, - climbed to the half, - waits; - the water increases, - it is at an end.”

The Kenai give each month 30 days and therefore not unjustly wonder: where else does the time remain. [These following apparently are the names of months.]

Takoši, the geese fly southward, the bear creeps away, the deer become pregnant;

Banantlxcí, it begins to snow;

Banan tukstá tlxē, the days begin to increase;

Tunejaší, the snow begins to melt;

Tlxu xakaneu, when *Salmo orientalis* are caught;

Talxeneu, the geese fly back;

Koonaneó, *Salmo proteus* has been caught;

Banankantlxti, the berries ripen;

Banantc'tanáši, one goes to the mountains;

Bananktičiki, the leaves become red;

Bkančensšáne, the Earth begins to get cold;

Golčana nagá, one goes visiting.

Endnotes

1. Originally published as “Ueber die Kinaivölker im äussersten Nordwesten Amerikas” in *Globus* XXVI(6):87–88 in 1874.
2. See Bland (2007).

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