

# Continuity and Survivance: Overview of Alaska Native History and Culture

Maria Shaa Tlaa Williams

University of Alaska Anchorage

# History of Alaska

---

Geography

---

Indigenous Peoples

---

Russian Period 1754-1867

---

American Period 1867-1959

---

Modern American Period 1959-present

---

Renaissance in traditional practices – 1980-present

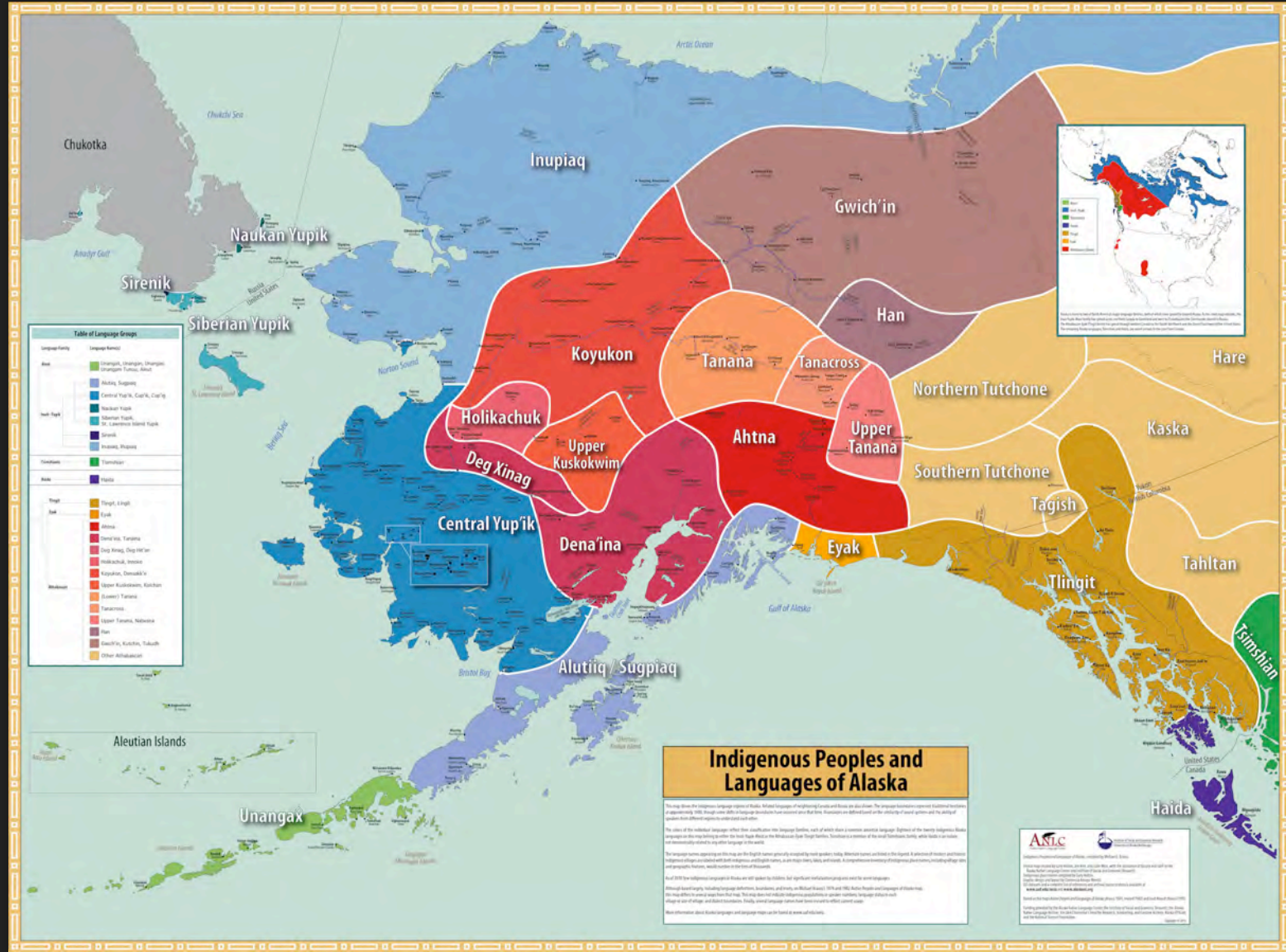


# Geography of Alaska

# ○ Geographic Quick Facts

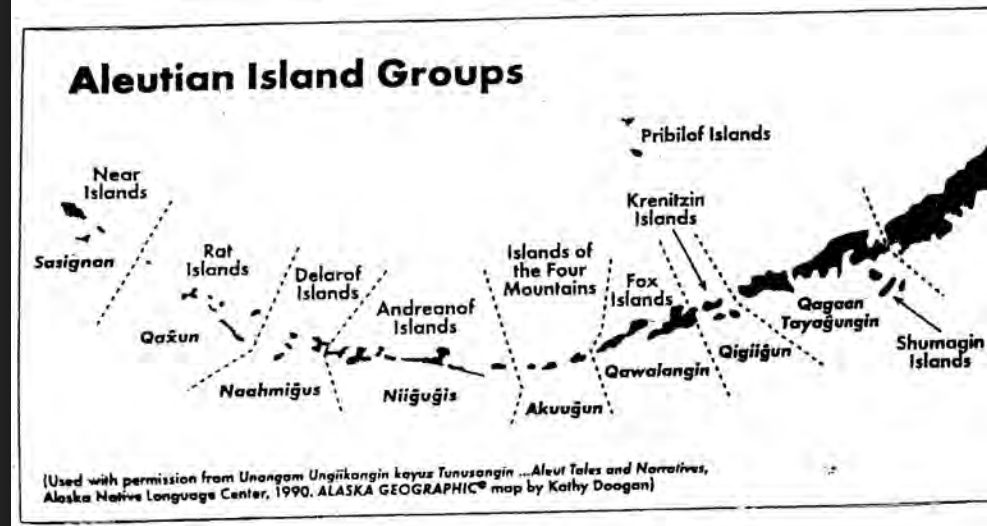
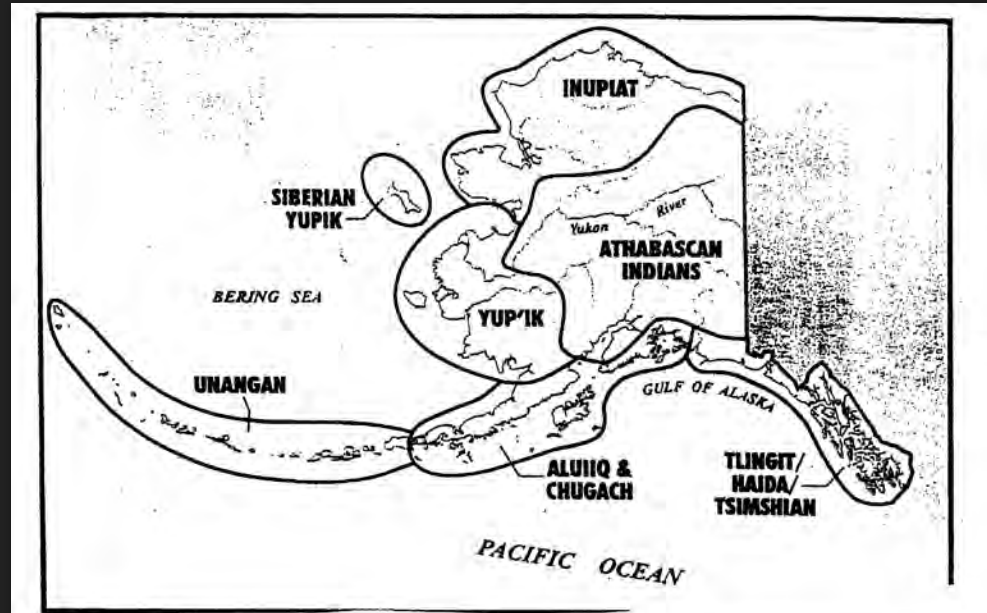
- Alaska is a subcontinent (one-fifth the size of U.S.) 586,000 sq miles
- 6 geographic regions (SE, Southcentral Pacific Rim, Southwest, Bering sea coast, Interior, Arctic)
- 33,000 miles of coastline
- 100,000 glaciers (Malaspina Glacier is larger than Rhode Island. Columbia Glacier is largest glacier in the world)
- 39 Mountain Ranges, 3,000 Rivers, 3,000,000 lakes
- Largest Mountain in North America (Denali at 21,000 feet) Of the 20 highest peaks in America, 17 are in Alaska

# 20 Alaska Native Languages



# 7-8 Broad Cultural Groups in Alaska

Inupiaq  
Siberian Yupik  
Yup'ik/Cup'ik  
Unangax/Aleut  
Alutiiq/Sugpiaq  
Dene/Athabascan  
Tlingit, Haida & Tsimshian



# Circumpolar map of Inuit Peoples



• [https://nunatsiaq.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/arctic\\_languages\\_map\\_72\\_dpi.jpg](https://nunatsiaq.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/arctic_languages_map_72_dpi.jpg)

**Na'Dene family**

- Athabaskan branch
- Eyak branch
- Tlingit branch

**Esqualeut family**

- Inuit group of Inuit-Yupik branch
- Yupik group of Inuit-Yupik branch
- Aleut (Unangam Tunuu) branch

represented by Permanent Participants  
endangered or recently extinct

**Altaic family**

- Turkic branch
- Mongolic branch
- Tunguso-Manchurian branch

**Paleo-Asian family**

- Paleo-Asian family

**Uralic family**

- Finno-Ugric branch
- Samoyedic branch

**Language isolates**

- Ket
- Nivkh
- Tsimshianic
- Haida languages
- Yukagir languages

# Iñupiaq People- 3 Regions

- Northern (North Slope)
- Kobuk area
- Seward Peninsula area





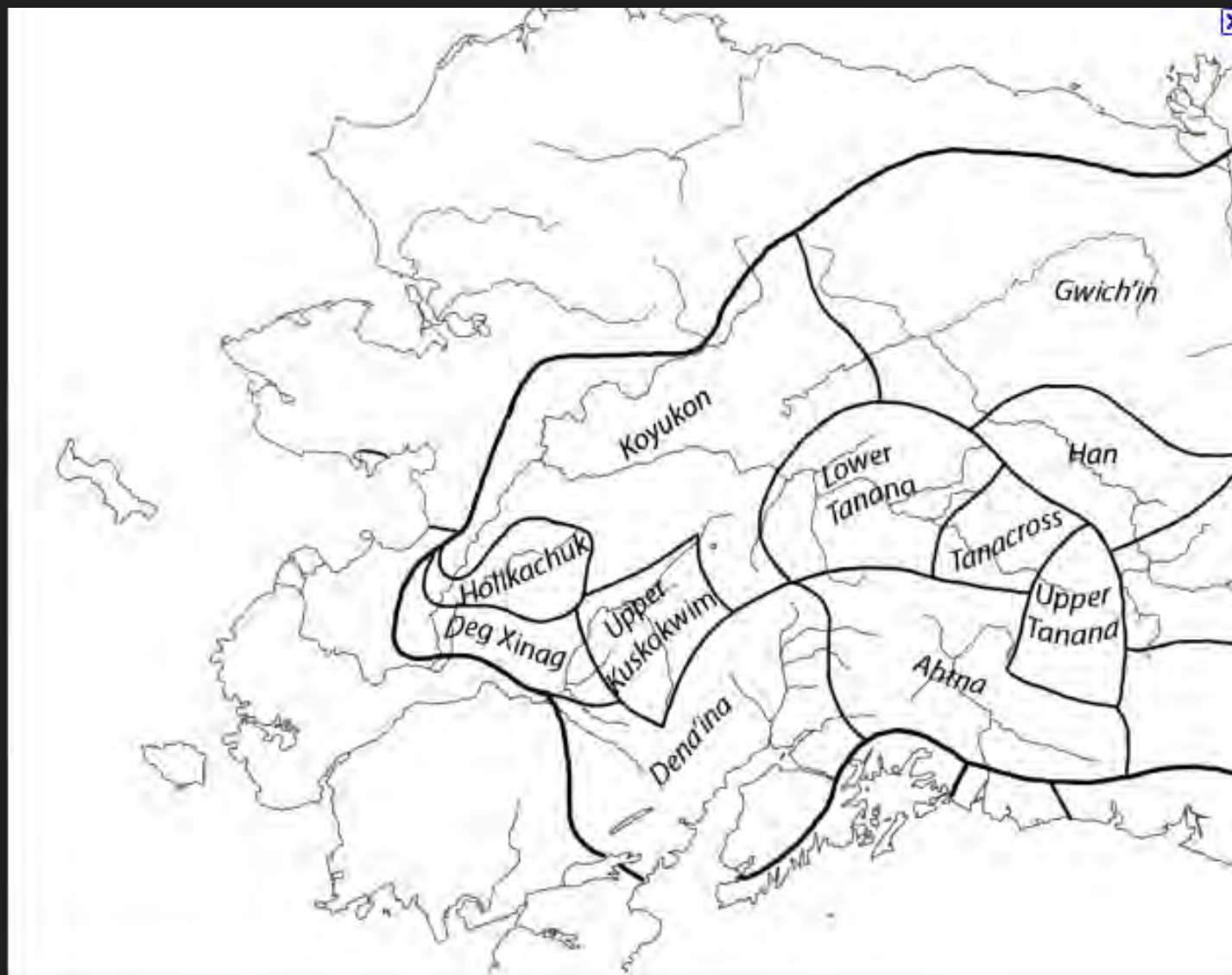


# Yup'ik and Cup'ik Peoples

# Siberian Yupik – St. Lawrence Is.



# Dene/Athabascan Peoples of Alaska

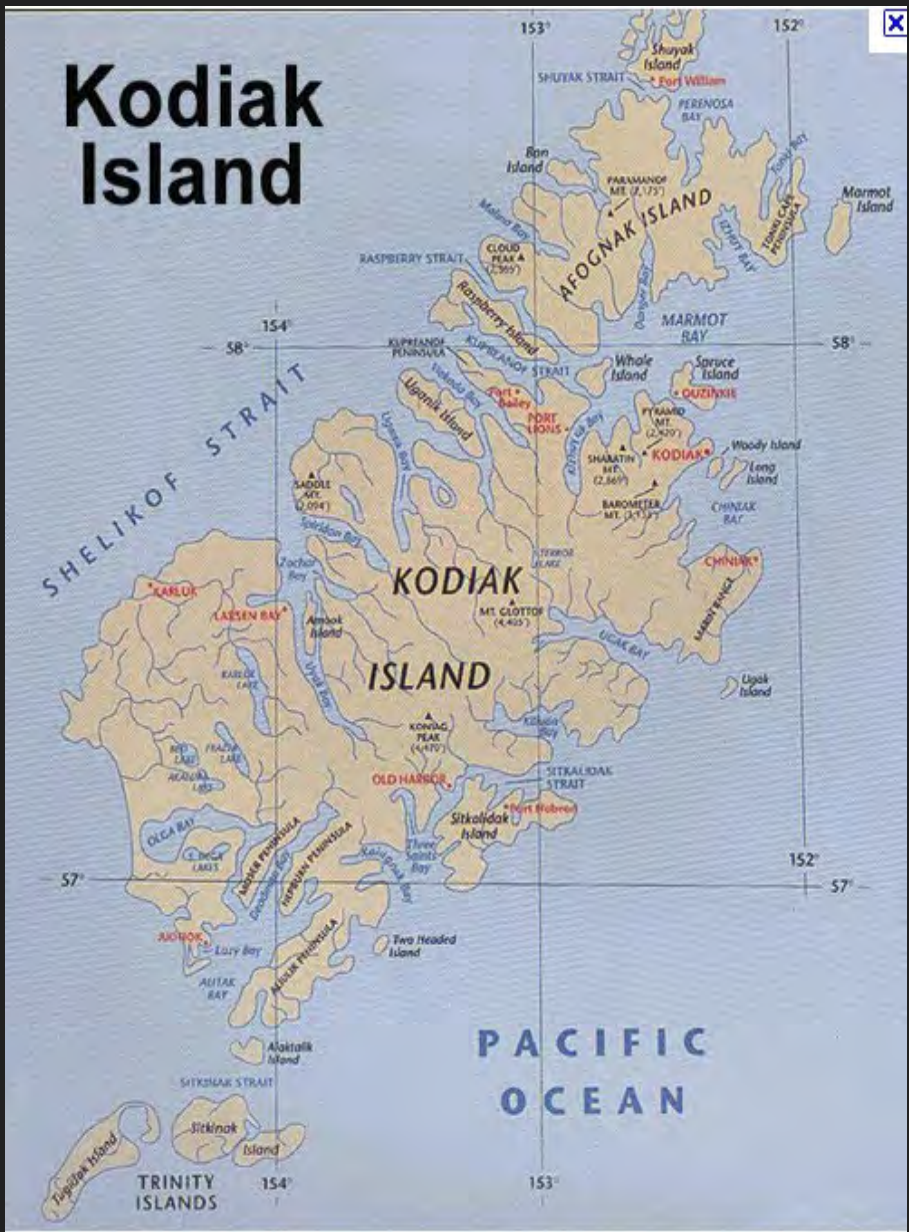


# Boreal forest in North America



- Sugpiaq/Alutiiq & Chugach peoples: The Sugpiaq or Sugcestun speaking peoples in the Alaska Peninsula, Prince William Sound and Kodiak Island area share a language – but have diverse cultural, social and political practices.
- Self Designative terms are different – the Chugach or Chugachmiut of Prince William Sound

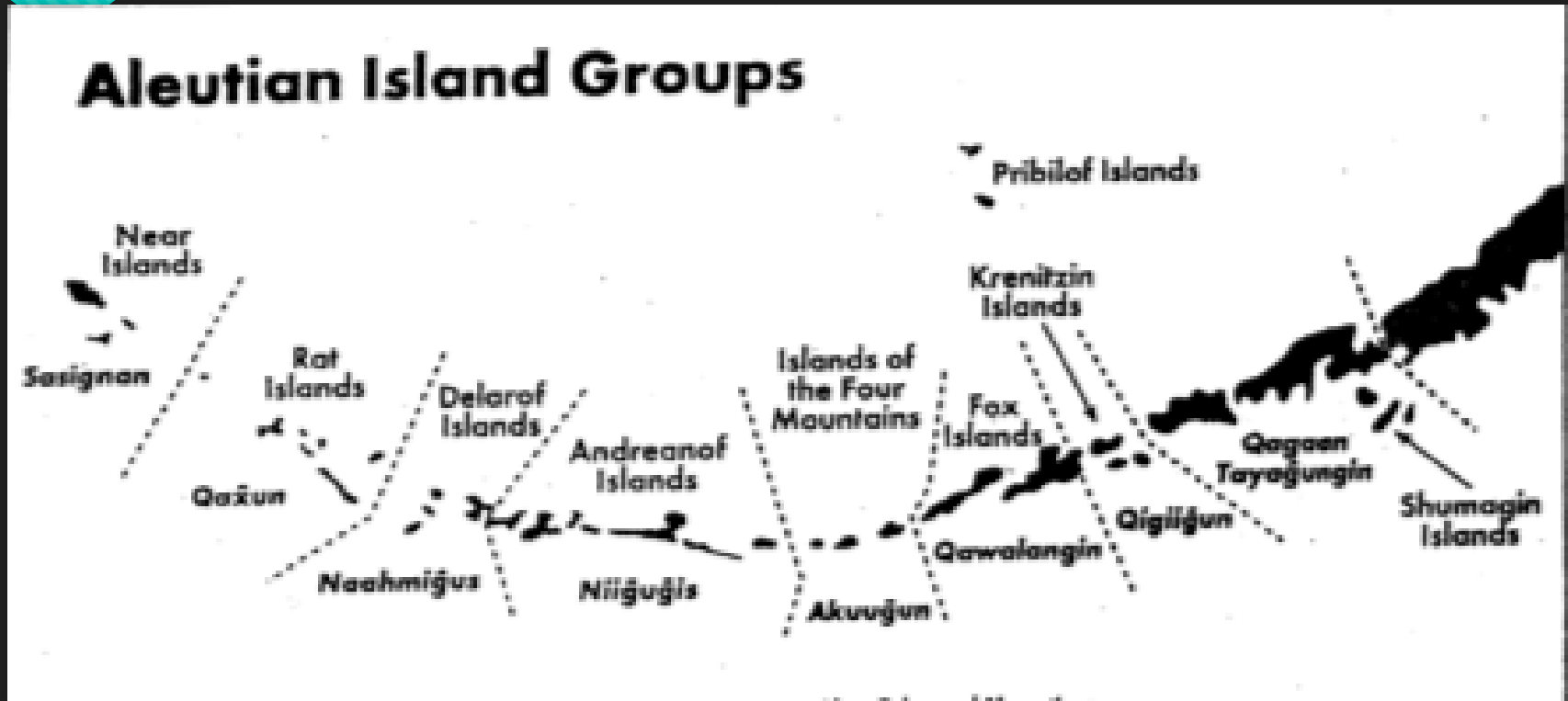
# Kodiak Island



# Rainforest people - Tlingit, Haida & Tsimshian



# Aleut – Unangax, Unangan





# Pre-colonial cultural practices

- Diversity of social structures
- Diverse ceremonial and masked dance practices
- Elaborate body art
  - Tattooing
  - Facepainting
  - Pierced septums
  - Labrets
  - Hair styles
  - regalia

# Colonial portraits of the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries

- In various archives
- 'hidden' history
- Shur Collection at the University of Alaska Polar Archives
- St. Petersburg Arts Academy
- Not well known to Alaska Native people

# Siberian Yupik/Louis Choris



**Tikhanonov Portraits, c. 1817-1819**

*Native Woman from Ukamok Island named Pameisinak*



The Toen of Afognak Island or inhabitant of Guakhana Island



Tikanov portrait Native of Copper River (Athabascan)



Tikhanov portrait of Tlingit warrior



# Russian period

- Russians enslaved Aleut/Unangan people to obtain the valuable sea otter pelts.
- Population in 1750s was 16,000 by 1790 was 1,600
- Russians invaded Kodiak Island – there were 56 village sites on Kodiak, by 1841 only 7 villages remained





# Affects of American period

- Treaty of Cession 1867
- Missionaries arrive in 1880' s
- Establish missions thru-out Alaska
- English-only
- Change the social-landscape
- No more ceremony
- No more body art
- No more music/dance

# 1874 Comity Agreement

All the Protestant church representatives gathered and divided Alaska into a pie in a meeting in New York City in 1874

Presbyterians were assigned the North Slope and Southeastern part of Alaska, Moravians were assigned Southwest Alaska, the Baptists were assigned Kodiak island, etc.

By the 1880's many Missionaries came to Alaska to convert the Indigenous population

# Indian Boarding Schools established across the U.S. and Canada

Carlisle Indian school was established in 1879-1918 and was the prototype

Quickly – across the U.S. these schools were established and primarily run by missionaries – to ‘Kill the Indian and Save the Child’

Used abandoned army facilities/barracks

Before and  
after photos  
were common  
Carlisle Indian  
School



# Apache students - after



PHOTOGRAPH BY U.S. ARMY SIGNAL CORPS,  
COURTESY OF THE ARIZONA HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

○ 1886 Yup'ik Family - Alaska



ESKIMO FAMILY ON THE KUSKOKWIM RIVER ALASKA  
(UNCIVILIZED)



HELIOSCOPE PRINTING CO. BOSTON, MASS.

# Medical Missionaries, orphanages

- Missionaries did offer medical assistance and, in many cases, saved Alaska Communities from starvation
- Orphanages were established to care for Alaska Native Orphans
- Diseases had a terrible impact on Indigenous communities

# Old world Diseases such as smallpox, influenza, and STD's

1835-40 – 50% of the entire Alaska Native population died during a Smallpox epidemic

1900 - Influenza and measles epidemic

1918-20 Influenza Pandemic

The surviving population was traumatized and vulnerable. Many villages were abandoned, shamanism disappears by 1940.



# 20<sup>th</sup> Century

- Alaska Native people had been subjected to colonialism from the Russian period, and the early American period.
- Diseases had devastated every single community in Alaska.
- American Missionaries arrived in the 1870's and 1880's and began to strip communities of their languages, dance practices, cultural practices.
- The Alaska Native population by 1950 was a little over 40,000
- Average education was 8<sup>th</sup> grade
- Average life expectancy was 34
- TB was a major epidemic affecting 90% of the population

# Oil discovery

- Oil discovered in Arctic shelf in the 1950's
- Oil industry develops technology to drill in Arctic
- Alaska becomes a state in 1958/59 in effort to develop an oil industry
- The new state of AK selects lands, leaving out Native people

# Land Claims becomes an Issue

- Yukon River Dam project
- Eider Duck protests in Barrow
- Project Chariot near Pt. Hope (1957-1962)
- Establishment of Tundra Times in 1962, the first and only Alaska Native statewide newspaper



# Tundra Times, publisher and editor was Howard Rock, an Iñupiat from Pt. Hope

- Alaska Native people began to unite and form political associations.
- Working together across cultural and regional boundaries

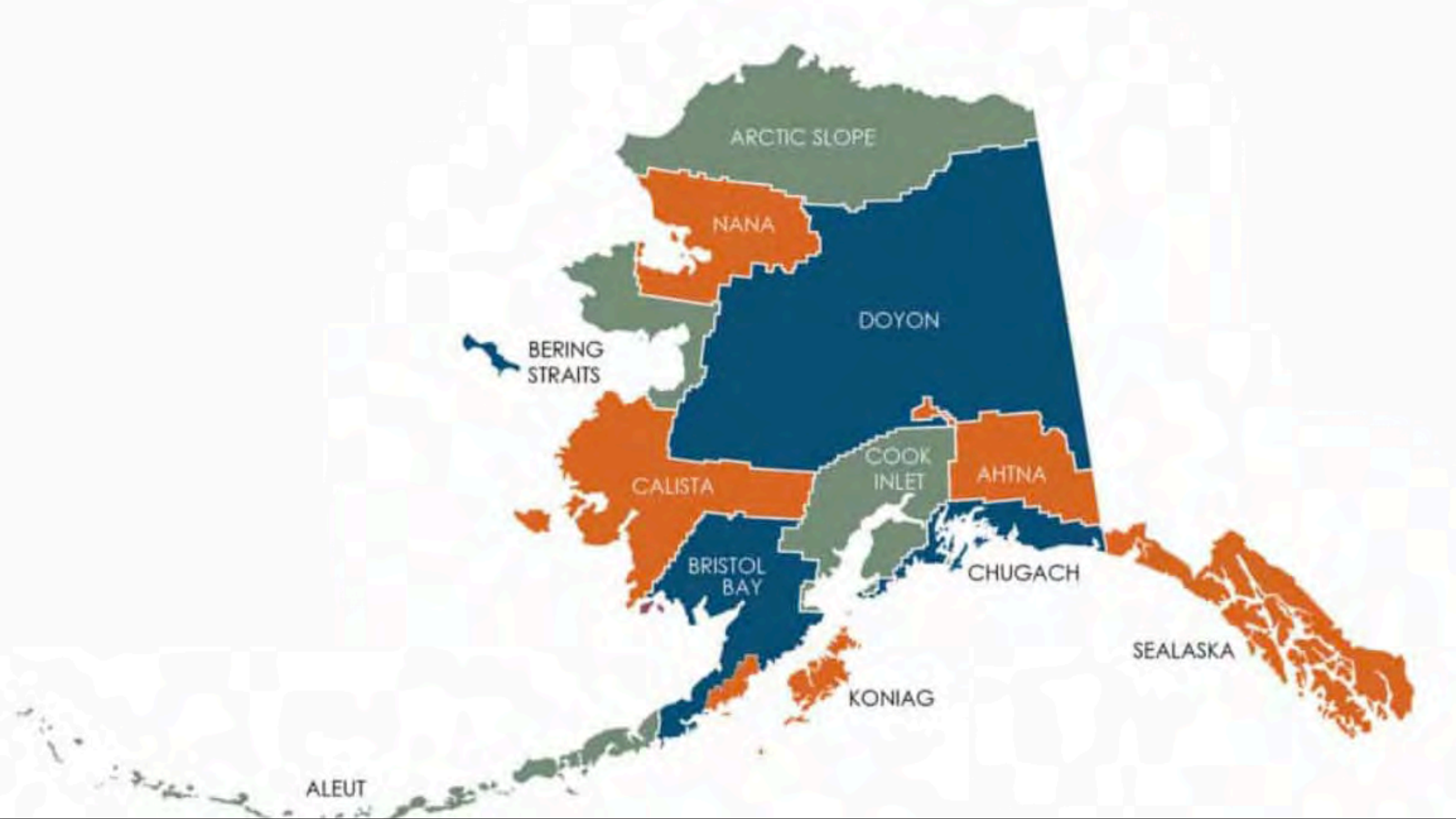


# Native Solidarity Movement

- State of AK has to negotiate a land settlement with indigenous people
- Alaska Federation of Natives est. in 1966/67 - the Statewide Native organization
- ANCSA becomes law in 1971

# Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act

- 44 million acres of land (10% of AK)
- 900 million dollars
- 12 regional corps. Established (later a 13<sup>th</sup> est.)
- Social Engineering



ARCTIC SLOPE

NANA

BERING STRAITS

DOYON

CALISTA

BRISTOL BAY

COOK INLET

AHTNA

CHUGACH

SEALASKA

KONIAG

ALEUT

# Renaissance in traditional Music/Dance

## 1980-present



Francis Usungan, Yup'ik dancer



Young people begin to dance again





Jonathan David of Minto, 1969 Tundra Times photo

# Tsimshian- Git Hoan Dance group



# Sugpiaq - Alutiiq



Nathan Jackson, Tlingit carver and dancer (!)



~~P-1-A~~

~~1087~~

WEIO, Tikigaq Dancers around late 1970' s



Little King Island Walrus dancer at WEIQ



Kotzebue Northern Lights Dancers, Alvy Shagoloak, elder





Upallret dancers from Bethel at AFN -



# Unangan dancers from King Cove



# Renaissance and rediscovery of body art

- In the early 2000's, Indigenous Alaskan Native artists began to study old photographs that showed the elaborate facial tattooing of the Inupiaq areas and St. Lawrence Island
- Sara Whalen
- Holly Nordlum
- Yaari Walker
- Dustin Newman

## Yaari Kingeekuk Walker – St. Lawrence Island Yupik



ANNE RAUP / Anchorage Daily News

Yaari Kingeekuk practices her dance in 2009. Kingeekuk is originally from Savoonga but now lives in Anchorage. She is a cultural educator and works with the Alaska Native Heritage Center.



### Biography

Owner and Artist Holly Mitiq Nordlum received a Bachelor of Fine Art Degree in Graphic Design and Photography from the University of Alaska Anchorage. Nordlum was named a Time Warner Fellow with the Sundance Film Festival, and received an Art Matters grant, and a Humanities Forum grant



### My Medium

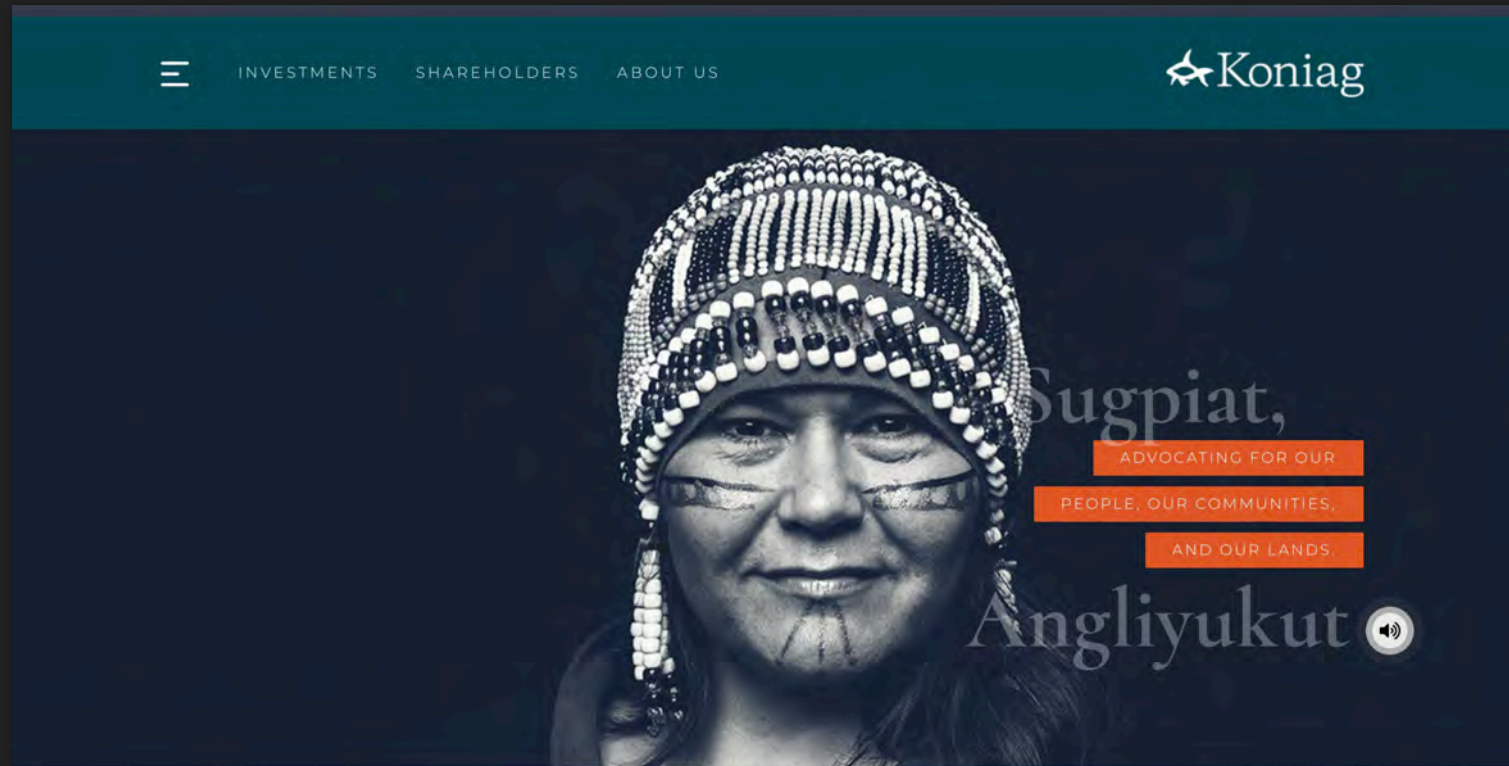
Holly Mitiq Nordlum is an artist, a graphic designer, public art contractor, traditional Inuit tattooer and a hopeful social justice insister. Using many mediums: .printmaking, painting, filmmaking, and tatooing to express her ideas about life and issues of native people in todays world.



### My Inspiration

Inuit culture and my Ancestors guide my work but I am most inspired by our lives today and the way we live in two worlds, one old and the modern urban life.

# Koniag – Regional corporation



# Concluding thoughts

- critical epistemology that reflect themes of resilience, colonialism, and Indigenous resistance.
- Younger generations led the renaissance in music/dance, and now are leading the way in traditional languages and body art

**Gunalsheesh  
or Thank you**