

# THE ROLE OF *BEGGESH* AND *BEGGESHA* IN PRECONTACT DENA'INA CULTURE<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Excavation at precontact Dena'ina village sites in southcentral Alaska typically produces few artifacts or faunal remains despite the presence in some cases of fifteen to twenty large semisubterranean houses (*nichit*) with village populations of up to several hundred people. The paucity of material remains is disproportionate to the large population who lived at these intensive salmon fishing localities on a semisedentary or sedentary basis. The explanation is rooted in behavior motivated by the concepts of *beggesh* and *beggesha* wherein negative or positive information might be encoded in an artifact or a place and the emission of that information could be detected by spiritually aware Dena'ina, animals, ancestor spirits, and other spirits, with potentially adverse consequences.

**KEYWORDS:** spirituality, interpretive archaeology, northern subarctic

## INTRODUCTION

Most southcentral Alaskan archaeological studies have been based on principles of cultural materialism and related concepts of cultural ecology, which have provided the foundation for chronology building and understanding the context within which cultures adapted to prehistoric environments of the region. Archaeological materialism rests on the principle of inferring cultural behavior from material remains; however, in one instance, that of the late prehistoric Dena'ina Athabascans, there is a distinct lack of material remains in the archaeological record, and reliance solely on materialist interpretations leads to a skewed version of the prehistoric record. Were it not for oral tradition and the linguistic and ethnographic record, the Dena'ina

would have become virtually invisible to history as hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Dena'ina house depressions and associated cold storage pits, most lacking associated artifacts, erode into obscurity leaving almost no material trace of their existence. However, through the postcontact ethnohistoric record we know a vibrant culture operated in the Cook Inlet basin and upper reaches of the Bristol Bay drainage before European contact, and from this we can make inferences about the late prehistoric time period (see Fig. 1).

The question "why so few artifacts and faunal remains in the late prehistoric Dena'ina archaeological record?" cannot be explained by materialist principles alone, but is related to deeply held spiritual beliefs that motivated behavior and in themselves reflect practices

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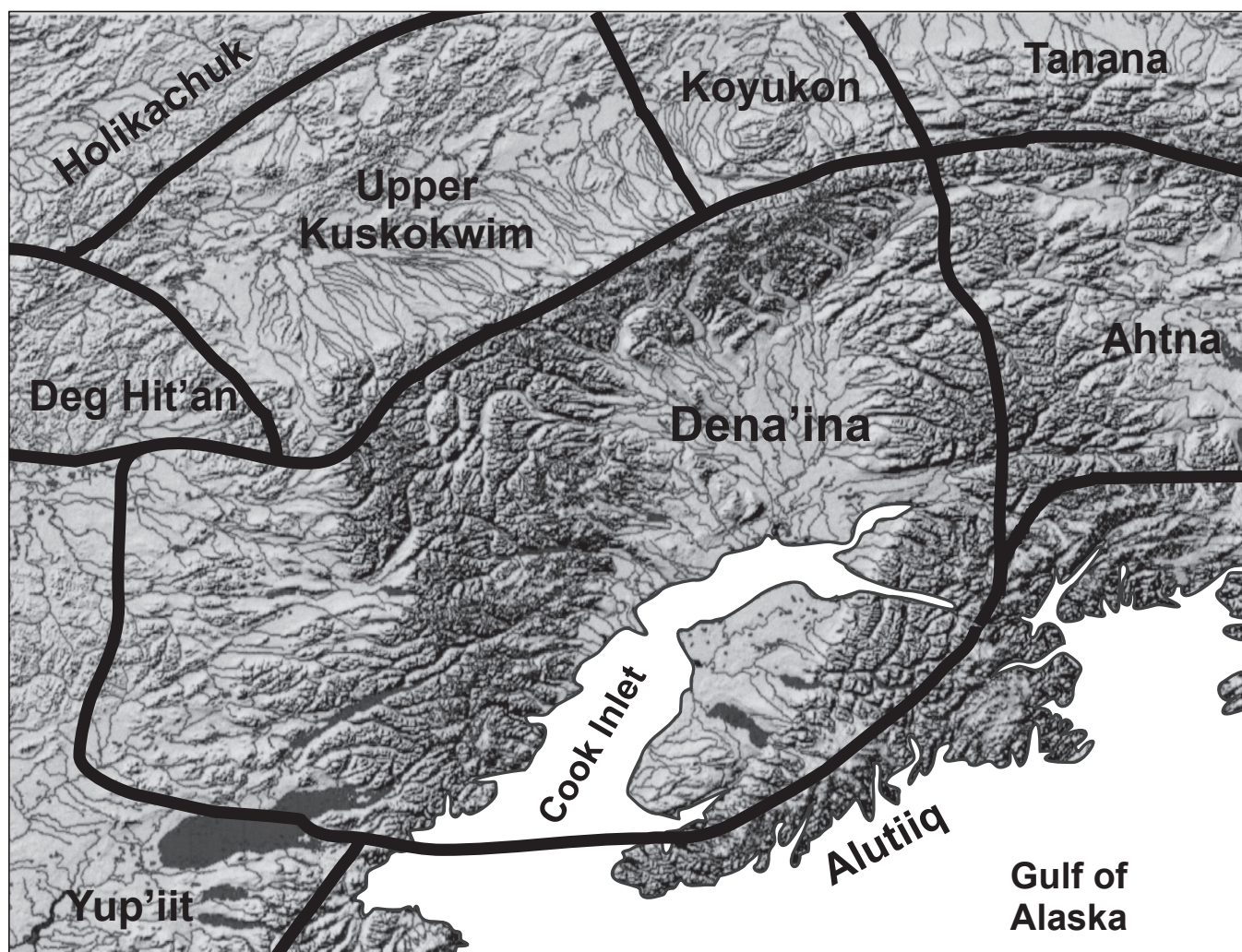


Figure 1. Dena'ina territory and Surrounding indigenous territories at the time of European contact. (Map by Alan Boraas.)

symbiotic with an ecological adaptation to southcentral Alaskan environments. In this paper we offer the position that principles of symbolic and interpretive anthropology provide a useful context to answer this question. This “interpretive archaeology,” to use a phrase coined by Christopher Tilley (1993), draws primarily upon Dena'ina oral tradition, in this case cosmological perspectives, to understand late prehistoric Dena'ina culture. Our thesis is that precontact Dena'ina were motivated through spiritual beliefs related to concepts termed *beggesh* and *beggasha* to carefully control the disposal of artifacts and bone refuse and to imbue certain places with a kind of power that told the history of interaction with the land. The result, with a few exceptions such as certain coastal sites, is a sparse archaeological record of artifacts that in itself is affirmation that these beliefs motivated precontact Dena'ina behavior.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

When compared to the periods immediately preceding (Riverine Kachemak) and immediately following (historic Dena'ina), it is clear from empirical evidence that there are far fewer artifacts in precontact Dena'ina sites in Cook Inlet (Fig. 2). Evidence from three Kenai Peninsula house excavations from the three cultural periods, each located at a prime salmon fishing locality, is compared in Table 1. In each case the samples are drawn from 1 m wide trenches bisecting the long axis within a house excavated down to culturally sterile subsoil. The samples enumerate total artifact finds and exclude unworked faunal remains and fire-cracked rock but include cultural detritus such as unmodified waste flakes (of which there were few). The earlier non-Athabaskan Riverine Kachemak excavation (KEN-147, Kenai River site) yielded 125 artifact finds

|         | INLAND                        | ILIAMNA                       | KACHEMAK BAY     |                   | OUTER INLET       | UPPER INLET              |
|---------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| AD 1800 | Historic Dena'ina             | Historic Dena'ina             | Historic Alutiiq | Historic Dena'ina | Historic Dena'ina | Historic Dena'ina        |
|         | Dena'ina                      | Dena'ina                      | Alutiiq          | Dena'ina          | Dena'ina          | Dena'ina                 |
| AD 1000 |                               | ?                             | ?                |                   |                   | ?                        |
|         |                               | Norton                        | Norton           |                   |                   |                          |
| 0 BC/AD |                               |                               | Marine Kachemak  |                   | Riverine Kachemak | Riverine Kachemak/Norton |
| 1000 BC | Ancestral Dena'ina (inferred) | Ancestral Dena'ina (inferred) |                  |                   |                   |                          |
| 2000 BC |                               |                               | ?                |                   | ?                 | ?                        |
|         |                               |                               |                  |                   |                   | Interior Oc. Bay         |

Figure 2. Recent cultural chronology of Dena'ina territory (calibrated radiocarbon years). Data from Reger (1998), Reger and Boraas (1996), Reger and Townsend (2004) Workman (1998), and Workman and Workman (1988).

per cubic meter while the more recent historic Dena'ina site (KEN-014, Kalifornsky Village) yielded 232 finds per cubic meter. The historic Dena'ina house sample (from KEN-014) included numerous fragments of broken window glass, which inflated a sample that would otherwise approximate that of the Riverine Kachemak find density. In marked contrast to the previous and following periods, a sedentary late prehistoric Dena'ina house excavation at *Shqit Tsatnu* (KEN-230) yielded only two finds per cubic meter, only one of which was particularly distinguished, a slate point that was fit together from three fragments found in the central hearth (counted as one find). Extensive testing outside the houses at this and similar age precontact Dena'ina sites also yielded few artifacts while excavation outside Riverine Kachemak and historic Dena'ina houses yielded substantial finds, though not as dense as within the houses themselves. Though variations occur, these results are typical of comparable age dwelling sites in Cook Inlet and in the Lake Clark area.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to estimate with precision the length of occupancy of each house; houses occupied for a short time would, of course, be expected to yield fewer artifacts. In each instance the houses consisted of substantial log structures consistent with a sedentary or semisedentary settlement pattern and would be expected to have been occupied for a number of years, perhaps decades, until the log structure became too decayed to

permit continued occupancy. It is also likely prehistoric houses were rebuilt at the same location since excavation of the semisubterranean pit would have involved substantial labor.

Several hypotheses have been formally and informally made to account for the lack of Dena'ina artifacts in archaeological sites. Before a substantial number of radiocarbon dates were available, the suggestion was made that perhaps the Dena'ina did not occupy their territory long enough to leave substantial material remains (Dumond and Mace 1968:18–19), a prospect first commented on by de Laguna (1975:14–15). Cook Inlet radiocarbon chronology now firmly establishes a Dena'ina occupation by AD 1000 (Reger and Boraas 1996). Because virtually all the late prehistoric Dena'ina radiocarbon dates are drawn from hearths within decayed log structures (*nichił*),<sup>3</sup> it is most likely that the AD 1000 dates represent the advent of sedentary fishing practices, and that the earlier Dena'ina were nomadic, tent-dwelling, caribou hunters utilizing harder to find, and therefore radiocarbon date, temporary camps (identified as “Ancestral Dena'ina” in Fig. 2); thus, the duration of the Dena'ina in southcentral Alaska is actually much longer than the past thousand years. A thousand years is enough time to leave a substantial artifact trail—but none is evident.

2 Examples of sites with similar artifact inventories and densities: Riverine Kachemak: KEN-029 (Reger 1977), KEN-043 (Dixon 1980), and KEN-066 (Reger, field notes); late prehistoric Dena'ina: KEN-230–3 (Boraas 1991 field notes), KEN-360 (Mobley et al. 2003), and SEL-010 (Boraas and Klein 1992); Historic Dena'ina: ANC-036, (Seager-Ross and Bowden 2000), KEN-007 (Kent et al. 1964), KEN-068 (Yesner and Holmes 2000), and XLC-001 (VanStone and Townsend 1970).

3 Unless otherwise noted, all Dena'ina words are from James Kari (2007), *Dena'ina Topical Dictionary*.



A second suggestion is that the Dena'ina were “artifact poor” and therefore had few material remains to leave behind. Table 2 identifies the personal, portable, durable artifacts as recorded in Osgood's (1976) *Ethnography of the Tanaina*.<sup>4</sup> While precontact Dena'ina material culture emphasized perishable items of wood, hide, and skin, there were potentially forty-two types of artifacts made from durable stone, bone, horn, or shell, most of which would have been in common everyday use and could be expected to have been found in precontact sites.<sup>5</sup> The inventory ranges from stone adzes and knives to war clubs, and the ethnographic and oral historic records indicate each individual had a wide range of artifacts at his or her disposal. The Dena'ina were not artifact poor during the precontact period and had both a durable and nondurable material culture to successfully adapt to their environment. Third, it may be that the precontact Dena'ina, while occupying Cook Inlet and the upper Bristol Bay drainages for at least a thousand years, did not occupy any single sedentary dwelling or site long enough to leave artifact remains. That remains a possibility if it can be demonstrated by fine-tuned radiocarbon or another form of dating, but it seems unlikely because short-term house occupation also meant abandoning a prime salmon fishing locality altogether. Sedentism at prime fishing localities with a seasonal round radiating from a central village consisting of stout log houses suggests that an artifact accumulation concentrated around the dwelling places would have been the consequence of day-to-day living, but this was not the case. We do not think any of these arguments satisfactorily account for the lack of material remains at Dena'ina sites.

Whereas the Riverine Kachemak and historic Dena'ina sites exhibit a kind of material entropy of highly disordered, meaning highly probable, artifact and bone scatter, late prehistoric Dena'ina depositional processes of artifacts and bone were mediated by some cultural practice that

caused an investment of energy to create highly ordered (i.e., highly improbable) sites with virtually no artifact scatter. We suggest that the Dena'ina were motivated to control artifact disbursement because of beliefs related to the concept of *beggesh*—that artifacts could absorb and exude information of events associated with their use; this potentially negative information was believed to send unwanted messages to other Dena'ina, animals, ancestor spirits, and other spirits disrupting social and ecological order. The meaning of *beggesh* is to be understood within the overall context of precontact Dena'ina cosmology, which involved a set of beliefs that many Dena'ina still understand today but few have communicated to non-Dena'ina for fear of being misunderstood.

## TRADITIONAL DENA'INA COSMOLOGY

The traditional Dena'ina world consisted of six dimensions. First, and most familiar to Western thought, was the human physical dimension described by the terms “body” and “breath” (Osgood 1976:169), which are described by the Dena'ina terms *benest'a* (his or her body, Kari 2007:86) and “breath” (*beyich'*, his or her breath, Kari 2007:97). The body was the corporal self while breath was an expression of a life force and associated with health that Kalifornsky (1991:202) describes as *deshishch'idnulk'edi nitlu qghech'ex*, which literally means “for durable breath they breathe” (Kari n.d.). The second dimension was the human spirit or soul of that body called a “shadow-spirit,” termed *beyiga*, “his or her shadow spirit” (Kalifornsky 1991:54), while alive, or *k'eyiga*, “someone's shadow spirit” (Kari 2007:307) if the person had died. The person in the form of a shadow spirit would seek a purpose that would guide them in life (Kalifornsky 1991:13). While the person was alive the shadow spirit was capable of leaving the body and traveling to other dimensions in dream

**Table 1. Artifact density from three Kenai Peninsula excavations representing historic Dena'ina, precontact Dena'ina, and riverine Kachemak cultural periods.**

| Cultural Period      | Site                         | Average Occupation Date | Cultural Feature | Area       | Volume            | Total Finds | Finds per cubic meter |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|------------|-------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Historic Dena'ina    | KEN-014, Kalifornsky Village | AD 1900                 | House            | 1x10x0.5 m | 5 m <sup>3</sup>  | 1,161       | 232                   |
| Pre-Contact Dena'ina | KEN-230, Shq'it Tsatnu       | AD 1200                 | House            | 1x12x0.5 m | 6 m <sup>3</sup>  | 11          | 2                     |
| Riverine Kachemak    | KEN-147, Kenai River         | 200 BC                  | House            | 1x12x1.5 m | 18 m <sup>3</sup> | 2,243       | 125                   |

4 The spelling “Tanaina” with an initial “t” and no glottal stop (') can be traced to Russian documents originally published in German. An initial “d” and a glottal stop more accurately reflects the pronunciation of the ethnonym, Dena'ina, and will be used in this paper.

5 Osgood's inventory is listed in Table 2. A complete inventory of durable items from other sources, including museum repositories, remains to be undertaken.

states (Osgood 1976:169), and shamans were capable of controlling their shadow spirit to willfully pass into other dimensions through trance states. Upon death, the shadow spirit was transformed into the third dimension, the ancestor dimension, through a cremation ritual and subsequent memorial potlatch. Ancestor spirits, *k'eyiga*, "someone's shadow spirit" or the "spirit of the recent dead" (*q'egh nutnughel'an*, literally "he looks at his tracks again") (Kari n.d.:789; see also Kari 2007:310), were human souls who had not achieved their purpose as determined by a vision quest and at some point in time would be reincarnated. Ancestor spirits were generally discomfiting and potentially ominous to the living because they knew your thoughts and could detect information about your life from your material items. Animals and their spirits represented a fourth dimension wherein potent animal spirits could become one's spirit helper and had power to aid an individual (Mamaloff 1993:2–3), but their power also made them ominous, and, if treated badly, a sentient and willful animal spirit could take action detrimental to humans. Like ancestor spirits, animals could detect actions, words, and even the thoughts of the living and respond accordingly. Animals could also receive information from human artifacts concerning how those artifacts had been used and events they were associated with as well as receive information from a place where a bad or good event happened. The fifth dimension included over twenty spirits that populated the Dena'ina world (see Table 3) and operated as part of what Osgood (1976:169) called a "semi-visible world which exists as a shadow of their own environment." Some were spirits of place—good or bad—and some were universal and powerful such as the mountain spirits, the *Dghely Dnayi*; *Gujun*, the "Spirit of the Animals"; and *Gujun's* wife *Kunkda Jelen*, the "Mother of the Animals." The final dimension was that of *Naq'eltani*, first reported to the Western world by Sheldon (1908:277), who described *Naq'eltani* (written Nah-critah-ny) as a kind of "supreme being" (see also Osgood 1976:174); today the word is often used as a synonym for God among Christian Dena'ina. But *Naq'eltani*, literally the "breath that passes over us," is very ancient and in a traditional context was thought of as a dimension that encompassed a state of purity, goodness, and harmony not unlike the Navaho Dené concept of *hozho* (cf. Wyman 1983:537). Many traditional Dena'ina believe that one is reborn out of the ancestor dimension until one achieves his or her purpose in life and at that point the shadow spirit permanently enters the dimension of *Naq'eltani*.

Each dimension operated in parallel space and time and that was the basis of communication between them. In traditional Dena'ina cosmology human actions, words, thoughts, and information absorbed by artifacts traveled across the dimensions as a form of energy much like light radiating from its source through a window and would potentially be received by an animal, an ancestor, or another spirit existing in the parallel dimension. Thus, the Dena'ina were consciously motivated to control their thoughts, words, actions, and artifacts and their associated informational energy so only intended messages were sent and unintended messages were suppressed. Artifact information in the form of *beggesh* fit into this system because, without control, an artifact left lying about could have inadvertent negative consequences.

### BEGGESH AND BEGGESHA

Osgood (1976:169) states, "The idea of inanimate objects speaking is commonplace among the Tanaina [sic]," and we now know the concept through which the information is retained and relayed is *beggesh*. To the Dena'ina *beggesh* is a trace, like a scent, carried by humans and their artifacts or attributed to a place, and transmits information about past events associated with the thing or place, or it can express an abstract idea. The root *-ggesh* translates as "impurity, trace, scent, dirt, or smell" (Kari n.d.:300) depending on the context of the sentence, and the prefix *be-* is a possessive pronoun meaning "his/her"; so *be+ggesh* literally means "his/her impurity, trace, scent, etc." *Beggesh* denotes that the "trace" or "scent" is negative or impure, but the opposite was also found. The enclitic *-a* negates the action of the stem and hence *be+ggesh+a* denotes the absence of *beggesh* or the absence of impurity or a pure state and would refer, for example, to the pure essence of a child, which, because it has yet to live life fully, has no *beggesh* (cf. Kalifornsky 1991:37).

Negative events could impart *beggesh* to the artifacts associated with that event. For example, an object may absorb *beggesh* by having been used by someone in a hostile act, by someone who violated taboos regarding animals, or by someone who otherwise had an unrepentant spirit toward violations of social norms. In a similar vein malevolent shamans were said to be able to cause their spirit to invade an object, usually an effigy of their own making, giving it *beggesh*. For example, in the shaman war described in "The Kustatan Bear Story" (Kalifornsky 1991:290–301) a shaman-made effigy had the power to

*Table 2. Durable late prehistoric Dena'ina material items. From Osgood (1976); other durable material items are known in addition to those listed here. A complete inventory of museum collections has yet to be made.*

| Item                  | Durable Part   | Use                                      | Reference              |
|-----------------------|--|--|------------------------|
| Fish spear            | Barbed bone point, bone fore shaft   | Salmon, halibut fishing                  | Osgood 1976:83         |
| Harpoon (three types) | toggle point<br>barbed bone point<br>stone inset point<br>bone fore shaft                            | Sea mammal hunting                       | Osgood 1976:83-5       |
| Killing lance         | bone lance point   | Sea mammal hunting                       | Osgood 1976:85-6       |
| Bear Spear            | slate point<br>bone lance point  | Brown bear hunting/<br>protection        | Osgood 1976:86         |
| Arrows                | Slate point<br>with bone fore shaft<br>Bone point<br>Blunt point                                     | Land mammal hunting,<br>avifauna hunting | Osgood 1976:88         |
| Harpoon arrows        | bone toggling harpoon<br>fore shaft  | Fishing, seal hunting                    | Osgood 1976:88-9       |
| Deadfall knives       | bone<br>horn   | Bear protection                          | Osgood 1976:96-7       |
| Halibut hook          | bone barb  | Halibut fishing                          | Osgood 1976:101        |
| Knives                | Man's straight slate knife<br>Copper knife (cold hammered)<br>Woman's slate ulu<br>Curved bone knife | General use                              | Osgood 1976:101-3      |
| Adze                  | Stone<br>Copper (cold hammered)  | Wood working, picks, ice-<br>chipping    | Osgood 1976:103        |
| Scrapers              | Chipped Stone<br>Slate scrapers<br>Beaver teeth<br>Shell scrapers<br>Boulder spall scrapers          | Wood, skin working                       | Osgood 1976:103        |
| Awls/Needles          | bone awls<br>bone needles  | Skin sewing                              | Osgood 1976:103        |
| Wedges                | bone   | Log splitting                            | Osgood 1976:104        |
| Spoons                | Sheep horn   | Eating/household use                     | Osgood 1976:106        |
| Lamps                 | Serpentine stone (Iliamna only)  | Light/heat                               | Osgood 1976:108        |
| War clubs             | Horn (antler?), oil soaked<br>chipped stone point inset  | Warfare                                  | Osgood 1976:110        |
| Shields and Armor     | Bone shield<br>sand/spruce gum   | Warfare                                  | Osgood 1976:111        |
| Calendar              | Bone   | Event recording                          | Osgood 1976:115        |
| Shamanic Artifacts    | puffin beak rattles<br>bone tube   | Shamanic activity, curing                | Osgood 1976: 119;178-9 |
| Amulets               | Lucky agates   | Luck                                     | Osgood 1976:175-6      |

cause sickness and death (Dena'ina Legacy Tapes, Tape 3, February 19, 1991).

The pure or positive aspects of *beggesha* are exemplified by the Dena'ina concept of a lucky agate stone (*nu-dech' ghela*), one of the principal amulets of the Dena'ina. Lucky agates were sometimes found in unusual circumstances (Osgood 1976:175–176), and Kalifornsky (1991:47) writes, “And whoever would find it [a lucky agate stone], when he found it, he would put a scent on it, so it [the luck] wouldn't disappear.” The English term “scent” is translated from *qbeggesha* (*q+be+ggesh+a*) wherein the *-a*

negates the impurity referenced by the stem *-ggesh*, and the *q-* refers to the quality of abstractness; so the scent or trace, in this case, is a positive, abstract force associated with his/her good luck. Luck, in the Dena'ina case, is a form of energy, not unlike gravity, which is universally present and can potentially be used to good advantage, and not a random event as generally perceived by Western culture. *Beggesha* was imparted to the object by positive thoughts and proper behavior in the opposite way that negative thoughts and behavior created *beggesh*.

“The Kustatan Bear Story” (mentioned above) and “The Other Half of the Kustatan Bear Story” (Kalifornsky 1991:290–301, 302–307) exemplify how shamanic power described by *beggesh* and *beggesha* could be incorporated into animals or objects. In these stories two powerful early twentieth-century shamans, or “*elegena*,” from Kijik invaded a bear at Kustatan and shortly after a moose at Kalifornsky Village and threatened the people, inciting what Kalifornsky describes as a shaman war (Dena’ina Legacy Tapes, Tape 3, February 19, 1991). The villagers could not kill the shaman-occupied animals by normal means until, in each case, a spiritually powerful man baptized three bullets with holy water, blessed them with incense, and carved an Orthodox cross into the lead and then killed the spirit-animals. Kalifornsky uses the phrase *beggesh qul’i mitni* to refer to Russian Orthodox “holy water.” The term *qul’i* is another form of negation, expressing that *beggesh* is reversed and *mitni* means “water”; hence the bullets contained a powerful force imparted through blessing by holy water that was able to negate the power of the evil animals. Some Dena’ina men today still carry a blessed bullet with an Orthodox cross carved in the lead for use in special circumstances, carrying on the tradition of *beggesha*.

The Dena’ina believed that shamans, true believers termed *k’ech eltanen* (see Boraas and Peter 1996), spirits, and animals could detect *beggesh* and *beggesha*. Because information travels across the dimensions, animals, sensing negative information, would abandon a place if artifacts containing *beggesh* were present. Shamans were capable of doing “shaman work”—spiritual practices learned through apprenticeships—on objects suspected of having *beggesh* to detect and contain the negative information they emitted (cf. Kalifornsky 1991:37, 105). Some modern Dena’ina speak of those capable of doing a “reading” on artifacts detecting characteristics of past users or past events associated with the artifact. As with shaman work, the details of this practice are considered privileged cultural property rights and non-Dena’ina are not generally allowed to observe a reading. Only some Dena’ina have this ability and in the past they would have been channeled into a shamanic role or encouraged to pursue true belief (*k’ech eltani*). The aptitude to do a reading is said to be passed matrilineally, suggesting that this ability has some degree of biological inheritance through the mother’s genetic lineage that is made manifest through learned cultural practice.

*Beggesh* was imparted to objects solely by human actions or thoughts, not by supernatural entities, and reflects

that component of self that is bad or evil (again the similarity to Navaho Dené *hozho*). Animal spirits and supernatural entities were not believed to be capable of producing *beggesh* and, as a result, shamans could not detect their trace. Kalifornsky (1991:61) writes:

They say that the Dena’ina would see supernatural animal spirits. If they would see an animal spirit they would be afraid. And the shaman would use his powers to understand its meaning. But he could not figure it out. It left no trace [no *beggesh*].

And describing Dena’ina spirits, Kalifornsky (1991:55) writes:

The Dena’ina hear things and see things: supernatural things, and various kinds of monstrous animals. Then the shaman works on it, but he can’t find out about it. It has no *beggesh*, it has no shadow-spirit. The shaman looks around, but there is no trace of anything there.

The concepts of *beggesh* and *beggesha* are not limited to artifacts but also extend to places (Boraas and Peter 2005). Dena’ina spirituality of place involves a message of a past event that emanates from a location which some can detect whether or not they had been part of the original event. The events are sometimes morally neutral everyday occurrences; some can be morally good, while others are bad. According to a Dena’ina elder, the late Nellie Chickalusion, the concept of “evil” did not enter the Dena’ina lexicon until it was introduced by Orthodox priests (personal communication to her granddaughter Donita Peter), and Peter Kalifornsky taught that there is good and bad in all things (Dena’ina Legacy Tapes 1990; personal communication to Donita Peter). Thus, the Western distinction between absolute good and absolute evil is better reflected by the concept that good or bad can emerge or be suppressed by willful intent. Events of this “emerging good” or “emerging bad” can be encoded in the landscape, and for a Dena’ina to travel was to encounter the moral history of the people as detected by feelings, images, emotions, or thoughts experienced at a place.

Most often placenames are geographically descriptive, for example *Nibena*, or Island Lake—a lake with a small island in it. Other placenames are descriptive of relatively benign events that happened there; for example, *Tsats’dulqet’t* on the Kenai River translates as “where we tipped over” and *Shk’ituk’t*, the Dena’ina Village at Kenai, was called “we slide down place” (Kalifornsky 1991:347, 349). Places, however, can carry a deeper meaning than that conveyed by the placename and this is often expressed through the



spirits of place. Table 3 identifies some of those spirits. The name is a collective that describes the habitat or physical entity the spirit occupies, but can also describe specific places. Marmot people, *sq'ula dnayi*, for example, are found above tree line throughout Dena'ina territory where the *sq'ula dnayi* of a specific place could be good, bad, or neutral depending on the events that happened there. Good tree spirits, *ch'wala dnayi*, might exist at a place below tree line that was associated with a good event and where one regularly got a good feeling, while menacing tree spirits might populate a place where an aggressive or hostile act occurred and an ominous feeling would be felt by someone who ventured there. Those with acute perception might be able to detect the event in picturelike form while others might only get a generally good or generally bad feeling. Although he was apparently unaware of the depth of Dena'ina cosmology, Osgood alluded to this when he wrote in 1937, "The trees and grass talk to people and so do stones and mountains" (1976:169). Spirits of place are described by the term *dnayi*, which derives from the Dena'ina root for "people" and reflects the fact that these are willful, sentient entities, not the ghosts of the people who committed the act but rather the ghost of the act itself.

Some places became associated with good events and became revered. One such place is thought to be *Nduk'eyux Dghil'u*, or Telaquana Mountain, which means

"animals went into the mountain." There are four versions of a story associated with animals emerging from a mountain, one by Kalifornsky (1991:72–77), two by Alexi Evan (in Tenenbaum 1984:178–191 and in Rooth 1971:68–70), and one by Ruth Koktelash (Kari and Balluta 1986:A-63, English; A-86, Dena'ina), which describe the Dena'ina moving into the western portion of their present territory in the Stony River area due to starvation in their former homeland to the north. In the mountains they find abundant food resources, which they utilize using new cultural practices. Kalifornsky and Evan describe the new cultural practices in their new homeland as having *beggesh qistlagh*, "no impurity," meaning the practices were good. Telaquana Mountain remains to this day a special place to the Dena'ina people, representing all that is good and prosperous about the people and their territory. Other places became known as bad or, after contact, evil places. *Tiduqilts'ett* means "Disaster Place" (Kalifornsky 1991:270) and is an abandoned village on the Cook Inlet bluff between the Swanson River mouth and the mouth of Bishop Creek on the Kenai Peninsula. The "disaster" is the influenza epidemic of 1918–19 in which as much as half of the Dena'ina population of Cook Inlet died (Boraas 2002; Fall 1987:21–22; Mishler 1985). As a consequence many Dena'ina villages became too depopulated to sustain themselves and the survivors moved to nuclear villages

**Table 3. Partial List of Dena'ina Spirits**

| English Name             | Dena'ina Name       | Reference                            |
|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Barking Dog              | Łik'aqwa yetsayi    | Kalifornsky 1991: 278                |
| Evil spirit              | Nantina             | Osgood 1976:170 Kalifornsky 1991:57  |
| Detached hand            | Qujexa              | Kari 2007:309                        |
| Giant (Mountain Spirit)  | Gujun               | Kalifornsky 1991:157                 |
| Giant, (Mountain Spirit) | K'eluyesh           | Kalifornsky 1991:65                  |
| Giant                    | Gilyaq              | Kalifornsky 1991:59                  |
| Giant, First Man         | Chiyalchin          | Kari n.d.:74                         |
| Household spirit         | Yuh Ht'ana or Kin'i | Kalifornsky 1991:55, 372             |
| Mother of Everything     | K'unkda Jelen       | Kalifornsky 1991:327                 |
| Steambath spirit         | Neli Qelch'eha      | Kalifornsky 1991:49, 51              |
| Chinook Wind people      | Chuł dnayi          | Kari 2007:309                        |
| Glacier people           | Łi dnayi            | Kari 2007:309                        |
| Lake people              | Yen'at dnayi        | Kari 2007:310                        |
| Marmot people            | Sq'ula dnayi        | Kari 2007:310                        |
| Mountain people          | Dghili dnayi        | Kalifornsky 1991:30<br>Kari 2007:310 |
| North Wind people        | Ezhi'i dnayi        | Kari 2007:310                        |
| Rock people              | Tsayan dnayi        | Kari 2007:310                        |
| Sky people               | Yuh'tana            | Kari 2007:310                        |
| Sunshine people          | N'uyi dnayi         | Kari 2007:310                        |
| Spruce Tree people       | Ch'wala dnayi       | Osgood 1976:Kari nd.:7               |
| Underwater creature      | Tat'uh beł qiz'uni  | Kari 2007:309                        |
| Kingfisher figure        | Ch'iduchuq'a        | Kari 207:310                         |



like Kenai, Tyonek, Nondalton, or Eklutna; *Tiduqilts'ett* was one of the abandoned villages. This village seems to have been particularly hard hit and Kalifornsky identifies a number of people, including Nikiski Pete Baktuit, Max Maxim, and Fred Chulyin, who left the village and subsequently reestablished themselves in Kenai in the early twentieth century (Dena'ina Legacy Tapes, June 8, 1990). The influenza epidemic was taken as a premonition of political disaster involving Dena'ina loss of sovereignty and *Tiduqilts'ett* took on the meaning of an uncontrollable adversity (Peter Kalifornsky 1990, personal communication to Alan Boraas). Many Dena'ina refused to go near *Tiduqilts'ett* well into the twentieth century because of the evil forces that linger there.

Whether places or artifacts will ever be shown through Western positivist science to absorb and emit information is debatable. String theory and the Einstein, Podolsky, Rosen Paradox of Quantum Theory have each been implicated as possible mechanisms through which information can become coded into matter, and the pituitary gland, the "third eye," has been hypothesized as a possible receptor for "sixth sense" information. Unfortunately, pseudoscience, New Age recontextualization of Native American cosmology, and outright quackery are rampant in what is considered the paranormal in the West, and scientists risk censure if they tackle such questions. Moreover, just as cultures can create maladaptive socioeconomic systems resulting in their collapse, cultures or subcultures may temporarily go ideologically awry and create maladaptive structures having no or little bearing on reality.<sup>6</sup> But cultures also cannot last long if mentally construed cognitive reality does not match external natural reality, and the thousands of years the Dena'ina practiced these beliefs suggest at the very least they are neutral from the standpoint of an adaptation to subarctic environments and very likely contain perspectives and practices that enhance a symbiotic interaction between culture and nature. The question we wish to ask, however, is not "Is this form of psychometry scientifically valid?" but rather "How did the centuries-long practice involving multiple dimensions and *beggesh* and *beggesha* motivate and direct Dena'ina behavior?"

## HUMAN CREMATIONS AND THE RITUAL PURIFICATION OF ARTIFACTS

Before the introduction and spread of Orthodoxy, the Dena'ina cremated their dead (Osgood 1976:165–168), a practice directly related to a belief in human reincarnation (Osgood 1976:160). It was the function of the cremation ceremony to resolve the interpersonal conflicts that had accumulated between the deceased and the living and is based on the premise that after death the shadow spirit of the deceased knew the thoughts of the living. After death the body was attended by close relatives in a twenty-four-hour watch during which conciliation in the form of prayers, songs, or one's personal thoughts was sought with the deceased's shadow spirit regarding unresolved conflicts during life. Normally, balance and order were achieved by a simple recognition—spoken, sung, or thought—of the things unsaid during life. Sometimes, however, the nature of the relationship was such that the apology took the form of hysterical grief involving uncontrolled crying, self-torture, and occasionally suicide, sometimes carried out at the cremation ceremony itself (Osgood 1976:168). The "dead that holler from the grave" (*nuqnujelen*) (Kari 2007:309) are distraught ancestor spirits potentially harmful to humans whose spirit has not been propitiated. As a measure of protection from ancestor spirits (and other spirits as well), Osgood (1976:170) reports that Dena'ina would leave a container of water at the doorstep to prevent the passage of an ancestor shadow spirit into their house.

Regarding personal artifacts of the deceased, Osgood (1976:166) states they were burned in the funeral pyre along with the body: "Outside [of the village], about two or three miles away, the Indians make a crematory by building up a pier of logs. On the top they finally place the body together with the particular implements and necessities of the deceased." In addition to sending the soul to be reincarnated, the funeral pyre ritually purified the artifacts of *beggesh*, and hence any stone points or similar durable objects that survived the fire would not affect the animals or spirits while nondurable artifacts would, of course, be consumed by the fire.

The memorial potlatch (big potlatch) followed the cremation after a year or so and ritually commemorated the fact that all the bad feelings between the deceased and

6 Examples of beliefs that resulted in significant dissonance between cultural practice and physical world reality include the Shaker religion (strict celibacy); the Ghost Dance (becoming impervious to bullets while wearing the ghost shirt); various Christian, Islamic, and Jewish "end-times" sects resulting in maladaptive incidents such as the Jonestown mass suicide; and, arguably, the cult of Hitler, which led to the Holocaust.

the living had been resolved during or after the cremation ceremony. The memorial potlatch was a powerful liminal state of renewal reestablishing harmony in the social order. Details of the ceremony varied, though it always involved memorial songs, adulatory speeches, feasting, games, and gifts from the deceased's moiety. Gift-giving at a memorial potlatch was not purely a materialistic transfer of goods from one village to another, because a village was composed of families formed through moiety exogamy and avunculocal rules of residence; thus most, if not all, clans were present in a particular village. Rather, what was given were artifacts imbued with *beggesha*, or "love," intended to commemorate the reestablishment of harmony both within the human dimension and the ancestor dimension of the now deceased.

### FIRE AND WATER RITUALS INVOLVING ANIMAL BONES

In addition to a lack of artifacts, Dena'ina sites exhibit a remarkable lack of faunal remains for a hunting-and-gathering culture relying on salmon, halibut, a wide range of freshwater fish, caribou, bear, hare, and other animals of the subarctic north for a substantial portion of their diet. Boraas and Kalifornsky (1991) described the Dena'ina practice of cremating faunal remains as an explanation for the lack of animal bones at precontact sites wherein the bones of hunted and consumed animals were ritually treated either by burning them in the fire or depositing them in a lake or stream. These fire and water rituals initiated a set of events that sent the animal spirit to a "reincarnation place" presided over by the spirit *K'unalda Jelen*, "The Mother of the Animals," also described as "The Mother of Everything Over and Over," where they would become animals again. Proper attitudes and proper behavior toward animals are primary themes of the mythology associated with becoming a true believer (*k'ech eltanen*) and are represented in a traditional story (*sukdu*) recorded by Peter Kalifornsky titled "*K'ech' Eltani*, Belief in Things a Person Cannot See," which, like many Dena'ina stories, has a preamble that defines the belief in question:

The Dena'ina, they say, had some beliefs about animals. After they killed and butchered an animal in the woods while hunting or trapping they would put the bones in one place. In the winter they would cut a hole in the ice and put the animal bones in the water. At home in the village, too, they

put all the animal bones into the water, either in a lake or in the Inlet, or they would burn them in the fire. They did this so the animals would be in good shape as they returned to the place where the animals are reincarnated. They say they had that kind of belief about the animals. (Kalifornsky 1991:41)

The story goes on to relate how a man listened to the stories of the elders but did not believe them. In particular he did not believe in any special treatment of the animal bones after butchering, and so he simply cast them out where people would inadvertently walk on them—a practice severely prohibited by the stories. While out hunting, he is beset by mice and wantonly kills them by pouring scalding water on them—another practice with adverse consequences. As a result of his actions, he is plagued by bad hunting luck and later he has a dream in which he travels to a mythical place where a beautiful woman, *K'unalda Jelen*, "The Mother of the Animals," chastises him for his inappropriate actions and shows him the horribly disfigured animals he mistreated that are being tended to but are unable to be reincarnated as animals again. Then she shows him the place where the ritually treated animals are being reincarnated to return to the human land to be used again. She states:

The Campfire People [Dena'ina] take good care of us. They take our clothes [skins] for their use and if the humans treat us with respect, we come here in good shape to turn into animals again. We will be in good shape if the humans put our bones into the water or burn them in the fire. (Kalifornsky 1991:45)

When the man wakes from his dream he is ashamed of his actions and confesses the error of his ways in front of the people of his village. There are many levels to this story, but the most significant for the purpose of this study is the prohibition against leaving butchered bones scattered about and to assure natural recycling by ritual disposal of bones in fire or in water—essentially a spiritual expression of ecology.

The mythological prescription of fire and water transformations was realized in actions described ethnographically and can be illustrated by a few examples. Several sources indicate great care was taken with animal bones. Peter Kalifornsky relates that at Kalifornsky Village, during the first part of the twentieth century, bones were piled in one place during the winter and dogs were kept from scavenging the mound. In the spring the bones were taken to Cook Inlet, where they were dispersed in the

tide (Peter Kalifornsky 1991, personal communication to Alan Boraas). According to information told to Priscilla Russell (letter in Boraas's files, December 11, 1989), twentieth-century inland Dena'ina buried land animal bones, but water animal bones were returned to water. Bear bones, for example, were never put in water because, as Russell was told, "bears don't belong in water." Among the inland Dena'ina, as with other Dena'ina, it was important not to scatter animal bones or place them where animals or people might bother them because, as Russell was told, it showed lack of respect and would cause the bones to "leave the country."

While extracting charcoal from fire hearths during a 1989 project involving excavation of four precontact Dena'ina houses at the mouth of the Kenai River (KEN-230, KEN-231, KEN-232, and KEN-233), Boraas observed an inordinately large amount of bits of bone in a matrix of what can best be described as "bone meal" and saved the entire contents of each of the four hearths as bulk samples. Random samples were taken from the four hearths within the Dena'ina houses and analyzed using an atomic absorption spectrophotometer for three

elements which would indicate the presence of bone: calcium, magnesium, and orthophosphate.<sup>7</sup> As a control, a noncultural sample from a nonhearth area 100 m beyond the perimeter of KEN-230 was also analyzed for the same three elements to indicate the presence of calcium, magnesium, and orthophosphate in the natural soil in the vicinity of the prehistoric houses. The results are portrayed graphically in Fig. 3 and indicate the Dena'ina hearths contained as much as 470 times the amount of calcium, 9 times the amount of magnesium, and 120 times the amount of orthophosphate as the nonhearth control test. We conclude from this analysis that the late prehistoric Dena'ina were burning bone in their fire hearths, and the most obvious explanation for this practice is that they were conforming to the dictates of traditional stories (*sukdu*) to ritually transport the animals back to the place where they are reincarnated, and this behavior accounts for the lack of abundant animal bones at most precontact Dena'ina dwelling sites.

### HISTORIC DENA'INA ARTIFACTS AND FAUNA

Artifact recovery at nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Dena'ina historic village sites such as at historic Kijik (VanStone and Townsend 1970), Kenai (Kent et al. 1964), Cooper Landing (Yesner and Holmes 2000), and Kalifornsky Village, among others, indicates a return to an abundance of recoverable artifacts in the archaeological record. Whereas the 1975 excavation of a prehistoric house at coastal Kalifornsky village yielded only a handful of artifacts (Boraas 1975), a 2002 excavation done as a collaborative effort between Kenai Peninsula College and the Kenaitze Indian tribe of the remaining historic house (beach erosion having taken the other seven) yielded an abundance of artifacts, including firearms, broken and whole bottles, European ceramics, beads, sewing implements, nails, and even some leather goods. The historic site was abandoned in the mid-1920s after being reestablished about 1822 by Qadanalchen, who had taken the baptized name Nikolai Kalifornsky. Over a thousand artifacts from a 1 x 10 m trench span this hundred-year period (see Table 1). We can infer that during this time either the concept of *beggesh* was weakened by colonial ideology or Orthodoxy,

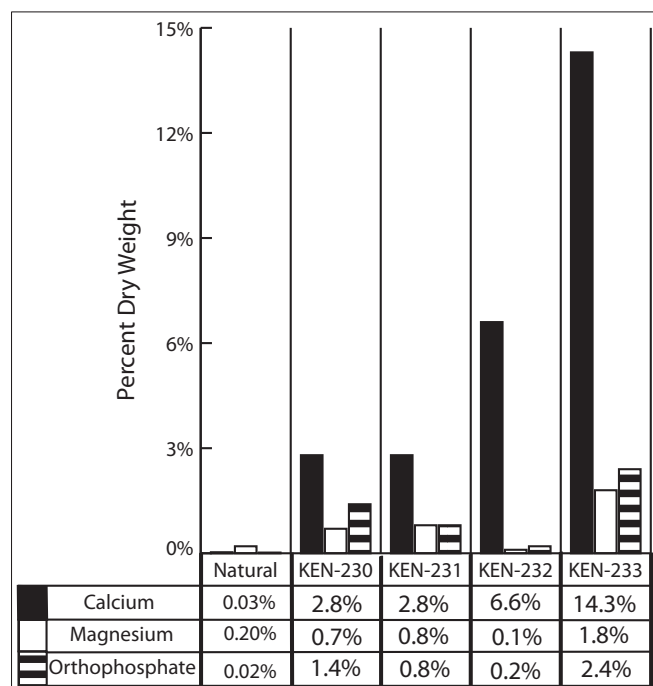


Figure 3. Chemical analysis reflecting burned bone content of four Dena'ina hearths compared to natural, noncultural soil. (Redrawn from Boraas and Kalifornsky 1991.)

7 The hearth and nonhearth samples were refluxed with hydrochloric acid to prevent sulfate precipitation, brought to volume with deionized water, and analyzed for calcium, magnesium, and orthophosphate using a Perkin Elmer atomic absorption spectrophotometer. A digest blank was run with the samples and the results of the blanks, though negligible, were subtracted from the sample results before calculation. The analysis is reported as percent of dry weight. The analysis was done by Sheree VanNatta Ross.

or, in the indigenization process, artifacts of Euro-American manufacturing origin took on a different cognitive conceptualization and operated according to different rules that restricted their capacity to absorb and emit *beggesh*. During early historic times, a short prayer was said to cleanse items of Euro-American manufacture of residual *beggesh*, but it is not known how prevalent this practice is today. In addition, through the potlatch, purchased items could be ritually infused with *beggesha*. Traditional Northern Dené still practicing the potlatch speak of manufactured items given in the ritual setting as being infused with “love” (John 1996:59; Madison 1992), a concept similar to *beggesha*. Rifles, blankets, and other manufactured items take on special meaning when given in a potlatch ceremony (Simeone 2002) such that to give a rifle, for example, is giving of one’s love to another both symbolically and literally. Euro-American items obtained and/or given outside of the context of the potlatch do not necessarily take on this quality, and thus their disposal is not as critical as that of items made from natural materials and transformed through knowledge and skill into artifacts. Since artifact finds are common at historic Dena’ina sites, either items of Euro-American manufacture gradually came to lack the capacity to retain *beggesh* or they are regulated by other means and thus, unlike their prehistoric cousins, their disposal did not have to be ritually controlled.

An additional factor is that the artifact finds at KEN-014, with the exception of sharpening stones, are all of European or American origin. Some traditional artifacts such as bone arrow points and harpoon arrows survived well into historic times, and, because they were of personal manufacture potentially carried *beggesha* or *beggesh*—good or bad spiritual qualities associated with their use—and would have had to be disposed of in a traditional way and thus are seldom found at nineteenth- or twentieth-century sites. There might have been additional pressure not to spiritually cleanse artifacts in the old way since this was traditionally done in a cremation pyre. Orthodoxy forbids cremations because one’s body as well as one’s soul potentially goes to heaven. Since the later villagers who died at Kalifornsky Village were buried in wooden caskets in Orthodox ceremonies (Peter Kalifornsky, personal communication, July 1975), there would have been no cremation and the practice of cleansing artifacts of *beggesh* gradually disappeared. Interestingly, the early twentieth-century house excavated at Kalifornsky Village was occupied by Simeon and Annie Unishev, both devout Orthodox, while she was also among the last practicing shamans on the

Kenai Peninsula (Peter Kalifornsky 1991, personal communication to Alan Boraas). As described by Kalifornsky, the Unishevs’ religion was not syncretic blending but a practice that involved fundamental truths common to both Orthodoxy and traditional Dena’ina shamanic belief.

Peter Kalifornsky stated that when he was a child at the village the practice of performing fire and water rituals was continued (see above). The people would save all the fish, hare, and other bones in a pile over the winter, keep the dogs away from them, and then when the inlet thawed in the spring they would take the bones down to the beach and distribute them in the water where they would be scattered by the tide. True to Kalifornsky’s words, the 2002 excavation at Kalifornsky Village turned up few animal bones with one exception: butchered moose bones. In random excavation units scattered mostly outside the house area we found numerous cut and butchered moose bones. Kenai Dena’ina recognize that moose have appeared fairly recently on the Kenai Peninsula. According to oral history, a Dena’ina man named Fred Chulyn was the first to kill a moose near Kenai; this happened in the early 1900s (Kalifornsky 1991:271; Mamaloff 1993:20–21). Caribou, once the dominant ungulate, disappeared on the Kenai Peninsula at the beginning of the twentieth century and moose became the primary land mammal hunted for food. Because they were new the people appear to have treated them differently than other food animals, and the bones no longer needed to be ritually disposed of through fire and water rituals for the animals to return.

## SUMMARY

The interaction between spiritually driven ritual practices and material items and places is complex. Had the Cook Inlet Dena’ina of the late prehistoric period existed, say, five thousand years ago, they would have become invisible to history because of the lack of artifacts they left behind; it would have resulted in a thousand-year gap between the periods that came before and after and, without a written record, there would have been no evidence of their existence. Undoubtedly other cultures have similarly disappeared from history, or interpretations of their artifact record have been substantially altered, because of spiritual practices involving disposition of material items. As it is we have significant ethnohistoric, linguistic, and oral tradition and mythological evidence through which to contextualize the general lack of recoverable artifacts and faunal refuse during the late prehistoric Dena’ina period, and



it can be characterized as a case of material negentropy. If entropy is the most probable state of matter or energy, ultimately a form of disorganization, negentropy (Bateson 1979) is a highly improbable organization of matter and energy (from the standpoint of physical laws) and is driven by either biological or cultural processes. In this case the cultural process is a Dené version of spirituality that motivated precontact Dena'ina people to prevent artifact and faunal scatter, and thus precontact Dena'ina villages became highly ordered places in the sense that one had to invest a substantial amount of energy to keep a place occupied by fifty to a hundred people so devoid of discarded artifacts and refuse. At the same time the precontact Dena'ina minimized the amount of recoverable information from artifacts by later archaeologists, they also minimized impact on the land and thus, along with spiritually driven practices involving plant and animal use, become an archetype of a sustainable society.

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