ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

Dena'inaq' Huch'ulyeshi

The Dena'ina Way of Living

3

TOOLS FOR TEACHERS

Lesson Plan 3

The Old Dena'ina Beliefs

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Elementary (Grades 3-5) and Secondary (Grades 6-12)

Overview

Students learn about traditional beliefs and values, especially as they relate to the environment and its creatures, through one or more of the following strategies:

- Reading a traditional *sukdu* (story) and determining its meaning and messages
- Studying the traditional Dena'ina values and considering how they can be enacted in daily life
- Reading informational text and answering text-based questions about the Dena'ina worldview

Goals and Desired Outcomes

Topical Understandings

- The traditional Dena'ina relationship with the universe goes beyond physical dependency; it is also based on emotional and spiritual ties to specific places and on covenants between humans and the other beings that inhabit the universe.

Essential Questions

- What is the nature of the relationship of the Dena'ina with the environment?
- How can I learn from the Dena'ina to become a steward of the land and its creatures?

Assessments

- Art work or other creations inspired by traditional *sukdu*
- Application of Dena'ina values to students' own lives
- Writing projects prompted by the Dena'ina values and the reading
- Completion of text-based questions from informational readings

Learning Activities

Materials

- Alaska Native Knowledge Network website
  http://ankn.uaf.edu/index.html
  - Alaska Native Values for Curriculum online resources
- Readings and text-based questions
  - "The Mouse Story" by Peter Kalifornsky
  - Synopsis of "Dena'ina First Salmon" story
  - Excerpt of "Dena'ina Worldview" by Alan Boraas
- Art materials (e.g., drawing supplies, etc.)
- The book *Dena'ina Sukdu'a* (optional; available in libraries)
- The book *A Dena'ina Legacy: K'tl'egh'i Sukdu* (optional; available in libraries)

Background for the Teacher

The traditional ways to impart knowledge and wisdom were, first, through example and mentoring, trial and error, and second, through stories. The largest class of Dena'ina stories, *sukdu*, take place in an ancient time when all animals were "people." Sometimes characters act the way they would act in animal form, other times they do things only someone in human form could do. In those days, they had the ability to be either animals or humans, and they would transform back and forth at will.

Although the stories were told for entertainment, they also impart Dena'ina beliefs about the origin of the world and its inhabitants. But perhaps more important, the *sukdu* demonstrate through parables the Dena'ina behavioral code, which governs relationships between animals and humans—as well as between various sets of humans—and the consequences of breaking that code.

In Dena'ina life, it was important to maintain a proper spiritual balance between the human and the nonhuman world. This was a matter of direct daily concern. For example, in the *sukdu*, we learn the proper way to dispose of animal bones and other remains. The bones of water animals such as fish or beaver were to be placed back in the water; those of land animals, such as caribou, were to be placed on the land. If proper respect was shown in this way, the animals would return and make themselves available again for harvesting.

Strategies

Strategy 1: Read traditional *sukdu*

1. Begin reading "The Mouse Story" aloud to students. Just after the giant comes into the hut, but before he begins speaking, stop reading. In groups or individually, have students complete the story. Share endings. Then have students read the actual ending of the story and compare and contrast the various endings.
2. Discuss the story: What did the man learn from his experience? Why was he considered worthy of help, even though he was a lazy man?
3. Look at the Dena'ina values. Which values does this story teach?
4. Have students create an art piece that represents the story and the lessons taught in the story.
5. Read the summary of the First Salmon Ceremony. As with "The Mouse Story," talk about how this shows the special relationship between people and animals. What values does it illustrate?
6. Extension: Choose another animal story from the book *Dena'ina Sukdu'a*, if it available. Read it in class and guide students to determine its message and the values it illustrates.

Strategy 2: Examine the Dena'ina Values

7. Research the Alaska Native Values for Curriculum online. (Alaska Native Knowledge Network). Write a list of Athabascan Values (17 values) on paper and cut the paper into pieces so that each value is on a single strip.
8. Decide as a class which of the Dena'ina values are commonly practiced in your classroom.
9. Distribute the value strips to individuals or small groups (depending on the size of your class). Each individual or group is to write an example of a behavior that fits that value. The behavior can be from the students' own lives or from Dena'ina culture. Have students share their responses and position them on a piece of poster paper to remain on display in the classroom.
10. As you progress through the lessons on Dena'ina history and culture, refer back to the poster regularly to determine how the various values are enacted or illustrated through what you are learning.
11. For older students, concentrate on one value, "Nudnelyahi ch'u Qeneshi, Respect for Plants and Animals." Have students write multi-sensory stories about their favorite natural (not man-made) place. They should compare their feelings about that place with those of a Dena'ina teen who might have lived in Southcentral Alaska 200 years ago.
12. Share stories that are based on that value. Consider in class: How does a sense of place and knowledge about one's natural environment relate to personal identity as a Dena'ina, an Alaskan, or whatever group your students identify with.

13. Discuss stewardship of natural resources. After reading several *sukdu*, discuss with students how traditional Dena'ina enacted stewardship of the environment. Prompt students with examples of respect shown or lessons learned in the stories. Is the Dena'ina way of stewarding the environment and its creatures different from the way students and their families care for the land and animals today? If so, in what ways?

14. Have students work in small groups to define ways in which they can be stewards of the land today. If feasible, help them put their ideas into action.

Strategy 3: Read an informational piece about worldview and explore aspects of the spiritual world (older students)

15. Have students read and answer text-based questions on the Dena'ina Worldview reading. Discuss the reading.

16. Look at "A Raven Story" by Peter Kalifornsky, which is included in the reading. Use this story as a writing prompt to have students produce poems about the impact of someone or something on their own lives.

17. Encourage students to read Peter Kalifornsky's award-winning book, *A Dena'ina Legacy: K'tl'egh'i Sukdu*, which contains rich contemplations on the nature of the universe and of traditional Dena'ina culture.

"The Mouse Story"

By Peter Kalifornsky

From *A Dena'ina Legacy – K'tl'egh'i Sukdu: The Collected Writings of Peter Kalifornsky*. Edited by James Kari and Alan Boraas (1991), pp. 155, 157.

Long ago this is the way the Dena'ina lived. They drove poles for a fish weir where they fished with a dip net. They brought in fish with a dip net and they made ready for winter.

One man only walked around, and he was lazy. He wasn't preparing for winter at all. Then a little mouse was going in the brush with a fish egg in its mouth, but it couldn't get over a windfall. The man lifted the little mouse over the windfall.

Then winter came to them and sickness struck. Bad weather came and they couldn't find any animals to hunt and what they had stored for winter was gone. They were hungry. Sickness struck them.

The young man who had helped the little mouse over the windfall went out walking without hope. He went to the foothills. There he walked, and walked, and walked, and came to a big brush shelter. Smoke was coming out. There was no door, but from inside he heard a voice, "Yes, we were expecting you. Turn around the way the sun goes [clockwise] and come in," someone said. He turned around the way the sun goes and, as he turned, a door opened. He went in. A big old lady was sitting inside. A fire was burning in the center of the room. "My husband is coming back. Sit here. We [were] expecting you," she said to him. She fed him. "I know why you are here. We know you," she said. "When my husband returns he'll explain it to you," she said.

Not long after it hailed. The earth shook. "Yes, my husband is coming back," she said. From outside, a giant came in.

"Hello," he said. "I know why you are here. Your relatives are all hungry. Sickness has struck them. You are going about to try to save your relatives. Good, I'll help you," he said, "because you have helped me."

The giant put all kinds of small little fish eggs and little meats and dry fish into a little skin a pinch at a time. Pinch after pinch he put in and then he wrapped it up. It didn't come to much of a pack. He put down feathers in the pack.

The giant said, "Take this to your village. Before you arrive put down the pack and spread out the food. Then sprinkle the down feathers over it. Turn around the way the sun goes and, when you touch it, it will turn into a large pile of food. Then go

to your village and tell your relatives to come with you. They will help you bring the food the rest of the way to your village. With this food you will save your relatives. You will feed them and before it is all gone, they will regain their strength. They will go to the woods and they will kill game. You will be saved," the giant said.

"The mouse you saved was getting ready for winter like everything else. But no one took pity on it when it needed help," the giant said. "You were lazy. You were walking about when you should have been helping. But you lifted me over that windfall when I had that fish egg. You helped me. That is why it has turned out this way," he said. "My name is mouse's relative, but really my name is Gujun. Gujun is related to all of the animals."

Dena'ina First Salmon

Story Synopsis

Adaptation of "The Story of Beł Dink'udlaghen: The One Who Swam Back Inside with Them (the Salmon)" by Shem Pete. Original story in *Shem Pete's Alaska: The Territory of the Upper Cook Inlet Dena'ina*. Edited by James Kari and James A. Fall (2003), pp. 184-190.

Here is the synopsis of the story:

> In the beginning the people have no salmon. A boy turns into a fish. Then the salmon come to them for the first time. So the boy swims back out to the ocean with the salmon. After staying with the salmon, he flies back with the geese to the Kroto Creek area. He turns into a salmon and goes back out a second time. When he returns he leads the salmon to Kroto Creek and the Dena'ina develop their salmon fishery there at their specific places. Then the salmon boy turns into a human and gives them instructions on how to place him up by the bank to celebrate the catch of a small king salmon. While on the bank the salmon boy begins to transform himself into different types of animals. Also he shows them how to do a winter solstice ceremony in the steambath, which then brings the arrival of the migrating fowl, the land animals, and the sea animals.

Dena'ina Worldview

Adaptation of "What Is Good, What Is No Good': The Traditional Dena'ina Worldview" by Alan Boraas. Original essay in *Dena'inaq' Huch'ulyeshi: The Dena'ina way of Living*. Edited by Suzi Jones, James A. Fall and Aaron Leggett (2013), pp. 103-119.

The Dena'ina world is made up of what can be seen and what cannot be seen. Every living thing, as well as places, geographic features, and deceased ancestors, has a spirit or soul.

The various types of spirits and souls came into the world during different time periods. There are three periods: "the time when the animals could talk," "the coming of the campfire people," and "after the whites came."

The Time When the Animals Could Talk

"The time when the animals could talk" was before humans, when animals lived in villages and talked with one another. There are four categories of living things:

- First, warm-blooded animals are termed *ggagga*, which is also the name for brown bear. This category contains both mammals and birds, called *ch'ggaggashla*, "someone's little creature," which is the name for chickadee. There are three kinds of birds: winter birds, summer birds, and migratory birds.
- The second category is fish, which are called by the name for salmon, *łuq'a*.
- Insects are called *ggih*.
- Plants are named for the most important tree, *ch'wala*, or spruce.

The Dena'ina believed that animals could hear human thoughts and words. They knew about human actions that left a "scent" at a place or on an artifact. Also, animals could choose to let hunters take them for food if the men were humble and respectful, knew how to hunt and butcher correctly, and disposed of the bones in the right way. But if humans were sloppy or boastful, animals might not allow themselves to be killed.

Nickafor Alexan explained,

> Once upon a time all the animal was talking like us and have masters like fish. One time they had a meeting and each animals decide how human should take care of them if they got killed for food. For example, beaver say if anybody got him for food, they should take care of his bone, put in fire so dogs won't chew it fresh. And if they have to club them to kill, they shouldn't use other kind of stick or wood except what beaver eat.

People sometimes were helped by animal spirits. The most common spirit helpers were the eagle and wolf, which would agree to be a person's helper spirit after a vision quest.

The Coming of the Campfire People

"The coming of the campfire people" is the time when people came onto the earth. Their origin is credited to the "Dreamer," often in the form of Raven, who conceived of what society would be like, and then made it so.

The following story provides an example of the way that Raven helped form human society:

Suk łu Dena'ina sukdu ch'u k'eli abegh aighestle.
Chu'uts'iłguhdi Ggugguyni qbu k'dgheli.
Yet hzah hdi quid hdi, "Di ya du hu,"
ts'iłq'u qyeł teldeł qghetnut hteldełt. . . .

Yet htl'egh Dena'ina k'eli qbegh hdazlan.
Ggugguyni gin quth'ana gheniyu badi nlan k'usht'a qut'aqyitne.
Ch'u Ggugguyni sukt'a nuhqelnish,
Ndahhqugh qyut'an ch'u ch'qenik' t'ent'ach' ch'u.

A long time ago, they say,
the Dena'ina didn't have stories and songs.
Then one time Raven sang for them.

Before that time, there was only "Di ya du hu,"
to keep them together in time,
when they were working or moving. . . .

After that time,
the Dena'ina came to have songs.
They didn't know who he was,
this Raven who visited people.
And they told stories about Raven,
how smart he is,
and how foolish, too.

These new humans formed families and villages like the animals and plants, and sometimes visited those worlds. It was during these visits that they learned how to behave properly toward animals. From those early days, Dena'ina have understood that people have three parts: the body, the breath, and the spirit or soul.

Besides the spirits or life force of all living things, there were several spirits with specific names. One was called Gujun. There were also giant spirits and a number of evil spirits. Finally, there is a supreme being named Naq'eltani, who "dreamed" and created the universe, using Raven as his agent, and is unseen but is everywhere.

Ancestor spirits demanded care and attention. The body must be cremated and a memorial potlatch ceremony was needed to settle conflicts that had not been resolved in life. After death, the deceased's shadow spirit lingered nearby. Relatives watched over the body for 24 hours. During that time, they prayed or sang to ask for forgiveness for the deceased for any unresolved issues. To protect themselves from ancestor spirits (and other spirits as well), Dena'ina would leave a container of water at the doorstep to keep the spirit out of the house.

Besides memorial potlatches, others, called "little potlatches," were given for other reasons, such as for the first animal killed by a young boy. Giving a potlatch was a major event and, in the case of a memorial potlatch, involved years of preparation. Individuals created string calendars as time markers with bits of fur or other representations to indicate successful potlatches.

After the Whites Came

"After the whites came" is the period after 1786, when the first Russian fort was built at the mouth of the Kasilof River. The two institutions that changed the Dena'ina worldview most during this period have been Christianity and public schools. Practically everything changed for the Dena'ina as a result: the old beliefs were gradually replaced by Christian beliefs, the language by English, and the ideas about the nature of the universe by Western history and science.

Text-Based Questions on the Reading

1. What are the three periods in history, as understood in the Dena'ina way of thinking?
2. What does the phrase "the animals could talk" mean?
3. How is this different from a modern American understanding of animals?
4. In what ways are humans and animals similar?
5. What is the nature of Raven's involvement in the creation of people and human society, according to this reading?
6. Describe the agreement between animals and humans.
7. How did the Dena'ina worldview change "After the Whites Came"?