



**ANCHORAGE**  
MUSEUM

# Dena'inaq' Huch'ulyeshi

---

## The Dena'ina Way of Living



**TOOLS FOR TEACHERS**

**Lesson Plan 4**

**Leaders and Trade**

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

### Overview

Students learn about the important role of *qeshqa*, or traditional Dena'ina leader. They role-play trade, in which the *qeshqa* played a central role. They consider the meaning of wealth and prosperity in different cultures.

### Goals and Desired Outcomes

#### Overarching Understandings

- Effective leaders serve their followers.
- “Wealth” or “prosperity” has many definitions.
- People can interact with strangers through a variety of ways.

#### Essential Questions

- What makes a good leader?
- How could I become a good leader?
- How is “wealth” or “prosperity” defined in the Dena'ina world?
- What ways did the Dena'ina devise to interact with their neighbors?
- Why are some interactions with strangers friendly, while others are hostile?

#### Assessments

- Ratings of others and self against the characteristics of a good leader
- Reading and responding to questions about informational text
- Participation in class discussions
- Writing assignments
- Participation in trade game

## Learning Activities

### Materials

- Readings and text-based questions
  - “Dena’ina Qeshqa” by James A. Fall
  - “The Boy Who Had No Father” by Peter Kalifornsky
- Trading Cards and instructions for playing the Trade Game

## Strategies

### Strategy 1: Leadership study

1. Ask students to define “leader.” Ask them to describe what makes a good leader. As they speak, write their responses on the board to begin a list of the characteristics of a good leader.
2. Talk about benefits and responsibilities of being a leader. What might those be?
3. There are two versions of an informative text and text-based questions: one for Grades 3-5 and one for Grades 6-12. Have students read and respond to questions for the appropriate reading.
4. Return to the list you made of the characteristics of a good leader. When it seems fairly complete, have students copy it and place two (elementary) or three (grades 6-12) columns next to it. In the first column they will rate a leader they are familiar with. They need not name that leader, but should keep him or her in mind. They rate the leader against the attributes on the list, from 1 to 4, with 4 being the best. In the second column, they rate themselves as leaders today.
5. Older students will fill in a third column by rating one of the Dena’ina leaders in the reading.
6. After students have filled in the columns, engage in a class discussion about leadership. Are there differences in what was expected of a Dena’ina leader than students expect in leaders today? Discuss them.
7. Discuss the Dena’ina concept of wealth or prosperity, as indicated in the reading. Compare and contrast it with students’ own definitions of wealth. Discuss: What is the purpose of wealth? Why might people in different cultures have different ideas about the importance and usefulness of wealth?
8. Read the story “The Boy Who Had No Father.” Discuss the concept of poverty and wealth in this story. How does it fit with the reading about the nature of wealth in Dena’ina society?
9. Make the following statement, and ask students to react to it in writing: “Effective leaders must serve their followers. They must give as well as receive.”

### Strategy 2: Trade

1. Talk about trade and how it is different from purchasing items from a store. Talk about items students have traded, rather than purchased.
2. Consider Dena'ina trade. Why did the Dena'ina trade? With whom did they trade? What did they want that they couldn't get in their homeland?
3. Play the trading game. Instructions and cards provided.
4. After playing the game and debriefing what was learned, have students draw Venn diagrams to illustrate the comparisons and contrasts between trade in Dena'ina days and purchasing items in stores as is done today.
5. Use this writing prompt: Write a story based on a trade item (e.g., "The Life and Times of a Dentalium Shell").

## Secondary Reading

### Dena'ina Qeshqa

Adaptation of "Dena'ina Qeshqa: Leaders and Political Organization" by James A. Fall.  
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. 73-97. © Anchorage Museum.

Every Dena'ina person was born into his or her mother's clan, and each person was also part of a regional band. In traditional Dena'ina society, these clans were led by men called *qeshqa*. They became leaders by accumulating and giving away wealth and by being hard workers, good hunters, trappers, and traders. They were allowed to lead as long as they showed skill, knowledge, and generosity, and as long as they had support from their followers. If a *qeshqa* had many leaders and was seen to have much spiritual power, people were drawn to him.

#### The *Qeshqa* and the *Duyeq* in Dena'ina Social Organization

In traditional Dena'ina society, there were two classes, leaders and followers. Leading men (*qeshqa*) and women (*qiy'u*) passed their high status onto their children (*jiggi*).

Other members of the clan, household, village, and regional band were the followers of the *qeshqa* and were called *ghelchitna*, which means "members of a clan" or "working people," or *ukilaqa*, "his clan helpers."

During Russian days in Alaska, Orthodox missionaries held elections for a new kind of "chief," which was called the *duyeq*. This man was expected to help the Russian-American Company in the fur trade. The *duyeq* was never as successful a leader as the *qeshqa*. In fact, the most effective *duyeq* were also *qeshqa*.

#### The Economic Role of the *Qeshqa*: "Master of the Cache"

According to Dena'ina oral traditions, the *qeshqa* organized cooperative hunting and fishing groups of his clan or band, coached his clan to work hard to bring in lots of food, told people when and how to put up the food for winter, and took charge of all the food that was placed in the caches. He decided when and how to use the food, giving it to clan members or using it for trade. In this way, the food was sure to last throughout the winter.

Shem Pete said:

The *qeshqa* was the boss, the captain, so his *ukilaqa* gave him half of it. When they killed caribou, they gave him half of everything they caught, meat and skin. That's the way they did it a long time ago. Chief, they gave him half of everything they caught. They dried the meat up real good and he save it. Maybe once a week that chief put up lots of grub and he told his wives to cook for their people. He save that, in the winter time, that dry meat, he save it, and they packed it all home for the winter when they needed it.

Each family had different places. When they came back they just put the meat and stuff in with the chief's grub. The captain knew how much grub each man had and he'd tell one man in the morning, "You get this much grub and feed everybody. You get bear meat and two bundles of fish and feed everybody in the house." The next day he'd tell another man to do that. That chief was really smart. He'd tell everybody what to do before they got up in the morning. He'd tell them what to eat. If food was low, they'd put it all in one pile and ration it out.

Peter Kalifornsky (1991:209) described the *qeshqa*'s management of salmon supplies among Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina:

Their chief would estimate how long the food supply they had put up would last. It was the rule that one day's allowance of food was a piece of dry fish as big as from the meaty part of your palm at the base of your thumb to the tip of your middle finger.

The *qeshqa* organized trade between villages. Tyonek elder Nickafor Alexan explained:

At one time the old Chief of Tyonek was a friend with the Chief of Knik. The two chiefs had made an agreement to sell food between each tribe. The agreement was for the Tyonek Chief to sell the Knik Chief dried and smoked fish, because the Knik people couldn't catch enough. As for the Tyonek Chief, he could trade fish for caribou hide, moose hide, and dried meat and sinew, because the Knik people lived a lot closer to the mountains where there is a lot of meat to hunt. The two Chiefs call each other Shluchin, which means be friends always, no matter what came between them. Both of the chiefs had been good friends and had traded for a long time.

By trading and giving potlatches, a *qeshqa* could earn a reputation as a generous man. He would attract more and more followers as his reputation grew.

### Guardian of the people

*Qeshqa* made sure people followed rules and were well provided for. Billy Pete explained that *qeshqa* inspected the village and watched people as they performed their daily tasks. If he noticed someone, for example, chopping wood in a dangerous

manner or carrying too heavy a load, he corrected them or instructed them to get help, because “he didn’t want his people to get hurt.” The *qeshqa* also trained the younger members of his clan, who served as his *ukilaqa* or helpers.

The *qeshqa* also helped settle disputes between clans. He could banish any individual who was antisocial or lazy. *Qeshqa* also organized war parties, but during battle the actual leader was usually a skilled younger warrior. Some *qeshqa* were shamans.

### Personal Characteristics of Dena’ina Leaders

A Dena’ina *qeshqa* had to be “rich” and generous. For the Dena’ina, being rich did not mean simply accumulating and displaying wealth for one’s own benefit. Rather, it meant making sure the entire clan was prosperous.

A leader was also “smart.” He showed his intelligence by being a successful hunter, trapper, and fisherman, and by his knowledge of many traditional stories.

Verbal eloquence was another important quality. He had to be able to inspire and convince his followers.

Many *qeshqa* also had a reputation for bravery in war, and were known to have great spiritual power.

### Benefits of being wealthy

Rich Dena’ina people were allowed to show their wealth by wearing certain items and giving them away at potlatches. Traditionally, those items were strings of *k’enq’ena* (dentalium shells) that were stored in caches, sewn onto on clothing, or worn as necklaces and bracelets.

Wealthy people also wore nose ornaments of dentalium. “Rich clothes” made of especially valued furs such as marten or lynx were also signs of high status.

Besides the right to wear dentalium shells, the *qeshqa* did not have to do basic chores such as chopping wood or hauling water. In addition, they could marry more than one woman. *Qeshqa* were said to have had up to eight wives.

### Becoming a Leader

Young Dena’ina boys were trained and toughened by their fathers and later by their maternal uncles. They learned how to become successful hunters, fishers, and

trappers, and traveled from village to village to learn from their relatives. If the *qeshqa* was impressed, he invited the boy back. Billy and Shem Pete said,

In September a rich man would take the hardworking young man to the mountains. The rich man showed him the country. ‘Come back in September month and I’ll show you my country,’ he said. The *qeshqa* was looking for another man in case he died, to take his place. He didn’t want his knowledge to go to waste.

### The Dena’ina *Qeshqa* and the Fur Trade

The Dena’ina were skilled traders long before Europeans brought the fur trade to the Cook Inlet area in the late 1700s. *Qeshqa* were leaders in this trade. One such *qeshqa* was Diqelas Tukda (Alexander) of Alexander Creek, who lived from about 1830 until about 1906. Diqelas Tukda was a middleman between the Russians on Cook Inlet and the Upper Kuskokwim Athabascans. He and other nineteenth-century Dena’ina *qeshqa* also traded directly with Dena’ina groups. Diqelas Tukda traded with the *qeshqa* of Tyonek, bringing furs he got from inland people to exchange for European goods.

### Some Twentieth-Century Dena’ina Leaders

The role of the *qeshqa* changed in the twentieth century. In its place, a new style of Dena’ina leaders emerged. They had some of the skills as the traditional leaders. Some examples of twentieth century leaders follow.

#### Gabriel Trefon

Ellanna and Balluta provide a biography of Gabriel Trefon (1897–1964), one of the last traditional chiefs of Nondalton. He is remembered as a man “who could see into the future” (i.e., he had foresight), but he also had considerable knowledge about traditional Dena’ina ways of living. Nondalton people recall that it was the responsibility of the chief “to make sure that everyone had enough and that people would help one another. It was the chiefs, they say, who solved problems in the community.” Gabriel Trefon was a skilled hunter and trapper, a commercial fisherman, and an innovator—he was the first Inland Dena’ina to own an outboard motor, a Coleman lamp, and a snowmachine. When “first chief” Zachar Evanoff passed his leadership role to Alexie Balluta in 1930, Gabriel Trefon became “second chief” of Nondalton. He succeeded to the position of “first chief” in 1947. Soon after his death, the leadership of the community was turned over to a council and a mayor.



### Simeon Ezi

Simeon “Basdut” Ezi (1870–1935) was the *qeshqa* at the former village of Niteh, at the mouth of the Knik River. According to Shem Pete, Ezi succeeded to this leadership position after the “rich man” at Niteh, Nitehen, died. In 1920, Ezi was recognized as first chief at Eklutna after the death of Chief Nicholai. He was known as an excellent hunter and fished for many years at Nuch’istunt (Point Woronzof). According to his granddaughter, Alberta Stephan, Simeon Ezi “was the last recognized chief of Upper Cook Inlet. He was the chief of the Natives. Simeon Ezi inherited a document that was given by the dominating foreign people stating that he was in charge of the Natives of Upper Cook Inlet.” Simeon Ezi was buried in the Anchorage Cemetery when he passed away in January 1935.

### Mike Alex

Mike Alex (1908–1977) was the last traditional chief at Eklutna. He was known as a hard worker, a skilled fisherman and hunter, a fine storyteller, and an excellent teacher. In the 1950s, Mike Alex and his sons built a new church in Eklutna and restored the cemetery. In addition, Mike had a chief’s concern for the future of the Dena’ina people. He would advise the young Dena’ina about their personal affairs. He would call and visit the sick and elderly, telling them of church activities and other news.

### Simeon Chickalusion

Perhaps the best-known Dena’ina leader of the twentieth century was Simeon Chickalusion of Tyonek (1880–1957). He was born in Tyonek in 1880 but lived in Kustatan, where his father was chief, into the 1920s. Nickafor Alexan wrote of Chickalusion’s leadership qualities,

I would say he was a very good rustler and hardworking man. In 1931 our chief Chilligan Phillip died. Chickalusion became our Sixth Chief of Tyonek. To me he is best man for Chief because he understand everything. He talk English, he talk Russian good and he talk very good in our native language.

In 1930, Chickalusion organized the relocation of Tyonek to its present site to avoid flooding. Nickafor Alexan recalled,

After the village was complete we elect Chief Chickalusion for our Governor. He organize Constitution and by law and charter for the village. With that we borrow eighteen thousand dollars from Government to buy stockholder store for the community store. With Chickalusion advice we bought caterpillar tractor, sawmill, projector show, wood saw.

In 1934, Chickalusion invited the last Susitna Station Dena’ina to move to Tyonek. Both villages had lost many people in the 1918 influenza epidemic, and Chickalusion believed the communities would be stronger if they joined together.

Billy Pete recalled Chickalusion’s “paternal guardian” role as Tyonek’s chief:

Chickalusion was chief down here. Don’t matter what it was—if you wanted cup of tea, or if you needed a hand, for anything at all, he’ll get right out there and help you. Don’t matter what it was. He’ll get right out there and help you. He’ll boss the whole thing—how to build a house. He’ll just walk around and tell everybody how to do things. If somebody didn’t know anything about how to do a certain job, why he’d go and tell them how to do it. And they did it that way.

Simeon Chickalusion died in 1957. In 1959, Shem Pete hosted Simeon Chickalusion’s memorial potlatch in Tyonek and performed a mourning song he had composed in Chickalusion’s memory. Shem Pete inherited the *ghuliy* (wealth) that had signified Chickalusion’s role as a *qeshqa*: a beaded wool shirt (*sukna dghak*), a dentalium shell necklace (*t’uyedi*), dentalium shell wristlets (*nk’itl’if*), puffin beak rattles (*ch’dulafi*), and an eagle feather headdress (*chijef*).

### Dena’ina Leaders in the Twenty-First Century

Dena’ina leadership in the twenty-first century takes many forms. Some leaders hold offices in the regional and village corporations established by ANCSA. Leaders are also members of the tribal councils that govern each Dena’ina community, although none of the Dena’ina tribes any longer has the formal office of “chief.”

Elders who are traditional culture bearers are also important leaders in twenty-first-century Dena’ina communities. In some ways, they most resemble the Dena’ina leaders in the past in sharing their knowledge and wisdom in the form of traditional stories and survival skills with new generations.

### Text-Based Questions on the Reading

1. What groups did the *qeshqa* lead?
2. What are the qualities of a good *qeshqa*?
3. What were the duties of the *qeshqa*?
4. What were the benefits of being *qeshqa*?
5. Name one 20th century leader from the reading. Compare his skills and knowledge with that of a traditional *qeshqa*.

## Elementary Reading

### Dena'ina Qeshqa

Adaptation of "Dena'ina Qeshqa: Leaders and Political Organization" by James A. Fall.  
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. 73-97. © Anchorage Museum.

Every Dena'ina person was born into his or her mother's clan. Each person was also part of a larger group or band that lived in a certain territory. In the old days, these clans were led by men called *qeshqa*. They became leaders by getting and giving away wealth and by being hard workers, good hunters, trappers, and traders. They were allowed to lead as long as they were smart and generous.

The *qeshqa* was in charge of large hunts that needed the cooperation of the whole band. He encouraged his clan to work hard to bring in lots of food. He also told people when and how to put up the food for winter. After the food was put in storage caches, he was in charge of making sure it lasted through the whole winter. He could also decide when to give away food at potlatches, or when to trade it away for other things.

The *qeshqa* organized trade between villages. By trading and giving potlatches, a *qeshqa* could earn a reputation as a generous man. He would attract more and more followers as his reputation grew.

#### Guardian of the people

*Qeshqa* made sure people followed rules and had enough to eat and houses to live in. He looked around the village and watched people work. If he saw something wrong, such as chopping wood in a dangerous way or carrying too heavy a load, he corrected the person or told him to get help, because "he didn't want his people to get hurt." The *qeshqa* also trained the younger members of his clan to be future *qeshqa*.

The *qeshqa* made peace between clans when there was a disagreement. He could remove a person who was mean or lazy from the village. *Qeshqa* also organized war parties, but during battle the actual leader was usually a skilled younger warrior. Some *qeshqa* were shamans.

#### Personal Characteristics of Dena'ina Leaders

A Dena'ina *qeshqa* had to be "rich" and generous. For the Dena'ina, being rich did not mean just having things and showing them off. Instead, it meant making sure the whole clan was prosperous.

A leader was also smart. He showed his intelligence by being a successful hunter, trapper, and fisherman, and by his knowledge of many traditional stories. He had to be able to speak well so he could inspire and convince his followers.

Many *qeshqa* were brave warriors and had great spiritual power.

### Benefits of being wealthy

Rich Dena'ina people were allowed to show their wealth by wearing strings of dentalium shells and giving them away at potlatches. The shells were stored in caches, sewn onto clothing, or worn as necklaces, bracelets, or nose ornaments. *Qeshqa* also had "rich clothes" made of valuable furs like marten or lynx.

The *qeshqa* did not have to do chores such as chopping wood or hauling water, and he could marry more than one wife. *Qeshqa* were said to have had up to eight wives.

### Becoming a Leader

Young Dena'ina boys were trained by their fathers and uncles. They learned how to become successful hunters, fishers, and trappers, and traveled from village to village to learn from their relatives. If the *qeshqa* was impressed, he invited the boy back to learn to be a *qeshqa*.

### The *Qeshqa* and the Fur Trade

The Dena'ina were skilled traders long before Europeans brought the fur trade to Cook Inlet in the late 1700s. *Qeshqa* were leaders in this trade. They were middlemen between the Russians on Cook Inlet and the Upper Kuskokwim Athabascans. They got Russian trade goods such as flour, sugar, tea, crackers, salt, rice, and beans from the trading posts. They also got tobacco, copper pots, and cloth clothing. They carried these things across the mountains into the Interior of Alaska. They traded them to the Upper Kuskokwim Athabascans for furs, then took the furs back to the trading posts. They kept a part of each trade for themselves, getting richer with each trade.

## Text-Based Questions on the Reading

1. How did a person become a *qeshqa*?
2. What were the qualities of a good *qeshqa*?
3. What were the duties of a *qeshqa*?
4. What were the benefits of being a *qeshqa*?

## **“The Boy Who Had No Father”**

**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. 179, 181. © Alaska Native Language Center.

They say that long ago poor people did not marry one another. There was one young man who was born out of wedlock. The old men would get together and tell stories, and when the young man would come in to visit them so he could listen, they would stop talking when he entered.

In the evening he would sneak up outside. He heard a little of what they told. He heard about how they learned from animals. He heard about how they move about. “When we hunt, we do not go with the wind because the animals will smell us.” That’s what he heard.

And he was going around in the woods, and was returning to the village, and a dog was lying there in the open. He went up to it on the windy side. The dog got up. He hid, and the dog came up to him there. “Yes, you smelled me,” he said to it, and he patted it.

Now he had become a full-grown man. There was a girl of his own age. He said to her, “Let’s go away from them. You’ll be my wife.” She agreed. In secret they got ready and they left the people.

They moved away from the people. They set traps at the base of the foothills. All kinds of game lived there: whistlers, ground squirrels, mountain sheep, caribou, and many other animals. They built a smokehouse and a cache. And they had salmon too. In the winter they put up furs. And they had a baby boy. They rubbed a beaver’s paw on the boy’s hand. “Let him be a good worker,” they said.

And they went to the village. They went in to the chief. “I came to you to have you visit me along with all the poor people.” And they went to where he stayed. They ate well. He said to the chief, “This is how I live now. But I had no advice when I was growing up. I had no father. When I came in when the old men were telling stories, they would stop talking. That is why I took this woman for my wife and left. Now I will give a potlatch. I will put something before you. And you will divide this among the poor people.”

And he put in front of him skins of all kinds. The chief divided the skins among the poor. And then the man said, “If the poor people were to get married, there would be good people among them.” And the chief returned with the poor. And the poor married one another. And they all started to help one another.

In this story they say that, not long ago, the Dena’ina would rub a baby’s hand with the paw of the beaver so that he or she would be a good worker.

## Student Role-Play Trade Game

Russian goods: flour, cloth, beads, iron knife, rifle

Upper Kuskokwim goods: beaver pelt, marten pelt

Dena'ina goods: caribou skin, seal oil, bear intestine parka

### Instructions

1. Prepare the cards: Print or copy and cut the trading cards. There are ten different cards, and each student should have one card, so make as many cards as there are students.
2. Distribute the cards randomly to students. Note that there are cards for three groups. Ask students to look at their cards but not to show them to other students yet. Ask them to raise hands if they are Dena'ina, Russian or Upper Kuskokwim. Be sure students know the home territories of each of these three groups, using globes or the Native Peoples and Languages of Alaska map. As an option, using resources on this website or the *Dena'ina Huch'ulyeshi* catalog, have students draw pictures of their resource on the backs of the cards.
3. Tell students that their task is to meet within their own groups and come up with a strategy to convince the other groups to trade for what they have. Model the behavior by making a sales pitch for a textbook, or other item in the classroom. Tell them their "sales pitches" should be delivered orally, since this was the way trade was carried out in the 19th century. However, since part of their strategy might be to show the object, they will need to make a visual or physical representative of their items (such as the illustrations on the backs of the cards). Each team must be convincing. Discuss what verbal and physical strategies might make a sales pitch convincing. Explain that students cannot put a dollar price on their goods since this was in the days before currency was used in such situations, but they should try to convince the others that their items are extremely valuable.
4. Have students assemble in three groups depending on their cards: Dena'ina, Upper Kuskokwim and Russian. Provide art supplies for posters or replicas. Set a time limit – perhaps 20 minutes for artwork and presentation preparation.
5. Each team in turn offers its sales pitch to the other two groups. Then the groups go back into caucus and decide how to value the items the other two groups have to trade on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the least valuable items and 5 the most valuable. They should also value their own items on a scale from 1 to 5. The teams should write down their ratings.
6. Call the teams back together and write their values on a large paper chart, as below. Circle the items that are rated most highly and talk about how those ratings, if agreed upon by all, would affect what or how much the person would get in exchange for the item.

	Dena'ina rating (1 to 5)	Upper Kuskokwim rating (1 to 5)	Russian rating (1 to 5)
Bear Intestine parka			
Beaver Pelt			
Iron Knife			
Cloth			
Beads			
Seal Oil			
Marten Pelt			
Rifle			
Caribou Skin			
Flour			

7. As a class, look at the ratings for the items. How similar were the ratings? If the items were rated differently, how would the traders have figured out how to trade for them?
8. Talk about this trade system, in which there are no firm prices, and compare it with a currency-based economy, where the seller determines the price. What happens if the seller sets the price too high? What happens if it's too low? What's the difference between the trade and currency systems?

**Trading Cards**

<b>Beaver Pelt</b>	<b>Seal Oil</b>
<b>Rifle</b>	<b>Cloth</b>
<b>Beads</b>	<b>Caribou Skin</b>
<b>Flour</b>	<b>Bear Intestine Parka</b>
<b>Marten Pelt</b>	<b>Iron Knife</b>





© Anchorage Museum (907) 929-9201  
625 C Street, Anchorage, AK 99501

[www.AnchorageMuseum.org](http://www.AnchorageMuseum.org)