

**An Introduction to Frederica de Laguna's  
"Matrilineal Kin Groups in Northwestern North America,"  
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Reprinting the Frederica de Laguna's study of the American Northwestern matrilineal clan systems is an important duty. The northern American Pacific coast is host to several distinct though compatible matrilineal lineage and kinship systems that lend support to the rich and complex matricultural systems of the Tsimshian-, Haida-, and Tlingit-speaking peoples on the coast (and a few neighbouring coastal communities) and of the largest part of the Athapaskan-speaking people inland from the Alaskan interior to northwestern Canada down through British Columbia to the Southwest in the United States. These systems are changing from generation to generation and Indigenous people, who inherited these cultures and are involved in working for their continuity, need easy access to solid historical references. The best source remains Frederica de Laguna's study, (re)published here for the first time since 1975. It is a systematic review of all the information that was available at the time, which she had gathered over a period of fifty years (from 1921 to 1971) in the field herself or from her colleagues. The information is presented tribe by tribe, together with an analysis of descent groups, names, crests, inherited prerogatives and traditions, in relation to geographical and linguistic neighbourhoods and historical or ethno-historical data. It is a long, incomplete, and technical document that uses older orthographies from the period in which the information was gathered, but such as it is, it retains its usefulness and relevance to both local Indigenous communities and to anyone interested in matricultures.

One must bear in mind that this article was written for ethnologists, hence its technical character, and that it was first presented in 1971, that is, fifty years ago. We chose not to modify the text and this



had two consequences. First, it meant keeping a phonetic alphabet no longer in use today. During these last fifty years, the names attributed to Indigenous societies, nations, or communities have changed as Indigenous peoples reclaim their own names and ways of designating themselves. For ease of identification, we have provided a map at the end of this introduction using the original names (Appendix 1) and a table providing original and current names of these communities (Appendix 2). Secondly, as was customary at the time of the original publication, the name designating the linguistic family identified by linguists as *Athapaskan* (or Athapascan or Athabaskan) has been retained to designate the speakers themselves, rather than the Indigenous *Dene* (or Dine, Dineh, T'ené, or T'ena).

Furthermore, some of the most essential technical terms used to describe kinship systems have evolved since the 1960s and 1970s to reflect new understandings. Frederica de Laguna and her colleagues did not necessarily use Indigenous terms to designate the various kinds of kin groups they encountered in the field, because using an Indigenous term was practicable only as long as the researcher remained within a single language group. Among the technical terms current in mid-20th century anthropology, the term *sib* was often used to signify what would now be called a *matrilineal clan*. Frederica de Laguna used *sib* throughout her study to speak about any unilineal descent group whose members trace their ascendance through the female line to a single (mythical or symbolic) ancestor. This choice allowed her to maintain a basis for comparison throughout her survey. Today, anthropologists and most Indigenous peoples would use the term *clan*, whether descendants are identified through the male line or through the female line. When the single ancestor is either unknown or mythical, the term *clan* takes precedence today; when the ancestor's name is known and kin ties between the ancestor and her or his descendants can be identified, the term *lineage* is preferred. Clans are often subdivided into lineages; groups of clans are called *phratries*. When a society is divided in two clans or two phratries, that is, when every member of the society must belong to one or to the other side, the community is said to be organized in *moieties* (from the French term *moitié* that means "half").

Throughout the area under study, lineages, clans, phratries and especially moieties are exogamous; this means that their members must marry outside of their descent group, which insures a distinction between the father's side and the mother's side of the family. Children belong to one descent group (with all the rights and duties corresponding to this identity) and at the same time claim kin connections with the opposite side (in-laws, or father's side), which gives them access to another set of resources and assistance. As members of a kin group were forbidden to marry each other, they had to marry someone on the same side as their father. This gave rise to a marriage rule found among all the matrilineal societies of this area: the preferred choice for a spouse is the child of one's father's sister (that is, a cousin – or anyone of that generation – who belongs to the paternal clan) or the child of one's mother's brother (a cousin or any one of that generation who belongs to a maternal uncle's wife's kin group, which would also be the same as one's paternal clan). Anthropologists use the term *cross-cousin marriage* for this pattern and in local terms, it is often expressed by the formula: "You marry back into your father's side." In practice, this does not mean that one has to marry one's own

biological cross-cousin, but rather that all the members of one's father's clan are considered potential spouses.

*Parallel cousins* (the anthropological term), on the other hand, are the children of one's mother's sister and one's father's brother (who would have a mother from your mother's clan); they are your same clan, and considered and treated as siblings. The daughters of your mother's sisters, the daughters of the daughter of your mother's mother's sister – all the female members of your generation within the clan or within the moiety system – will be called 'real sisters.' The term *sister* does not only mean 'a daughter of my mother' in the anglophone sense of the term; it means 'a woman of my generation and my clan'. A marital union with one of them would be considered incestuous.

Such a system resulted in a vast and flexible network of exchange of goods, services, and knowledge that could extend over many different tribes. This network came into public view during the feasts called potlatches, or feasts for the dead, when one "side" feasted the other, the dead were honoured, social news was announced, crests, names, and inherited ceremonial privileges were displayed, and goods were exchanged between one side and the opposite side.

When exogamous rules weaken in a moiety or phratry system, the entire ceremonial and economic exchange system may collapse. Unfortunately, colonial Christian churches did not approve of cross-cousin marriages nor of inheritance through the mother's line, and nor did they understand the system of matrilineal and moieties. They, together with both Canadian and American administrators, favoured a patriarchal social organization which they enforced at all levels of governance.

In 1971, de Laguna noted that in half the communities she had surveyed, the clan and moiety system was no longer observed by younger people, who had typically travelled and preferred Euro-American individualist marriage rules. Nevertheless, although coastal communities had struggled to create arrangements which integrated breaches in the kinship system, the links between clans, crests and territorial rights survived. Meanwhile, inland Athapaskan communities, who were without any support for their matrilineal groups, often lost track of the old system; on their websites today, while some tribes, thanks to dedicated cultural heritage protection actions, list matrilineality as a feature of their cultural identity, most do not.

Frederica de Laguna documented kinship systems, clan distributions, and the organisation of moieties because they were important to the people for whom she worked. While local terminologies were being replaced by Anglophone terms, thereby reinforcing the influence of the Anglophone bilateral kinship system (with no attention paid to any descent system unless patrilineal), and while the increasingly influential new marriage rules no longer sustained matrilineal ideals, she knew that the values expressed by the ancient norms would survive as long as they were not forgotten. Before she died, she left to her scholarly heirs the task to make her work more widely available to her most important readers.

But the theoretical front does matter also. Many preconceived notions still circulate about matrilineal kin groups, especially in administrative and governmental circles. These have to be explicitly addressed. Scholars are not innocent bystanders in this quest for information, and Frederica de Laguna meant for her research to solve an old riddle about the origins of the Athapaskan matrilineal system and the specificity of the Northwest coast clans, noble names, and crest systems. She set out to demonstrate that matrilineal descent groups did not come to the Athapaskan-speaking people through the influence of the coastal groups, as was believed by most researchers at the time; instead, matrilineality was present among the Athapaskan speakers all along. This reset old ideas about matrilineal societies and the relevance of matrilineality for societies of hunter-gatherers. The theoretical context revolved around at least three points:

#### 1. Diffusion or local development

This opposition was part of the early anthropological discourse about the origins of matrilineality among the Athapaskan peoples. It was deemed obvious that the close proximity of and regular encounters between the flamboyant coastal and riparian cultures of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian communities and the hunting / fishing / gathering way of life of the semi-nomadic Athapaskan speakers must have resulted in a one-way flow of ideas and customs (from coast to interior). The better-known coastal cultures, with their formal and visual displays of crests identifying noble houses, lineages, clans, and phratries or moieties and with their hierarchical system of names or titles linked to territorial rights and ceremonial privileges, all inherited within matrilineal systems, were thought to foster the development of prolific artistic traditions and aesthetic theories which permeated the entire social and ceremonial and religious life. Meanwhile, Athapaskan-speaking peoples were deemed by many scholars to be the impoverished survivors of cultural degenerescence, who were therefore ready to assimilate the norms of their 'superior' neighbours. The almost total absence of visual art in their ceremonial life did not help their reputation among the Euro-American scholars; one cannot collect rich poetry or appreciate beautiful songs unless one speaks the local language, which most scholars did not.

#### 2- Matrilineal descent groups

From the 1930s until the mid- to late-1960s, two schools of thought polarized not only scholarly views on kinship systems, but the ensuing social policies for dealing with Indigenous peoples. George Peter Murdock (Murdock 1949), his colleagues, and their students favoured a social and biological approach to kinship systems, with the environment considered a primary factor in their evolution. Edward Sapir, his colleagues, and their students preferred a cultural approach as taught by Franz Boas and cultural anthropology, taking kinship as an expression of worldviews, values, and systems of meaning.

For Murdock and his colleagues, matrilineal societies could arise only in a stable (settled) environment with women working in economically productive domains, such as gardening or farming, or conceivably in a rich fishing economy which depended upon the work of women to prepare and preserve the fish. Hunter-gatherers in the subarctic woods could not be conceived of as having become matrilineal because the survival of the communities depended on teams of men bound

together by living together and led by the ablest and strongest male hunter. Furthermore, the long distance between the necessarily small and temporary settlements or bands would preclude frequent encounters - and bands had to be endogamous. From the point of view of this school of thought, the social organisation of northern Athapaskan-speakers was an anomaly, a theoretical impossibility. The strong matricultures of the northern Algonkian-speaking peoples in the northern and central Canadian subarctic, also hunters, would have created an equally distressing anomaly, but not enough was known about them at the time, and they were easily dismissed. According to this perspective, the Northern Athapaskans must have either borrowed their clans and moieties from their coastal neighbors or acquired them in a distant past, possibly in Asia, before they became inland hunters of northern North America -- two hypotheses equally difficult to sustain.

Meanwhile the debate intensified for ethnologists working on the Pacific Coast. Some discussed an Asian origin (Olson: 1933; Birket-Smith: 1938; Murdock: 1955), while others favoured a local development (Ingليس: 1970; Steward: 1955). Diffusion from Asian Pacific cultures to the American Coast would not fit with an absence of matrilineal systems on the Asian coast of the Pacific (although now the presence of matrilineal cultures in central Eastern Asia is known), but diffusion from the coast toward the interior was accepted by most researchers. Yet some Athapaskanists remained unconvinced and Catherine McClellan, among a few others, stood firm in defending the thesis of an ancient, separate origin for both the coastal and the inland matrilineal systems (McClellan: 1953, 1964).

### 3- New data

During the past century, steady field research has been bringing actual data to the debate; ethnographers (many of whom are women) have made known more widely the rich cultural heritage of the semi-nomadic people of the subarctic, battered as they may be by the colonization process. Linguists have confirmed that the large linguistic family of the Na-déne - originally envisioned by Edward Sapir in the 1960s and combining the northern coastal peoples with the Athapaskan - is in fact not a linguistic family but merely a label bringing together unrelated language isolates. There was one possible exception: the Northern Athapaskan-speaking people (remote relatives of the Eyak) could have been linguistically related with the Tlingit, but further research has shown that their language is actually closely related to Southern Athapaskan-speakers, such as the Navajo and Apache peoples. The Tsimshian and Haida languages are now known to be language isolates and not related to any neighbours.

When Frederica de Laguna demonstrated the independent accession of the Athapaskan people to matrilineal kinship systems, she thereby confirmed that hunters and nomadic or semi-nomadic societies could develop their own matrilineal and matrilineal kinship systems. She also suggested that, far from having been borrowed from the coastal groups, many crests were probably brought to the coast by migrating inlanders, especially in the complex social milieu among the Tsimshian and Athapaskan connections. The diversity of natural environments in which Athapaskan people lived did not seem to affect their matrilineality and did not have to be taken into consideration.

In 1974, a few years after the Athapaskan conference in Ottawa, Isidore Dyen and David Aberle published the results of their own comparative research on the Southern and Northern Athapaskan kinship systems, focusing on kinship terminology. This research was undertaken to identify, if possible, the elements of a proto-Athapaskan kinship system which might be considered the ancestral model of contemporary Athapaskan kin relationship. It confirmed Frederica de Laguna's conclusions by demonstrating the antiquity of the proto-Athapaskan kinship framework and its general bias toward matrilineality, even among northeastern Athapaskan people. Among these last, the researchers did not find matrilineal, but in 1974, several communities in question continued to practice cross-cousin marriage – a strong marker of matrilineality.

Frederica de Laguna also vindicated the emphasis Edward Sapir had placed on the cultural context to understand kinship systems. She reinforced this theoretical shift to cultural context and away from environmental determinism by suggesting, in her conclusions, the idea that the names and crests of clans and moieties, on the coast as well as inland, might be directly linked to what we call shamanic practices. The most recent ethnographic inquiries indicate that, indeed, human kinship systems should not be separated from the human connections with the non-human world. Given the extensive differences between the various shamanic traditions among the northwestern North American Indigenous cultures, the quasi-shamanic nature of crests and other inherited privileges should lead to new perspectives on the roles of kin-groups in the matricultures of this region.

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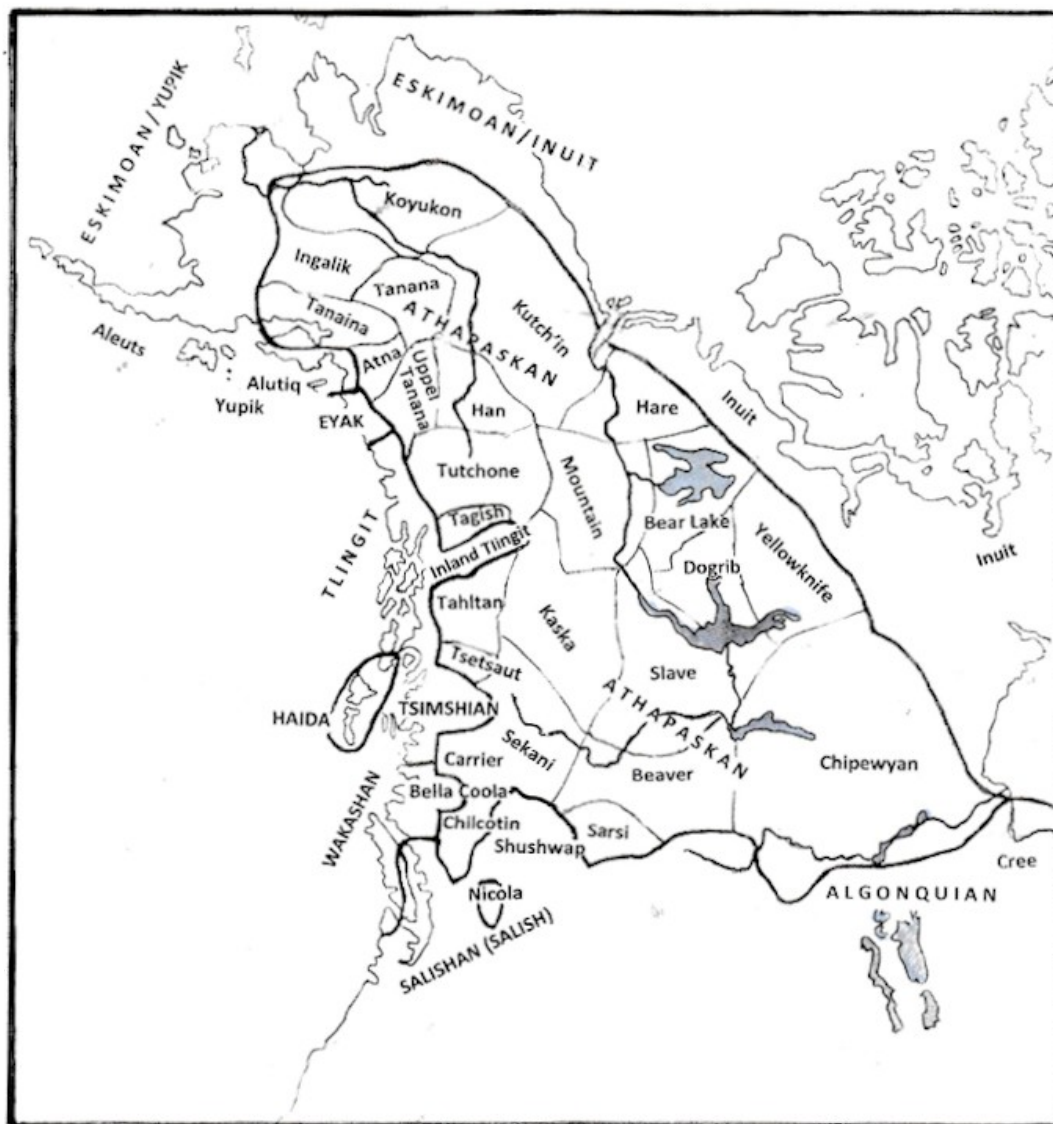
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## Appendix 1

Map of language families and languages on the Pacific Northwest Coast



## Appendix 2

Table of correspondences between some former Euro-American place or language names and restored or new Indigenous place or language names, both for the preceding map and in the text 'Matrilineal Kin Groups in Northwestern North America' by Frederica de Laguna (next article). The names are grouped alphabetically by language, presented in Latin orthography, and French place names are in parentheses. Please note that, despite our best efforts, this list is not exhaustive.

### Algonquian speakers

Cree (Cri)

Nehiyawewini

### Athapaskan speakers

Atna  
Bear Lake (Lac des Ours)  
Beaver (Castor)  
Chilcotin (Tchilcotin)  
Carrier (Porteur): Northern Carrier  
: Southern Carrier  
: Western Carrier  
: Babine Lake  
: Frazer Lake  
Han  
Hare (Gens-du-Lièvre)  
Holikachuk  
Ingalik  
Kaska  
Koyukon  
Kutchin (Loucheux)  
Mountain (Montagnards)  
Nabesna  
Sarsi  
Sekani  
Slave, Slavé, Slavey: North Slavey  
: South Slavey  
Tagish  
Tahltan  
Tanaina  
Yellowknife (Gens-du-Cuivre)

### Athabaskan or Na-Dene speakers

Ahtna  
Sahtúot'ine  
Dunneza, Dane-zaa, Dunne Tsa, or Tsattine  
Tsilhqot'in  
Dakelh  
Dakelh, Nazko, and Ulkatcho  
Wetsuwet'en  
Nataot'en  
Nadot'en /Yinka Whut'en  
Hän, Hän kutchin, Hwëch'in  
K'asho Got'ine  
Doogh Hit'an  
Deg Hit'an  
Kaska Dena  
Koyukon, Denaa  
Kutch'in or Gwitch'in (in Alaska)  
Gwitch'in or Dinjii Zhuh (in Canada)  
Shuta Got'ine  
Nabesnat'ana  
Tsuut'ina/ Tsu-T'ina/Tsúûtinà  
Tse'khene, Tsek'ehne  
Sahtú  
Dehcho, Deh Cho, Deh Gah Got'ine  
Kot'inè  
Tahltan, Tâltan  
Dena'ina  
T'atsaot'ine Weledeh

### Eskimo-Aleut speakers

### Inuit speakers



	Aleut (Aléoutes) Eskimo Yupik	Unangan, Unangas Inuit Alutiiq, Sugpiat, Chugach, Koniag
<b>Eyak speakers</b>	Eyak	Eyak, daXunhyuu
<b>Haida speakers</b>	Haida	Xaayda
<b>Kutenai speakers</b>	Kutenai	Ktunaxa
<b>Salishan (Salish) speakers</b>	Bella Coola Shushwap	Nuxalk Secwépemc
<b>Tlingit speakers</b>	Tlingit, Koloshi,	Tlingit, Lingít
<b>Tsimshian speakers</b>	Gitksan Metlakatla Niska	Gitxsan Maxłaxaala Nisga'a, Niska'a
<b>Wakashan speakers</b>	Bella Bella Haisla Kwakiutl Nootka	Heiltsuk Xaisla Kwakwaka'wakw Nuu-chah-nulth