

# Eyak

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*\* Data Source entry, prepared based on data sourced from an external project.*

*\* Secondary Source entry, prepared from a literature review by a Ph.D. RA*

Entry tags: Native American (North American) Religions, Circumpolar Religions, Religious Group

This entry focuses on the Eyak living in the Copper River Delta, Alaska, around the time of 1890. The principal ethnographic source of information (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938) reconstructs this focal time using informant testimony, written sources, and the account of American Colonel Abercrombie's visit to the area in 1884. Reconstruction was necessary given that by the beginning of the 20th century, "...the 'civilizing' of the Eyak was practically complete, and they had almost ceased to exist as a separate tribal entity" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:360-361). Consequently, limited information on the Eyak's non-material culture was available, making a description of Eyak religious beliefs and practices somewhat limited. However, enough information is available to gather a general picture these religious beliefs and practices. Overall, the Eyak beliefs are animistic in nature, as "all animate and inanimate things have souls or spirit 'owners'" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:230). The spirits of deceased human beings are present, but not described in detail. There is indication that the sun was important and worshipped in earlier times. Also present are a variety of supernatural beings (often associated with natural elements or meteorological phenomenon), such as the somewhat mythic Thunderbird, or the spirit in control of the Copper River. Magic plays an important role in daily life, including taboos and superstitions around subsistence activities. Fasting served as a means of invoking the supernatural, or (in addition to sexual abstinence) promoting ritual purity. Witches and shaman are both present, and could be either male or female. Witches are differentiated as they only use their powers for evil. Shamans, on the other hand, possess high esteem; they serve as ritual leaders, medical/supernatural healers, and can enter trance states to foresee future events. Informants believe their powers are possibly inherited somehow, and note that their spirit helper(s) manifest(s) in dreams. Shamans are not equivalent to chiefs, but chiefs can command the services of shaman. Because religion does not exist in a distinct realm, but is rather bound up with the functioning of society at large, this entry considers the religious group to be coterminous with the society itself.



Date Range: 1880 CE - 1910 CE

Region: Copper River Delta

Region tags: North America, Arctic and Subarctic, United States of America

Copper River Delta, Alaska, ca. 1890

## Status of Participants:

✓ Elite    ✓ Religious Specialists    ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

## Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

— Source 1: Divale, W. 2004. Codebook of Variables for the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. World Cultures: The Journal of Cross-Cultural and Comparative Research.

- Source 2: Murdock, G.P. & Wilson, S.F. (Jul., 1972). Settlement patterns and community organization: Cross-Cultural Codes 3. *Ethnology*, 11(3), 254-295.
- Source 3: Tuden, A. & Marshall, C. (Oct., 1972). Political organization: Cross-cultural codes 4. *Ethnology*, 11(4), 436-464.
- Source 1: Birket-Smith, K. & De Laguna, F. (1938). *The Eyak Indians of The Copper River Delta, Alaska*. Copenhagen.

## General Variables

### Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

— Yes

Notes: "...the first definite record we have of the Eyak is that left by the Russian exploring party under Ismailov and Bocharov who visited Kayak Island and the vicinity in 1788" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:357). "The Eyak were subjected to white contact first through the Russian post at Nuchek, afterwards taken over by an American trader named Hilt, who used to visit them with a schooner. Charles Rosenberg established the first and only trading post at Alaganik, just a few years before the village was abandoned. A cannery was opened at what is now Cordova between 1884 and 1890, and by the end of the century the 'civilizing' of the Eyak was practically complete, and they had almost ceased to exist as a separate tribal entity" (ibid, pg. 360-361).



Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

— No

Notes: SCCS Variable 1649, Frequency of Internal Warfare (Resolved Rating) indicates that internal warfare seems to be absent or rare (original code=1). Additionally, SCCS Variable 1654, Pacification, indicates that the Eyak were not pacified for all of part of the twenty-five-year time period. Source of information: Ember and Ember, 1992; Retrieved from Divale, 2004.



Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

— Yes

Notes: SCCS Variable 1650, Frequency of External Warfare (Resolved Rating) originally coded the Eyak as 2.5, which is between "external warfare seems to occur once every 3 to 10 years (original code 2)," and "external warfare seems to occur at least once every two years (original code 3)". Source of information: Ember and Ember, 1992; Retrieved from Divale, 2004.

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for a system for assigning religious affiliation. Further, because the religious group is considered coterminous with the society at large, there was most likely no concept or need for assigning religious affiliation.

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of the recruitment of new members.

Does the religion have official political support

— Yes

Notes: Religion does not have its own separate sphere of life among the Eyak, rather, religion is bound up with the functioning of society as a whole. Consequently, this entry considers the religious group to be coterminous with the society itself, and the religion is considered to have political support.



Are political officials equivalent to religious officials:

— No

Notes: "The chiefs were never shamans, though they could command the services of a shaman in time of war or bad weather" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:128).



Polity legal code is roughly coterminous with religious code:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of either a formal polity legal code or religious code.

## Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

— Estimated population, numeric: 154

Notes: The Eyak population was estimated to be 154 individuals in 1890 (78 males, 76 females) by Petroff, 1893:158 (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:24).

Are there recognized leaders in the religious group:

— Yes

Notes: The Eyak had two exogamous, matrilineal moieties: the Eagle and Raven groups (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:123). "At the head of each moiety was a chief. One of them was the head chief of the tribe. The other chief was simply the leader of his own moiety" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:126-127). Shaman served as religious specialists and led the religious sphere of life among the Eyak. "The chiefs were never shamans, though they could command the services of a shaman in time of war or bad weather" (ibid, pg. 128).

## Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral

scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of scripture.

## Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

— I don't know

Notes: Contradictory information; no ethnographic evidence for the presence of monumental religious architecture, however: "The most impressive structure (or type of structure) is a fort, citadel, massive defense wall, or other military installation" and additional important type of large or impressive structure is "a temple, church, commemorative monument, or other essentially religious or ceremonial edifice" (Murdock and Wilson, 1971; Column 6: Large or Impressive Structures) Note: equivalent to SCCS Variable 66.

Are pilgrimages present:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of pilgrimages.

## Beliefs

### Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

— Yes

Notes: "All animate and inanimate things have souls or spirit 'owners'...Galushia [informant] could tell us nothing about the size, shape, material, appearance, or location of the human soul" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:231).



Spirit-mind is conceived of as non-material, ontologically distinct from body:

— Yes

Notes: "Sickness may be caused by the theft of the soul..." (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:212). Presumably, if the soul can be stolen/removed from the body, it must be ontologically distinct from the body.

Belief in afterlife:

— Field doesn't know

Notes: The key informant for Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938, "knew nothing about a spirit land, not of any punishment for the wicked after death" (pg. 231).

## Reincarnation in this world:

### – Yes

Notes: "A new-born baby had the soul of a dead relative, revived by the Sun...He [informant] believed that a part of the dead person's soul may have remained separate from the part that was reincarnated" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:231).

#### ↳ In a human form:

##### – Yes

#### ↳ In animal/plant form:

##### – No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of a belief in reincarnation in animal/plant form.

#### ↳ In form of an inanimate object(s):

##### – No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of a belief in reincarnation in the form of an inanimate object.

## Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

### – Yes

Notes: "The dead were buried or burned, according to their own wishes to that of their relatives...the corpse was never dried or mummified" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:164).

#### ↳ Cremation:

##### – Yes

Notes: "The dead were buried or burned, according to their own wishes to that of their relatives...the corpse was never dried or mummified" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:164).

#### ↳ Mummification:

##### – No

Notes: "The corpse was never dried or mummified" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:164).

#### ↳ Interment:

##### – Yes

Notes: "The dead were buried or burned, according to their own wishes to that of their relatives...the corpse was never dried or mummified" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:164).

#### ↳ Corpse is flexed (legs are bent or body is crouched):

– Yes

Notes: "The dead were interred squatting...placed to face the setting sun. Later Galushia [informant] said that they were buried on the back, with the arms and legs flexed, and the head to the east. All the belongings to which the dead person had been particularly attached were placed, unbroken, in the grave with him" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:165).

↳ Corpse is extended (lying flat on front or back):

– No

↳ Corpse is upright (where body is interred in standing position):

– No

↳ Cannibalism:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of cannibalism.

↳ Exposure to elements (e.g. air drying):

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the practice of exposing corpses to the elements.

↳ Feeding to animals:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicating that corpses were fed to animals.

↳ Secondary burial:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 1850, Secondary Bone/Body Treatment: Original Scale, indicates that secondary bone/body treatment is absent (Schroeder, 2001; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

↳ Re-treatment of corpse:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the re-treatment of corpses.

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

– Yes

Notes: "When a chief's son or daughter died, a slave was killed by a spear thrust. The slave's body was cremated, but on a separate pyre, and the ashes were not saved" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:166).

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Elite

↳ Human sacrifices present:

– Yes

Notes: (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:166)

↳ Out-group humans are sacrificed:

– Yes

Notes: Slaves were sacrificed (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:166). "Slaves were captives taken in war or the children of slaves. All the slaves of the Eyak are said to have been Eskimo" (ibid, pg 139).

↳ In-group humans are sacrificed:

– No

Notes: Slaves were sacrificed (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:166). "Slaves were captives taken in war or the children of slaves. All the slaves of the Eyak are said to have been Eskimo" (ibid, pg 139).

↳ Animal co-sacrifices present:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of animal co-sacrifices.

Are grave goods present:

– Yes

Notes: "All the belongings to which the dead person had been particularly attached were placed, unbroken, in the grave with him...if the corpse were cremated, the dead man's possessions were saved for burning at the death potlatch" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:165).

↳ Personal effects:

– Yes

Notes: (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:165)

↳ Valuable items:

– I don't know

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

Notes: See Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938, pgs. 164-168, as well as questions below, for a description

of burials among the Eyak.

↳ In cemetery:

— Yes

Notes: Corpses (or ashes if the body was cremated) are buried in graveyards (described in Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:28-31, 166-168). Graves are surrounded by a small fence (to contain the spirit of the deceased), and on top of the grave sits a grave house. The grave house is a small wooden box-like structure.

↳ Family tomb-crypt:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence that individuals are interred anywhere besides graveyards.

↳ Domestic (individuals interred beneath house, or in areas used for normal domestic activities):

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence that individuals are interred anywhere besides graveyards.

## Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

— Yes

↳ A supreme high god is present:

— No

Notes: SCCS Variable 238, Religion: High Gods [Note, equivalent to Ethnographic Atlas column 34] indicates that a high god is absent (Murdock, 1962-1971; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

↳ Previously human spirits are present:

— Yes

Notes: Previously human spirits are present, but not described in substantial ethnographic detail. "Ghosts are invisible, harmless, and make no noise. The popping of logs in a fire is the dead person speaking. When this occurred, the people would put food into the fire for him" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1928:231).

↳ Human spirits can be seen:

— No

Notes: "Ghosts are invisible, harmless, and make no noise" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:231).



- ↳ Previously human spirits have knowledge of this world:
  - I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:
  - I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits have indirect causal efficacy in the world:
  - I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits have memory of life:
  - I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits possess hunger:
  - I don't know
  - Notes: "The popping of logs in a fire is the dead person speaking. When this occurred, the people would put food into the fire for him" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:231).
- ↳ Human spirits communicate with the living:
  - I don't know
- ↳ Non-human supernatural beings are present:
  - Yes
  - Notes: "In the old days the Sun was worshiped...thunder was supposed to be caused by a big bird like a raven...the thunderbird makes earthquakes when it moves" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:232-233).
- ↳ These supernatural beings can be seen:
  - I don't know
- ↳ Non-human supernatural beings have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:
  - I don't know
- ↳ These supernatural beings exhibit negative emotion:
  - Yes
  - Notes: "...the Copper River was controlled by a malevolent spirit that stole people who ventured into the rapids..." (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:234).

## Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information on supernatural beings.

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information on supernatural beings.

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information on supernatural beings.

## Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of messianic beliefs.

Is an eschatology present:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of an eschatology.

## Norms and Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: "Bad weather was believed to be caused by intentional abortion, and by the murder and concealment of an illegitimate child...Bad weather is caused when children play with boats or sleds or snowshoes in winter. To spin a buzz in winter brings the north wind. If a young girl walks about during the period of her puberty isolation it would bring rain. Rain is also caused by touching freshwater clams" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:234).

# Practices

## Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicating the presence of required celibacy.

Does membership in this religious group require castration:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicating the presence of required castration.

Does membership in this religious group require fasting:

— Yes

Notes: "Fasting also has magic and religious efficacy. Thus, warriors used to fast overnight before a fight, and all the people fasted during the mourning ceremonies when a warrior had been killed. During the three-month probation period the would-be shaman must not eat much, and must also fast occasionally for two or three days at a time. The shaman fasts overnight before attempting a cure...The general fast...can be considered as a means of provoking the pity of the supernatural forces, or like sexual abstinence, it may be a method of keeping the body pure and receptive to supernatural powers. The fasting during the dances commemorating the slain warrior may be, like the fasting of the relatives after a death, the traditional expression of sorrow, and without magical significance" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:203-204).

Does membership in this religious group require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations:

— No

Notes: Tattooing was present, but does not appear to have had religious significance (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:61).

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

— Yes

Notes: "Only at the death of a chief's son or daughter was a slave killed as part of the funeral ceremonies" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:129).



Foreign, slaves:

— Yes

Notes: Slaves were sacrificed (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:166). "Slaves were captives taken in war or the children of slaves. All the slaves of the Eyak are said to have been Eskimo" (Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:139).



Commoners:

– No



Elites:

– No



Other:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of required sacrifice of children.

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of required self-sacrifice.

## Society and Institutions

### Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

– A chiefdom

Notes: The Eyak have one level of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community, which is indicative of a petty chiefdom (Ethnographic Atlas column 33, Murdock, 1967; retrieved from Divale, 2004). For more information on the nature of Eyak chiefs, see Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:126-130.

### Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 20, Food Storage, indicates that food is stored in individual households (Murdock and Morrow, 1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of water management. Further, the Eyak do not

practice irrigated agriculture.

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

— No

Notes: It can be assumed that transportation infrastructure is not present, as routes of land transport are "unimproved trails", according to Murdock and Morrow (1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004; SCCS Variable 14).

Is transportation infrastructure provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— No

Notes: It can be assumed that transportation infrastructure is not present, as routes of land transport are "unimproved trails", according to Murdock and Morrow (1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004; SCCS Variable 14).

## Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

— No

Notes: "Police functions are not specialized or institutionalized at any level of political integration, the maintenance of law and order being left exclusively to informal mechanisms of social control, to private retaliation, or to sorcery" (Tuden and Marshall, 1972; Column 10: Police) Note: Equivalent to SCCS Variable 90.

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

— No

Notes: "Supreme judicial authority is lacking at any level above that of the local community" (Tuden and Marshall, 1972; Column 9: Judiciary) Note: Equivalent to SCCS Variable 89.

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of institutionalized punishment. Punishment varies depending on the situation, and is not necessarily consistent. See Birket-Smith and De Laguna, 1938: 141-145 for a description of crime and punishment among the Eyak.

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

— No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of a formal legal code among the Eyak.

## Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 149, Scale 1 (of cultural complexity)- Writing and records, indicates that neither writing nor records are present (Murdock and Provost, 1971; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

## Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– Yes

Notes: The Eyak's primary mode of subsistence is fishing, with hunting and gathering as secondary modes of subsistence. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232. For a detailed description of Eyak subsistence practices, see Birkey-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:100-122.



Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:

– Gathering

– Hunting (including marine animals)

– Fishing

Notes: The Eyak's primary mode of subsistence is fishing, with hunting and gathering as secondary modes of subsistence. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232. For a detailed description of Eyak subsistence practices, see Birkey-Smith and De Laguna, 1938:100-122.