The Athabascan and Inupiat peoples of northern Alaska two hundred years ago identified with one of four major groupings, each tied by a common culture and language. These included Inupiaq and three Athabascan languages, Koyukon, Gwich'in, and Lower Tanana. Within each language group, subgroups formed, whose members shared similar dialects and local customs. Landholdings for each were formally delineated, but conflicts, surrendering of land, moves in response to shifting caribou ranges and other natural resource fluctuations, and expansion or contraction of populations caused shifts in who lived where.

This map shows Athabascan and Inupiat lands reflecting geographic borders and cultural identities about 1800. Boundaries were generally agreed upon and were only crossed when there was a purpose. When there was unrest between groups, to avoid conflict, they were strictly adhered to. Still, there was considerable interaction across borders: some trading, some raiding, some friendly visits, some hostile. More permanent moves across lines involved cultural adaptations. New arrivals would often adopt the language of their new home, becoming multilingual. In the east, languages were predominantly Athabascan, in the west, Inupiaq.

The steep mountain passes of the Brooks Range, known as Gwazhal to Athabascans, allowed the peoples of northern Alaska to create structures that funneled caribou toward valley narrows, brush thickets, and near lakes—all places that made them easier to hunt. In the eastern east, these took the form of brush fence lines; in the treeless tundra of the western mountains, lines of stone cairns. Occasionally some employed U-shaped corrals.

River names also played with language. A river with two prominent branches, for example, the Teedriinjik, had different names for each branch. The west fork is called Ch'idriinjik, which means “heart river.” The addition of “heart” indicates that there is a lake upstream. The east fork is called Deetreenjik. The fact they sound similar is no accident. Deetreenjik means raven, the trickster bird, is sending you up a valley that isn’t really there. Caribou were essential sources of food and raw materials for clothing, housing, and tools. They were so central to life, they were a fixture in Athabascan songs and stories. When caribou populations shifted or ranges shifted, the peoples of northern Alaska responded in kind, moving they settlements. Areas without caribou were left uninhabited as people moved to better prospects, and the most reliable hunting spots became focal points for the largest settlements.

Rivers were and continue to be the most prominent landmarks for navigating the landscape. They provided both food sources and ease of travel, and often served as natural boundary markers between territories. Each had an Athabascan name long before non-Native Alaskans arrived. Those names indicated on this map provided clues to navigation, referenced the stream’s position within the entire river system, and indicated other landmarks like lakes along the course.