

Who Are the “Atnah”?

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The term “Atnah”¹ is found in records of the fur trade, beginning with Alexander MacKenzie (Mackenzie 1801;164) who used it in reference to the Shuswap. Historians and anthropologists have often interpreted it as designating particular native peoples. The meaning of this term has become an issue in at least one legal case, *R. v Billy and Johnny*, where according to Judge Ellen Gordon's decision one of the witnesses for the Crown, Sheila Robinson, argued that in records from the Williams Lake area it probably referred to Chilcotins rather than Shuswap. The court did not accept her opinion on this point.

Banks (2008:86-97) critiques Sheila Robinson's testimony in *R. v. Billy and Johnny* at some length but never mentions the fact that Robinson had no knowledge of any of the relevant languages and that no witness with linguistic expertise, nor any linguistic reference material, was drawn upon either by Robinson or by any other participant in the trial. Judge Gordon correctly rejected Ms. Robinson's opinion on this point but on the basis of other evidence as to the identity of the particular group in question.

This word is a Carrier word, phonetically [ʔatna], written *'utna* in the Carrier Linguistic Committee writing system now in common use.² That sources discussing areas near Williams Lake should use a Carrier term is not surprising as the early explorers and fur traders came down the Peace River, passing through Sekani and then Carrier territory before reaching what is now Williams Lake.

Unfortunately, none of the people who have given opinions as to the meaning of this term have been familiar with the Carrier language, as a result of which its true meaning has remained obscure. The older and more readily available reference works are not clear on this point. Morice (1932;35) glosses the word (*Etna* in his spelling) as “alien, foreigner”. His understanding was like that of the fur trader William Connolly (Connolly 1825) who described the term as “a name applied by the Carriers to all nations who are not of their Race”. Antoine et. al. (1974;43) is more accurate, glossing the word as “Indians of west coast”, but still not entirely accurate.

For people from such places as Tache (Tachie), Nak'azdli (Fort Saint James) or Saik'uz (Stony Creek), the most likely reference of *'utna* is one of the coastal peoples: Gitksan, Nisga'a, Tsimshian, Haisla, Haida, or Tlingit, but it could also refer to the Shuswap, for whom the more specific term is *nda'utna* “downstream *'utna*”. The Cree are usually referred to by the specific term *dushine*, but if asked, people agree that the Cree are a kind of *'utna*. For people from the Lhtakoh (Red Bluff) and Ndazkoh Whut'en (Nazko) bands the most likely reference of *'utna* is the Shuswap, but they also use the term for the various coastal peoples. For people from Ulkatcho and Lhoosk'uz (Kluskus) the most likely reference of *'utna* is the Nuxalk (Bella Coola)³, but it can also refer to the Haisla, Heiltsuk, and other coastal peoples, or to the Shuswap in the interior. Groups classified as *'utna* include:

1 The “Atnah” in British Columbia should not be confused with the Ahtna or “Copper River Indians” of Alaska, whose name is sometimes also spelled “Atna”.

2 According to native speaker Stella Stump (p.c. 2026), Chilcotin uses the related *?Ena* for the Shuswap, *?Enay* for the Nuxalk.

3 This term underlies the name of the Atnarko river, which originates at Charlotte Lake on the Chilcotin Plateau and descends to join the Bella Coola River, which reaches the Pacific Ocean at Bella Coola. Atnarko is an anglicisation of *'utnakoh* “river of the *'utna*”, in this case referring to the Nuxalk. The spelling with an <r> evidently reflects an r-less British dialect of English. The current English pronunciation with an /r/ is a spelling pronunciation.

Group	Language Family
Cree	Algonquian
Gitksan	Tsimshianic
Haida	isolate
Haisla	Wakashan
Heiltsuk (Bella Bella)	Wakashan
Nisga'a	Tsimshianic
Nuxalk (Bella Coola)	Salishan
Shuswap	Salishan
Tlingit ⁴	Dene-Yeniseian ⁵
Tsimshian	Tsimshianic

On the other hand, the term *'utna* is never used in reference to Babine, Beaver, Carrier, Chilcotin, Kaska, Sekani, Slave, Tahltan, or Witsuwit'en people or even much more distant peoples whose language is clearly related, such as the Navajo and Apache. If asked, Carrier speakers respond that none of these are *'utna*.⁶

In sum, *'utna* does not designate any particular political, ethnic, or linguistic group. Rather, it refers to any native⁷ person whose language is not perceived as related to Carrier. In any given area, it may typically designate a particular, locally salient, group, but even then the possibility always exists that it refers to some other group. Under no circumstances does it refer to speakers of a clearly related Athabascan language such as the Chilcotin.⁸

4 Although linguists consider Tlingit to be related to the Athabascan languages, the relationship is sufficiently remote that speakers of languages like Carrier do not recognize Tlingit as related to their own language.

5 Dene-Yeniseian consists of the Yeniseian languages together with the universally recognized family consisting of the Athabascan languages, Eyak, and Tlingit, often called "Na-Dene".

6 This discussion of the use of the term in Carrier is based on the author's 34 years study of the language with over 100 speakers from all parts of Carrier territory.

7 The qualification "native" cannot have been part of the definition of the term prior to the arrival of Europeans. If it was ever applied to Europeans, as it may initially have been, we have no record of it.

8 It is conceivable that Europeans might have used the term differently, in particular, more expansively, than Dakelh people, but there is no evidence of that. As far as we can tell, they applied the term only to peoples to whom they had heard the term applied by native people.

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