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## Meet Native America: Chairman Tony Johnson, Chinook Indian Nation

**In the interview series Meet Native America, the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian invites tribal leaders, cultural figures, and other interesting and accomplished Native individuals to introduce themselves and say a little about their lives and work. Together their responses illustrate the diversity of the indigenous communities of the Western Hemisphere, as well as their shared concerns, and offer insights beyond what's in the news to the ideas and experiences of Native people today. —Dennis Zotigh**

### **Please introduce yourself with your name and title.**

My name is Tony A. Johnson. I'm chairman of the [Chinook Indian Nation](#) (CIN).

### **Can you share your Native name and its English translation, or your nickname?**

It's naschio. It means Little Brother. It was originally given as a nickname, but it has come to mean a lot to me.

### **Where is your tribal community located?**

We live by the mouth of the Columbia River and along the adjacent seacoast. The CIN includes the five westernmost Chinookan speaking tribes—the Clatsop and Kathlamet from present-day Oregon and the Lower Chinook, Wahkiakum, and Willapa from Washington State. Our tribal offices are currently located in the traditional village of Bay Center on Willapa Bay in Washington.

### **Where is your tribe originally from?**

We are fortunate that we still live on our aboriginal homelands. However there are many issues our nation deals with today because we refused to participate in the relocations proposed for us.

### **What is a significant point in history from your tribe that you would like to share?**

Our people signed treaties in 1851 that were never ratified. These Anson Dart treaties, which were negotiated on the treaty grounds at Tansy Point, were good for us, because they allowed us access to resources and, most importantly, they allowed us to stay in our villages. They say that the next winter was one of our worst—the government never came through with the goods promised at the negotiations.

The treaties of 1851 weren't ratified because some in Congress wanted to remove us east of the Cascade Mountains.

In 1855 we participated in another treaty negotiation with our neighbors. At that treaty council we learned that the rumors we had heard were true and that we were being asked to move north away from our traditional territory. We refused, along with our closest neighbors. Naturally the people from the lands we were to be removed to agreed. They had a treaty ratified later that year, but the Native people of southwest Washington and the mouth of the Columbia River were left without a treaty. All of the tribes from this area are still suffering the consequences of these actions, or this lack of action. Most of the tribes are federally recognized, but do not have large reservations or other treaty-guaranteed rights. The CIN, however, still lacks official federal recognition today.



**Tony A. Johnson, chairman of the Chinook Indian Nation. In addition to serving in tribal government, Chairman Johnson is an artist and Chinook language teacher and the education director of the neighboring Shoalwater Bay Tribe.**

**How is your tribal government set up?**

We transitioned from a traditional form of government to an elected form of government under a constitution in the early 1950s. A point of pride with us is that the original writers of our current Constitution were all hereditary leaders within the community. In fact the first elected chairman was an important hereditary chief.

**Is there a functional traditional entity of leadership in addition to your modern government system?**

Hereditary leadership is still valued and in some cases has more weight than the elected government, but the Chinook Tribal Council runs day-to-day business.



Chairman Johnson and artist Adam McIsaac (*background*) carving a canoe for the Community of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde in Western Oregon.

**How often are elected leaders chosen?**

We have a nine-member council, with members serving staggered three-year terms. Elections for three positions happen every summer at our annual General Council meeting.

**How often does your Tribal Council meet?**

Our Constitution requires monthly meetings, but we meet more often as

needed.

**What responsibilities do you have as tribal chairman?**

I am most concerned with the big picture of the preservation of our community and the lifeways associated with it. Our people have a right to exist in our territory and to access its resources. This drives me every day.

**How did your life experience prepare you to lead your tribe?**

I was enrolled when I was three months old. My father was elected to our Council the same year. Chinook politics have been a part of my life from the beginning.

Despite our lack of federal recognition, we have always had certain rights and we have always been treated as Indians. When I was a young man, these rights were being challenged, and I grew up watching our community fight for them. Without federal acknowledgment and treaties, many of these rights have been stripped from us in my lifetime. This includes the basic right of fishing in our rivers to feed our families.

**Who inspired you as a mentor?**

We had very hard-nosed leaders when I was growing up. Watching them pound the table and defend us in the strongest way possible was very inspiring. Nearly all the leaders of that old group are gone, and I miss their fire every

day.

### **Are you a descendant of a historical leader? If so, who?**

oskalawiliksh was a treaty signer in 1851. His wife akensi was also a person of high status. They are not the only ones in our family line who are significant, but our inheritance from them is important for our position in the community. My wife is also a descendant of one of our treaty signers, a chief named wasilta. He is also not the only prominent person in her family. These are important inheritances for our children.

### **Approximately how many members are in your tribe?**

We have about 3,000 members.

### **What are the criteria to become a member of your tribe?**

We had three citizenship rolls commissioned by the U.S. government in the early part of the 1900s. A person must have an ancestor on one of these rolls to be considered eligible for enrollment.

### **Is your language still spoken on your homelands? If so, what percentage of your people would you estimate are fluent speakers?**

Three languages were common in our area until recently. Many others were spoken as well. Chinook and Kathlamet are the primary languages of our ancestors. They are the two westernmost Chinookan dialects. Most of us are also descendants of our Salish neighbors, so their languages were common here as well. These are primarily the Tillamook and Chehalis languages.

Our ancestors also created a pidgin language known as Chinuk Wawa or Chinook Jargon. This was used widely and for many generations as a common language for people who did not otherwise share a language.

Today there are very few people who speak any of the Chinookan dialects. Salish languages and Chinuk Wawa became more prominent in our lands because of the disruptions associated with Americans and Europeans arriving here. More people understood those languages, and they were more useful over a broader area. Of Chinook, Kathlamet, and Chinuk Wawa, Chinuk Wawa is closest to flourishing, but it is still endangered. I am a good speaker of Chinuk Wawa.

### **What economic enterprises does your tribe own?**

We do not have any significant economic enterprises today.

### **What annual events does your tribe sponsor?**

We sponsor community events such as our First Salmon Ceremony, a number of paddle events, an annual Winter Gathering and a Storytelling Gathering. The community also has a large canoe family that practices the canoe culture of our ancestors.

**B2 The Chinook Indian Nation canoe *skakwal* taking part in the 2006 Tribal Canoe Journey. That year the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe, whose lands lie along South Puget Sound, hosted the journey's traditional five-day potlatch.**

### **What other attractions are available for visitors on your land?**

Our homeland is beautiful—one of the most incredible places on the planet—but we do not operate any significant tourist activities.

### **How does your tribe deal with the United States as a sovereign nation?**

We fully expect to be treated as a sovereign nation, and despite a current lack of clarity on our federal status we receive that treatment. We consult on a nation-to-nation basis on projects in our area at the county, state and federal level. Amazingly, all branches of the federal government, including many offices within the Department of Interior, treat us

as sovereign. Only the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)—in fact, only a part of the BIA—doesn't recognize our sovereignty.

### **What message would you like to share with the youth of your tribe?**

We can't let our youth accept our current status—lack of land and diminished rights cannot be considered acceptable. I am 45 years old, and many of these rights have been taken in my lifetime. My father and his brother were raised on Indian Trust land. Our grandparents were forced to go to Indian Boarding Schools. They were all given allotments. So much in our lives is affected by the abuse and neglect that we have experienced.

Our young people need to know that while recognition will not be perfect for us, it will at least raise us up to be on an equal standing to the other tribes. As my dad has often said, we are third-class citizens. We need to be able to be self-sustaining, to be able to govern our own land base and to access our own natural resources for the preservation of our culture and sustenance of our children. We must fight as a community for this. We have been here 10,000 years and have an inherent right to be here another 10,000!

### **Is there anything else you would like to add?**

An amazing story: My father was the chairman of the Chinook Indian Nation at the end of a 23-year process through which we had petitioned the federal government to clarify our status. In January 2001 we were given federal acknowledgment. Then-Assistant Secretary of the Interior Kevin Gover, director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, apologized for the incredible treatment we had received over the years, and it was finally done. Justice had happened, and the Chinook were again a federally recognized tribe of the United States of America.

As chairman of the federally recognized Chinook Indian Nation, my father attended a luncheon hosted by President George W. Bush that was intended to honor the tribes along the Lewis and Clark Trail and kick off the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. That was on July 3, 2002. My father and mother stayed in Washington for the Fourth of July, and while they were walking in the city on the July 5, they received a call from the BIA. Under the new Bush administration and with a new assistant secretary, the BIA had rescinded our federal acknowledgment. Rather than judging us on our own merit, the broken system of the bureau's Branch of Acknowledgement and Research acted on the objection of another federally recognized tribe. What happened at home that day as the word spread is another story. We still have not recovered.

### **Thank you for sharing this with us.**

Thank you.

Photos courtesy of the Chinook Indian Nation, used with permission.

To read other interviews in this series, click on the banner below.



*From left to right:* Representative Ponka-We Victors (Tohono O'odham/Southern Ponca) taking the oath of office in the Kansas House of Representatives; photo courtesy of Kansas Rep. Scott Schwab. Bird Runningwater (Cheyenne/Mescalero Apache) at the Sundance Film Festival; photo courtesy of WireImage. Sergeant Debra Mooney (Choctaw) at the powwow in Al Taqaddum Air Force Base, Iraq, 2004; photo courtesy of Sgt. Debra Mooney. Councilman Jonathan Perry (Wampanoag) in traditional clothing; photo courtesy of Jonathan Perry. Suzan Shown Harjo (Cheyenne/Hodulgee Muscogee) at Blackhorse et al. v. Pro Football, Inc., press conference, U.S. Patent and Trade Office, February 7, 2013; photo courtesy of Mary Phillips. All photos