

THE VOLCANO IN ATHABASCAN ORAL NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests that some Athabascan oral traditions support Workman's hypothesis of early Athabascan movement after cataclysmic volcanic eruptions in the Wrangell–St. Elias region of Alaska. Oral traditions collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries contain key metaphors that link Athabascan notions of language change, environment, and history to periods of unusual hardship and migration. The association between story and environmental shifts contributes to the body of scientific knowledge about human ecology in context with volcanism. Moodie et al. (1992) made similar interpretations based on similar findings in the eastern Subarctic.

KEYWORDS: Alaska ethnohistory, volcanic impact on humans, migration

INTRODUCTION

This study formed part of an interdisciplinary master's thesis completed at the University of Alaska Anchorage in 1990 (Fast 1990:239–278). Dr. William Workman's (1974) study of volcanoes as a contributory determinant of Northern Athabascan distribution formed a central issue in my research regarding the potential impact on culture of a massive volcanic eruption. Beginning in 1915, geologists and archaeologists studied a layer of ash covering about 125,000 square miles in the Upper Yukon basin in northern Canada and Alaska (Fig. 1). This geographic area corresponds to the distribution of a popular Gwich'in oral narrative called *Ko'ehdan* (Man Without Fire). The archetypal characters, Ko'ehdan and his wife, L'AtPa-Natsandé, are central characters in numerous stories, of which the most commonly told depicts L'AtPa-Natsandé's kidnap by enemies and eventual rescue by her husband. Slobodin (1975) detailed one of the most complete versions of this dramatic narrative told to him by a Canadian Loucheux or Gwich'in man. Workman postulated that northern Athabascans moved into eastern Canada and northern Alaska as a consequence of the fall of volcanic ash on the Upper Yukon basin around fourteen hundred years ago.

Slobodin (1975) suggests the enemies who kidnapped the archetypal woman are Inuit, and that the kidnap of L'AtPa-Natsandé fits a common theme among Gwich'in Athabascans of so-called Prize Women who were repeatedly kidnapped by Inuit and later rescued by their Athabascan husbands. According to Workman, the Athabascans of Canada and the Gwich'in of northwestern Alaska are the descendants of a group of Athabascans who had migrated east to escape the disastrous environmental effects of a massive volcanic eruption that occurred in the Wrangell–St. Elias Mountains near the present-day border between Alaska and Canada as noted on Fig. 1. Others have indicated the importance of the eruption. For instance, Émile Petitot (1888:415–416n1, as noted by Moodie et al. 1992:155), speculated that the Athabascan discovery of metal occurred because of the volcanic eruption of St. Elias along the Copper River. Workman proposed that the Athabascans of interior Alaska are descendants of people who migrated north due to an eruption from the same volcano approximately one millennium earlier. In support of Workman's hypothesis, my argument here is that the *Ko'ehdan* tale developed among the

eastern Canadian Athabascans, including the Gwich'in, subsequent to the second eruption and that this tale is not part of the traditional tales of Athabascans in other parts of Alaska because of cultural adaptations occurring one thousand years later. Athabascans may have adapted to the resistance they may have encountered by Inuit peoples, who were also entering Canadian territory as they moved from Asia along the northern coastline of North America in roughly the same era as the volcano may have moved Athabascans northward and eastward. Slobodin's summary of Gwich'in Athabascan Prize Women narratives suggests that early conflicts might have been explained in oral tradition through the metaphor of kidnap. In other words, the metaphor of Athabascan Prize Women suggested by Slobodin (1975:285–299) may have become the counterpoint to what Burch (2005:19) suggests as Iñupiat customs regarding inter-national marriages. Burch points out that when two nations, such as the Gwich'in and Inuit, found

themselves in conflict, they had to find a way to safely rescue their emigrant daughters from Athabascan husbands. It's my suggestion that Gwich'in families also faced the same problem and that their solution was to kidnap their emigrant daughters. Indeed, Slobodin suggests that such kidnappings occurred in both directions across the Inuit-Gwich'in boundaries, and that the boundaries have been in continuous negotiation because of two separately motivated migrations by the Inuit and Athabascans into north-eastern Canada.

DISCUSSION OF WORKMAN'S HYPOTHESIS

The body of this hypothesis is found in Workman's article "The Cultural Significance of a Volcanic Ash which Fell in the Upper Yukon Basin about 1400 Years Ago," which he originally presented at the International Conference on Prehistory and Paleoecology of Western North American Arctic and Subarctic and later published in 1974. Geologic reports indicate that ash deposits seem to have originated from a vent in the St. Elias Mountains in Alaska. The first ash deposit occurred in the north along the Tanana River valley from 1,750 to 2,005 years ago, with an average estimate of 1,890 years ago (Workman 1979:349). Ash from this event would have affected the area occupied by the present-day Han, Northern and Southern Tutchone, and Upper Tanana Athabascans. The second, eastern lobe event probably occurred around 1,250 years ago, with a range of 1,175 to 1,390 (Workman 1979:349), and its ash deposits spread over a great deal of the Yukon Territory and some of the Northwest Territories in Canada.

As a hypothetical reconstruction of the environment prior to the eruption in the affected areas, Workman summarized climatic occurrences believed to have happened since the glacial retreat occurred approximately ten millennia ago. First were the probable high winds and blown loess and silt conditions contributing to an extensive dry period. These could have lasted until the maximum warm/dry period of the Hypsithermal, some four thousand to twenty-eight hundred years ago, depending on the area and limited information available. In response to the presumed warming period, the glaciers in the St. Elias Mountains withdrew inside their present boundaries, and "at least one (The Kaskawulsh) was to retreat at least 13.7 miles [22 km] above its present terminus" (Workman 1974:241, citing Denton and Stuiver 1969:173). During the Hypsithermal the tree line in Alaska may have extended north of where it is now by as much as 300 km

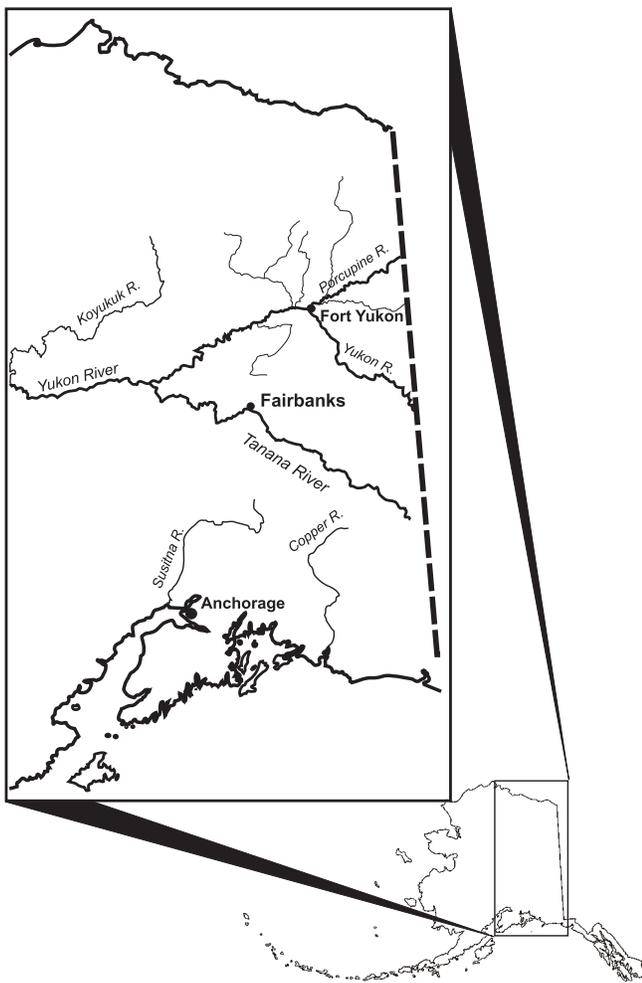


Figure 1. The area of eastern Alaska discussed in this paper.

(Dumond 1977:47). The environment after the eruption may have featured cooler, damper periods in which the moisture prevented volcanic ash from blowing as it would have during the era of high wind velocity.

In the Desadeash and Shakwak valleys on the southern periphery of the ashfall area in Canada, ice that had dammed the Alsek River broke up and moved out, thereby opening up new land that later became the grasslands and prairies of today. This was followed by a cooler, damper period that probably occurred between twenty-five hundred and sixteen hundred years ago, and was likely similar to contemporary conditions. The first eruption probably occurred during this moist cooling period.

What kind of life was it for people in this area after the eruptions? Increased moisture would have permitted the forest to expand, cutting into the prairie lands. Pre-ash faunal remains indicate that bison, inhabitants of the grasslands, disappeared along with the prairies of that region more than two millennia ago. Some possible physical effects of volcanic eruptions include the emission of noxious fumes and substances, including sulfur dioxide, fluorine, and chlorine, which even in small amounts could do extensive damage. Workman suggests that evergreens, a common presence in Alaska and northern Canada, are more susceptible than deciduous plants to such toxins (Workman 1974:247). The Katmai eruption of 1912, for example, emitted an acid rain that caused painful burns to humans, vegetation and metal, reportedly affecting areas 400 to 580 km from the volcanic source. Again citing Workman (1974:247), fumes “sufficient to tarnish brass in a few moments were reported 700 miles [1,100 km] downwind” of the Katmai eruption. It is possible to infer some of the long-term effects of ashfall from contemporary volcanic activity. For instance, Mount St. Helens spewed ash for six months prior to erupting in 1980. The ash from that vent is much coarser than the St. Elias volcano, so few other comparisons are possible. The Alaska Volcano Observatory records ashfalls from many volcanoes, such as Mount Redoubt and Mount Augustine in southcentral Alaska, that have produced ashfall hundreds of miles away. A consequence of ashfall putatively includes damage to the environment that must have come in a variety of forms, and the extent of damage depends on the season. Workman, since his first writing, has found several lines of evidence suggesting that the second, easterly eruption in the White River valley occurred in the winter (Workman notes, 1988). A winter eruption corre-

sponds to at least one Upper Tanana oral tradition in the area around Beaver Creek (Isaac 1990).

Workman suggests that if the seasonal effect of the major eruption in the upper Yukon region occurred in the winter, ash on snow could have precipitated flooding, just as Redoubt’s minor eruptions have done near Beluga Point at the base of the mountain. Travel would have been difficult, and subsistence activities would have been interrupted at a time when food was likely already scarce. “From several points of view the worst time for the ash to have fallen would have been in late winter or early spring, the best perhaps between midsummer and early fall” (Workman 1974:249).

Workman (1974:249–250) argues that the ashfall would have rendered the area uninhabitable, or at least unable to support as many people as before. If the trees were already laden with snow, severe ashfall in the quantities suggested by geological records might have damaged and killed trees. There may have been a number of subtle changes to drainage and vegetational patterns. Potable water may have been in limited supply, and herbivores may have been unable to survive given the limited or reduced availability of food resources.

Psychological effects would have been great, particularly since mountains have symbolized sources of metaphysical powers to many Athabascan peoples, northern as well as southern. For instance, the version of the *Ko’ebdan* tale documented by the nineteenth-century French Oblate missionary Émile Petitot includes a prayer translated as “Oh great mountain, my grandfather, in the beginning I sacrificed a fattened animal for you. What have you done with it?” (Petitot 1976:67) This is probably a prayer to the Navigator, a common northern Athabascan mythic character who first retreated to the top of a mountain to escape the great floods, and then built a canoe into which he loaded the small animals, thus saving the world. That person is also commonly referred to in many Athabascan oral traditions as “Grandfather” (Petitot 1976:6). There is no way to ascertain how much of this legend has been intertwined with the Christian story about Noah and the Ark, which Petitot probably taught a number of Athabascans himself.

Workman cited Verne F. Ray, who recorded a comment made by a woman of the Sanpoil-Nespelem Plateau cultural region who had been in the vicinity of a “very minor fall of ash” (Workman 1974:248). Briefly, she recounted a time when ash fell along the Columbia River when she was a little girl. Her people were so frightened

that they didn't gather food for winter, but instead prayed and engaged in ritual dancing, "something they never did except in winter" (Workman 1974:238). The import of this citation is to support the potential psychological impact ashfall might have on a community that had little experience with volcanic activity.

DISPERSION OF NORTHERN ATHABASCANS AFTER THE SECOND ERUPTION

Speculating that a large area around the base of the St. Elias mountains might have been rendered uninhabitable for several years after the second eruption, Workman argues that many of the residents would have been inclined to move toward the north and south of the Wrangell–St. Elias Mountains, rather than toward the east (where the ash was falling) or west toward Prince William Sound (near the source of ash). He suggests the following three possibilities about the region prior to ashfall: (1) the entire area was occupied by humans; (2) the population at the time was about the same as it is now for "boreal hunters without access to salmon runs"; or (3) the population was depleted due to the ashfall. Workman speculates that in the best case only 50 people may have been affected, but in the worst case as many as 1,550 people might have been impacted by ashfall, and that a probable figure is around 500 people.

Linguist Michael Krauss (1980), using glottochronology, suggests that Athabascan languages started to diverge from each other approximately twenty-five hundred years ago. This date correlates to the approximate beginning of neoglaciation, a period characterized by the onset of cooler and moister climatic conditions (Workman 1974, 1979). It is also relatively close to the hypothetical date of the first eruption, between 1,635±80 and 1,990±30 years ago. Krauss (1980) also suggests that the southern Athabascan languages (Navajo and Apache) originated north of where they are now approximately twelve hundred years ago, tantalizingly close to the time of the second eruption.

Where the original Athabascans were or may have come from prior to the dispersion of the modern Athabascan languages twenty-five hundred years ago is a question still open for debate. There is archaeological evidence indicating that people have occupied interior Alaska for at least ten thousand years, but there are few indications that those ancient people were ancestral Athabascans. The stone tools used by the ancient peoples are not the same as

those used by Athabascans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Richard Slobodin (1981:517) points out that Gwich'in culture is dominated by two "overriding principles, namely flexibility and opportunism, and a tendency to act out and mark status relationship in terms of physical relationship." These principles are supported by my own fieldwork in the Gwich'in area from 1993 to 1995 (Fast 2002). Slobodin and I both have written that the Gwich'in view themselves as different from their neighbors, whether Inupiat or Athabascan. An overarching Gwich'in cultural premise is having a relationship to caribou. This cultural principle operates in a geographic way by having regional boundaries that match the migratory patterns of the Porcupine caribou herd. By contrast, Koyukon and other river-based Athabascans focus their territorial interests around fishing sites rather than terrestrial mammals such as caribou. While caribou and moose provide a larger volume of food and related products, such as hide for clothing and bone for tools, it is more practical to rely on fish migrations for annual food requirements. Caribou herds frustrate fish and wildlife experts because of their unpredictable migratory patterns, whereas fish reliably keep to their own spawning streams unless there are significant environmental changes. Moodie et al. (1992:159–160) brought forward a Hare narrative ("Seated at the Zenith") that associates Hare migration from the Rocky Mountains to the MacKenzie River because they discovered fish spawning there after sighting a comet.

The Gwich'in, western neighbors to the Hare, seem to have a powerful affiliation to the Canadian area rather than Alaska, and, in fact, have continued to maintain strong family and political ties despite the nation-state boundary imposed by Canada and the United States through the Gwich'in Nation (Fast 2002). The Gwich'in affinity to Canada is borne out by the unusual distribution of the key oral traditions. For instance, other Alaskan Athabascans do not have the *Ko'ehdan* epic tales in their traditional canons. Some northern Athabascan oral traditions occur throughout the vast region as well as in other indigenous regions, including tales of the dog-husband, the Traveler, and the flood. On the other hand, there are narratives from eastern Canada that have no widespread counterpart in Alaska except among the Gwich'in. In addition to the *Ko'ehdan* tales, there are tales about the Copper Woman, all part of a body of oral traditions that Petitot referred to as the Dene Bible. The Gwich'in share these tales with the

eastern Canadian Athabascans, but not with their western or southern neighbors. Why not?

In agreement with Workman, I suggest the Gwich'in have a common history, and therefore a common body of oral traditions, with eastern Canadian peoples, and that they are descendants of the people who migrated away from the ashfall toward the east into the forbidding flat lands left by the Laurentide Ice fields of the Pleistocene era. The emigrants would have encountered hostilities wherever they went, and their need to establish their own territories as well as their need to defend those territories would have caused them to develop an interest in cultivating heroes such as Akaitcho of the Yellowknife. *Ko'ehdan* is such a hero, particularly as portrayed in the western Gwich'in versions of the tales.

EVIDENTIARY SUPPORT FROM ATHABASCAN ORAL TRADITIONS

Several tales from the Petitot collection and one more recently collected support Workman's hypothesis about the psychological effects of an environmental catastrophe like volcanic eruption. In gathering these data I kept in mind that no version of any story is exactly like others, and variations always stem from social, political, environmental, historical, cultural, and personal issues. As Athabaskan tales, they offer a traditional emphasis on relationships between people, mortal and spiritual, as well as survival issues pertinent to the needs of the moment. The most important of these in terms of indigenous support of the migration of Athabascans after an eruption is from the Hare Athabaskan from the Petitot collection.

THE ÉMILE PETITOT COLLECTION

Émile Petitot collected, transcribed, and translated a collection of tales from several Athabaskan nations that were published in 1886. They were translated into English from French in 1976 by the Programme Development Division of the Department of Education of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada. There are discrepancies between the 1886 and the 1976 editions, apparently stemming from a twentieth-century comparison of versions in the original languages. Among the discrepancies are changes in national designation, such as from Hare to Slavey. While some of the trouble may have come from problems in cross-cultural communication, it may also have been related to choices made by Petitot or later First Nations people. As

an example, Petitot's 1886 edition presents two self-designations for the Hare: *Kha-tchö* on the east, and *Kha-tPa gottiné* in the west. The 1976 translation classified all of Petitot's Hare tales as neither of these, but as *Gahchodene* (Slavey). When in doubt I relied on the French version. What follows are summaries of the tales.

Hare Tale: "L'atpa-Natsandé Et Kpon-Édin"

Petitot encountered this version of the *Ko'ehdan* narrative from the Hare Athabascans of northeastern Canada. Of the narratives offering support for the hypothesis that Athabascans might have migrated from another location into northeastern Canada due to volcanic activity, this tale is the most compelling. The 1976 translators named the tale "The Man Without Fire and the Woman Who Was Ravished." To paraphrase, everyone fought over Without Fire's (*Ko'ehdan*) wife (*L'atpa-Natsandé*). A chief, *Yamon-kha* (Petitot 1886:162) or White Horizon (Petitot 1976:38), kidnapped her and took her to his people. *Yamon-kha* lived near a mountain beside a big lake. His people lived inside the mountain. The men who lived inside the mountain behaved just as men did who lived outside the mountain. Dogs played inside, as did foxes. *L'atpa-natsandé* was determined to escape, so she built a fire inside the mountain and escaped to live with her husband once again (Petitot 1886:162–164; 1976:38–39).

Yamon-kha or White Horizon has been seen by some scholars as a metaphoric reference to the Inuit, possibly the Mackenzie River Eskimo or Copper Eskimo of Nunavut, bordering Athabascans in Canada. Ironically, the Athabascans of the Canadian east do not have the matrilineal system of other northern Athabascans, and yet *L'atpa-natsandé* is an obvious metaphor for the Prize Women as Slobodin (1975) describes for the Kutchin (now known as Gwich'in) of the story. Such Prize Women, characterized by superior intelligence, were reputed to be abducted frequently between Inuit and Athabaskan villages. Because the kinship system of eastern Canadian Athabascans is bilateral, the emphasis on female power is radically different from western Alaskan Athabascans, and like that of their Inuit neighbors. Athabaskan women in this tale and other versions like it are structurally represented as intermediaries who are at ease in two worlds (that of their enemies as well as that of their Athabaskan husbands), while men of both cultures are either in one place or the other.

The dog and fox are also depicted as spiritually ambivalent beings associated with the men who occupy the spiritual source in the mountain. Another Slavey tale collected by Petitot (“The Little Loved One and Running Raven”) ends with the death of a puppy. The protagonist, Little Loved One, “killed a puppy, cut off its nose, mixed its droppings and its blood together and smeared the tent with it.” The last line of the story reads “Then it was really bad and Raven merely said: ‘they have cursed the Great Mountain!’” (Petitot 1976:47). Dogs, thus, are metaphorically equated with the power of the mountain.

Chipewyan Tale: Deneyat’ié L’an Adjya (The Multiplication of Language)

This tale states that at first all people spoke the same language. One day a child, mimicking adults, killed, skinned, and butchered a moose, and shared its meat in each tent. The people became very troubled because they believed that the spirits fled away because the child broke a cultural rule against such mimicry. People forgot the common language, and since then many different languages have been spoken (Petitot 1886:383–384; 1976:8).

The central theme of this tale is disruption focused on language and due to a failure in a relationship with the spirits. This is a typical cultural attitude among northern Athabascans, who attribute ill fortune to their lack of respect toward spirits who control natural forces. Good fortune is usually attributed to shamanic intermediaries. One may also note the thematic bond regarding language between this tale and the next.

Dogrib Tale: Shiw Gul’a Akutchia (The Mountain That Melted)

Petitot collected this tale in 1869 from Têti-wotca, the chief “Montagnard.” According to this narrative, the Old Man remade the earth and everyone headed for the high ground, where they built a tall round tower on a mountain, near the great tubes of burning rock (*derkPonni* in the original Dogrib language). As they were building it, they heard terrible voices inside saying in a sinister way, “You speak a strange language.” At that instant the bitumen mines began smoking and caught fire. Then the ground began to tremble, there was a landslide, and the mountain began to melt and the fire spread. The mountain disappeared and in its place was a flat plain covered with smoking debris. The people spread out in all direc-

tions, and from then on people spoke different languages (Petitot 1886:332–333; 1976:23).

This tale, while obviously engaging in both Christian and contemporary coal mining symbolism, also culls the dominant Athabaskan theme of mountains as a source of the spiritual power. Again, language themes are related to issues of disruption. While which cultural motif dominated the storyteller’s version is always an interesting question, a more salient issue is to expect that the storyteller was using whatever tropes he or she had in common with Petitot to communicate the basic text of the story. The tower imagery obviously pertains to the coal mining industry of Canada on one level, and perhaps on another it may signify an ancient source of cultural trauma.

Hare Tale: KokkPalé (The Spiker Woman, or the Rainbow)

The 1976 translation of this tale is identified as a Slavey narrative called “The Rainbow,” while Petitot refers to it as a Hare tale. Both versions feature two brothers who chase a rainbow until they reached a mountain slope. An old man was there. The old man gave them an arrow and told them to use the arrow to shoot something on the condition that they not reclaim the arrow. One brother shot a squirrel and then tried to retrieve the arrow. The arrow kept running away. Suddenly a gigantic mountain surged up in front of them. Inside they heard voices of giants saying, “Your language is different.” The brothers tried to throw the arrow away, but it was stuck to their hands, and eventually it led them to the top of the mountain where there were many men. They lit a fire to warm themselves. Suddenly the mountain destroyed itself, and became a vast plain. The terrified people ran in many directions, and from then on, no one spoke a common language (Petitot 1886:126–130; 1976:32–33). (The 1976 version differs from the French version only slightly.)

It should be noted that unlike the popular *Ko’ehdan* tale that narrates a typical Athabaskan storyline about intertribal warfare, tales of environmental catastrophe are also common in Athabaskan oral traditions. The Hare storyteller incorporated the history of a volcano into the northern Athabaskan saga of two brothers who encounter a number of troublesome people or problematic hunting events. The *Ko’ehdan* story is included in the Gwich’in version of that saga. The old man is often termed the Sailor, the Traveler, the Wise Man, the person who saved the peo-

ple and animals from the flood. A common trope in these legends is that he lives on top of a mountain.

All three of the narratives presented here have many common elements. As Petitot pointed out, they all form part of a Dene Bible, meaning a body of knowledge that explains important epistemological themes for future generations. Included in those themes is the function of language in history, the role of mountains as a housing for wisdom, and, above all, the notion that mountains contain living entities that cause change. While the storytellers have also used industrial (coal mining) as well as Christian tropes, the indeterminacies implied in their narrative roles are manifold.

Hare Tale: Kottené-Tchö (The Giants)

In the 1976 version, this tale is identified not as a Hare tale but as a Slavey tale as Petitot recorded it, and in that version it is called “The Huge Giants.” The story narrates a time before the Wise Man existed and all people disappeared. It is part of a saga about how Raven helped the Sailor/Wise Man repopulate the world.

The Wise Man saw a moose and went to it. He discovered a fork in the trail and turned himself into an ermine to save himself in case the people were giants. He found a perch in a tree and watched. He saw a giant hurrying toward a mountain. The giant penetrated the mountain, and the Wise Man heard voices inside. “It smells as if something is burning!” There was a big fire and the whole mountain burned along with all the giants inside (Petitot 1886:254–255; 1976:32–33).

In other Athabascan tales, the protagonist’s name is translated differently from the local vernacular to Wise Man, Sailor, Grandfather, and in some, the Giant. The transformation of humans into ermines or weasels is a common mechanism among Northern Athabascans. See Deacon (1987) and Osgood (1959) for Deg Hit’an comparisons in which men and animals inhabit a great mountain, the center of their cosmological world. A giant living in a mountain once again situates the power of the numinous in mountains. The giant who lives underground or in a mountain is seen in a number of Athabascan metaphors. For instance, some of the Yukon and Tanana River Athabascan matrises are sometimes identified by visual symbols about underground elements such as copper or bears who hibernate in winter. Petitot also translated the Giant as “He Who Sees Ahead and Behind,” possibly an allusion to notions of ascendancy and descendancy, simi-

lar to the Tlingit term *shuká*, a genealogical term that also indicates the importance of balancing past, present, and future through kinship (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1987). The main concern in this context is to recognize the importance of mountains as a source of spiritual power in Athabascan symbolism.

The four oral narratives presented above provide evidence of the metaphoric importance that Athabascans of Canada place on mountains. Such an emphasis could simply be taken as environmental coincidence and common sense—that its metaphors are drawn from what is important in everyday life. Indeed, most scholars have observed the importance of rivers and mountains to interior Athabascans. However, it should be observed that the most ubiquitous environmental phenomenon, snow, is not imbued with supernatural qualities as are the mountains of these narratives. The next example in this study brings the metaphor of supernatural mountains into notions of traumatic change.

Hare Tale: Nné Ehta-son-tagé (The Changing of the Earth)

Like the preceding tales, in the 1976 translation this story, “The Earth Revolved on Its Axis,” is identified as a Slavey rather than a Hare tale. It begins with Phantoms who lived in the east. The Phantoms were once dogs, but had become men. Thus, the Dene people lived in the west and are men, and men fight constantly with Phantoms.

The narrative then describes the earth turning from one side to the other, as if it was doing pirouettes. Since then the Phantomes have lived in the west and the Dene have lived in the east. At first they moved to the big sea on the east after living in the high mountains. One day an old man (*Tchanézele*, The Old Bald Man) went down to the river and discovered the fish swimming in it. He caught many of them. That was why the Dene now live beside the river (Petitot 1886 230–231; 1976:57–58).

The 1976 translation refers to the Phantoms as Koloshes, a widespread term for Tlingit. The narrative’s reference to a former life in the mountains could mean many things, including a reference to a time in the distant past when the Dene lived in the mountains to the west and had to move east because of the Phantoms. The earth turning on its axis might refer to earthquakes that might have occurred in conjunction with volcanic activity.

The 1976 version alludes to a metal similar to bear dung, which may be a reference to copper, found abundantly in

Yellowknife and other parts of eastern Canada. Copper is also abundant along the Copper River of Alaska, near the Wrangell–St. Elias mountains. As mentioned previously, bear is also a metaphor for Athabascan kin groups, although the origins and consistency of its use that way are as ambiguous and tantalizing as the relationship between volcanoes and Athabascan migration. Bears, as mentioned before, are seen as creatures of the underground in Athabascan traditions, as is copper.

The final narrative from the Petitot collection brings in notions of migration. Petitot's 1886 version terms it Gwich'in, while the 1976 translation has it as Slavey. Petitot noted that he collected it from Sylvain Vitoedh in 1870 in Fort Bonne-Esperance (Fort Good Hope), a community in the Slavey area. It is possible that Vitoedh was from or had traveled to Gwich'in territory, as he also told him the Gwich'in version of *Ko'ehdan*. Thus, the potential for confusion about its national source is obvious.

Gwich'in Tale: Kpan-t'et NaxatsetoetPal (Funeral Passage among the Tents)

This story begins at night with the time of snowfall during a lunar eclipse. People cook meat and put it into bags that the young people circulate among the tents. The people divide into two groups and circle around the tents. As they walk, they sing, "Pass! Shrew mouse two times in a cross jump over the earth quietly! Mountain pines, come!" (Petitot 1886:70–71). This is done at a lunar eclipse to beseech abundance from the Man in the Moon.

The 1976 translation has this variation: "It's heavy! Shrew-mouse, you have carried me on your back. Wooded Mountain, come!" (Petitot 1976:47–48).

While this tale does little to support the notion of volcanic eruption leading to a migration into northeastern Canada, it does reveal two of the most important Athabascan tropes: migration and mountains. The metaphoric association of the moon with abundance is common throughout the world, and like this Athabascan narrative, there are many ways of calling upon that power to assure human beings of food. The Man in the Moon could refer to the tale of the boy who used his shamanic power to call caribou to his band. When the people disobeyed his restrictions, he left them and became the Man in the Moon. The people were supposed to save a hindquarter from the leader of the caribou to give to the boy. In other versions, they are to let the leader pass without killing it. This form of ritual feeding is intended to guarantee more food will be

available as well as to instruct young people on the need to reserve food for needs that are not immediately obvious.

The second important Athabascan custom is more prosaic and very common. Harvesting such deposits of food left by mice is a common practice in many parts of Alaska. Along with this custom is the idea of leaving some food behind for the mice. In addition, the shrew is omnivorous, living beneath the leaf litter and grass that would be covered by ashfall (Hall and Kelson 1959:22). Their fortitude and example of survival would be important reminders after a traumatic volcanic eruption. Thus, a story heralding mice as having carried the people on their backs is a gentle tribute to the value of harvesting mouse food to stave off times of starvation.

Another important metaphoric construction in the story is the idea of breaking into two groups, a possible reference to the jig dancing styles that French Canadian fur trappers introduced to both Canadian and Alaskan Athabascans. It could also reveal another practical idea that when migration is a must, a family should break into two groups in hopes that at least one half will survive. In any event, it should be noted that since the major contents of the narrative are both metaphoric as well as instructive, it is also possible that the idea of a funeral march through the tents is equally metaphoric and instructive. During times of starvation, a notion supported not only in narrative but by archaeological discoveries as well, migration might be necessary.

The shrew mouse among Koyukon and Gwich'in is an omen of death as well as a characteristic of power. Having a mouse as one's spirit guide is still considered an honor among Alaskan Gwich'in.

Han Gwich'in Tale: Däänooje (Long Time Ago Story), Sraa Ko,ey Cha,Lut Clut (No Sun and Lots of Ice)

A contemporary oral narrative collected by Gerald R. Isaac of Whitehorse gives an indication of the impact that might stem from an environmental catastrophe. Isaac transcribed and translated a story told by his grandmother, Eliza, who told him the story in about 1955, when he was five. According to his grandmother, there was a year when there was no sun and the ice stayed in the river a long time. The people were afraid that the Creator was punishing them. The *luk cho* (salmon) had to swim under the ice and it wasn't easy to catch them in the fish traps. *Gah* (rabbit) did not change color, and moose and caribou were confused. The bull moose got very friendly with each other during

rutting season instead of fighting as they normally did at that time (Isaac 1990). Isaac also wrote that he discovered some of the literature regarding the volcanic eruption in the Wrangell Mountains, and he considers that the geological findings substantiate his grandmother's story.

Many elements in Isaac's tale support Workman's hypothesis, particularly the winter occurrence of the eruption and the devastating effect it had on subsistence activities. However, it is also possible that the climatic changes Isaac's grandmother describes may have occurred due to the 1815 eruption of the Tambora stratovolcano (Decker and Decker 1989:211–212), which reportedly affected weather on a worldwide scale, including Alaska. That event occurred well over a century before she told the story to Gerald Isaac, giving an idea of how long a traumatic event can remain in cultural history via oral traditions. Of more importance is to acknowledge that Athabascans have reported the impact of volcanoes through oral tradition, making note of the environmental changes that have both a physical as well as a subsistence orientation.

CONCLUSION

This has been a study of the relation between environmental catastrophic events and Athabaskan oral narratives. While not directly supporting Workman's hypothesis of the Mount St. Elias volcanic eruption of over a millennium ago, there is sufficient evidence in tales collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to indicate how Athabascans would react and, moreover, how durable such narratives can be. In this study I noted that some themes, such as mountains with internal fires, are reported in the eastern Canadian Athabaskan area rather than in the Alaskan Athabaskan area. This coincides with the distribution of ashfall and the potential need to remain aware of why and how their ancestors came to be in that particular part of the world. Workman enlisted the glottochronological reconstruction of Na Dené language distribution by Michael Krauss to support his hypothesis. Three of the narratives presented here attempt to explain the plurality of languages, and two of them tie that issue to mountains with internal fires. Athabaskan oral traditions explain key factors about the world and enjoin the upcoming generations to be successful by knowing the past. Important clues are encoded in oral tradition and explained outside of the narrative to children in a variety of enculturative techniques, such as song, ritual, and dance. It is my opinion that Athabaskan oral narratives offer important support to William Workman's hypothesis of Athabaskan migrations.

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