

## Preface



It is our hope that the following pages will serve as a bridge between cultures as well as a record of the depth of traditional Native cultural history for generations yet to come.

Through storytelling, indigenous societies have long participated in the renewal of a distant paradigm and, in some ways, revitalized their lives through a powerful spiritual reconnection to a reality that extends backward to the pre-dawn of time.

*Yaabaa Teeshaay* was a cultural hero who lived a priori, or, as some would suggest, at the very beginning of time. He came to earth on a mission: to set things right among animals and mankind. Some say that he was like a god. Others equate him with Jesus. There are people among the *Mendees Cheege*<sup>1</sup> who consider him a mythical character, similar to those found in fairy tales, as well as others who believe that he was an actual man who had supernatural gifts and lived before recorded history. Regardless of whether one perceives *Yaabaa Teeshaay* and his exploits in a figurative or literal manner, the influence of his adventures continues to permeate the *Mendees Cheege* worldview.

Best known in Native culture, in numerous other cultures, and over various periods of history is the hero's tale (cf. Jung 1964:101). The following epic stories from the *Mendees Cheege* of the Upper Tanana River Valley of eastern interior Alaska have been passed from generation to generation for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years as a means of providing continuity to that earlier

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<sup>1</sup> People of Healy Lake.

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mythic time when harmony was established and cultural heroes made the world safe while providing instruction and guidance for all time (see Eliade 1960:59).

After a painful incident involving his wives and extended family, *Yaabaa Teeshaay* set off on a long and for the most part solitary journey, which eventually led him all the way around the world.

During this sacred journey, *Yaabaa Teeshaay* straightened out many injustices and poor treatment of man. As he traveled, he took it upon himself to right the wrongs found among a variety of species, thus making it easier for man to thrive. His work set the standard for all time, having been accomplished in sacred time, or a priori.

Although *Yaabaa Teeshaay* went about doing good, he also presented some characteristics of the trickster nature frequently associated in Native culture with Raven or Crow. These characteristics are integrated into the holistic worldview of indigenous cultures throughout the world and are interpreted in Jacobi (1959:154) as being archetypal, instinctive, sometimes inciteful, or as a gestalt.

Mircea Eliade explained the cultural relevance of epic stories such as the Hero's Journey:

We are at last beginning to know and understand the value of the myth, as it has been elaborated in "primitive" and archaic societies—that is, among those groups of mankind where the myth happens to be the very foundation of social life and culture. Now one fact strikes us immediately: in such societies, the myth is thought to express the absolute truth, because it narrates a sacred his-



**Members of the Luke family from Salcha**

tory; that is, a trans-human revelation which took place at the dawn of the Great Time, in the holy time of the beginnings (in illo tempore). Being real and sacred, the myth becomes exemplary, and consequently repeatable, for it serves as a model, and by the same token, as a justification for all human actions. (Eliade 1960:23)

Throughout interior Alaska, other First Man stories from the same genre as the *Yaabaa Teeshaay* stories have traditionally been told during long winter nights in small family gatherings. For instance, to the north and west, on the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers, the stories of *Kk'edonts'ednee*, that is, "The Distant Past" (in Koyukon Athabascan), bear similarities to the *Yaabaa Teeshaay* stories in that they speak of an earlier time when things were done differently. These stories also have been told and retold for pleasure and guidance. The Koyukon speaking people in that area believe that the stories help

shorten the winter and bring good luck to the narrator and audience (Attla 1996:v).

In the book *First Medicine Man: The Tale of Yobaghu-Talyonunh* by Arthur R. Wright, the stories themselves are very similar to the adventures of *Yaabaa Teeshaay*. These stories consist of fourteen tales, most of which are also found in the *Yaabaa Teeshaay* stories. Wright wrote while he was living in Tanacross, Alaska, in 1977, although he was born and raised in Tanana, where we believe his stories have their source. He was serving a ministerial post in Tanacross when he wrote the *Yobaghu-Talyonunh* stories. Also, Tanacross elders have stated that the Tanacross Athabascan name for their cultural hero was *Yaamal Teeshaay*, which is similar to his name in the language of Healy Lake speakers.

*Tales from the Dena: Indian Stories from the Tanana, Koyukuk & Yukon Rivers* by Frederica de Laguna (1995) also reflects similarities to the *Yaabaa Teeshaay* stories. In chapter V, pp. 121–134, narrated by John Silas, we find stories about *Ch'eteetaalkane*, “The Man Who Went Through Everything on a Canoe.” These stories bear a striking resemblance to the *Yaabaa Teeshaay* stories, although the Healy Lake version does not mention a giant as the Dena version does.

Another version told by Titus Bedes in *Tales from the Dena* (pp. 96–104) begins with *Ch'eteetaalkne* making his canoe, but this story is not the same as the Healy Lake version. Of the seven stories told by Bedes, most differ considerably from those told by the *Mendees Cheege* people, although the animals that the cultural hero visits on his journey are the same and, as in the case of the rabbit, one or two stories are quite similar.



Ellen Demit's mother, Selene

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Catherine McClellan recorded tales from the Yukon First Nations regarding “First Man Stories.” “Beaver Man,” also known as “Smart Man,” was the “monster killer or transformer par excellence” who made the world safe for man by reducing to their present size a whole series of man-eating animals and ordained what these man-eaters should eat instead of eating human beings (2001:73). *Yaabaa Teeshaay* also decreed which foods certain animals, such as Eagle, were to eat instead of humans.

We are fortunate to have at least six versions of the Traveler’s Tale or First Man stories in several Athabascan languages; however, no version contains all of the complete epic stories. The Koyukon Tales from the Dena comprise twenty-four episodes, which is the greatest number to be found, and the Healy Lake version contains both the story of the birth of First Man and the tale in which the cultural hero completes his journey, neither of which has been found anywhere else.

Although the times and situations have changed dramatically, a traditional person, fortified with knowledge of the culture and First Man stories, may apply the stories to puzzle out meaning to aid in dealing with contemporary situations, maintaining the tie to the sacred and supernatural teachings. By this means the flow of creative energy extends across time, and the standard set so long ago by *Yaabaa Teeshaay* continues to be acknowledged and reframed to apply in the present just as in the past.

Ellen Demit, the primary narrator of the *Yaabaa Teeshaay* stories, was born on May 13, 1913, in Chena, Alaska, which is now part of the city of Fairbanks. While



**At Healy River, 1905**

Photo courtesy of Lee Saylor

Ellen was very young she was taken from her family by Chief Luke, a powerful medicine man (Callaway and Miller-Friend 2000:3), from Goodpaster in interior Alaska. When Luke’s wife, Anne, passed away, Ellen was three or four years old. She was taken by her adopted father to Healy Lake at the mouth of the Healy River in eastern interior Alaska, where she was again adopted—this time by the brother of Old Chief Healy, who was known as Old Blind Jimmy, and his wife, Selene. Ellen was accepted as a member of the Healy Lake band and grew to adulthood in this village, where she was finally laid to rest. In her later years, when she lived in Tok, Ellen visited her cabin at Healy Lake during the summers and even in the extremely cold winters, traveling over an ice bridge, whenever she had opportunity to go home.

The stories presented here were recorded in Ellen’s cabin in Tok throughout the winter of 2007–2008. They

are written as Ellen shared them, sometimes in her Healy Lake dialect and sometimes in English. The Athabascan has been translated as faithfully as possible by Irene Arnold, a Tanacross language expert, and Richard Thoman, a linguistics PhD candidate at the University of Alaska Fairbanks who specializes in Tanacross. There is little written record of the Healy Lake dialect. The Healy Lake dialect is appreciated as a form of Tanacross Athabascan with a melodious resonance.

The stories begin with the extraordinary birth of *Yaabaa Teeshaay*. After he had grown to adulthood in a miraculously short time and had taken care of his adopted grandmother, he met and married two women, one of whom bore him a son.<sup>2</sup>

The stories pick up again as the cultural hero receives poor treatment from his wives and close relatives and starts off on a journey around the world. One of his wives follows him but turns back out of fear, and so one or the other of them straps her baby onto her back and picks up his trail. Both she and the baby nearly die as a result, but *Yaabaa Teeshaay* saves them. After traveling for many days, they find themselves at the home of Eagle, where *Yaabaa Teeshaay* begins straightening out the behavior of animals.

Along the way, he and his wife visit a large village of women, and his wife becomes very rich there. Later his wife and son are killed in a large village where tailed

people live and *Yaabaa Teeshaay* continues his journey alone.

He visits Otter Woman, Rabbit (Snowshoe Hare), Wolverine Man, the Woman Who Married a Bear, and likely others whose stories have been lost over time. Finally an old man, he returns home to his remaining wife and son and ends his journey, at his wife's suggestion, by painting a red ochre symbol on the cliffs to mark the end of his travels around the world.

In the eastern interior region of Alaska, man and nature have engaged in an elemental reciprocal agreement for thousands of years. The First Man stories about the exploits of *Yaabaa Teeshaay*, presented on the following pages, are at the heart of this agreement and the cultural worldview that the *Mendeas Cheege* have held for longer than anyone can remember.

In discussing the stories, an interdisciplinary approach is used to aid in interpreting the broader meaning of some of the more archaic motifs found throughout the stories. The works of psychologist C. G. Jung, historian Joseph Campbell, and philosopher/historian Mircea Eliade, as well as anthropologists Frederica de Laguna, Catharine McClellan, Chad Thompson, Catherine Attla, and others (see Bibliography) illuminate the breadth and depth of the messages within the hero's tales. For Jung there was no question that the imagery used in myth was symbolic of psychical processes that explain the stages of man's development and can be found in the collective unconscious (see Radin 1971:306).

Wherever not otherwise indicated, the interpretations in annotations or elsewhere presented in this book are strictly my own perceptions, which undeniably have

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<sup>2</sup> At the end of *Yaabaa Teeshaay*'s journey, he returns to his other wife, who, Ellen then says, also has a son. It is not known whether the second wife did have a son, or whether, given Ellen's advanced age and strong medication that she was taking for her illness, she may have been confused about the ending.

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been influenced by Upper Tanana elders, the works of the aforementioned authors, and my personal beliefs. Annotations throughout the book are intended to clarify concepts and metaphors, many of which precede us by hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

A poetic format was chosen to represent the way that Ellen told the stories, using her natural cadence when storytelling. Whether speaking in Athabascan or in English, Ellen slipped into a cadence that resonated with a rhythmic pattern quite pleasant to hear. The transcription is

broken into lines according to the pauses that Ellen took as the stories unfolded. The result has the ability to penetrate beyond auditory channels, entering into the subconscious, where stories of this genre find refuge and a deep sense of knowing or of “coming home.”

Connie Friend  
Tok, Alaska  
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**Healy Lake Village group, 1937**