

Foreword

Michael Koskey

Some stories are meant to be read, but many others are intended to be told. The early tellers of *Yaabaa Teeshaay* would have embellished the telling of the stories with sweeping hand and body movements and dramatic accentuation on speech. Often these stories were told at night, and frequently in winter, when much less movement across the land for subsistence needs was required. In the half-darkness of a fire-lit night, the telling of the exploits of *Yaabaa Teeshaay* would have left a more significant impression on the listeners—and a heavy impression is exactly what such stories were supposed to accomplish.

Rather than teaching through the formality of concepts of “right and wrong” or “good and evil,” traditional stories such as *Yaabaa Teeshaay* are intended to display how a person is “supposed to be,” within the context of a particular culture. These are issues of “honor and dishonor,” and through *Yaabaa Teeshaay*’s accomplishments and actions and as a member of its originating culture—the Athabascans of interior Alaska and northwestern Canada—behavioral instruction was provided. This version of *Yaabaa Teeshaay* is specific to one localized area of the Athabascans, centered on the lands surrounding and including the communities of Healy Lake, Dot Lake, and Tanacross.

The stories of *Yaabaa Teeshaay*, then, are not intended simply to entertain, though that is one aspect of their purpose. Nor is the *Yaabaa Teeshaay* collection intended to be a history, though historical conditions are portrayed. Fundamentally, the role of these stories is to inform the listener, and to remind the teller, of those aspects of hu-



man behavior that are best. These form a portion of the cultural exemplars of a people, elucidating the values and ethics held to be important. In this way, the *Yaabaa Teeshaay* stories constitute a portion of the body of myth of the indigenous peoples of the Upper Tanana region of Alaska.

Myth is an often-misunderstood concept. In our contemporary world of facts and measurable processes, the less tangible, non-material aspects of existence are often overlooked, and often these concepts are discarded as anecdotal, imaginative, or spiritual in nature, and therefore less viable as “knowledge.” Nevertheless, most of what a person concerns oneself with is these intangible, ideational portions of experience. To dismiss or discard these aspects of a cultural study is to severely limit one’s understanding of another’s cultural motivations. Myth is a “literature of the spirit,” a way to understand one’s conceptual role in the experience of life, and a way to metaphorically express that experience.

Myths are also stories that try to harmonize our experience of life with reality. Through the stories told, heroic and tragic characters display for all to see the merits or dangers of a particular action or decision. Interwoven with these spiritual and ethical messages are references to the known—events of the past or physical manifestations of the universe in which we live. Myths tend to be, therefore, pseudo-historical and cosmological in nature, linking mythic times and events to the manifestation of the material in the form of the earth, sun, moon, stars, and all things that are encountered in our cosmos.

Tying together the cultural values with the experience of the physical world gives rise to stories that are often

fantastical but that are moored in the feelings and sights of everyday life. To be sure, the myth is not a scientific treatise or investigation into the physical reality of star-formation and biophysical evolution, but then that is not the myth’s role. Beyond all else, the myth provides a conceptual understanding of the interdependence of all things in the world of experience, and this is a realization that can be extended to the material world as well. Through the use of cosmological and spiritual allegory and metaphor—both in a culturally specific way—an “explanation” can be provided for the state of things, but the listener should (and would be directed to, ideally) be aware that the story is not about “truth,” but about how to be “the right person.”

Just as it is difficult to provide a truthful explanation of another person without highlighting shortcomings, the myths of the Athabascans—and many others besides—often impart the wisdom of “what not to do” by the misdeeds of the protagonist. Often it is a misunderstanding of this element of myth that leads to a misinterpretation of the message that is being imparted. Cultural knowledge certainly serves to inform a culture’s myth just as a myth imparts cultural knowledge. This often makes comprehending an unfamiliar culture’s myths a challenge.

In this book the editor, Connie Friend, attempts to help the reader to bridge this gap. Providing helpful and culturally relevant commentary throughout, Friend enables the reader to better understand the actions of *Yaabaa Teeshaay*, his motivations and responses to what to an “outside” reader might otherwise seem nonsensical. This commentary is preceded by an excellent preface that places the *Yaabaa Teeshaay* stories in a cultural, tempo-

ral, and academic context.

What Friend has presented here are the stories of *Yaabaa Teeshaay* as told by Ellen Demit, an Athabascan Elder of Healy Lake village in the interior region of Alaska. Ellen Demit acquired these stories from her Elders and desired to pass them on, most especially to her own descendents. Two considerations must be recognized in Demit's telling of these stories. First, by committing these stories to writing a new condition is forced on the material—that of permanency of form. Second, the Tanacross Athabascan language in which they were composed had to be translated (or was translated by Demit herself) into English—a language of many expressive forms dissimilar to Athabascan's expressive conventions.

Myths are specifically attuned to the cultural nuances of both tradition and language, and those of *Yaabaa Teeshaay* are no exception. Surrounding the presentation of these stories are other stories that help place the tellings and actions of *Yaabaa Teeshaay* in cultural context. Some of these stories are mythical, like the *Yaabaa Teeshaay* stories, while some are of a personal nature, told by Demit or her friends and relatives. Together these additional stories, along with the commentary provided by Friend through introductions and footnotes, help bring about an understanding of Demit's form, style, and traditions of storytelling.

Ellen Demit's storytelling, then, is not only a reflection of her own life perspectives, but also of the perspectives of those who came before her. These perspectives stem from a cultural tradition that holds family and community as the highest cultural concern, and these are intimately linked to all aspects of life and experiences

through spiritual connections. Though the expression of this spirituality is personal and changing, it nevertheless maintains the support of certain behaviors as being honorable.

Most important, perhaps, is the universal context of respect, manifested through sharing, ceremonies such as the potlatch, and interdependence. This respect is extended to all aspects of life, but is especially due to animals—those who willingly give themselves for the benefit of others. This perspective enables a symbolic expression of respect that humans are to emulate. Self-sacrifice is nevertheless not seen as such—as a sacrifice—but instead is reckoned as honorable behavior. As will the animals give themselves to a respectful hunter, so too should the human person give of themselves whatever is required for the good of the family, the clan, and the community.

These values exemplify the egalitarian nature of such a society, practiced by a culture that perceives all aspects of the infinite existence as sacred. Honorable action is a symbolic expression of the spiritual sacredness of an idea or a place, and by right action the mundane becomes sacred. The creation of sacred places or behaviors serves to tie together generations of a people, and the actions enabling the creation of the sacred are codified in the myths and other stories of the group, whether it be a family, a clan, a community, or a nation. Ellen Demit's home, Healy Lake, is one such sacred place.

The habitation site of Healy Lake is ancient, possessing evidence of permanent or semi-permanent structures well before the historical period and possibly as far back as eleven thousand years ago (Callaway and Friend 2001). Archaeological excavations have revealed

that west of Healy Lake were habitation sites along most of the large lakes that commonly lie to the north of the Tanana River, including at Birch, Harding, and Quartz Lakes, all located west of Delta Junction and east of Fairbanks. In this area was formerly located the indigenous village of Salchaket, situated near the contemporary community of Salcha, though this settlement was abandoned in the second quarter of the twentieth century (Yarborough 1976).

Some residents of Healy Lake continue to speak of settlements and their use of lands for subsistence hunting to the west of Healy Lake. Together, the many large lakes in the hills north of the Tanana River to the Tok area, then south of the river east of Tok, formed the ecological and therefore demographic core of the inhabitants of the Upper Tanana. By extension, then, this region provides the mythic and physical landscape for the stories told by Demit.

Formerly nomadic and generally divided between the Healy River-Joseph Band and the Kechumstuk-Mansfield Band, the Tanacross Athabascan-speaking inhabitants of the region still retain some qualities of mobility in their efforts to subsist off the land and its wild resources. Due to these conditions, the residents of Healy Lake and Dot Lake, and of the wider Upper Tanana region, comprise a greater regional community in which meaningful and ongoing social relations are maintained. For this reason these stories can be said to reflect the culture of the people of this entire region, and the people of the communities of Healy Lake and Dot Lake are related in large part to each other and to the people of Tanacross. The indigenous people of this region also have connections through

time by ancestral links to the Kechumstuk area located in the Mosquito Flats between Eagle and Tanacross.

The editor of this book, Connie Friend, has lived in the Upper Tanana region for decades and has been deeply involved in the lives of the resident peoples, both indigenous and non-indigenous. Friend has worked on subsistence and other cultural issues of the Upper Tanana for much of this time, and has developed a sincere passion for understanding the cultural characteristics of its peoples. This book brings together two traditions—Upper Tanana Athabascan storytelling and Western academic publishing and writing—to make Ellen Demit’s stories speak to as wide an audience as possible. Friend’s work, both formal and personal, with the Upper Tanana’s peoples led to her friendship with Ellen Demit, enabling us to learn from the wisdom contained in these traditional stories.

Michael Koskey
College of Rural and Community Development
University of Alaska Fairbanks
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