NOTES ON SOME TAHLTAN ORAL LITERATURE

by

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The present paper is intended merely as an appendix to more extensive extant sources on the myths and traditions of the Tahltan Indians of British Columbia (Teit 1909; Teit 1919; Emmons 1911; Meek n.d.). The material herein was gathered incidentally in the course of inquiries into other matters made in Telegraph Creek, B.C., during the summer of 1956 (1). The several items were gathered at different times in different contexts. The result is a variability in the completeness and quality of my notes. On the assumption that whatever value these items may have may lie in their original form, I have stuck as closely as possible to this form, rather than arbitrarily impose a unified style throughout.

First is a summary given me by a white long-term resident of Telegraph Creek, a highly literate man and amateur student of local Indian ways. This gentleman reports that arrow-making (and perhaps other arts) was a specialized craft.

> The arrow-maker killed his mother, and so he became an outcast and had to run away. Some people set out after him to get retribution. They finally caught up with him while he was sleeping under a tree. They stole up on him and bludgeoned him to death. Some of their blows cracked open his skull, and, to their astonishment, millions of mosquitoes issued from the dead man's head. That's where all our mosquitoes come from (cf. Teit 1917:445,445n.). You really can't blame the fellow for what he did;if you had all those mosquitoes buzzing around in your head, you'd do things like that too.

My informant cited the final moralizing as a trait typically Athabaskan (as opposed to Coastal,) and an accompaniment of many Tahltan Tales.

One elderly Indian informant remained unconvinced that I was not some sort of government agent. In a context of talking about Indians generally he favored me with several myths and traditions. The myths particularly, in his versions, are clearly aimed at propagandizing for certain transparently implicit political and personal ends. These versions of familiar tales are chiefly of interest (a) because of the propagandizing, the points propagandized, and the transformations of the tales (as compared with versions collected earlier) to this end, and (b) because of the replacement of Big Crow (Raven) (2) by God as the principal or sole creator and transformer. This second aspect is certainly related to the first, and it is in keeping with the theology of the informant, who believes all forms of Western religion are equivalent ("I go to any church. It's all the same.") and that these are all equivalent to ancient Tahltan religion ("We believe in one God before we even heard of the White Man ... It's all the same.")

> God made the world at Tahltan. He made the beaver, the game, ... the rocks, the house with the pipe in it across the river (3). That's where God made the world: right up in Tahltan.
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> When He was finished, He lived in the hole at Eleven Mile (4). In the morning He would come over to the rocks and make water. There was a woman living with Him. She would make water on the other side of the hole. There are two different black streaks running down the rock where they made water. (cf. Teit 1919:212).
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> When He was finished, He went away. He made the game for food (cf. Teit 1919:230-1.) He told the people to eat moose, caribou, goats, sheep, black bear, grizzly bear. He said, "That's your food." We don't know White Man's grub. We live on meat. The old people tell us that; that's why I'm telling you.
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> There was no tent at that time. There was thick timber. We build a house, we make campfire; but when travelling we sleep under a tree. This is a long time ago I tell you about, a long time.
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> When He finish, He go away. He never talk about no grub, no potatoes, no nothing (5); just meat, game -- That's what the old people tell us. They die now. -- and fish; we used to live on

fish.

One time the government wanted us to stop fishing. This was not good. We live on meat and fish (6). You people got cattle; God made us the wild game. "That's your game," He tell us.

When God was making the world, this fellow had all the fire; he wouldn't give it to anybody. He wouldn't give fire to God. So God called the Big Crow, and He said, "Let's get that fire." He put a whole mess of shavings around on His head, and they went to the man who had the fire, saying, "Let's have a dance. Make a big fire." So God and Big Crow danced around the fire, getting closer. Then the shavings on God's head caught fire, and He flew high up into the air, shaking His head, so that fire was spread all around. (cf. Teit 1919:218-9).

God stole water too. In those days there was no water. This fellow who had it wouldn't give it to anybody. One day God came up on him while he was asleep and piled (feces) all around his(buttocks). Then, when the fellow wakes up, God tells him he's dirty, and the fellow goes out to clean up. God drinks a lot of water until He's real big, and then flies out over the country, sprinkling a drop here, and a drop there, making the lakes and streams. (cf. Teit 1919:201-3, 219-20; Emmons 1911:118).

There was a big flood. The people knew it was coming. The otter (7) had got up and told them the end of the world was coming. The people got up on top of a mountain. (cf. Teit 1919:199, 232-4; 1917:442-3).

There was a White Man married to an Indian woman, who told her husband about these things, the creation of the world at Tahltan and the other things. He didn't believe. Then one day he found a book in the trail that said all of these things. He went home and told his wife, "By golly, I guess that's right."

God Himself created the world at Tahltan, and He specifically created the game, certain forest products, and fish for the Tahltan. This same God is

also the God of the White Man, and the White Man is, or should be, subject to His ordinances. Thus there is divine sanction for Indian claims implicit in some of these narrations. To the best of my knowledge there is no plan to immediately further restrict the Indians' rights in the utilization of natural resources. Yet to the Indians of my acquaintance, government is a distant, incomprehensible, whimsical, arbitrary entity realized in the person of the Indian Agent. The fear was expressed to me that restriction of Indian rights to wood and to hunt in any season was imminent. The wants of at least the older Indians seem clear. "We don't want all that gold, that copper. You can have it. Just give us a little wood and our game." There seemed a definite feeling that the game belonged (in the sense of free use) to the Indians under some supernatural authority.

The same individual who supplied the myths above also gave some information of the historical-tradition type. One bit of this falls into the same propaganda class as the latter-day mythology:

> The first White Man in had a fiddle. They did not want other people in because other people always fight. They gonna kill him. This man had a fiddle. He tuned it up, and he played that fiddle. They always had a boss. The boss say, "Let the White Man go," because he liked the fiddling. The Tahltan did not kill one White Man, except maybe when drunk. And the White Man gets drunk and fight too. We don't bother the White Man. When he got hard times, we help him.

Two themes stand out in the remaining historical material: that of the early isolation of the Tahltan -- for a long time they existed in the area in ignorance of related peoples relatively nearby -- and that of the former prowess of the Tahltan, which is associated with the current hostility between the Indians of Telegraph Creek and the "Nass Indians" of Prince Rupert.

In the first place we may speculate that the Tahltan are in a subordinate position both in their native home and in Rupert. In the second place these stories seem to reflect some of the anxiety and hostility centering on Rupert. Prince Rupert is the great metropolis toward which those with ambition tend. It is the abstract "outside" in its most important and concrete form. Yet there is some anxiety and reluctance

about going to Rupert. The most obvious implicit explanation for this is the stories I frequently heard from Telegraph Creek Indians about violence suffered by Telegraph Creek Indians at the hands of Nass Indians in Rupert. One white official told me with a touch of apparent impatience that such stories were nonsense, excuses cooked up by the Indians for not going to work in Rupert. Such stories are numerous and plausible, but I am unacquainted with conditions in Prince Rupert.

This second theme was summarized in an aside during one of the historical narrations: "We had plenty of fight. They hate us in Rupert, those Nass." (v. Dawson 1888:194B-195B).

> There was a fight way this side of Stewart. Up to Five Mile damn people come up on Stikine. They surround the place. This boy went out for a drink of water. He saw the people all around him reflected in the water. He pretends he doesn't notice, goes back and gives the alarm. All the people run to Nine Mile except one old man and his grandson, who wants to see what a big fight is like. The enemy attacks. Each of the defenders takes one of the doors, which are at opposite ends of the house. They fight hard, getting very bloody, but not seriously hurt. They call back and forth from time to time, and at one point the youth observes that now he has seen what a big fight is like; and they decide to cut their way through the enemy and go to Nine Mile. This they do.
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> Another time an attacking party was turned back by high water in the canyon.

In response to a specific question about fights with the Kaska:

> A long time ago a Kaska killed a Tahltan's Bear Dog (8). This started a fight between the Kaska and Tahltan. They killed a lot of Kaska. Then for a long time they and the Kaska didn't see each other. Then they quit, and they do not start a war. They count the dead and the people say, "No more we kill our dogs." They quit (9).
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> The last fight, which was with the Taku, was at Salmon Creek, where it flows into the

Sheslay. It was settled. (cf. Teit 1909:314-8).

For a while the people didn't know that there were other people living down the river and up the Tuya. The first time they met the Wrangell Indians was when a bunch of Wrangell Indians came way up the river for berries, farther than they had ever come before. The Wrangell Indians didn't know there were any people up here. One girl goes way off from the others, looking for berries. The people steal her. (cf. Emmons 1911:18-9). Only one man, the father of the girl keeps looking for her. The next summer he came back, and he found Tahltan; he looked down on it. The people were dancing. This man had a sealskin blanket. The people smelled it; they hadn't smelled anything like that before; they said, "What makes that terrible stink?" The girl said, "That is a blanket of my people." They found the man, and they gave him lots of stuff. He goes back to Wrangell; he got big pack, and he come in yelling, "I found your daughter." We never fight the Wrangell people (9).

There were people up the Tuya too. (cf. Emmons loc. cit.). We that close, and we don't know about each other. We talk the same language; God made us the same; and we don't know about each other. They found out when some chips came floating down the river. One man said, "Those are axe-chips; there must be people." Another man said, "No, a beaver made those chips." The first man said, "Those are axe-chips. Let's go see." They went and found the other people.

At the mouth of the Taku there were people. The river was blocked by a glacier; the people on either side didn't know of each other. Finally one man went across and returned, saying, "There are people there. They speak our language."

NOTES

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(2) Teit (1919:198n.) states that the Tahltan tcEs-'ki-a means raven, and thus that the Tahltan transformer, tcEs-ki-a-tco, is Big Raven; but that Tahltans generally translate the term into English "Big Crow." Emmons makes a similar statement (1911:117). Palgrave (1902:74-5) gives the meaning of tcEskia as crow, big crow thus being a literal translation of the term applied to raven.

(3) Possibly a reference to the striking feature illustrated in Dawson 1888:71B, Fig. 4, one of the most impressive features in an impressive landscape, all of which is almost certainly covered in Tahltan tradition, e.g. Teit 1919: 211-2.

(4) Locations like "Eleven Mile," etc., are named with reference to the distance by road from the nearest major terminus, in every instance in this paper, Telegraph Creek. Tahltan is approximately twelve miles from Telegraph Creek.

(5) The Telegraph Creek Indians are presently heavily dependent on government rations. Many families maintain small garden plots with seed, including seed potatoes, supplied by the government. Some pressure is apparently put on the Indians to maintain these plots productively. The narrator of this origin myth had told me an hour or so previously that the Indian Agent had refused to give him seed and had reassigned his plot on the grounds that he was not caring adequately for the plot.

(6) The same man also told me with some apparent bitterness that some years ago, when the Tahltan were still highly dependent on a large accumulation of fish, which their annual cycle forced

them to acquire in a few weeks of intensive fishing, a missionary tried to get them to stop fishing on Sunday. Because of the nature of the fishing operation, this would mean loss of more than a day's fishing; because of the tendency of the fish to move in schools, which often pass a fishing site in one day, this could mean a considerable loss.

(7) In Teit's version the prophet was a wise man (1919:232) or possibly Beaver (232n.). My informant says that the owl also tells people things. An owl told him about coming sickness; that spring there was a bad flu epidemic. (The odds on this are pretty good, since, I am told, in recent years at least, there has been a serious flu epidemic every spring.)

(8) See "Tahltan Bear Dog," The Beaver, Outfit 287, Summer 1956, pp. 38-41. The Tahltan are said to have been unusually fond of their Bear Dogs, treating them more like pets than was typical of the behavior of northern Indians toward dogs.

(9) The Tahltan rarely, if at all, fought with the Stikine Tlingit and the Kaska. Commercial intercourse and relative lack of violence was typical of these relationships, as it was of most groups in the general area along east-west lines of communication; lines of hostility being generally north-south. The theoretical implications are touched upon in C. McClellan, 1950, "Culture Change and Native Trade in Southern Yukon Territory," Ms. PhD thesis, U. of Calif. (Berkeley), and in B. MacLachlan, 1955, "The Social System of the Western Kaska: Sociological Development in the Greater Northwest," Ms. MA paper, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.

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