

SEMESTRALE DI LINGUE, LETTERATURE E CULTURE MODERNE

Lettera

ESTRATTO DAL N. 10/11

ANNO VI-VII - N. 2/1 - LUGLIO 1994 - GIUGNO 1995

nuova arnica editrice

The Dog Husband And 'Dirty' Women: The Cultural Context Of A Traditional Tahltan Narrative

Introduction

In the following paper I wish to consider two interrelated problems, namely, boundaries expressed in oral tradition, and the other, which deals more specifically with contextual factors affecting interpretation. Both come into play in my treatment of a narrative from the Athapaskan-speaking Tahltan of northern British Columbia, Canada.

The idea of boundary surfaces in two ways, one in a geographical sense involving the border between two neighbouring peoples—the coast Tlingit and the interior Tahltan, and the other, in a social sense tied to a change in the status of young girls around the time of their first menstruation. Indeed, the mythic structure of the tale depends on the metonymic and metaphorical connections between these two 'borders'—the geographic and the social—between the Tahltan and the Tlingit, and between the 'neutral' pre-pubescent girl and the 'dangerous' (polluting) post-pubescent young woman. Contextual factors involving the overall cultural situation also figure in our discussion of this narrative but of particular interest are the more recent interpretations and conversational retellings by the Tahltan themselves.

The narrative is among seventy-nine collected by James Teit during his field research in 1912-15 (Teit 1919, 1921, 1956). The story is called, «A *tse'dextsi*, or, the girl who married the dog-man». Since I do not have information on the performance situation at the time this narrative was recorded, my analysis is confined to the text alone. I also collected a version of this story during my field research (1977-79), as did Karen Clark (1977) as part of her work on the Tahltan

Native Studies project, but these were part of a conversational retelling rather than performances and assume, in the words of Dell Hymes (1975:69), the narrators' «responsibility for knowledge of tradition» rather than «responsibility for performance». I intend to bring all three versions into my analysis together with various facts collected by myself and by previous ethnographers George Emmons (1911) and James Teit (1906, 1909, 1913, 1956).

The Tahltan are a hunting, gathering and fishing people who traditionally moved throughout the drainage basins of the Stikine, Nahlin and Iskut rivers in northwestern British Columbia. They live in a mountainous plateau located between the coastal zone and the Rocky Mountains in the interior. In the past (but somewhat less today), their movements followed the seasons—a spring and fall hunt (late March to mid-May and late August to October, respectively), winter trapping (late October to mid-March), and a spring/summer salmon fishery (June to mid-August). Salmon fishing occurred at a number of key locations along the Nahlin, Sheslay and Tahltan rivers as well as for a short distance below the confluence of the Tahltan and Stikine rivers. Salmon was dried and stored for winter use in large pits near these sites. The Tahltan, therefore, like all hunting and gathering peoples, experienced internal social pressure that resulted from the opposed pulls of centrifugal dispersal (hunting in small dispersed groups most of the year) and centripetal aggregation (small groups come together for salmon fishing).

Sociologically, the Tahltan are divided into two exogamous phratries and six localized descent groups, descent being traced through the mother's side.¹ On the other hand, domestic groups are publicly recognized, and these are headed by males; therefore children 'belong' to their mother's descent group—in the sense of permanent social identity—but are born into their father's domestic group. This dual aspect of social identity is to a certain extent mirrored in the practice of initial matrilocality after marriage—the young man and his wife live and work for a time in his father-in-law's camp. Following this, he and his wife link up with other couples to form their own domestic group arrangements—arrangements

that change from year to year depending on the choice of hunting/trapping partners. Hence, every Tahltan has two identities, the permanent maternal phratric identity and the flexible domestic group identity that is conferred by the father and his economic activities.

In the same way that dual social identity is part of peoples' experience, the Tahltan not only fought with their Tlingit neighbours but traded as well. Taguun and Gundachaaga² were southern locations of contact and trade with coastal peoples who made their way up the Inklin and Stikine rivers. These two aspects, social identity and geography, are an important framework upon which much of the narrative is constructed.

It is Gundachaaga that Robert Campbell visits in the summer of 1838 while trying to assess local fur resources and establish a trading post for the Hudson's Bay Company. He describes the site in this way:

These Indians camped here for weeks at a time, living on salmon that could be caught in thousands in the Stikine by gaffing or spearing, to aid them in which the Indians had a sort of dam built across the river (Campbell 1871:69).

He goes on to explain that when he entered the camp, he was greeted by Shakes, a coast Indian:

He came to the Stikine every year, with boats & goods, to the splendid rendezvous where I met him. Here he traded with the Indians of the Interior for the Russians, who supplied him with goods at Fort Highfield at the mouth of the River (Campbell 1871:70).³

Contemporary Tahltan confirmed the existence of these trade arrangements and explained that Chief Shakes and the Tlingit from the mouth of the Stikine River made annual trips not only to trade but also to catch and dry their supply of salmon before returning to the coast for winter. Benny Frank, a Tahltan elder, added that the site of this inland fishery was at the confluence of Shakes Creek and the Stikine River. As Emmons explains (1911:20),

In their hunting and fishing trips they ascended the Stikine until they reached Glenora, and finding an abundance of salmon and a favourable climate for the curing of their winter supply they pre-empted the streams thereabouts. The name of the hereditary chief, Sheks [*sic*], was given to this camp, to which they returned annually.

This is significant since this site is just above the place mentioned at the end of the narrative. In fact, the location is marked by a rock formation in the Stikine River called by Euro-Canadians «The Three Sister Rocks». According to the Tahltan, however, they are four in number, not three, and are brothers, not sisters.⁴ The narrative tells us that «Three Sisters» was created as the result of an offence by an adolescent girl who was cloaked with robe and hood (the custom observed at a girl's first menstruation) to prevent her polluting gaze from harming people and animals. However, she broke the taboo and glanced at her brothers as they attempted to ford the Stikine River; they were instantly changed to stone.

In fact, the dangerous substance or power that mature women were said to possess is one of the central metaphorical axes of the story. Its importance in Tahltan life cannot be underestimated or dismissed as 'just another' initiation ritual. Spiritual power—its management, taming and channelling—was central to the culture of Athapaskan-speaking peoples. Power meant hunting success, but it also meant something much more fundamental because it defined the social roles of men and women and constructing group identity in relation to the social and spiritual universe (cf. McDonnell 1984). It is the differential power of men and women in Tahltan culture that gives rise to an important image in the narrative, the seclusion of women and control of power.

In traditional Tahltan culture, a girl's first menstruation was marked by seclusion, taboos, and instruction. As Teit states (1956:115), «...the attainment of puberty was considered the most critical and important period in a girl's life.» Girls were endowed with supernatural powers at first menses and became unclean and polluting—that is, they became imbued with powers that were directly harmful to men, animals (especially

those considered game by the Tahltan) and salmon. To ritually 'tame' the girl she was placed in a special hut about 500 yards from the main camp, and at intervals of three months or so (the period of isolation and instruction lasted about a year) the hut was moved closer and closer to the camp (Teit 1956:116). During her seclusion she was approached only by women who would give her useful instruction in practical female skills she would need as an adult. She also performed a few simple rituals that would delay old age, ensure health and easy childbirth, and make her into a strong yet beautiful woman.⁵

Like neighbouring peoples of the Northwest Coast, the secluded girl could not drink water directly but used a drinking tube made from the wing bone of a swan or goose,⁶ as well as a scratcher for her hair and skin. She wore mitts when gathering firewood (Teit 1956:121). She ate no fresh meat but only dried or smoked food.⁷ Her face was blackened with charcoal (like smoked meat?), her hair pulled back from her face, and she only washed herself with her hands moistened by a little water she spat into them (Teit 1956:120-123)—she would not enter the river to bathe for fear of offending the spirits of the salmon, who would no longer offer themselves to the Tahltan if this and other taboos were not observed. Her gaze was dangerous: «It was especially bad for a girl to see her brothers or uncles» (Teit 1956:126), hence the cloak and hood and averted gaze. The situation was changing even as this description was written in 1915, and at the time of Teit's research the young girl was merely confined to a corner of the dwelling house (Teit 1956:129). In short, all these rules served to isolate the girl, or, more properly, to isolate the social group from the girl's power. It seems likely that female blood is the marker of this power because of the Athapaskan emphasis on hunting (cf. Perry 1977).

Not only is the 'Three Sisters' a site that marks ritual impurity; early maps compiled by Teit suggest this stretch of the Stikine River was an area of overlap—a boundary zone between these two neighbouring peoples, Tlingit and Tahltan. As Emmons (1911:7) explains,

A strange overlapping of Tahltan and Stikine Tlingit territory occurred on the river from just below Glenora to Telegraph Creek,

a distance of some fifteen miles. Here the Tlingit claimed the exclusive fishing rights of all the salmon streams along the northern shore, and the ownership of the contiguous berry fields, leaving the main river, as well as all hunting rights, out of account.

Here then is at least part of the context to which the narrative makes specific mention.

The story is based on the association between the very important social boundary crossed by a woman at first menstruation and a geographic boundary that marks the limits of Tahitan social and political influence. However, just as the inevitable transition from girlhood to dangerous womanhood is marked by attempts to channel and control female power, the geographic boundary between the two antagonistic allies (they are trading partners, after all) is marked by an incomplete bridge—four separate rocks (not joined together like a real bridge) that simultaneously mark the division and yet symbolically link the two areas. But all this is rather premature since this is at the end of the tale and we need to know something of the events leading up to this final act. Now the story.

A *Tse'Dextsi*⁸ Story, or, The Girl Who Married the Dog-Man

A wealthy man had a daughter who lived in a recess of the main part of the house. The entrance to her chamber was from the main room, and the girl could neither go out nor in without being seen. Her father's old dog was in the habit of lying down at the entrance to her room, and was always in the way. Going in or coming out, she had to step over him or kick him out of the way. One night the old dog turned himself into a good-looking young man. Then he asked her if she would marry him. She consented; and forthwith they eloped, and made their camp on a distant mountain. The man proved to be good hunter, and always brought home plenty of game. The girl noticed, however, that each time he went hunting, there was the sound of a dog barking in the direction whither he had gone. She asked her husband about this; and he said, «Your father's dog comes here.» She asked, «Where is he now? I will feed him;» and he answered, «I called him, but he would not follow me. He must have gone off somewhere.» She also noticed that her husband put all the bones from their meals on the opposite side of the fire. He never threw them into the fire. At night she often heard crunching of bones, and thought that perhaps her father's dog had come. In the morning, however, there was

never any sign of the dog having been there. She also noticed that her husband, on his return from hunting, invariably lay down for a short time and went to sleep quickly, as dogs do. She thought much over these things, and at last made up her mind to watch one night. She saw her husband get up, change into a dog, chew the bones alongside the fire, then change back into a man and go to bed again. She made up her mind to kill him. She prepared a block of wood and had a club ready. On the following day, when he came home from hunting, she said to him, «Well, you are tired. Lie down and have a nap. Put your head on this block while I cook for you. When all is ready, I will wake you up.» While he slept, she hit him on the head. He changed into her father's old dog, and died. Now she returned to her parents, told them how she had eloped and that now she was pregnant. They said, «If your children are human, it will be well; but if they are dogs, it will be bad.» One month afterwards she gave birth to four male and one female pups. The people were angry, and at once deserted her, leaving her without food. She would also have been without fire had not her maternal grandmother taken pity on her, hidden some fire in a pit, and secretly told her of it. The people had left in canoes.

The woman dug clams every day, and fed her children abundantly. Sometimes, when she returned home, as she approached the camp, she heard sounds of laughing and talking, as though children were playing in the lodge. She also noticed sticks lying about, as if children had been playing with them. She watched, and found that the boys had stripped off their dog-skins and had assumed the form of children. The girl, however, was ashamed to strip naked, and pulled her skin down, exposing the upper part of the body only. The boys had piled up their dog-skins while they were playing. The girl would run out from time to time to see if their mother was coming. The woman then went down to the beach to dig clams. She set up a stick, and put her hat and robe on it, to deceive the girl and make her think she was still on the beach. The mother then went back to the camp, and, creeping stealthily up behind the girl seized her and pulled off her skin. She then seized the other skins and threw all into a hollow log that she had put on the fire before leaving.

The boys grew up to be good hunters, and always supplied the family with plenty of meat. Now the family left the coast and moved into the interior, where there was plenty of game. They hunted on the north side of the Stikine River in the Tahltan country. As they depleted the game in each place where they hunted, they often moved camp and hunted in new places. When they had finished hunting in the Level Mountain country north of Telegraph Creek, they made up their minds to move to the south side of the Stikine River. They forded the river at «The Three Sisters,» a little above Glenora. The girl, who was adolescent, and therefore not supposed to look purposely at anything, wore a robe with a hood which came over her head and face. She sat down at the river's edge to wait for her mother, who was resting herself on the edge of the bank above and had divested herself of her pack. The four boys had entered the

water. Their mother was watching them, and seeing the foremost ones struggling in the current, and, as she thought, in danger of being drowned, she called out in her excitement. The girl then looked at her brothers, who at once became transformed into stone in the positions they occupied in the water.⁹ Then she and her mother and her pack also changed into stone; and all of them may now be seen as rocks at this place. These rocks are called «The Three Sister Rocks» by the whites, because of the three large rocks in the river close together. The Indians call the upper rock Aske'tleka'; the middle one, KaskEtI; the next one to the lowest, Tsexhuxha'; and the lowest one, Tlkaia'uk. These rocks are the four brothers. The rocks known as the girl and mother are on the shore, and a rock which stands out at the mouth of the little creek near by is known as their pack. Because the Dog men hunted throughout the Tahltan country on the north side of the Stikine, and killed off so much game, marmots are scarce there now, while they are plentiful throughout the country on the south side of the river, where they did not hunt (Teit 1921: 248-250).

Analysis

There are at least five themes that unfold in this tale: first is the physical and political geography of the region since the places mentioned really do exist; second, the economy (hunting and gathering); third, social organization; fourth, the relationship between humans and 'otherness' ('Dog'); and fifth, the appearance and behavioural attributes that accompany this 'otherness'. Each theme unfolds according to its own logic and reaches a 'conclusion' in which the initial problem—the terms of reference that are placed in opposition to each other—is not resolved; however, the contradictions in Tahltan culture are laid bare and accepted as axiomatic.

According to Lévi-Strauss these themes should contain a series of oppositions which, as the myth unfolds, move from a statement of opposition towards a statement about their resolution. What he finds is that two opposites with no intermediary relating to a particular contradiction come to be replaced by two 'equivalent' terms that admit a third one as a mediator. From his analysis of numerous myths, Lévi-Strauss concludes that myth provides a logical model capable of overcoming contradiction—of course, «... an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real (1967:226)». In this case, as we shall see, mediations are sometimes attempted but never achieved.¹⁰ The contradictions here are made to seem very real indeed.

The first reference to the geography of the region comes after the elopement of the daughter to 'dog husband', and the two make their way to a distant mountain. There is no further mention of the region until the daughter, portrayed as a mother with her five children, decides to leave the coast for the interior (this action had been announced by the dog-husband moving the bones from their meal—his secret food—to the opposite side of the fire). This move takes them hunting along the north side of the Stikine River in Tahltan country. But having depleted the game—though never staying too long in one place while hunting, the normal pattern of movement—they decide to cross the river and continue hunting on the south side of the river. This attempted crossing, as noted above, occurs at Three Sisters, a point where the whole family is then transformed to stone.

The discursive domain that deals with economic activity in the myth contrasts male/mountain hunting with female/coastal clam digging. Thus after the elopement of the daughter, the myth tells us that dog-husband is a good hunter who provides plenty of meat.¹¹ This contrasts with the next situation where the daughter, as mother of five pups and abandoned by her people, must dig clams—a local, 'wet', 'low' (coastal, riverine) food, unlike nomadic, 'dry', 'high' (mountainous) game—to feed her family, although she too feeds her family well, we are told. And it is not until she has «grown boys» that there is plenty of meat once again. Yet the success of these boys depletes the available game, and this brings us to Three Sisters since they are obliged to go into new territory across the river to find more game. And another note of reversal is struck—at the time of the incident the boys are hunting for their mother when in 'real' life they should be hunting for their (future) father-in-law.

The social organization of human groups in the story begins with a wealthy man and his unmarried daughter (and thus she is properly secluded, since the higher the rank the longer the period of seclusion). But the daughter runs off and when she returns is pregnant. This is a serious situation, since a high-ranking girl would be more likely to marry far away to create alliances with her people's potential enemies. She kills her husband (by standing above him and hitting him on the

head, a replay of what caused his initial transformation when she stepped over him) and thus destroys the male-centred domestic group. When she gives birth to five pups, people are angry and immediately abandon her, leaving her without food. However, her maternal grandmother gives her fire, emphasizing that 'proper' descent through the female line is not all bad, and in fact we are told that the woman and her offspring fed «abundantly» on clams. Not until she transforms these pups into children do we have a human group once again re-established in the form of a mother and her five children. Yet the groups in the tale are all a mixture of unbalanced composition and 'correct' organization: father and daughter (male-centred domestic group—'correct', but no husband or mother—'incorrect'); daughter and husband (male-centred domestic group—'correct', but no children or maternal ancestors—'incorrect'); isolated daughter and pups (female descent group—'correct', but no male to head the domestic group—'incorrect'); daughter/mother with human children who hunt (female domestic group—'incorrect', but female descent group—'correct'); mother with daughter with brothers eliminated by being transformed to stone (female descent group—'correct', but no males to perpetuate the domestic or descent group through reciprocal exogamy with others—'incorrect'). In sum, the myth moves through various configurations that are neither totally incorrect—in the sense of completely contradicting Tahltan ideals—nor totally correct. The tale seems to be constantly reinforcing the idea of dualism, of the need to have both systems of identification in place, and like 'real life' it never comes to the conclusion that there is one completely satisfactory arrangement.

Finally, we come to human relationships and what I call 'otherness', the closely-related theme of the appearance and behavioural attributes of this 'otherness' manifested by the dog. It is the wealthy man's old dog, the myth tells us, who is transformed into a young man and elopes with the daughter. But we suspect that is the daughter herself who may have had a hand in the transformation—she is isolated in the house, which suggests she is menstruating and in seclusion—and yet she steps over the dog, directly exposing him to her 'poisonous' genitals. Normally all Tahltan women avoid

stepping over men or their weapons, even when not menstruating—such an act would bring 'bad luck' and ruin the man's hunting abilities. Later, the discoveries made by the daughter about this young man's true identity soon leads to his execution. Not until the birth of the five pups does his identity re-surface (in a patrilineal arrangement—the children are pups and thus inherit from the father), but this is only temporary since the daughter as mother strips the skins from all five pups and transforms them into human children. In both cases, it is the behavioural attributes of both the 'dog husband' and 'pups' which leads the young woman to her discoveries—despite the transformations in each case, they cannot conceal their true identities. For 'dog husband', it is the barking she hears from the direction of his travel when he is away hunting; the sound of bones being chewed at night; and, finally, the speed with which he falls asleep after a hunting trip. In the case of the 'pups', it is the human laughter and talking she hears, the evidence of children's play, and finally, the fact the 'pups' can remove their outer skins to reveal an inner human appearance, which ultimately leads to their transformation into children. In sum, 'otherness' is not linked to the other but constantly emerges from within the group.

The myth, therefore, has it both ways, with dualism always acknowledged throughout even though it constantly seems to cause problems. There is transformation, but 'true' identity—or at least opposite of the superficial characteristics that seemingly define the person—emerges nonetheless. And there is the constant theme of ambiguous female power: even when the pups temporarily transform themselves by removing their dog skins, the young female only pulls it off half-way (because she is «ashamed»—an allusion to her polluting state), leaving her lower half (hindquarters) covered—another clear allusion to female power. Yet this action also evokes its opposite image, since 'real' girls emphasize the cloaking of their upper halves—it is their gaze which is dangerous, not contact with their genitals (at least, not yet, since young female initiates are not sexually active). Culturally, therefore, there is a ritual reversal ('bottom' genitals to 'top' eyes and face) which becomes re-reversed and made 'right' in the myth (uncovered top and covered bottom), and then 'made wrong'

at the end when her gaze kills her brothers: in 'real' life females pollute because of their genitals yet cover their heads when in their most polluting, menstruating, state; in this mythological representation, the genitals are covered by dog skin and 'safe' and the girl's gaze is uncontrolled and dangerous. It is also noteworthy that the mother uncovers and transforms her daughter after pretending to dig clams—a female activity, to be sure, but clams are 'wet' and 'low' like women.¹² And she throws the skins into a hollow log (a penis that is also a vagina?), not into the fire to definitely destroy them (and here there may be an allusion to the dog-husband's bones that he failed to throw into the fire but ate later).

Discussion

If there is a dominant theme to this story it is the unfolding relationship between the woman and her people, on the one hand, and her relationship with what I call 'otherness' as embodied by 'dog', on the other. In terms of her people, the narrative focuses first on her father, as a wealthy man, and then more generally on her 'parents' (male-centred domestic group). In terms of 'otherness', we begin with a husband/wife relationship that then becomes a mother/children relationship (female-centred descent group). I think it is interesting and significant that when this 'otherness' is manifested within the girl's father's house—as at the very outset of the narrative, or within her parent's village, as when she gives birth to five pups—both the appearance and behaviour associated with this 'otherness' truly is that of a dog. As we move away from her people, however, or at least in their absence, the intensity of this 'otherness' weakens, or so the narrative would have us believe. Thus we have 'dog' as husband who appears as a human male (he hunts effectively, just like a normal male Tahltan) when he takes the woman off to some distant mountain, just as we have children who appear as 'pups', which results in abandonment by her people, but they revert to human form when they are away from the rest of the village (and even if they are not 'the other' when far away, each instance shows a separate aspect of Tahltan identity, male domestic groups and female descent networks). Ultimately, of

course, it is the dog-like behaviour of husband that betrays his true identity, just as it is the child-like behaviour of the 'pups' which betrays their human identity. But in both instances this strangeness must be discovered surreptitiously—at first it is not at all clear to the protagonists. Only when the woman has transformed the 'pups' into children—in effect incorporating them into her own group—is she able to achieve by social means what could not be achieved through physical (movement) means. But having achieved autonomy on this level, as they move into the interior to hunt they deplete game as they travel. It is this fact, the narrative tells us, which leads to the crossing of the Stikine River at 'Three Sisters Rocks' and causes the final immobility of the group. The narrative in fact reverses some aspects of Tahltan social and political reality (in general terms, by associating 'otherness' with the Tahltan and not with Tlingit foreigners), only to re-establish, at the end of the story, the ambiguous situation that characterizes Tahltan social life: dual exogamous phratries, male and female principles simultaneously used in their social organization, trade and conflict with their neighbours, and so on. It seems as if the Tahltan are calling into question their very existence and re-affirming it though acknowledging that they may not be as autonomous as they would like to be. I think it may be significant that one of the final human images that the tale presents is that of the mother removing her pack—her symbolic luggage, perhaps, carrying one-half of her identity. Yet this might be the final warning the tale offers against abandoning dualism, since the mother, daughter and pack are all transformed into stones, like the sons/brothers, but without the agency of the girl's gaze.

Variations

When I spoke with Tahltan elder Benny Frank about this narrative, he stated that the mother and her children first went to the Yukon (to the North, the opposite direction where traditional conflict is situated), but as he said «nobody wanted them there». Then they came to Tagoon village, but they didn't want them there either; and nor where they welcome at

Tahltan—his explanation for this circumstance simply being that the children were from a dog. Finally, he says:

Down four mile, you know four mile hit Stikine River, sand bar right there. She try to get across—no boulder—nothing in there just fine sand bottom you know. I swim the horses a lot of time you know—many, many times the train go up to ranch. So half way see them kids—them young—they holding each other. The whole thing float down, they float down and she holler at them. They float down to the shore. They three sisters right there—turn to stone.

For Irene Inkster, though, who was interviewed by Karen Clark as part of the Tahltan Native Studies Project, it is not so much the travels of the woman and her children that are at issue but the mistreatment of the dog at the very outset of the story. Thus she states:

This girl mistreat that dog. Anything she gave him, she took it away from him, or she tell him «Yuh!» And she wasn't suppose to step over that dog, but she kept doing it to be mean (1977:34).

And her ending is different as well, with the woman killing her dog-husband after the birth of their children and the children choosing to «leave home» as a result.

These variations are not necessarily inconsistent with what I am suggesting but rather represent a difference in emphasis tied to the particular perspective of the person speaking. Thus Irene emphasizes the particular role and perhaps power of women while for Benny, a male hunter, it is the geographical locations that are touched by this story. On the most elementary level, these different viewpoints are completely consistent with traditional roles—male hunting and female nurturing. But the problem with which this narrative is trying to deal remains pretty much the same throughout; that is, if we accept dog as an alien 'otherness', then the marriage to dog but residence elsewhere (with the birth of pups) are really attempts at mediation. Their failure, of course, leads to the incorporation of the pups as children into mother's group—yet another possible solution. And it is in this form, a mother and

her grown children, that according to Benny Frank visits are made to various locations beyond the coast—notably Tagoon and Guundachaaga. But this solution, the myth and contemporary variants tell us, is unacceptable.

Conclusion

A number of years ago Edmund Leach, writing about boundaries of social space and time, observed (1976:35) that, «...a boundary separates two zones of social space-time which are normal, time-bound, clear-cut, central, secular, but the spatial and temporal markers which actually serve as boundaries are themselves abnormal, timeless, ambiguous, at the edge, sacred». He went on to say that the crossing of frontiers and thresholds is always hedged about with ritual (1976:35).

In this case, the threshold, of course, is the ritual observance around the time of a girl's first menstruation. The narrative both begins and ends with this social boundary made explicit. And the frontier crossed takes us into the country of the Tahltan and back to a marker on the Stikine River—a marker where Tahltan could still be observed leaving gifts of tobacco not too long ago. There is a sacredness, then, tied to this place, positioned as it is at the edge in its timeless form of stone. The two zones of social space separated by this marker are Coast Tlingit and the interior Tahltan, and it is perhaps because the Tahltan very much superficially resemble the Tlingit that they must call the otherness into their midst to confront it, tame it, and declare themselves the winners and therefore truly Tahltan.

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The Dog Husband and 'Dirty' Women: The Cultural Context of a Traditional Tahltan Narrative

The analysis of variant forms of narrative texts has a long and scholarly tradition among ethnographers of North American Native peoples, though this is often linked to the analysis of performance. Yet when tales survive in documented form for many generations—like this example from the Tahltan of northern British Columbia, Canada—it becomes important to have a historical and cultural 'base line' that serves as a context for

reinterpreting older versions in light of modern retellings. This essay explores the relationship between these versions and the contextual factors influencing their interpretation. This story seems to revolve around the idea of the impossibility of establishing clear boundaries, geographical and existential.

L'analyse de formes variées de textes narratifs a une longue tradition parmi les ethnologues qui étudient les autochtones septentrionaux de l'Amérique du Nord, quoique celle-ci soit souvent liée à l'analyse de la performance. Quand des contes survivent dans une forme documentée pour plusieurs générations—comme cet exemple des Tahltans de la Colombie Britannique septentrionale, Canada—il devient important à avoir une base historique et culturelle qui sert comme un contexte pour l'interprétation des versions précédentes dans l'optique des racontes contemporains. Cet essai explore le rapport entre ces versions et les facteurs contextuels influençant leur interprétation. Ce mythe semble pivoter sur l'idée de l'impossibilité d'établir des limites précises, soit géographiques ou existentielles.

L'analisi delle varianti dei testi narrativi ha una lunga tradizione presso gli etnologi dei popoli nativi del Nord America, ed è generalmente correlata all'analisi performativa. Quando i racconti sopravvivono, in modo documentato, attraverso numerose generazioni, come nel caso dei Tahltans della Colombia Britannica settentrionale del Canada, diventa necessario recuperare una base storica e culturale che serva come contesto per reinterpretare le versioni più antiche nella prospettiva dei racconti contemporanei. Questo lavoro vuole esplorare le relazioni fra i racconti e i fattori contestuali che ne influenzano le interpretazioni. L'idea che si vuole sviluppare nel mito è che quasi impossibile stabilire dei confini geografici ed esistenziali precisi.

NOTES

1. And on this superficial level the Tahltan and Tlingit resemble each other—both have phratries with similar names, a class structure, named political ranks, and so on. The Tlingit, however, are much more dependent on salmon and therefore less mobile. They are also more numerous and militarily more powerful (better organized) than the Tahltan.

2. Main village sites included Taguun, Sheslay and Gundachaaga or 'Old Tahltan'.

3. Russians at that time were still in Alaska.

4. They are named individually rather than lumped together collectively— Aske'tleka', KaskEtI, Tsexhuxha', and Tlkaia'uk (Teit 1921:250).
5. Neither too tall nor too short, and with delicate white hands that did not seem to have known work were considered signs of beauty—the Tahltan had rudimentary social classes and kept slaves.
6. Eagle bones were used by male shamans, and so girls were not permitted to use them (Teit 1956:119).
7. If hunger constrained her to eat fresh meat, she wore a mask over her face (Teit 1956:120).
8. Said to mean «rocks sitting down» with reference to the rocks at this place, which were the Dog-Man's wife and children (Teit 1921:248).
9. Compare stories of persons transformed into stone (or killed) by the glance of a pubescent girl: Shuswap (Teit JE 2:650,651); Thompson (Teit, MAFLS 6:45; Teit 1921:250).
10. There are several theoretical reasons for this which cannot be explored here, but it seems possible that the Tahltan want to reinforce, not 'resolve', the contradictions at the heart of their social structure. Thus the politically more important 'mediation'—a stronger hierarchy than commonly found among hunters and gatherers—is made acceptable by tales like 'Dog Husband' that stress rather than hide underlying problems (cf. Lanoue 1990). A more-defined hierarchy is in turn tied to the pattern of resource distribution that brings people together and separates for long periods of time.
11. Dogs were traditionally used for hunting among the Tahltan and only later for 'packing', carrying goods. Perhaps it is significant that the Tahltan consider their dogs to be «... of one breed or descent, although they varied considerably in size and colour» (Teit 1956:88). They were selectively bred, however, for their hunting qualities.
12. It is perhaps not wise to enter into an extended discussion of this point in this brief paper, but in Tahltan ideology men were associated with 'upper' spiritual powers—only men went on a puberty vision quest, for example— while women are in theory limited to earthly concerns. This, of course, is ideological obfuscation, since Tahltan isolate women at their most dangerous times precisely because women are power while men are not—they must seek it.

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