

**THE TRUE BELIEVER AMONG
THE KENAI PENINSULA DENA'INA**

Alan S. Boraas and Donita Peter

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ALAN S. BORAAS

Alan Boraas has taught and researched anthropological subjects at Kenai Peninsula College at Soldotna for twenty-one years. Two of his more important courses are *Cook Inlet Anthropology* (for seventeen consecutive semesters) and *Dena'ina Language and Mythology*. Boraas states that he is sustained "by the belief that everyone should have a place they care deeply about and spend their life trying to understand." For him, the Kenai Peninsula is his place and his ways of understanding it are "through Dena'ina culture, language, and mythology studies; archaeological research; oral history collection; natural history writing; and active outdoor experience in all seasons of the year."

DONITA PETER

Donita L. Peter resides in Soldotna, Alaska. She is a wife and mother of four children. Employed by the Kenaitze Indian Tribe, IRA, in the Cultural Heritage Department at Yaghanen, she writes and creates curricular materials in the Dena'ina language, among other responsibilities. Currently the dance leader for the tribes' Kenaitze Dena'ina Jabila'ina Dance group, she also teaches Dena'ina songs and choreographs dances for youth and adults. Formerly, she directed the Emergency Medical Services, Community Health Representative, and Drug/Alcohol Programs in Tyonek. She has team taught with Alan Boraas at Kenai Peninsula College and tutored in English and Russian at the college. Donita received her Associate of Arts degree, Cum Laude, there in 1993 and now is earning her Teaching Certificate and Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology and Mathematics. She is a member of the Native Village of Tyonek, Tyonek Native Association, and Cook Inlet Region, Inc.

THE TRUE BELIEVER AMONG THE KENAI PENINSULA DENA'INA¹

Alan S. Boraas and Donita Peter

ABSTRACT

Before European contact the Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina had a highly developed cosmology that involved a quest to become a *k'ech' eltanen* or 'true believer.' Achieving the spiritual state of 'true belief' (*k'ech' eltani*) resulted in perceiving nature as an ordered system in which individuals symbolically replicated each generation as a symmetrical copy of the previous one by performing certain daily rituals. Contact with Europeans and later Americans who came to the Kenai Peninsula caused the belief system to break down because the nonbelieving Euro-Americans did not practice the requisite rituals, yet ecosystems were not drastically changed until the early twentieth century. Consequently, the Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina were forced to restructure their world view in a process similar to the European Enlightenment that we call the Dena'ina Enlightenment.

¹ Before he died, Dena'ina elder and writer Peter Kalifornsky read and heard earlier drafts of this paper. We hope he would approve of this product and dedicate this paper to his memory. This is an expanded version of the paper presented at the symposium on April 10, 1993.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is twofold. The first is to describe an aspect of Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina² traditional cosmology that involved a belief quest which resulted in one becoming a 'true believer' or *k'ech' eltanen*. Information about the 'true believer' comes from Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina mythology and the traditional stories or *sukdu* transcribed by Peter Kalifornsky or recorded from other Dena'ina storytellers. The *sukdu* are renditions of ancient stories and thus give insight into beliefs from an earlier time.

Lévi-Strauss (1963:207-208), among others, has cautioned that mythology should not necessarily be interpreted as a blueprint for a culture's prescribed social behavior, citing mythologies that do not dictate proper behavior but whose significance lies

² The Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina referred to themselves as *Yaghenenht'ana* "The Good Land People." The people living on the lower Kenai River, from whom much of the traditional mythology included in this essay is derived, referred to themselves as *Kahtnuht'ana* or "River Mouth People," (Kari 1977:92). Today some of the Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina call themselves Kenaitze, a Russian term derived from the Alutiiq word for the people of the Kenai River, *Kenaiyut*, (Leer 1978:106).

at a more abstract level. It may well be that Dena'ina mythology has a deeper significance than discussed here, but it is also apparent, as Fall (1990:5) points out, that many aspects of the mythical stories were designed both to describe proper attitudes and behavior toward nature and to prescribe ideal cultural practices and thus have descriptive veracity.

In addition to the mythological basis for the practice of 'true belief,' we present ethnographic and archaeological evidence suggesting that *k'ech' eltani* practices and attitudes were a significant part of Dena'ina cosmology during the Kenai Peninsula's late-prehistoric and early historic periods.

The second purpose of this essay is to suggest that breakdown of the 'true belief' system after Euro-American contact resulted in an intellectual awakening much like the eighteenth century European Enlightenment. In the case of the Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina our premise is that the traditional Dena'ina world view did not change by small increments, increasingly becoming more like Euro-American culture. Rather the Dena'ina evaluated Euro-American beliefs using their traditional theology as an intellectual foundation and created innovative, often pluralistic, beliefs. We feel this process has been occurring for the two hundred years since European contact and continues today.

Furthermore, we suggest that examining new beliefs in terms of the old ways was an active, purposeful, mental process engaged in by all Dena'ina to one degree or another since Captain Cook first sailed into Cook Inlet. Dena'ina cosmological change was neither a passive reaction to missionary teachings, nor was it governed entirely by deterministic forces over which individual Dena'ina had no control. The

purposeful evaluation of cultural beliefs is part of what we call the Indigenous Enlightenment of North America.

K'ECH' ELTANI OR TRUE BELIEF IN TRADITIONAL DENA'INA LIFE

To be spiritual, for a traditional Dena'ina, involved a quest for a state of *k'ech' eltani* or "true belief" (literally: "belief in things one cannot see") that was achieved by becoming a *k'ech' eltanen* or 'true believer.' A 'true believer' explained and interpreted physical and metaphysical events as the consequence of human attitudes and actions toward a willful nature that was aware of those actions and the beliefs they represented.

A number of *sukdu* recount how Dena'ina should aspire to *k'ech' eltani*, (Kari and Boraas 1991:10-11; Kari 1984:10). An example is a story called "Beliefs in Things a Person Can See and in Things a Person Cannot See," (Kalifornsky 1991a:40-45). The preamble to the story defines the belief in question:

The Dena'ina, they say, had some beliefs about animals. After they killed and butchered an animal in the woods while hunting or trapping, they would put the bones in one place. In the winter they would cut a hole in the ice and put the animal bones in the water. At home in the village, too, they put all the animal bones into the water, either in a lake or in the Inlet [Cook Inlet], or they would burn them in the fire. They did this so the animals would be in good shape as they returned to the place where the animals are reincarnated. They say they had that

kind of belief about the animals.
[Kalifornsky 1991a:41]

The story goes on to relate how a young man listened to the *sukdu* told by the elders, but he was a doubter and did not believe the stories' message. In particular he did not believe in performing any special treatment of the animal bones after butchering, and so he simply cast them out where people would inadvertently walk on them, a prohibited practice because it conveyed a callous attitude that insulted the animals. While out hunting, the young man is provoked by mice and he wantonly kills them, a practice which again violated the tenets of Dena'ina belief. As a result of his improper actions, he is plagued by misfortune.

Later, he has a dream in which he travels to a mythical place where a beautiful woman, the mother of the animals, chastises him for his inappropriate actions and shows him the animals he mistreated. Because of him, they are horribly disfigured and are unable to be reincarnated as animals again. Then she shows him the place where the properly treated animals are reincarnated. They are healthy and willingly return to the human land to be used again. When the man wakes from his dream he is ashamed of his actions and confesses the error of his ways in front of the people of his village.

The Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina realm included the perception of two separate spaces: a human space that was empirical and observable and a mythical space described as, "the place where the animals are reincarnated." The transformation of animals from one realm to another was affected by beliefs that caused one to have the correct attitudes and therefore act

properly toward nature. Belief was the driving force in ecological recycling, and it was up to individuals to learn to abide by the stories' teachings and to behave in such a way as to keep the culture operating. The core of cosmological order was 'true belief' that preserved both cultural and ecological symmetry with each passing year for every succeeding generation.

"True believer's" attitudes and behavior are personified by the *Gashaq* and a pantheon of mythical characters sometimes described as "the men with *Gashaq*" who include the Dreamer (*Qatsitsexen*), the Sky Reader (*Yuq' Hdnil'anen*), the Doctor (*Hkut' K'el'anen*), the Prophet (*Behnaga Dnadlunen*), and the Shaman (*El'egen*).

These individuals are usually men, although the *k'ech' eltani* belief could also be achieved by women, as found in the story "The Woman Who Was Fasting," (Kalifornsky 1991a:168-169). Further, the Dena'ina had female as well as male Shamans (Osgood 1937:177), and it is likely the roles the *Gashaq* and the others could be filled by either women or men.

The *Gashaq* and the men with *Gashaq* are distinguished by their particular clairvoyant powers—powers that were sought by individual Dena'ina as part of the 'true belief' quest. To traditional Dena'ina much of what Western society classifies as paranormal was considered normal. This included telepathy, psychokinesis, teleportation, precognition, prescient dreams, and extrasensory perception. Defining clairvoyant powers in mythology gave them legitimacy, and events that could not be explained in any other way were attributed to one or more of those powers.³

³ Critics who would label traditional Dena'ina thought as superstitious should bear in mind that modern

The *Gashaq* is an important figure whose name has no translation and may be a Yup'ik loan word (Kari 1991b). In some *sukdu* the roles of the *Gashaq* and Shaman seem interchangeable and in other stories they appear as separate individuals performing separate roles. Kalifornsky (1991a:19) writes that the Shaman had beliefs that allowed them to make contact "with every living thing;" this he describes as *k'elen il ch'qghe'uyi* or "belief in things one can see." The Shaman detected and explained mysterious but tangible phenomena because they had a kind of scent called *beggesh*, which only a shaman could interpret and understand (Kalifornsky 1991a:55).

Kalifornsky (1991a:19) writes that the *Gashaq* and the others also had shamanic beliefs, but, in addition, had a spiritual awareness that allowed them to receive revelations and undertake transformations of consciousness. Like the Prophet and the Dreamer, the *Gashaq* was capable of predicting the future or "having his words come true."

A second powerful figure is the Dreamer who shaped the cultural organization as it emerged from "the time the animals could talk," and who foretold of events that were to happen in historic time "after

the Whites came." The Dreamer's name *Qatsitsexen* literally means "the one with prescient dreams" (Kalifornsky 1991a:15) and the Dreamer actively sought dreams through which to provide guidance to the people.

In traditional Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina thought, dreams were perceived quite differently than in Western culture. In psychoanalytic interpretations, dreams are generally considered expressions of an individual's subconscious, often reflecting an event from one's past. Because they are considered to be beyond conscious control and vague, dreams take on an illusionary or surrealistic dimension.

In the Dena'ina interpretation, dreams were not about the past or present, but about the future, and represented not an illusion, but the reality of something that surely would happen. Osgood (1976:169) described them as "certain premonitions of consequent realities." The Dreamer personified the concept that dreams foretold the future.

The Sky Reader's powers involved formulating calendars, predicting solstices, forecasting the weather, and predicting when the animals would decline so the people could prepare for famine (Kalifornsky 1991a:15). One of the few stories that Peter Kalifornsky chose not to put in print before he died was about the Sky Reader because, he said, "The practice of the Sky Reader doesn't work anymore" (Kalifornsky 1991b). The Sky Reader's role was much like that of an applied scientist in the modern, Western world.

The word for the Doctor, *Hkut' K'el'anen*, literally translates as "one who works on the insides" (Kari and Boraas 1991:9). The Doctor was an anatomist who

culture often labels an unexplained phenomena (such as gravity or electromagnetism) and thereafter considers it normal, often attributing it to the realm of science. In the same way the Dena'ina would account for the appearance of an unusual object, such as an out-of-place rock, by attributing it to the psychokinetic power of a Shaman and consider it normal. Moreover, certain phenomena that perhaps have a physiological basis, such as telepathy, are usually suppressed in childhood in modern culture whereas similar abilities were encouraged in Dena'ina culture and hence were more common and more "normal."

studied the human body and prescribed herbal medicines to treat illnesses that could not be detected and treated by the Shaman because they had no *beggesh* or tangible spirit essence (Kalifornsky 1991a:27).

Like the Dreamer, the Prophet predicted the future, but the Prophet's powers seem to have involved precognition not achieved through dreams. The word for Prophet, *Behnaga Dnadlunen*, means "the one whose words come true" and Kalifornsky writes, "The Prophet is really dangerous. Because of his power, he might unintentionally say something harmful. He always stayed away, isolated from the village" (Kalifornsky 1991a:15).

According to Kalifornsky (1990), these mythical characters, in turn, represent social roles to which individual Dena'ina would aspire through the *k'ech' eltani* belief quest. Success in the belief quest resulted in one becoming a *k'ech' eltanen*, and that individual would then fulfill the role of the Dreamer, Sky Reader, Doctor, Prophet, or Shaman in his or her village. Each village could have one or more individuals who performed these roles and held positions of respect not dependent on material wealth.

In "The Old Dena'ina Beliefs" Kalifornsky (1991a:13) writes that the quest to become *k'ech' eltanen* involved fasting, prayer, meditation, dreams, and clairvoyance. Seeking *k'ech' eltani* is described as "dangerous" because the quest for deeper wisdom and awareness involved psychic duress, sometimes extreme in nature. The Shaman were said to advise people who were seeking *k'ech' eltani*, "If you're a coward, or if your heart is small, don't seek those powers. It's too dangerous" (Kalifornsky 1991a:15). Elsewhere, Kalifornsky writes, "To try to become good is dangerous. Struggling against evil is

dangerous" (Kalifornsky 1991a:13).

The following story illustrates the thin line between sanity and insanity involved in the pursuit of *k'ech' eltani*:

Once there was a young man whose heart was weak. "Let me try for *k'ech' eltani*," he said. And he tried for them [spiritual powers]. And he started seeing all kinds of things. And they were bringing fish out with a dip net. A sculpin swam into his net and turned into something terrifying to him. At that, he had a heart attack. A person with medical knowledge worked on his heart in the steambath. But his nightmares became severe and he didn't wake up again. The shaman said: "It is not possible to turn back from *k'ech' eltani*. Turning back is even more dangerous." [Kalifornsky 1991a:15-17]

The mental state of Dena'ina who pursued 'true belief' was a disquieting world, sometimes of apprehension and sometimes of terror, as individuals climbed the psychic plateaus of awareness, insight, and understanding needed to reach the state of *k'ech' eltani*. Sometimes an individual was compelled to seek spiritual powers by unknown forces, as Osgood (1976:181-182) reports of a man who almost became a Shaman against his will.

Most practices associated with the belief quest are unrecorded. One which is known involved taking three sips of water, a ritual which when coupled with introspection and meditation facilitated a deeper level of consciousness (Kalifornsky 1991a:19). The supplicant bent to one knee, held the water in a cup very still, and then gently took three sips. In precontact times, one

knelt by a lake or by a stream where the water was quiet, and carefully dipped out three sips by hand.

The other details of the quest such as fasting methods, techniques to induce self-hypnotic states, or techniques to induce dreams are not recorded.

DENA'INA FIRE AND WATER TRANSFORMATIONS IN MYTHOLOGY, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND PREHISTORY

Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina mythology describes transformation rituals involving fire or water which, though unpretentious, expressed one's proper attitude toward animals and plants and thus were a key concept in pursuit of 'true belief.' As depicted above in the story, "Belief in Things One Cannot See," burning discarded animal bones in a fire or disposing of them in the water was ritual action that caused movement from observable space to mythical space where, in a kind of metaphysical genetics, animals were reshaped to return to human space. Treating nature improperly or failing to dispose of the bones properly caused the animals to stay in the place where the animals are reincarnated and destroyed the ecology.

Transformational acts involving only water are also part of the 'true belief' quest, and seem to be a mechanism to gain understanding or to set an imbalance into balance. For example, water plays a primary role as a mechanism for symbolic transformations in "The Raven and the Camprobber" (Kalifornsky 1991a:108-109). Raven has died and his friend Camprobber brings him back to life by sprinkling water on him. In "The Woman Who Was Fasting" (Kalifornsky 1991a:168-

169) a woman who has fasted takes three sips of water and is then able to break a large porcupine bone, symbolic of spiritual strength, that her three physically strong brothers cannot break.

In "About the Shamans and the Men with *Gashaq*" (Kalifornsky 1991a:18-19) the *Gashaq*, Prophet, Dreamer, Sky Reader, Doctor, and Shaman pursue a consciousness transformation by taking three sips of water. In "The Man and the Loon" (Kalifornsky 1991a:144-149) a loon dives three times into a lake with a blind man thereby restoring his sight, a metaphor for awareness. This allows him to see the way to return to his camp and correct a bad situation. And finally in "The Steam-bath Spirit" (Kalifornsky 1991a:48-51) an inept hunter pours water on hot rocks in a steambath and states with proper respect for the steambath spirit, "Big Old Man, I give you a drink of water." Because of his correct attitude, the man receives good luck in hunting and becomes a useful and productive member of his village.

Ethnographic evidence indicates that beliefs leading to the *k'ech' eltani* state had a powerful organizing influence on Dena'ina society because they governed everyday activity by prescribing non-ceremonial rituals regarding treatment of food obtained by hunting and gathering. For example, several sources indicate great care was taken with animal bones. At Kalifornsky Village, before it was abandoned in 1926, bones were piled in one place during the winter and dogs were kept from disturbing the pile. In the spring the bones were taken to Cook Inlet where they were dispersed in the tide (Kalifornsky 1989).

According to information gathered by Priscilla Russell (1989) the inland Dena'ina buried land animal bones, and water animal

bones were returned to water, but bear bones were never put in water because, as Russell was told, "bears don't belong in water." Among the inland Dena'ina, as with other Dena'ina, it was important not to scatter animal bones nor place them where animals or people might bother them because these acts showed lack of respect and would cause the bones to "leave the country."

Russell and West (1992:23) report that in Lime Village water bird bones are returned to the water while land bird bones are left on land in a special place. Frederica de Laguna tells of meeting Alex Mishakoff at Kenai in 1930. Mishakoff's maternal uncle was a Shaman and he had aspirations of becoming a Shaman as well. Mishakoff told de Laguna that the reason caribou had recently died out on the Kenai Peninsula was because some people were not treating the bones properly and the animals had withdrawn themselves (de Laguna, in panel discussion, this volume).

Plants harvested for food or used for other purposes also had prescribed ways of being treated, especially in the mountains. Here the Mountain People (*Dghili Denayi*) could detect improper behavior and cause ill-fortune for the perpetrator (Kari, P.R. 1987:19-21).

According to Osgood (1976:165-168), before the introduction of Orthodox Christianity the Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina practiced a form of fire transformation: the cremation of their dead. A log funeral pyre was built two or three miles from the village and the deceased's body was burned along with all personal effects. In addition, Osgood (1976:160) states that pre-Orthodoxy Dena'ina believed in human reincarnation.

Archaeological evidence from late pre-

historic Dena'ina housepit hearths excavated in the Kenai area suggests the practice of performing fire transformations by burning bones was common before European contact (Boraas and Kalifornsky 1991). This implies the people were abiding by the dictates of the *sukdu* to transport the animals back to the place where they are reincarnated.

Furthermore, archaeological finds, or rather the lack of them, strongly suggest the dictates of the *sukdu* were important. Excavations of late prehistoric Dena'ina dwelling sites on the Kenai Peninsula are remarkable for the lack of artifact and bone refuse found in and around houses or *nichi* (Boraas and Kalifornsky 1991). These excavations typically result in just a handful of artifact finds and only a few bits of unidentifiable bone. However, large amounts of firecracked rock used for steambaths and stone boiling are evident.

Also, little faunal refuse is found in these late prehistoric sites. Since the prehistoric diet consisted mostly of mammals, birds, and fish supplemented by native plants, the remains of subsistence activities should occur at or near their dwelling sites. While fish bones, and to a lesser extent bird bones, are susceptible to decay, the bones of caribou, moose, bear, seal, and beluga are very resistant to decay and last for thousands of years in typical Kenai Peninsula soil conditions. Yet faunal refuse is all but absent from many sites. June Gagnon (1987), Dena'ina elder from Kenai, reports that during her youth she was taught not to leave anything scattered about because it was offensive to the animals.

Even though much technology consisted of perishable items constructed of wood or hide (Osgood 1976:47-107), pre-con-

tact Dena'ina did possess an artifact inventory not susceptible to organic decay. Durable items were manufactured by knapping, grinding, or pecking stone; working bone or horn; and cold hammering copper. These items included arrowheads, lance points, fish spears, fish hooks, harpoons, harpoon arrows, knives, ulus, clubs, adzes, wedges, mauls, lamps (Osgood 1976:83-108), ladles (Osgood 1976:46), and beads (Osgood 1976:51-52).

The scarcity of artifacts and faunal refuse has resulted in an unusual situation where the more recent part of the Kenai Peninsula's prehistoric record is less well understood than older periods, such as those represented by the Kachemak tradition and its treasure of artifact information (Workman and Workman 1988). Were it not for the remains of hundreds of house depressions (*nichilq'a*), the Dena'ina would be virtually an invisible people as far as the prehistoric record is concerned.

THE FUNCTION OF *K'ECH' ELTANI*

While the goal of a *k'ech' eltanen* was to achieve a deeper level of spiritual wisdom, the effect of the belief quest was to maintain ecological and social order. To the Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina an ordered universe was one which did not change and their theology valued maintaining each generation, both human and animal, as a copy of the one before. Ideally, neither the culture nor the cosmos changed; the regular repeating patterns of precontact Dena'ina quillwork may be regarded as a metaphor for their world view.

As individual humans and animal organisms lived and died, steps were taken to cause reincarnation into their former

being. If one had a *k'ech' eltanen's* attitude, one would act appropriately including performing the non-ceremonial rituals that affected the return of animals and plants. If one had an improper attitude, and did not perform the rituals, the animals would withdraw themselves, perhaps causing hunger or starvation. In this way, the interaction of belief-driven actions and willful nature provided a foundation for culturally perceived order in the natural world.

The Dena'ina, however, were aware of natural, ecological variations in animal and plant populations. Fluctuations in populations reflected a breakdown in the natural order. A downturn could be accounted for in two ways. First, declines could be attributed to the work of an evil Shaman. Evil Shaman were from a distant village and could use their powers to adversely affect a community by causing food animals to disappear. The practices of an evil Shaman were negated by one's own Shaman who, if powerful, could undue the dark magic and correct the decline in animal populations.

Secondly, variations could be the consequence of an improper attitude toward nature on the part of one or more individuals in the community. If someone had a "bad heart" it was reflected in their not following the *sukdu's* prescriptions for proper behavior toward animals. Since incorrect behavior was thought to harm subsistence efforts, pressure was exerted to cause the doubter to conform to proper practice.

Thus, natural population fluctuations resulting from predator/prey dynamics, of which the hunting and gathering Dena'ina were themselves a part, were explained by mythology, and, through proper belief, order was maintained.

It is tempting to suggest that the Dena'ina viewed their beliefs and practices associated with the *k'ech' eltani* quest as a metaphor explaining empirical causative factors in a kind of mythologically-couched ecological science. However, there is no evidence to suggest that metaphor was a conscious thought process among traditional Dena'ina. To 'true believers' the events depicted in the *sukdu* during "the time the animals could talk" really happened. The *Gashaq*, the Dreamer, the Sky Reader and the others were real people. The Dreamer's visions developing a blueprint for Dena'ina culture really happened. The "place where the animals are reincarnated" was a real place. There were good Shaman, and there were evil Shaman. Attitudes and actions did make a difference in reincarnating animals.

In short, the quest for *k'ech' eltani*, 'true belief,' was a heartfelt pursuit, made real by the depth of one's conviction and reinforced by observed reality. It was, in turn, the spiritual core of the Dena'ina. From a traditional Dena'ina perspective, to relegate beliefs to metaphor or other abstract intellectualizing robbed them of their vitality.

THE DENA'INA ENLIGHTENMENT

History, to Kenai Peninsula Dena'ina, involved three time periods. The earliest was mythical time described as "the time when animals could talk" (Kari and Boraas 1991:71). During this interval the animals formed a human-like society. Many *ninya sukdu*, the animal stories, portray the character of various animal personalities—the clever and tricky raven, the serious gray jay (camprobber), the bold bald eagle, and so on.

At some point a transformation to the second stage, human time, took place. The Dena'ina people appeared, an event sometimes referred to as the coming of the Campfire People. During human time⁴ Dena'ina society and animal societies were separate and parallel. Most communication between them occurred through actions. The *sukdu* describe the transformation from mythical time to human time as actuated by the Dreamer who perceived how Dena'ina culture would operate.

The third period came with European colonization and was recognized as historic time, or the time "after the Whites came." Many factors brought changes to Dena'ina culture during the nineteenth century; one of the most important was the effect of European attitudes toward nature on traditional Dena'ina theology. Because of the cultural encounter with European and later American society, maintaining order in exactly the same way as before was no longer possible.

In general, Euro-Americans viewed nature as an inanimate commodity whose end product was consumption or manufacture, at which point the items in question—furs, food, minerals—were no longer considered in a state of nature. The idea of nature as a terminal commodity differed sharply from the doctrine of nature reincarnate held by traditional Dena'ina theology.

In particular Euro-American hunting practices drastically affected the Dena'ina, not so much by eliminating game animals, as by affecting the traditional method of maintaining cosmological order. In the 1800s, Europeans and Americans did not practice the hunting, butchering, and dis-

⁴ Anthropologists refer to this as the "ethnographic present."

posals prescribed by the *sukdu*—in all probability many Russians and Americans ridiculed the old beliefs. Because they did not observe the same attitudes toward nature as did the Dena'ina, the newcomers could not be *k'ech' eltanen*.

Yet the animals returned and the ecological cycles were not drastically upset until the early twentieth century when moose replaced caribou, a change possibly resulting from habitat alteration by human-caused fires (Lutz 1960). Moreover, during the latter nineteenth century large fish canneries were established in Cook Inlet and tons of salmon were caught and processed. The cannery managers and fishermen who operated the traps and nets had no knowledge of Dena'ina transformation rituals let alone any inclination to practice them. The early canneries had some effect on stocks, but the fish continued to return in relative abundance.

For the Dena'ina, reproducing each generation as a copy of the previous one was no longer possible. Consequently that part of their cosmology linking humans and nature, the social soul of any hunting and gathering culture, no longer coincided with observed reality. Encountering a new concept of nature forced a reexamination of traditional values, resulting in enlightenment.

The concept of enlightenment is preferable to terminology such as assimilation and accommodation because these carry a connotation of one directional change, as in "assimilation into" and "accommodation to." In addition, the latter terms do not capture the intellectual vigor in the midst of which the Dena'ina, and other indigenous Alaskans, found themselves during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

During this time, massive amounts of information and ideas were brought to the

Cook Inlet area. The Dena'ina examined them through discussion (but not writing) and through their alternative analytical styles of analysis such as telepathy and dream interpretation. What emerged were beliefs not exactly like the precontact culture, and not exactly like Western culture, but a set of ideas and practices unique to the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The Dena'ina Enlightenment was in many ways like the European Enlightenment. It was as disparate as it was robust; no one point-of-view or doctrine emerged to satisfy everyone and the Native community today remains divided on some issues. Further, like the European transformation, the Dena'ina Enlightenment took an immense spiritual toll on those who found their stable, ordered world upset and seemingly thrown into chaos.

Last, the period was intellectually active and involved purposeful, willful decisions. There is no reason to believe that Dena'ina theological changes were governed by rules of social determinism or that the changes were simple responses to missionary teachings. The people examined issues and created choices that made a difference in the course of their lives and in the course of history.

At least two historic era Dena'ina stories depict the end of the old order and the emergence of a new order, thereby illustrating enlightenment thinking. "The Kustatan Bear" (Story) was originally told by Maxim Chickalusion and written by Peter Kalifornsky in 1982 (Kalifornsky 1982). For his last book in 1991, Kalifornsky edited the story and wrote an accompanying piece titled, "The Other Half of the Kustatan Bear" (Kalifornsky 1991a:290-307). Kari (1991a:287-289) points out that

at least some of the events reportedly occurred in the nineteenth century and the story has a basis in fact. Traditional Dena'ina believe it happened.

The mythopoeic "The Kustatan Bear" and "The Other Half of the Kustatan Bear," describe a thirty-year Shaman battle in Cook Inlet representing dissension among the people. In "The Kustatan Bear" two Shaman from Kijik caused their collective spirit to invade a bear who ravaged New Kustatan. For three days the people tried to kill the bear but to no avail. Finally, on the third day, a strong-willed man killed the Shaman-crazed bear with three bullets which he obtained from the trading post, baptized with holy water, blessed with incense (holy smoke), and inscribed with an image of the Orthodox cross. He fired all three bullets into the bear and, with the third shot, the bear died. A woman who was the village Shaman then sent the two Shaman spirits away by burning effigies in a fire.

In "The Other Half of the Kustatan Bear" a moose was invaded by an evil Shaman's spirit and plagued a powerful man at Kalifornsky Village. As with the bear, normal bullets did not stop the possessed moose. The powerful man finally killed it with three bullets he baptized with holy water and blessed with incense. When the third shot killed the moose, the Shaman who had caused his spirit to invade the moose also died.

In the Kustatan Bear stories new themes emerge such as the combined strength of Western technology and Christianity (baptized bullets) as a force to overcome evil. However, these stories and others like them should not be interpreted to mean that the Dena'ina were rejecting their heritage and adopting Western theology and

materialism in their entirety. There is much that is traditional including the community acting together in the face of adversity, the role of strong leaders, the belief that there are consequences to individual actions, psychokinesis of spirit forces, and dreams and clairvoyance as analytic tools to understand observable events.

These themes are presented within the context of an allegorical story, and in this way the Dena'ina began to reformulate their world to adapt to colonial expansion. Peter Kalifornsky (1991b) believed the Kustatan Bear stories depicted the end of shamanism on the Kenai Peninsula, but he was not prepared to say that it meant the end of the *k'ech' eltani* belief quest.

Stories like "The Kustatan Bear" and "The Other Half of the Kustatan Bear" were generally not told to the non-Native population. One reason the Dena'ina were reluctant to share this kind of information was because they feared the stories would be misinterpreted and they would be ridiculed because many of the events are not considered to be plausible reality from a Western cultural perspective. Another reason these stories were not told to the non-Native population was because they formed a body of privileged knowledge around which Dena'ina could maintain a sense of pride and identity in the face of economic and social duress.

In effect, Dena'ina villages like Kenai had a dual social structure during the nineteenth and early twentieth century and perhaps later. At one level, Dena'ina lived, worked and interacted with the relatively small non-Native population. At another level they shared stories and information among only themselves. Non-Natives rarely were privy to this world. Shared, exclu-

sive information was the nucleus around which Dena'ina formed their identity and shaped their future. And it was in the context of a hidden and parallel society that the Dena'ina worked through their Indigenous Enlightenment.

References Cited

- Boraas, Alan S. and Peter Kalifornsky
1991 Symbolic Fire and Water Transformations Among the Cook Inlet, Alaska Dena'ina. Paper presented at the 18th Annual Meeting of the Alaska Anthropological Association, Anchorage.
- Fall, James A.
1990 Upper Cook Inlet Dena'ina Oral Traditions: An Introduction to the Narrative Art of an Alaskan Athabaskan People. A Report to the Alaska Humanities Forum, Anchorage, Alaska. Ms in author's files.
- Gagnon, June
1987 Personal communication, letter in author's files.
- Kalifornsky, Peter
1982 Qezdeghnen Ggagga, The Kustatan Bear Story, translated into Dena'ina from English version told by Maxim Chickalusion. Alice Taff and James Kari, eds. Fairbanks: Alaska Native Language Center.
1989, 1990 Personal communications, notes in author's files.
1991a A Dena'ina Legacy, K'tl'egh'i Sukdu: The Collected Writings of Peter Kalifornsky. James M. Kari and Alan S. Boraas, eds. Fairbanks: Alaska Native Language Center.
1991b Personal communication, notes in author's files.
- Kari, James
1977 Dena'ina Noun Dictionary. Fairbanks: Alaska Native Language Center.
1984 Introduction to K'tl'egh'i Sukdu: Remaining Stories by Peter Kalifornsky. Fairbanks: Alaska Native Language Center.
1991a Introduction to the Kustatan Bear. In A Dena'ina Legacy, K'tl'egh'i Sukdu: The Collected Writings of Peter Kalifornsky. James M. Kari and Alan S. Boraas, eds. Pp. 287-289. Fairbanks: Alaska Native Language Center.
1991b Personal communication.
- Kari, James M. and Alan S. Boraas
1991 Editors' comments in chapter introductions. In A Dena'ina Legacy, K'tl'egh'i Sukdu: The Collected Writings of Peter Kalifornsky. James M. Kari and Alan S. Boraas, eds. Fairbanks: Alaska Native Language Center.
- Kari, Priscilla Russell
1987 Tanaina Plantlore, Dena'ina K'et'una: An Ethnobotany of the Dena'ina Indians of Southcentral Alaska. 2nd ed., rev. Anchorage: National Park Service, Alaska Region.
- Leer, Jeff
1978 A Conversational Dictionary of Kodiak Alutiiq. Fairbanks: Alaska Native Language Center.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude
1963 Structural Anthropology. New York: Basic Books.
- Lutz, H.J.
1960 Early Occurrence of Moose on the Kenai Peninsula and in Other Sections of Alaska. Miscellaneous Publication No. 1. Alaska Forest Research Center. Juneau: U.S. Forest Service.
- Osgood, Cornelius
1976 [1937] The Ethnography of the Tanaina. Yale University Publications in Anthropology 16. New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press.
- Russell, Priscilla
1989 Personal communication. Letter in author's files, December 11.
- Russell, Priscilla N. and George C. West
1992 Bird Traditions of the Upper Stony River Dena'ina: Upper Stony River Ethnoornithology. Report to the Alaska Humanities Forum. Ms.
- Workman, Karen W. and William B. Workman
1988 The Last 1,300 Years of Prehistory in Kachemak Bay: Where Later is Less. In The Late Prehistoric Development of Alaska's Native People. Robert D. Shaw, Roger K. Harritt and Don E. Dumond, eds. Pp 339-354. Aurora, Alaska Anthropological Association Monograph Series #4.