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Untitled

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To understand the customs and history of any people we must study the environment in which they live and which has helped to shape their destinies. We must attempt to capture, if we can, something of what the country means to its inhabitants, because its role in determining their lives has been mediated by what they understand it to be and by what they have made of it. The environment is not for the Tlingit simply the land and sea with natural resources to be exploited. It is much more a community of living beings, where the lines which would draw between man and beast or between the animate and inanimate are blurred or do not exist. The Tlingit shares his world with his nonhuman relatives and fellow creatures just as he shares it with other people.

The Indians believe that the mountains were people in the olden times and St. Elias and Fairweather were married. They had lots of slaves, work people and children. During a family quarrel they separated, Mt. St. Elias traveled west and took a lot of slaves and men with him and from these the range of mountains were formed between Mr. St. Elias and Fairweather. The mountains to the east of Fairweather are their children. A mountain at the head of Akwe River, Mount Raeburn, is the slave of Mt. St. Elias and Mt. Fairweather, whom the owners used to send back and forth with messages.

Glacier spirits were the "inhabitants of inside the glacier." There were both male and female glaciers, and it was the former that were dangerous:

"The Natives were afraid of the 'people' who lived in a male glacier. You cannot cook near a male glacier for if you do, these 'people' will come out of the glacier and come over and bother you and the only way to stop them coming is to burn all that you have in the fire. But from a female glacier the spirits do not come, so one can cook near a female glacier without being troubled."

It is obvious from the description given by this informant that the "female glacier" is one that has a large medial moraine and is retreating; the "male glacier" is presumably a cleaner white body of ice

that is either actively advancing or apparently ready to do so, thus Nunatak Glacier, which had been rapidly retreating since 1910 is a “female glacier,” and the broad dark streak down the center of the ice was said to be a woman’s hair, which was formerly parted in the middle and fell down each side of the head.

Not only were glacier spirits repelled by the stench of old clothes burning, but the great glacier that formerly covered Yakutat Bay was supposed to have retreated because a dead dog was thrown into a crevasse and the glacier in Ice Bay melted back because the entrails of a Tsimshian Indian were left there. In these cases, the dead dog and the decaying human flesh acted to waste away the glaciers.

A similar explanation was given to account for the retreat of Nunatak and Hidden Glaciers:

“They believed that a glacier was clean and that if a man fell into a crack of a glacier and rotted, the glacier would retreat.” At the time of the “Nunatak Gold Rush,” when prospectors were using the great glacier to travel between Nunatak Fiord and the Alsek River, a white man fell down a crevasse in Nunatak Glacier, and that is why it has retreated 6 miles between 1910 and 1940.

According to a Yakutat story told by the Reverend Hendrickson to Lieutenant Emmons, the glaciers near Yakutat were formerly selfish and nasty children whom an angry mother turned into ice because they had been unkind to her little daughter.

When descending the Alsek River, people used to put on their best clothing in order to pass under the glaciers that formerly arched over the river. After they were safe beyond the ice they would sing, and it would break behind them in response to their cries of joy.

“One should not speak in a bad way of animals, glaciers, or of such things,” Harrington was told.

Glaciers and mountains are also sensitive to the looks of human beings.

To the Natives, the sea and other bodies of water were considered as alive, or possessed by spirits, for it was possible to appeal to them. One Native group respected as seamen, use the ocean as a symbol, “they call the ocean and the breakers their friend. They always talk to it.”

All living things had souls or indwelling spirits. Those of animals, birds and fish were the most important to the Tlingit.

- Dr. Frederica de Laguna