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Dog and human from Raven's perspective: An interpretation of Raven myths of Alaskan Athabascans

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ABSTRACT

Raven appears as an important character in many Alaskan Athabascan myths. He is depicted as a powerful shaman who transforms the world through magic. In this paper, I analyze an often-neglected motif of Alaskan Athabascan Raven stories: Raven as Dog-eaters. I use mythological texts and ethnographic data collected in prior studies and from my fieldwork in the community of Nikolai, Alaska. In some Alaskan Athabascan myths, Raven has a strong appetite for dog meat and assists his neighbors who slaughter their dogs for him. This motif seems to describe a sacrificial practice whereby Raven, as a transformer, receives gifts of food in exchange for providing spiritual services and protection. However, in real life, Northern Athabascans do not practice typical animal sacrifice involving domestic animals. In addition, they do not regard dogs as being suitable for human consumption. This raises several questions. What is the significance of dogs in Alaskan Athabascan societies? Why is Raven thought to be fond of dog meat in traditional Alaskan Athabascan stories? How can we explain this motif of "Dog as Raven's Delicacy" through an ethnography of human–dog–raven relations in Alaskan Athabascan societies? This paper addresses these questions from the perspectives of comparative mythology, ethology and the storytelling strategy.

1. Introduction

Northern Athabascan mythology describes spectacles of wit, jealousy, humor, and cooperation among different characters, most of which bear the names of animals. In addition to well-known raven myths, there are serialized stories of journeys in which a hero subjugates huge predatory animals to establish a cosmological order in which humans hunt animals, and not vice versa (Hosley 1966; Ridington 1978). Storytelling was both an entertainment for long winter nights and an opportunity for young people to learn important life lessons (Cruikshank 1990, 1998). In the Upper Kuskokwim region, a part of Northern Athabascan homeland in Interior Alaska, it is said that those who fall asleep during *hwzosh* (storytelling) time will live a short life (Kondo 2017). The animal people described in myths follow the traditional lifeways of the Northern Athabascans who narrate the myths. They canoe, fish with traps, hunt with bow and arrow, and ask shamans for favors in exchange for wonderful gifts. People are expected to spend "life lived like a story" (Cruikshank 1990), partly because myths teach proper behavior through good and bad examples of animal persons. For example, in an Upper Kuskowkim story, a thief turns into a sucker fish and the items he or she has stolen transform into the bones of that fish. This story is told to teach children not to steal (Kondo 2016).

To a certain extent, myths are also based on the ethological observation of creatures of the boreal forest. This seems to be another reason why traditional stories are considered important for the growth of young people in these societies, where survival depends on a keen understanding of animal behavior (Nelson 1983). According to the Koyukon, another Northern Atabascan group[1] who had strong marriage tie with some of Upper Kuskokwim communities (Gudgel-Holmes 1991: 18), *Dotson' sa* (the Great Raven) is a powerful transformer of the world in

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[1] "Northern Athabascan" is used as an umbrella term for this group of northern hunter-fisher, who speaks one of Athabascan languages in Na-Dene language family and are well adapted to harsh environment of boreal forests in Alaska and western Canada. The term "Alaskan Athabascan" stands for the Northern Athabascan groups in Alaska including the Koyukon and the Upper Kuskokwim, who are the main target of this paper. As described in the text below, the Koyukon had a strong marriage ties with some of the Upper Kuskokwim communities. At one point, the cultural mixing was so great that the offspring of the intermarriage were fluent both in Upper Kuskokwim and in Koyukon and have a dual identity (Gudgel-Holmes 1991: 18). Edward Hosley (1966: 64), an anthropologist who conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the 1960s among the people in the Upper Kuskokwim region, initially proposed to call the northern subgroup of his research region the Telida Koyukon. Even though the term "Telida Koyukon" is later abandoned and not necessarily used by contemporary researchers nor people themselves, it nevertheless captures the strong connection between the Koyukon-speaking people and the Upper Kuskokwim people in the northern parts of their homeland.

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their mythology. He[2] is described as a cunning, self-centered character who monopolizes the prey his relatives catch while pretending to know nothing about it (Nelson 1983: 80, 82). Raven's image overlaps with that of the raven as a bird. A Koyukon elder says, "You know, raven doesn't hunt anything for himself. He gets his food the lazy way, just looking for whatever he can find that's already dead. As in the old story, he always fools everyone, so he gets by easily" (Nelson 1983: 81).

Raven's fame as a trickster is reflected in its name. In the Upper Kuskokwim Athabascan language, which is akin to the Koyukon language, *dotron'* (raven) translates literally as "shitter", according to Raymond L. Collins (personal communication, April 14th, 2012), who documented the language during the 1960s. Upper Kuskokwim mythology includes an episode in which Raven uses magic to transform spruce boughs and his own droppings into fine clothes. At the end of this story, the fine clothes disappear and the girl who wears them ends up covered in Raven's droppings. (See Example 2 in the Results section.) According to the Koyukon people, no sooner do ravens find a wolf kill than they land there and foul it with excrement (Nelson 1983: 81). Upper Kuskokwim people also note that ravens have the habit of scattering their droppings around carcasses to keep other animals away. This explains why the raven is called "shitter" (Raymond L. Collins, personal communication, April 14th, 2012). As discussed later in this paper, there are quite a few examples of close connections between the details of mythological motifs and ecological observations.

However, some motifs in Raven myths are hard to interpret. In the Koyukon and Upper Kuskokwim mythologies, when people have a favor to ask of Raven, the surest way to have that favor granted is for them to fatten a dog, slaughter it and serve it as *nemaje* (a dish of mashed fish or animal fat and berries, also known as "Indian ice cream") or boiled meat to Raven (Examples 1, 2 and 4). I call this motif "Dog as Raven's Delicacy." Still, Northern Athabascans in real life do not consider dog meat to be food, except in times of severe famine (Hosley 1966: 93; Hara 1980: 191; McCormack 2018: 127).

Dogs are an important domestic animal among Northern Athabascan groups and are differentiated from wild animals, which are destined for human consumption. They have been used for transportation (as pack dogs and later sled dogs), for protecting camps and as hunting aides. They alert the approach of bears and other dangerous animals in camp, especially at night, which is important for safety at hunting and fishing camps. However, the barks of dogs can interfere with hunting, because the game may notice the presence of predators. While there is some uncertainty as to dogs' contribution to hunting (Savishinsky 1994: 211), people in the Mackenzie River region have used barking dogs to drive prey toward snares as well as to constrain the movement of game (McCormack 2018: 129). In the Upper Kuskokwim region, there are customs for raising a good moose-hunting dog. One is to leave puppies in the rib cage of a dead moose for half an hour after the hunt. Another is to make a small collar for puppies and weave young buds of balsam poplar and willow, which are moose's favorite foods, into it (Kondo 2019). Upper Kuskokwim people used to awaken hibernating bears by setting dogs into the den (Hosley 1966: 92). They also have dogs that can track the blood of a wounded bear and guide hunters to its hiding place (Kondo 2019; See also Savishinsky, 1994: 211–215 for a comparative discussion on the usefulness of hunting dogs).

In pre-contact times, Northern Athabascan people used dog packs rather than dog traction, which required more dogs, before coming to participate fully in the fur trade (McClellan 1975; Hara 1980: 182; Savishinsky 1994: 191; Loovers 2015; McCormack 2018: 107). Scholars argue that few dogs were kept by Northern Athabascan groups in pre-contact times (McCormack 2018: 107; Loovers 2018: 195). From the pre-contact to the early contact periods, humans had to respect the autonomy of dogs and refrain from certain ways of interacting with them. As discussed in detail later, there used to be a taboo among Koyukon and Upper Kuskokwim Athabascans against speaking to dogs (Nelson 1983: 191; Kondo 2019: 234–235). The Kaska also forbade young women from socializing with dogs too much because they feared that the dogs might become attached to such women and might try to marry them (Yamaguchi 2014). This caution against dog interspecies sexuality is clearly a reflection of the mythological motif of the Dog Husband widely reported in the Mackenzie River Basin (McCormack 2018: 126–127).

However, the fur trade dramatically changed how people interacted with dogs (McCormack 2018: 137). In Interior Alaska, the introduction of fishwheels during the Gold Rush in the early 20th century enabled people to keep multiple dogs for traction (Hosley 1966: 95–96; Hosley 1977). Dog mushing became a crucial means of transportation during winter, including for postal services in rural Alaska (Schneider 2012). Dog keepers would treat young pups like their own children, although the pups would eventually have to endure a period of training. Based on fieldwork among the Hare during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Savishinsky (1994: 199) sees parallels in the socialization processes of children and pups.

According to Nelson (1983: 191), Koyukon people would usually shoot dogs that had outlived their usefulness, but they took the trouble to burn the carcasses to prevent other animals from eating them. Betty Petruska (personal communication, August 23rd, 2013), an Upper Kuskokwim elder, recalled that her older relative left a dog carcass in the forest with a piece of dried fish in its mouth. She did not know why the fish was left in its mouth, but it was likely a practice for placating the spirit of the dead dog. Other Northern Athabascan groups may have just discarded dead dogs in the bush (cf. Hara 1980: 191). In any case, eating dog meat or using dog skin is very unusual in most Northern Athabascan societies (Savishinsky 1994: 216). Now, we know that Raven's fondness for dog meat and dog-skin robes (Jetté 1908: 365) is a very peculiar setting for a transformer figure in the mythology where animal persons usually live a pre-contact lifestyle of Northern Athabascans. As Levi-Strauss (1967) argues, myths do not necessarily "represent" the reality of the society in which the stories are narrated.

Why is it that the Koyukon and Upper Kuskokwim people, neither of whom eat dog meat or use dog skins, talk about killing dogs and serving dog meat to Raven in myths? This paper attempts to answer the question from three perspectives: (1) the diffusion of mythological motifs, (2) ethological observations, and (3) rhetorical strategies in storytelling practices. Albeit an influential criticism on the use of the term "myth" in non-Western contexts (Scott 1996), I choose to use it because this paper involves what had been discussed under the banner of mythology[3] (e.g.

[2] In contrast to Koryak myth, where Raven persons can be male or female and often appear as a couple (Jochelson 1908: 267), Raven is usually imagined by the narrators as a male figure in Northern Athabascan mythology. This is reflected in Raven's behavior shown in many of the stories. For example, in a Koyukon myth, Raven goes out bear hunting with his nephew Mink (Nelson 1983: 82), which is a common practice for men and yet prohibited by taboo for women. Also, in an Upper Kuskokwim myth (Example 2 in this paper) Raven disguised as a man from the Ahtna tribe marries a girl of the upriver village and lived with her until he gets back the arm stolen from the downriver village (Ruppert and Bernet 2001: 285–287). Traditionally, uxorilocal residence was preferred at least in the beginning of marriage. Raven cohabitating with a girl in her village is in accordance with a local norm in Interior Alaska.

[3] Some readers may be curious why this paper does not take structuralist approach (e.g. Levi-Strauss, 1967), a well-known analytical technique in mythology. I agree with Cruikshank (1990: 343) in that Indigenous narrators of the myth are much more concerned with what can be learned from "the *story* of the myth rather than in its underlying structural oppositions." Levi-Straussian approach may be useful in discovering a hidden process of transformation where the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy emerges through travels from/via myth makers in distant regions, but its focus is too broad to elucidate ethnographically the reason(s) why the motif which is disgusting to local people's perception is repeatedly told by Indigenous elders, who are in charge of giving guidance to younger generations (emphasis original).

diffusion). I agree with Collin Scott (1996) in that Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) of northern Indigenous peoples leads the knowledge holders to a deep understanding of the environment, which is as accurate as or even more accurate than modern ecological research (cf. Kondo 2020). Though I continue to use the term "myth" as an analytical concept, my argument is far from the ethnocentric attitude of "Science for the West, Myth for the Rest" (Scott 1996), which put non-Western understanding of the world as mere representation and thus lacks foundation in reality (cf. Ingold 2000).

The diffusion of mythological motifs between the Old World and the New World[4] has been widely discussed since the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (e.g., Jochelson 1908: 58; Chowning 1962). Continuity in the myth motifs, pointed out more than 100 years ago, is the reason why I begin the investigation by comparing the myths of Alaska and Russian Far East. Non-Japanese researchers do not usually have good access to ethnographic data on Russian Far East groups (e.g., the Sakhalin Ainu) published in Japanese. Using Japanese and English sources, I show that the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy also exists in the Russian Far East.

Nonetheless, there is room for interpretations other than diffusion because Upper Kuskokwim and Koyukon people talk about slaughtering dogs to feed ravens in mythology and do not necessarily eat dog meat themselves. The ethological perspective was chosen because many characteristics of animal persons in myth are based on observations of animal behaviors and bodily features. This argument is then supplemented by an analysis of storytelling strategies in Alaskan Athabascan groups because it is also true that "the specific myth cannot be simply interpreted as the result of the observation of natural phenomena" (Boas 1896: 5). In other words, myths cannot be mistaken for TEK, even though the latter informs the former in many cases. By interweaving these three approaches, I conclude by discussing how the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy has been adapted to local boreal hunter-fisher contexts.

2. Methods

In this paper, I combine the results of archival research and my ethnographic fieldwork in Nikolai, Alaska, which lasted for 14 months between July 2012 and August 2015. Nikolai is an Upper Kuskokwim community whose 96 residents (as of 2010) are of predominantly Athabascan decent. Upper Kuskokwim Athabascan ethnobiology has been an important topic of investigation during my fieldwork (See also Kondo and Hanson, 2013). Participant observation and ethnographic interviews were the main methods of data collection. To understand people's relationship with fish, birds and other animals, I participated in Upper Kuskokwim daily activities including hunting, fishing, picking berries, cutting wood and mushing dogs. Many of the data on traditional stories (*hwzosh*) and taboos (*hwtlane*) that I mention in this paper come from my ethnographic interviews with Upper Kuskokwim elders, including Nick Alexia Sr. and Bob Esai Sr.

At the time of my fieldwork, it was difficult to record myths in local Upper Kuskokwim Athabascan, an endangered language. There are few opportunities to narrate myths in everyday life. In this paper, I use stories narrated both in English and in Athabascan languages. Other studies on Northern Athabascan storytelling practices also use those narrated in English (Cruikshank 1998).

Archival research was also conducted to collect more data on Upper Kuskokwim and Koyukon mythology. Some Upper Kuskokwim traditional beliefs and myths are quoted from the literature (Hosley 1966; Ruppert and Bernet 2001). As for the Koyukon, I use stories recorded by Richard K. Nelson (1983), a renowned anthropologist who studied Koyukon ethnobiology, and by Father Julius Jetté (1908), a Jesuit missionary known for his excellent study of Koyukon language and folklore.

3. Results

This paper focuses on four Raven myths (Examples 1 to 4). Fig. 1 shows the contexts of each narration. Examples are summarized in the text below. Fig. 1 illustrates that stories with the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy were narrated by three elders in three different periods, spanning more than 100 years (1890s–1900s, 1970s-1982, and 2014).[5]

3.1. [Example 1] Raven and the Seagull People

One day, people were having trouble catching fish, so they asked Raven for help. They mashed up dog to make *nemaje* for Raven. After eating it, Raven went downriver to find Seagull People catching fish aplenty in fish traps, thus preventing the fish from migrating upriver. Raven got them to remove the fish traps by falsely telling them there was a much better fishing ground upstream. As a result, people upriver were able to catch fish again. Thanks to Raven, even today, people in upriver communities can often catch fish even when downriver communities have a poor catch.

3.2. [Example 2] Raven Fixes Marten's Arm

Once upon a time, animal people living in a village downriver would invite those in a village upriver to play a ball game. The downriver people kept defeating the upriver people including Wolf People and Grizzly Bear People. Angry at their defeat, they tore the arm off a downriver person and took it back home. Loath to leave the person who had lost an arm to suffer, the downriver people asked Raven to recover it, and they fattened a dog and cooked it for Raven. Raven initially hesitated, but he eventually agreed in exchange for this dish. He took a canoe with his nephew, Hawk Owl Man, and when they came to a portage, Raven left the canoe and Hawk Owl Man behind and walked awhile in the woods. He picked some spruce boughs and set them in one place. Then, he defecated on them, and they turned into men's cloths decorated with dentalium shells. He put them on to impersonate a member of the Ahtna tribe of the Copper River valley. The clothes looked nothing like what the people upriver wore, indicating that Raven was from somewhere else. He put the spruce boughs together and did the same as before, and they became women's clothes. In the upriver village, Raven lived with a girl, and he gave her the clothes. The arm was hanging above where she was, but he couldn't get it because he was

[4] One may wonder whether the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy was the result of relatively recent diffusion from Northeast Asian societies or whether it might already have been held by the ancestors of the Na-Dene language family, who supposedly reached the American side of Beringia from the Eurasian side in ancient times. I argue that diffusion from Northeast Asia is more plausible than the explanation that the ancestors of Na-Dene language family possessed this motif before they reached the North American continent. First, we have no definite answer to the question of the Na-Dene family's homeland in Northeast Asia. The Dene–Yeniseian Connection was recently revisited by Vajda (2010) and has received some support from linguists (e.g., Hamp 2010). Still, systematic comparative mythological studies of these two language families have yet to be conducted. Second, while the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy is found in the myths of Northern Athabascan societies on the Alaskan side (Examples 1, 2 and 4), those on the Canadian side typically deal with the motif of the Dog Husband (McCormack 2018: 126–127), where a woman has sexual intercourse with Dog and often bears its children (usually in human form). If the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy is an ancient one that goes back to the time of the Athabascan migration to the Americas, it should also be found among some Northern Athabascan groups in Canada. So far, I have not identified any example of it there.

[5] It is true that some motifs and interpretations can be added by narrators, reflecting the contemporary interests of the audience and story-tellers (cf. Cruikshank 2005). However, the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy has been recorded three times during approximately 100 years of documentation, suggesting that the motif is not an arbitrary addition by individual narrators.

Number	Title	Culture	Language of Narration	Narrator	Time of Documentation	Source
Example 1	Raven and the Seagull People	Upper Kuskokwim	English	Nick Alexia Sr.	May 17, 2014	The author
Example 2	Raven Fixes Marten's Arm	Upper Kuskokwim	Upper Kuskokwim	Miska Deaphon	Before 1982	Ruppert and Bernet, 2001: 285-287
Example 3	Raven and an Old Woman	Upper Kuskokwim	English	Nick Alexia Sr.	May 17, 2014	The author
Example 4	The Raven	Koyukon	Koyukon	Andrew Kenyon	1890s or early 1900s	Jetté, 1908: 302-305

Fig. 1. Narrative contexts of Raven Myths.

under close watch. One day, when everyone had left the house, Raven stole the arm and returned home safely with his nephew. It was a Marten Person whose arm had been torn off. The arm went back in place, but from then on, that arm was a little stiff. This is why martens leave tracks where one paw print is always a little farther forward than the others (Ruppert and Bernet, 2001: 285–287).

3.3. [Example 3] Raven and an Old Woman

Once upon a time, Raven was a shaman. People prepared *nemaje* [In this narrative, the ingredient is not mentioned] for him and asked him to join them in hunting. To follow them, Raven took a boat and used magic to make a bow and arrow out of spruce sap. Paddling downstream, he saw an old woman coming toward him. Raven asked her what weapons she had, and she told him all she had was an ulu (a half-moon-shaped knife used for cooking). He offered to trade it for his bow and arrow because he thought the ulu is not much useful as a hunting weapon. They exchanged weapons, and she resumed her journey. When Raven turned around, he saw the old woman drawing the bow to the full, about to shoot an arrow at him. Raven prayed for the bow and arrow to become spruce sap again, and the arrow turned into sap and fell into the river. Raven threw the ulu at her, cutting her in two. Ever since, a sharp-leaved local marsh grass [unidentified] that had been poisonous enough to kill people has been poison-free.[6]

3.4. [Example 4] The Raven

There was a large village where something extraordinary happened: The sun suddenly disappeared, and all became dark. The people gave gifts to "the one under the blanket" [Raven[7]] and asked him to restore the sun, but to no avail. He wouldn't budge. They offered to kill two dogs for him, and this time he agreed. They fattened the dogs, killed them, and cut them into pieces that were boiled and fed to him. He then flew out, and after a while, he saw a light. He flew toward it and arrived in a village. He transformed himself into a tiny spruce needle, which fell into a water hole. At the water hole, a woman began to drink, and eventually she swallowed the spruce needle with the water. She became pregnant and gave birth to a child. When this child became old enough to take his first steps, he would play with the things that were in the house. Once, he found the sun in the southeast corner. He brought it into the middle of the house and began to play with it, but his mother brought it back to the southeast corner. The child began to cry, and one of his uncles said he was crying for the sun. The mother gave the sun back to her child. The child took the sun outside, resumed the raven form, and flew back to his village. There he gave the sun back to his people, and they thanked him (Jetté, 1908: 302–305).

4. Discussion

4.1. Possibility of the diffusion of motifs from the Russian Far East

It is interesting to note that some myths of Indigenous societies in the Russian Far East deal with the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy in a way that is similar to those of Interior Alaska. In Koryak myths, Raven-Man, a voracious figure who is distinguished from Big Raven, is said to like dog meat and excrement, although he seems ashamed that he and his family need those things to survive the winter (Jochelson 1908: 59, 92, 233–234). The Koryak have a custom of sacrificing dogs to placate spirits, and most of the sacrifices are practiced between fall and spring. However, they do not eat dog meat themselves, except in times of famine. The sacrificed dogs would be skinned after the winter, and only the pelt was used for clothing. During the time of Jochelson's fieldwork, each household in a Maritime Koryak village kept 10 dogs on average (Jochelson 1908: 95–96, 519–522). It is no wonder that Raven-Man's wife, in one Koryak story, brings back the carcass of a sacrificed dog from Big Raven's house (Jochelson 1908: 267–268), as the Koryak themselves would leave such carcasses outside unattended. It is intriguing to speculate that the Koryak practice of sacrificing dogs led ravens to feed on the skinned carcasses, thus contributing to the image of Raven-Man as subsisting on dog meat.

In a Sakhalin Ainu myth, Raven (or Crow) mother and son abduct a young woman to make her the son's wife, but she is stolen back by three brothers from Sanuipet Village, the protagonists of the myth. In retaliation, the mother and son hide the sun and the moon, leaving the world in pitch darkness. Cognizant of the mother and son's weakness for dog meat, the three brothers lure them out with the meat of a fattened dog and shoot them dead. As a result, the sun and the moon are restored (Chiri 1973: 442). In a Nivkh myth, a young woman who ends up living in the house of Raven (Crow) rejects or kills him when he sneaks into her bedroom under cover of darkness. When a flock of ravens come to her to protest against the rejection or killing, she offers to provide weapons or other valuables as compensation in order to placate them, but the ravens decline the offer and demand dog guts instead (Nakamura et al. 1992: 96–99).

What is interesting about the Nivkh myth is that the ravens ignore the woman's proposal of compensation with valuables, which she makes before she offers to pay with dog meat. Similarly, in a Koyukon Raven myth in Alaska, people ask Raven to restore the sun, which has been stolen by someone, in exchange for quite a pile of valuables, but it is not until they offer to serve the boiled meat of two fattened dogs that Raven agrees to go and look for the sun (Example 4). In both myths, it is worth noting that Raven's preference for dog meat is emphasized by his rejection of the offer of valuables. In the Sakhalin Ainu myth, Raven's

[6] It seems that the old woman is a Marsh Grass person and her ulu might stand for the sharp leaves of that plant.

[7] In the original transcript, the identity of this person is not mentioned in the beginning. See also Note 16.

preference for dog meat and the stolen sun appear as motifs. Also in the Koyukon myth, Raven's preference for dog meat has great significance to the plot, although in this case, Raven is the one who restores the sun, rather than the one who steals it.[8]

However, to further analyze the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy, it should be noted that the value placed on dogs as food differed significantly among different Indigenous groups in Interior Alaska and the Russian Far East. While Alaskan Athabascans and Koryak see dog meat as something undesirable for human consumption, the Nivkh and Sakhalin Ainu viewed dogs as a delicious food. The Nivkh used dogs as "currency": a medium of exchange, a bride price and a compensatory fine. In addition to consuming dogs given as ritual offerings, Nivkh people sacrificed dogs to pray for success in hunting and fishing and to placate divine spirits for violations of taboos (Kreinovich, 2004 [1930]). The Sakhalin Ainu sacrificed dogs as ritual offerings in prayers for recovery from illness. Before such a ritual took place, a dog would be presented to the shaman as a token of appreciation because the shaman's helper spirit is said to love the blood of dogs (Tamura 2001).

Based on observations by Kreinovich and other ethnographers, Éveline Lot-Falck (1953) maintains that for hunting rituals in Indigenous communities in Siberia and the Russian Far East, people selected sacrificial animals to be offered to the owner of game from among animals that were not owned by that owner. For this reason, reindeer and dogs, which were domestic animals, were considered as proper offerings to the owner of game, who reigns over wild animals. It seems highly likely that dogs were the first sacrificial animals to be used before people domesticated reindeer. Lot-Falck argues that the "prayers" to the owner of game during hunting rituals are best understood as simple commands like "grab" and "give" in many cases and thus stand for a call for exchange (Lot-Falck 1953).

While offerings to the owner of game and human shamans in Interior Alaska can also be described as "exchanges" (cf. Nadasdy 2007), dogs were not viewed as a desirable medium for such exchange. The Upper Kuskokwim people say that dwarfs known as "mountain people" (*dził-tohwt'ana*) live in the foothills of the Alaska Range. They believe that the dwarfs provide them with game such as moose, caribou, bear and Dall sheep in exchange for such offerings as cigarettes, dried fish and pocket knives (Bob Esai Sr., personal communication, August 15th, 2013). It is thought that shamans (*deninh*) use supernatural powers to provide the clients with game. Conversely, if someone offends a shaman, the shaman can take away their luck or worse, can bring sickness or death upon the offense-giver. This explains why people often had given meat to shamans when they harvested game. Upper Kuskokwim people remember that their parents would put dried fish in fire as offerings for the sprits of shamans and would pray for good luck in hunting or recovery from illness (Nick and Oline Petruska, Shirley Gover, personal communication, November 8th, 2014).

According to Upper Kuskokwim people, ravens sometimes let people know where to find game. Gracy Holmberg (personal communication, July 19, 2012), a long-term resident of the Upper Kuskokwim region, even thinks that people can develop a cooperative relationship with ravens by feeding them so that they alert the feeder of any approaching predators. However, people in the Upper Kuskokwim region feed ravens with the guts of salmon, beavers, and other wild animals. Discarded dog carcasses are not usually considered as (intentional) offering to the ravens.

Thus far, a comparative analysis of Indigenous communities shows some commonalities between Interior Alaska and the Russian Far East, such as the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy and the idea of making offerings to shamans or spirits. However, people in Interior Alaska did not generally sacrifice domestic animals to spirits, and the value of dog meat there contrasts sharply with that in the Russian Far East, because Interior Alaskans do not usually eat dog meat nor use dog pelts for clothing. If we assume that the mythological motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy originated in Indigenous communities in the Russian Far East, the question remains as to why people in Interior Alaska did not accept, along with such motif, dog sacrifice and feasts of dog meat (e.g., the Nivkh and Sakhalin Ainu) or the use of dog pelts (e.g., the Koryak).

4.2. Ethological interpretations of dog as Raven's delicacy

The motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy is found in Indigenous myths of the Russian Far East and Interior Alaska. Could this be because myth creators observed the feeding habits of ravens and reached the same conclusion by accident, rather than as a result of contact between human groups? Is Raven's strong attachment to dog meat and pelts explicable based on ethological research?

Daniel Stahler and his colleagues (2002) documented the presence and absence of ravens during winter observations of wolves, coyotes, and elk at Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, USA, from 1997 to 2000. Ravens were found to associate closely with wolves, but not with coyotes or elk. In fact, ravens were found at every recorded wolf kill site (49 in total). It was presumed that the ravens' successful discovery of carcasses from wolf kills resulted from their keeping an eye on wolves all day long in winter, when food is scarce. Ravens are preferentially associated with wolves, rather than with coyotes (another member of the Canidae family) or elk (the primary prey of wolves), because coyotes in the study region rarely killed large mammals.[9]

The frequency of ravens' association with wolves varied depending on the activity in which the wolves engaged. Ravens were found to associate with them the most when wolves were hunting prey, followed by when wolves were traveling and then when wolves were resting. When the wolves were hunting rats, ravens were often found playing around the wolves. While coyotes tend to consume rats as soon as they capture them, wolves often play with their prey rather than consuming them right away, or they may not consume them at all. Ravens stalk wolves because of the high probability that ravens can steal rats from wolves (Stahler et al., 2002: 288).

Ravens preferentially associate with wolves, and ravens and wolves often even interact with each other. For instance, near a wolf's lair, a raven and a wolf cub may be found chasing each other or a raven may be seen pulling a wolf's tail. According to Stahler and his colleagues (2002: 289), ravens, which usually keep their guard up when feeding, appear to let their guard down when wolves are nearby, making it plausible that ravens' close association with wolves suppresses the former's innate suspicion of novel food resources (See also Heinrich 2007: 229–232.). Heinrich (2007) argues that ravens and wolves form a symbiotic relationship whereby ravens give notification of the locations of carcasses, while wolves cut the skin open to make it possible for ravens to peck at the meat.

Interactions between ravens and wolves, which have been discussed by ethologists, may very well be related to the interactions between ravens and dogs in Alaska. Just like ravens hanging around a wolf den, they tend to flock around dogs in the village and try to steal dog food or eat their excrement (cf. Heinrich 2007). Similarly, ravens' habit of chasing a pack of traveling wolves to take advantage of any feeding

[8] It is well known that the release of the sun by ravens or raptors is a motif common to the Russian Far East, Alaska, the Northwest Coast of Canada and South America (Berezkin 2009: 76).

[9] In settings where prey is abundant, wolves also tend to leave behind lots of edible meat after they eat the choice parts of a kill (Heinrich 2007).

opportunity is akin to ravens' behavior of chasing dog sleds[10], which is well known among dog sledding enthusiasts. I had first-hand experience of this when I took a dog sled pulled by ten dogs with Phil Runkle, a young local dog musher in Nikolai, to go to a trapping camp approximately 40 km from the village. During a short break on a long, narrow, frozen lake after we had traversed a trail through spruce forest, a raven flew past us from behind and took a quick glance at us. Phil said that ravens like to chase dog mushers. When I asked why, he explained that ravens like to feed on the excrement of dogs that are fed nutritious food (Phil Runkle, personal communication, February 5th, 2015). It may also be the case that ravens have been able to find carcasses in traps by following trappers who use dog sleds. As Heinrich (2007: 242) argues, humans and dogs may be "surrogate wolves" for ravens in the North (cf. Marzluff 2005).

As described above, discussions by ethologists also confirm that ravens have a deep interest in wolves and dogs. This may explain why Raven dresses in a dog-skin robe in Koyukon myths. Ethologists have noted that ravens let their guard down in the presence of wolves and sometimes "play" with wolves. Aside from the explanation of diffusion, it may not be a stretch to say that myth creators chose to have Raven put on a dog-skin robe because of the impression of an extraordinary relationship between ravens and wolves/dogs.

Then, do ravens eat wolves? Since ravens are omnivorous, it may well be that they feed on wolf carcasses. Vucetich et al. (2004) note that wolves in the Lake Superior region choose to hunt in larger groups and defend their food from groups of ravens because ravens steal a large portion of the meat from wolf kills.[11] Even so, the annual mortality rate of wolves is 20–30%, mostly from starvation (Mech et al., 2003). Ravens hanging around close to a wolf den may have subsisted on wolf carcasses.

An Upper Kuskokwim hunter told me that a raven let him know that a wolf was coming his way. He had been waiting for game in front of a fallen tree by a river with rifle in hand when a raven flew over, croaking loudly, and "dropped a pack" to him. This is an idiomatic expression meaning that a raven rolls over in the air, which indicates the approach of game, according to Alaskan Athabascans. In this hunter's case, a wolf appeared after a while, so the hunter aimed his rifle at it. At that moment, the wolf sensed his presence, fixed its eyes on him, and returned to the woods on the other side of the river.[12]

If the hunter's interpretation is correct, it means that the raven let him know of the wolf's arrival in advance so that he could prepare to shoot it. According to Upper Kuskokwim hunters, ravens and other bird species let them know when large mammals (e.g., moose, grizzly bears) are approaching them. A study of the details of their stories shows roughly three patterns (Kondo 2014). The first pattern involves flocks of birds (e.g., red-throated loons, cranes) suddenly flying off or making piercing calls as if in warning. In such case, people read it as a sign of a large mammal's approach. The second pattern involves people interpreting bird calls. Great horned owls are believed to be able to speak in human language and foretell the future, including good luck in hunting. The third pattern involves birds (ravens, northern shrikes) guiding people to game or letting them know where it is, just like the honeyguide in Africa (cf. Isack and Reyer 1989). In the third pattern, there is still room for discussion on whether the birds have the intention to do what they are interpreted to be doing (cf. Heinrich 2007).

4.3. Rhetorical analysis of raven as a dog-meat lover

A look into ethological research has revealed deep connections between ravens and wolves, which presumably apply to the relationship between ravens and dogs. While ravens might actually subsist on wolf and dog carcasses (see the discussion on Koryak dog sacrifice in this paper) from time to time, Upper Kuskokwim and Koyukon myths do not necessarily have another plausible plot based on ethological observation, in which a Dog Person or Wolf Person hunted game animals to offer fine meat to Raven.[13] Should we also analyze the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy in terms of storytelling strategies?

In myths, people seek Raven's help when their food supply is disrupted or someone is injured. Raven's roles in these circumstances echo those of shamans who bring good luck in hunting or who treat illness. If people were unable to fish in summer as in Example 1, they and their dogs must have been in danger of starvation. Did that situation prompt people to resort to their last option, namely, the killing of their dogs and mashing them up to treat Raven to his favorite dish?

In Example 1, Raven is treated to *nemaje* prepared with dog meat. Today, *nemaje* is prepared by combining mashed fish—either whitefish or sheefish—with a mixture of commercial vegetable oil and sugar and topping it with blueberries or other berries. It is a dish served at local ceremonial events such as potlatches. To prepare *nemaje*, people used to use salmon, bear fat or moose fat, but never dog fat. Regarding Example 1, some may wonder if people used their domestic animals to make a ceremonial dish because fish, the most common ingredient for *nemaje*, was unavailable due to food shortages, irrespective of Raven's preference for dog meat.

However, this interpretation is inaccurate because Raven was treated to dog *nemaje* or meat even in circumstances where the village was not necessarily on the verge of starvation, as in Examples 2 and 4. I would rather hypothesize that making Raven love what humans are not supposed to consume was an attempt to stress Raven's uniqueness among other people. I argue that by using dogs, whose meat and skin people were loath to eat and wear, myth creators sought to emphasize the characteristics of ravens as tricksters that would go beyond the common sense and morals of the human world.

As discussed earlier, Alaskan Athabascans do not view dogs as a proper food source, nor do they have the custom of killing domestic animals for their meat except in severe famine. Previous studies in Northern Athabaskan ethnography revealed that many Northern Athabascan groups did not domesticate wild animals and that dogs were the only domestic animal in their communities (See Savishinsky 1994: 216 for an exception.). To the Koyukon and Upper Kuskokwim people, dog meat consumption was akin to cannibalism. Nelson quoted a Koyukon elder as saying that dogs could talk with humans in the mythological Distant Time, but that Raven took speech away from them because

[10] It is true that dogs are closer to coyotes than to wolves in terms of body size. Some may wonder why we can argue that dogs (more correctly, a hybrid community of sled dogs and a human driver) and wolves can be analogous from raven's perspective. Here, what matters is not the size of the animals in question but the chance of getting food. As Stahler and his colleagues (2002) point out, coyotes do not usually take down large prey, from which ravens can benefit. It is also important that ravens tend to follow wolves hunting the prey rather than those resting (Stahler et al., 2002: 288). Dog teams and a human driver carry loads of dog foods and engage in big game hunting as well as trapping (cf. Slobodin 1962: 51). It is likely that raven choose to follow sled dogs and a human driver not only due to slight resemblance to a pack of wolves but also due to its scavenging opportunities

[11] Inspired by Vicetich and his colleagues' discovery, Marzluff (2005) suggests that ancestors of dogs began to cooperate with humans in order to protect their kills from ravens and other scavengers.

[12] Ignati Petruska, an Upper Kuskokwim elder, told me that people used to pay special respect to brown bears, black bears, wolverines and wolves, all of which are top-level predators. When these animals are butchered, children are supposed to avoid being downwind from the carcass because the spirit of the animal may enter them and make them sick (Kondo 2020: 64).

[13] In Nikolai, I encountered no stories about Raven and Wolf or Raven and Dog, but there is a story about Wolf and Grey Jay, in which Grey Jay helps the starving Wolf. After Wolf becomes well, Grey Jay gives a sled full of dried meat for Wolf to take back home. After this event, grey jays are supposed to be always given permission to eat a wolf kill (Nick Alexia Sr., personal communication, May 17th, 2014).

otherwise, people would have become too fond of them to kill them. Thus, a taboo used to prohibit Koyukon people from speaking to their dogs, and this supposedly explains why people had to walk ahead of their dog team: There were no leaders trained for verbal commands (Nelson 1983: 191). Similarly, Bob Esai Sr. (personal communication, May 19th, 2014) of Nikolai recounted that people used to avoid speaking to dogs because of an old story where a dog ran into the bush and disappeared after someone spoke to it, and upon returning the village, the dog prophesized in human language that the village would be abandoned due to sickness (Kondo 2019; cf. Hill 2018: 96–97 on dogs indicating outbreaks of illness and death).

The mythological motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy takes advantage of differences in the value placed on dogs by people and Raven in a tripartite relationship. For people—and by extension, non-Raven characters in myths—dogs were part of the family in villages or encampments and were given much affectionate attention, while at the same time being considered unclean or even spiritually dangerous (Hara 1980: 191; Nelson 1983: 191; Savishinsky 1994: 195; Kondo 2019: 234–235). To put it simply, dogs are considered almost human by people. In contrast, Raven considers dogs to be a source of fine food and pelts. Dogs are, or should be, a speechless resource for exploitation by Raven.

The differences in how people and Raven regard dogs demonstrate the need to consider food-related rhetoric. In the 16th century, when Cunhambebe, a chieftain of the Tupinambá in the Amazon lowlands, was eating human flesh, Hans Staden, a German adventurer, criticized him by saying, "An irrational animal would not eat another of its kind, and should a man devour another man?" Cunhambebe countered, "*Jauára ichê*. I am a jaguar. It's delicious." Cunhambebe offered witty repartee to the German's criticism of his behavior by claiming his identity as a jaguar in human language (Viveiros de Castro, 2011: 92). In other words, since perspectives dwell in the body as defined as "a bundle of affects and capacities" (Viveiros de Castro, 1998: 478), performative utterances of claiming something as food define the speaker's species identity (Kohn 2013).

By extrapolating from Cunhambebe's example, myth narrators suggested the animality of Raven (and other animal persons) through their words and deeds. The differences in the bodies of animal persons are gradually revealed as the story goes on. In the beginning of Example 4, the protagonist's identity is not mentioned; the protagonist is just referred to in the third-person singular (he/she/it) .[14] The narrator interjects the following question after saying that there was a house where a blanket was spread on the ground.

Kĕn sŭ̆ŭ mĕ tōr rūlān ? [15]
What perhaps it under there is
(=What might be under there?)

The question invites listeners who are familiar with local myths to guess that Raven is meant, because they know that Raven loves (dog-skin) blankets and wraps himself in one. Further into the story, people offer to serve dog meat.

"Łekă̆ nŏterke tsĕ̆ītĕ̆lōłrał, nŏ́rō," rayĕ̆łnī.
Dogs two we-shall-kill you-for they-say-to-him
(=They said to him, "We shall kill two dogs for you.")

Arŭ̆rŭyĕ̆ł rătalnōn: "Ă'ă" nī.
Then he-moved yes he-said
(Then, he moved and said "Yes.")

By this time, the listeners are convinced that the story is about Raven because they know that only Raven eats dog (Jetté 1908: 307). The term "Raven" does not appear until the latter half of the story, except in the title, which was possibly given after the story was completed.[16] More specifically, the term "Raven" is used only after the character turns himself from a child to a bird after restoring the sun.

The nine stories recorded by Father Jetté include those in which "people" gradually reveal themselves to be animal people and display their animality. What is interesting in relation to the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy is that differences in feeding habits reveal who the animal people really are. The old man who stalks a woman is revealed to be a large Seagull Man because of his love of salmon slime. A handsome young man who is a good hunter and who is an Eagle Man, can take a human woman as his wife because he has stored lots of venison. A woman who weeps in longing to go to the far bank shows herself to be a Porcupine Woman when it is disclosed that her aim is to get to the spruce tree there (Jetté 1908: 320–337, 354–359). Such plot development evokes riddles. Audiences listen attentively to every move made by the unidentified yet somewhat distinctive character to figure out his or her true identity before the narrator reveals it.[17] For Koyukon listeners who were familiar with both Raven in the myths and ravens in the post-mythological age, the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy was an obvious hint in a sort of "quiz show" held on long winter nights.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy that appear in Raven myths of Alaskan Athabascans from three perspectives: diffusionism, ethology and rhetorical techniques in storytelling.

Indigenous societies in the Russian Far East practice dog sacrifice. The Koryak, who do not eat dog meat except in emergencies, thought of Raven Man in myths as a dog-meat eater. On the other hand, the Nivkh and Sakhalin Ainu considered dog to be good for human consumption and offered dog meat to shamans in exchange for spiritual services. Their mythologies also have the motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy. Russian Far East groups also use dog fur and pelts for winter clothes. These cultural practices may be behind the creation of the motif.

Ravens have survived the winters of North America by cooperating with or depending on wolves. This relationship expanded to include humans and dogs as "surrogate wolves" possibly since the first peopling of North America. We cannot pinpoint when the idea that ravens like to eat dog meat arose among the ancestors of Alaskan Athabascans. Comparative analysis revealed that there is a possibility that the motif diffused from Russian Far East, in whose mythology similar plots were found. Ethological observation may have influenced the emergence of motifs related to Raven's behavior (e.g. defecating all over the place), but it lacks a strong evidence to prove that the motif was inspired by direct observation of ravens eating dog meat. In any case, the idea that ravens like to eat dog meat was combined with a custom in which people

[14] In the Koyukon and Upper Kuskokwim languages, the conjugation of a verb for a third-person singular subject does not distinguish between animate or inanimate nouns, nor does it make any distinction of gender.

[15] The diacritical marks have been partially modified.

[16] In the standard narration style during Father Jetté's time, a Koyukon narrator would begin the story without mentioning its title, and short sentences would ensue, punctuated by shouts of approbation from listeners (Jetté 1908: 298). The interrogative sentence "What might be under there?" would be unnecessary if the narrator were to cite the title first and reveal who the story is about. Nowadays, contemporary Upper Kuskokwim elders usually start by giving the story title.

[17] David Koester (2002) analyzes Itelmen songs and dances as examples of mimetic understanding of the environment. Koyukon storytelling practices in Father Jetté's time can be also described this way, in that the listeners empathically understand the animal persons' moves as fellow "people". Yet, they must pay attention to the unique characteristics that differentiate one animal person from another.

offer special food (i.e., *nemaje*) to shamans in exchange for their services, thus developing into the Alaskan Athabascan motif of Dog as Raven's Delicacy.

For Koyukon and Upper Kuskokwim people, who usually neither eat dog meat nor use dog pelts, such a motif illuminates more-than-humanness of Raven the Shaman, coupled with the image of dogs (Dog) as almost-human or too-close-to-human. In this way, the motif turned into a powerful marker for indicating Raven in Alaskan Athabascan storytelling codes in which animal persons gradually exhibit their nature as a species of animal. This paper shows that Raven, the well-known trickster figure in Interior Alaska, cannot be understood only in relation to humans: we need to take into account the tripartite relations among ravens, dogs/wolves, and humans.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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