

ANGELS OF LIGHT: A MI'KMAQ MYTH IN A NEW ARCHÊ

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Abstract / Résumé

2002 marked the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Charles H. Long's *Alpha: The Myths of Creation*, a book that has become a standard for historians of religion. This essay results from an initial research project that sought to re-read *Alpha* in relation to contemporary accounts of the Mi'kmaq hero Kluskap. What resulted, however, was an exploration of the relationship between tribal knowledge, treaty rights, environmental and human illness, and arenas of dominant non-Native cultural authority (e.g. the academy and judiciary). The project shed new light on *Alpha*, and in turn the book offered some insight into the intricate link between contemporary Mi'kmaq life and mythic discourse.

2002 a marque le quarantieme anniversaire de la publication de *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* de Charles Long. Un livre que est devenu un critere pour les historiens en religion. Les resultats de cet essai initie par des recherches qui permettaient a retourner a *Alpha* en relation des explications contemporaines du hero Mi'kmaq Kluskap. Les resultats etaient une exploration entre les connaissances tribales, les droits de traite droits de traite, les malaises humains et de l'environnement, ainsi que de arenas domines par des autorites culturels non-natifs (e.g. academie et judiciaire). Le projet a etendu une nouvelle vue sur *Alpha*, ce qui a permis que le livre affra une appercu dans la chaine compliquee entre la vie contemporaine des Mi'kmaq et les relations mystiques.

2002 marked the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Charles H. Long's *Alpha: the Myths of Creation*, a small volume that has appeared in three editions since 1962 and has become a standard text for historians of religion.¹ Reflecting on the book in 2002, it occurred to me that it might provide an entrée into an exploration of the Mi'kmaq hero Kluskap who, in spite of substantial ethnographic attention in the late nineteenth- and early- to mid-twentieth centuries, has not received substantial scholarly consideration in his contemporary form.

Charles Long's *Alpha* is a book in which journeys figure noticeably. There are journeys of humanity from formless potentiality, through various non-human locations, to human existence in a human world (38). There are journeys of divine beings from primordial chaos to the natural world (65); and journeys from water, darkness, and embryonic modes to firm earth, light, and *being* of some form or another (146). Oddly enough, engagement with the book in preparation for the project at hand, took me on an unexpected journey too. The initial plan seemed relatively benign, involving a wedding of certain aspects of *Alpha* with the figure of Kluskap. It appeared simple enough: from earlier texts I had learned that this ancient and great culture hero of the Mi'kmaq taught the loon his cry, caused toad and porcupine to lose their noses, created the wind that moved the water, and made boulders and chasms simply by blowing smoke from his pipe (Leland 1884: 50, 59, 65, 106). He began his existence in his mother's womb, where he and his twin brother Malsum were said to have discussed at length how each would be born. Kluskap intended to be born in the same fashion as all people, whereas Malsum had quite different intentions. In time Kluskap was indeed born in the natural way, and he was followed by Malsum who burst through his mother's side, thereby killing her. Following a number of foiled attempts on Kluskap's life, Malsum was killed by his twin and transformed into a mountain range. Among other exploits, Kluskap traveled up a great river with his lifelong companions Marten and Grandmother Bear. The cliffs closed around them and the river began to flow downward into the earth, becoming increasingly narrow and tempestuous, the deadly current pulling the three voyagers down through rocks and ravines. Marten and Bear died from fear, and Kluskap continued to pilot the canoe through the night, singing powerful songs, until he broke through into sunlight. When he reached the shore, he carried his companions into a teepee where he brought them back to life (Leland 1884: 60-61). Prior to leaving the Mi'kmaq with a promise to return, Kluskap rid the world of all primordial monsters, cleared rivers for navigation, and taught the people all that they needed to know to survive in their environment (Paul 1993: 26-27; Leland 1884: 66-68).

From the perspective mythography, Kluskap seemed too good to be true: primordial mother, primordial twins representing good and evil, a descent into watery chaos for the purpose of regeneration (Long 1983: 37, 192, 190). It was merely incumbent upon me, I thought, to seek out current Kluskap stories and I would be able to explore the manner in which this hero—and, by extension, a traditional mythic framework—manage to modernize themselves. The plan was, however, somewhat naive. I set about asking a number of friends and Elders for stories; and although everyone I approached agreed to help me out, our conversations never quite found their way to Kluskap. In fact, I never heard a single Kluskap story. It began to dawn on me that I have heard an incredible number of Mi'kmaq stories over the past fifteen years, and can recall only two occasions when Kluskap figured in these. When I asked about this, a friend confirmed what I was beginning to suspect: that she could not recall having heard very many such stories at all while she was growing up (Elizabeth Marshall 2003a). I had begun the project with a long-standing assumption of Kluskap's cultural centrality, but as conversations transpired it became apparent that this assumption was substantially based on written reports dating from the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries, rather than on anything I had actually heard.

This realization reverberated with Thomas Parkhill's *Weaving Ourselves into the Land* (1997) a work concerning the development of popular forms of the Kluskap myth, in which Parkhill focused on the form of the story presented by Charles Leland in his *Legends of New England* (1884) and *Kuloskap the Master and Other Algonkin Poems* (1902). Leland's tales, Parkhill argued, were formative for subsequent folklorists, appearing in abridged or adapted form in works such as Lewis Spence's *The Myths of the North American Indians* (1914) and, more critically, Joseph Campbell's *Historical Atlas of World Mythology* (1988). Campbell's version undoubtedly reached the widest audience, but Spence's text was also reprinted into the 1990s in Canada, the US, and Britain. Parkhill attributed the appeal of the Kluskap tales for non-Native audiences to their dualistic—and hence European—structure, as well as to their capacity to meet conquest and place needs of colonial peoples. Although the explanation left me with some questions, Parkhill was obviously onto something. Considering the form that Kluskap acquired during the period of most intense scholarly interest in Mi'kmaq folklore, it is clear that he was appreciated substantially on the basis of European interpretive categories rather than Aboriginal ones. For Leland, he was the "lord Glooscap," a "divinity," and an object of Mi'kmaq worship (1884: 15);² he was, further, "the grandest and most Aryan character ever evolved from a savage mind," who could be easily grasped by anyone familiar

with Shakespeare, Rabelais, Beowulf, and Scandinavian myths (1884: 2-3). Other Folklorists found in Kluskap an instance of a universal "solar hero" a member of a trinity of heroes who were actually one being "named in three differing aspects"; a sky god (Hagar 1897: 101-102, 104); and a "Promethius" (Elder 1871: 13). Leland, further, argued that there was a direct connection, by means of historical diffusion, between all the tales of the Mi'kmaq and the sagas of the Scandinavians (1884: v-vi).³

It is impossible to establish the character of these tales (and of Kluskap himself) at the moment of their telling; but it is clear that those who recorded them had at their disposal ready interpretive categories that may well have shielded them from the potential disquietude of confrontation with something not clearly understood. Leland and his contemporaries committed what, according to a friend of mine, is a chronic scholarly error: "we think differently about things," Eleanor Johnson wrote a few years ago; "non-Native academics are forever trying to change around what we're saying to make their concepts try to match our concepts" (Johnson 1991: 14). My initial plans for this Kluskap project began to evaporate as I realized I was courting the same error, to the potential detriment of both a community's narrative structure and *Alpha: The Myths of Creation*.

From the moment I began asking questions, I was on a journey to somewhere different from what I'd anticipated. I initially went to my friend Elizabeth Marshall of Eskasoni, Nova Scotia, hoping to hear a Kluskap story. Instead, she told me about a new degree program at the University College of Cape Breton, where she was currently employed in the Mi'kmaq College Institute. The program, *Toqwa'tu'kl Kjjijitaqnn* ("Integrated Science") is designed to blend conventional methods and data from the natural sciences—biology, geology, chemistry, physics, and cosmology (Bartlett 2003)—with the knowledge system of the Mi'kmaq. Since Elizabeth's parents, both Elders of their community, were involved with this degree program from its inception, she suggested that I speak with them regarding the goals and course content of the program; and I did so the following day, secretly harboring hope still that I might obtain a Kluskap story. From Elizabeth's mother, Murdena Marshall, I discovered that the program had emerged from an idea for a single course in 1991. The course was offered for the first time in 1995, and in the spring of 2002 UCCB graduated its first Bachelor of Science students with a concentration in Integrated Science. When I asked about the content of the course, Murdena told me that the Milky Way can be defined by Western science from a number of perspectives, but it cannot be explained by science in respect to its meaning. The Milky Way, she pointed out, changes its angle in the spring and fall from diagonal to vertical, and it

does this to guide the Canada Geese in their migrations. As a rule, she said, the Western sciences do not ask *why* when approaching the natural world; or, to put it another way, science does not traditionally account for the meaning of natural phenomena in respect to the world that human beings inhabit (Murdena Marshall 2003).

Since Murdena's husband, Albert Marshall, had been instrumental in constructing the first course syllabus for an Integrated Science course, I proceeded to ask him about the content of the program. Albert replied that Mi'kmaq children are no longer able to learn their tribal knowledge in the way that previous generations had. Their lives are characterized by a kind of perpetual motion, and are inundated with video games and a drive toward consumerism. Sitting for hours at an Elder's table for the purpose of education is no longer a viable option for Mi'kmaq children (Albert Marshall 2003). Elizabeth would later add that even if children were inclined toward this form of education, illness (especially diabetes) has become so acute in her community of Eskasoni, that the number of Elders is decreasing noticeably (Elizabeth Marshall 2003a). The average life expectancy at Eskasoni is under forty years, with over sixty percent of the community's population under thirty years old (Elizabeth Marshall 2003c). Albert went on to say that the scientific community alone has real efficacy in impacting upon public and private policy toward the environment, and that it is imperative that Aboriginal people enter into this community in order to arrest the destruction of the natural world that is being enacted under the aegis of capital gain. Waving toward a window looking out on a bay Albert said, "The oysters are sick" (Albert Marshall 2003). The oysters are indeed sick in the Brasdor Lakes, a group of salt water lakes in Cape Breton Island on one of which the Eskasoni reserve is located. Cape Breton oysters were hit with MSX disease in the fall of 2002, and stocks have been devastated. The disease was dumped into Little Narrows at that time, along with ballast water from Chesapeake Bay ships that was riddled with the parasite; and it is now spreading to Prince Edward Island, threatening one of the province's most essential industries (Butler 2002).⁴ The disease was identified in Delaware in the late 1950s; and along with another disease—Dermo—has often cause a fifty percent annual mortality rate. Funding for research has been inadequate, and in fifty years researchers have succeeded only in developing population and disease models, and identifying triggering factors. (Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory 2005). They have not identified the parasite's infective stage, its lifestyle, nor critical "time-temperature-[and]salinity combinations." They have also been unable to engage in controlled transmission of the parasite, and have concerns that an unidentified intermediate host may exist. In practical terms, scientists have

been able to suggest only that disease-resistant oyster strains should be farmed, and that these should be maintained in disease-free areas (Mears 2003). This is not much to show for a half century of research, but at the very least it should have been sufficient to compel governing bodies to pay attention to environmental agencies that have been calling for controls on ballast water. Although some US coastal regions have stopped Chesapeake Bay ships from discharging their ballast, the Canadian Government has chosen not to follow this route (Butler 2002), and the oysters at Eskasoni—a community whose economy relies heavily on aquaculture—are dying. Albert believes that the oysters are emblematic: much of the world is being destroyed in a similar fashion, and the destruction rests on the Western premise that non-human entities are objects. He is convinced that the scientific community and its financial resources can be made to work for the Mi'kmaq and for the environment by introducing—and demonstrating the viability of—the Mi'kmaq understanding of non-human entities as subjects. The sustainability of any species is critical from this vantage point because of the integration of all species. Besides, added Albert, it also makes long-term economic sense (Albert Marshall 2003). Our discussion of the content and goals of Toqwa'tu'kl Kjjitaqnn involved the Milky Way, Elders, and MSX disease, in the context of which another attempt to mention Kluskap went by the wayside.

I approached Elizabeth again with what I believed to be two unrelated questions. I wanted to know, first, if anyone speaks of Kluskap the way in which he has been presented by folklorists and ethnologists; and second, what integrated science can accomplish, in practical terms. "Kluskap is not a god," Elizabeth said, "he is a figure associated with the landscape." She then pointed out what I have known for years: if there are such stories and meanings associated with any figure, it is perhaps more accurate to identify them with the figure of St. Ann, the grandmother of Jesus. Like many Mi'kmaq of her generation, Elizabeth was baptized Roman Catholic; and although she recognizes St. Ann as precisely this kind of figure, she is quick to point out that she does not regard herself as a Catholic (Elizabeth Marshall 2003a). In spite of a long association between the Mi'kmaq people and the Roman Catholic Church dating to the earliest fur trade alliances at the turn of the 17th century, a crucial rupture occurred in the 20th century with the partnership of the Church and the Canadian Government which resulted in the residential school system. In Nova Scotia the Shubenacadie School, which was operated by the Sisters of Charity and Roman Catholic Diocese of Halifax, was the Church and Government's chief agent of cultural assault upon the Mi'kmaq. One of seventy-seven similar institutions across

Canada, Shubenacadie was in operation from 1930-1967, during which time two thousand Mi'kmaq children were systematically divested of their language, subjected to abuse, denied proper medical care, and ruptured from family relationships (Pine Tree Legal Assistance 1998).⁵ The day we spoke, Elizabeth noted that the immediate results of the residential schools were the loss of the Mi'kmaq language, emotional sterility, an aversion to human touch in any but a violent fashion, and the devaluation of Mi'kmaq knowledge, including medicine. The legacy of this experience permeates the community, and is expressed in a current epidemic of domestic violence, sexual abuse, substance abuse, suicide, and a general inability to communally talk about any of these issues. As Elizabeth later said to me, "the teachings of the priests, nuns, and government...contaminated our people with illness and disease" (Elizabeth Marshall 2003c). The mechanisms in place for dealing with these devastating problems are not working. They are too often administered by Whites, or by Mi'kmaq who have been thoroughly educated in dominant models of psychotherapy, counseling, medicine, and the sciences broadly, and who have inherited a deep suspicion of knowledge systems identified as Mi'kmaq (Elizabeth Marshall 2003a).

Integrated Science, Elizabeth says, is part of a new mode of confronting these and other problems rooted in three centuries of colonial domination—a new mode that began most graphically with the *Marshall Decision, 1999*. By virtue of the Treaties of 1760 and 1761, entered into by the Mi'kmaq and the British Crown, the Mi'kmaq—who have the smallest reserve land base in Canada⁶ (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2004)—were granted the right to catch and sell fish. These rights were constantly denied during the Canadian period until 1985, when James Simon won the right to hunt for food anywhere in Mi'kmakik (the lands of the Mi'kmaq), thereby winning limited recognition of the validity of the so-called Friendship Treaties. A subsequent decision, however, had farther-reaching implications. In the mid-1990s, Donald Marshall was found guilty in the Nova Scotia Court of Appeal of fishing eels out of season, of fishing without a license, and of fishing with an illegal net (by implication, for sale). A team of lawyers (managed by four who were Mi'kmaq)⁷ took the case to the Supreme Court of Canada, and in September of 1999 the Court upheld Marshall's right to catch fish and to sell them in accordance with the Treaties of 1760/61 (Wood 2000; Indian and Northern Affairs 2004). The team of young Mi'kmaq lawyers used their legal training, their knowledge of the Canadian judicial system, and their understandings of the treaties to take on the system in its highest court. For many, their method became a model for confronting the legacy of colonialism, and those with whom I spoke on my Kluskap journey envi-

sioned Toqwa'tu'kl Kjjitaqnn in these terms: as a program whose intention it was to use the language, methods, and knowledge base of Western science, as well as the structure of the academy, to assert the validity of Mi'kmaq meanings of the environment, and to incorporate them into the management of the natural environment and human illness for the benefit of the land and the Mi'kmaq people.

Over the span of my Kluskap journey, I heard a great deal about treaty rights, residential schools, and aquatic parasites. I never got a Kluskap story, but I did discover *Alpha* in a new way. I found myself pouring over the final pages of the book, in which we are confronted with the arduous task of seeing clearly our cultural situation, and opening our ears to the new myths that will order and humanize the world that is coming into being (1983: 220). In light of these pages, retreating into *Alpha*, as I'd initially and simplistically intended—as though it could provide a catch-all rubric for interpretation—became impossible, except perhaps in a much more broad sense. For human communities, Long wrote, the discovery of new cultural dimensions has coincided with new dimensions of being,⁸ and myths have allowed humans to respond to these new modes of being. These structures signify at once a confrontation with the world, and a conceptual means of grasping it (1983: 217, 16). Given that myths express a human response to the advent of new cultural dimensions, Long asked, “what new structures will inform the modern period?” and he raised the prospect in 1962 of science and technology having a substantive role in the definition of our modern situation (1983: 219-220). Looking to the Mi'kmaq, there is no doubt that science and technology occupy a critical position, but sustained autocratic regulation must also be counted as among the dominant cultural structures of the period (as applied through education, government policy, and law).

As I attempted to find the way in which illness, suicide, diseased oysters, new science, the sale of fish, and the Milky Way related to one another, I recalled a line in *Alpha*: “It is impossible,” wrote Long, “to understand the reality and being of [a] people, unless one understands their reality in relation to the myth” (1983: 11). It occurred to me then that I had indeed heard a story from one of my friends, told to me after we had discussed *Alpha* at some length. At the time, I thought it had little relevance for my broader concern with Kluskap and the modernization of myth, but as I later grappled with those days of discussion, they came together in some manner in relation to this myth:

In the 1920's at Antigonish, Nova Scotia, there was a woman who had seven children, by seven different men. She never married. She was very spiritual, and considered by

her community also to be very holy. The woman was hard-working. She fed, clothed, and cared for her seven children to adulthood.

Throughout her adult life, the parish priest cited her as an example of depravity. He saw her as immoral, and lascivious; and when she eventually died, the priest refused to allow her to be buried in the church cemetery. He did not want her body placed in consecrated ground. The cemetery was located on the top of a knoll, and the ground dropped off beyond the knoll into a ravine.

The women's children pleaded with the priest to bury their mother in the church cemetery, but to no avail. Following her funeral, she was taken beyond church property to the bottom of the ravine, and buried there. It was almost dark when the priest left, and the children conducted their own traditional ceremony (*salite*), following which they turned for home. The sky behind them began to glow; and looking back toward the burial place, they saw dancing lights in the darkness. Turning back toward the lights, they followed them back to the place where their mother was buried in the bottom of the ravine. These lights were not coming from the sky, but from seven beings standing around the new grave, and who were sending up seven beams of light.

One of the children went to get the priest, who resisted but finally followed her back to the gravesite. Upon seeing the beings, he dropped to his knees, head in hands, and began to weep and ask for forgiveness. The beings informed him that this woman was special, and holy; and that his treatment of her was sacrilegious. They told the priest that she should be moved from the ravine to be reburied up on the hill in consecrated ground. He said he would do so, but to make certain that he would fulfill his promise he was told that the seven beings would remain all night with the woman and watch him remove her at dawn. At sunrise, he unearthed the woman's body and carried her up the hill where he reburied her in the church cemetery. (Elizabeth Marshall 2003b)

The colonial and neocolonial world of the Mi'kmaq has been characterized by marginalization, cultural assault, and rampant illness of all forms; and until recently, this community had little efficacy in arresting this cycle of destruction. There has been a totality of chaos at the foundation of the modern Mi'kmaq world, and the chaos within this *new*

arché (to use Long's words) is reminiscent perhaps in its latent possibilities of that at the root of many originary myths of which we read in *Alpha*—myths of World Parents, or a united earth and sky, in which offspring exist in darkness as no more than potentialities, and in which the union must be ruptured for both offspring and an ordered world to come into existence. Within the chaos that characterizes the unilateral power relations of the myth from Antigonish, the seven offspring require just such a rupture for their voices to be heard. In both cases, light enacts the separation that heralds a new order within which these offspring become agents rather than shadows (1983: 72-73, 80).

Long wrote toward the end of *Alpha* that myth can be used as a tool for historical research; and then considered the question of whether myth can be a "mode of orientation in the modern period" (1983: 218). As a tool for understanding, the power of myth cannot be overestimated. In the myth at Antigonish, I was afforded a glimpse of the meaning of what had previously appeared to have been rather arbitrary discussions. Broken treaties and institutionalized abusive treatment of children resided metaphorically with the priest at the top of the hill, while disease and silence were the inheritances of the offspring of this chaos. Redemption from chaos was possible only by means of an impetus from the earth far below, with which the people shared a sacred relationship. As Albert said to me, only the Mi'kmaq appear capable of understanding, and tending to, the welfare of an oyster (Albert Marshall 2003). As the first rays of light broke through the darkness, order began to be restored and, within that order, the silent marginalized were able to overtake the space from which chaos emanated—a cemetery, the Supreme Court, or the academy. As a microcosm, the myth is perhaps a sacred model of a Mi'kmaq world that may come into being within the parameters of modernity; and as such, represents a significant mode by which myth can be a medium of orientation in the modern period.

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Notes

1. Charles H. Long, *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (New York: George Braziller Publishers, 1963); Long, *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (New York: MacMillan, 1969); and *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1983). All citations in this article are taken from the Scholars Press edition (1983).
2. Silas Rand (1971: xliv) claimed that “He was, to say the least, almost an object of worship.”
3. Leland suggested: “When we, however, remember that the Eskimo once ranged as far south as Massachusetts, that they did not reach Greenland till the fourteenth century, that they had for three centuries intimate relations with Scandinavians, that they were very fond of legends, and that the Wabanaki even now mingle with them, the marvel would be that the Norsemen had not left among them traces of their tales or of their religion. But I do not say that this was positively the case; I simply set forth in this book a great number of curious coincidences, from which others may draw their own conclusions. I confess that I cannot account for these resemblances save by the so-called “historical theory” of direct transmission....”
4. According to Butler, ships go into Little Narrows, “the epicenter of the MSX outbreak,” to get gypsum, and dump the water to make space for their cargo. Little Narrows flows directly into the Brasdor Lakes.
5. In 1997, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples found that “residential schools severely disrupted Aboriginal families, cultures and identities.”
6. The Mi'kmaq share this insufficiency with the Maliseet community, both of whom also have among the highest levels of “on-reserve social assistance dependency.”
7. The lawyers were Douglas Brown, Joe B. Marshall, Jim Michael, and Paul Prosper.
8. Long, *Alpha*, 217.

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2003a Conversation with author at Sydney, N.S. (July 11).

2003b Conversation with author at Sydney, N.S. (July 12).

2003c Conversation with author at Sydney, N.S. (August 5).

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