

Folklore and the Aurora

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The Aurora Borealis is a natural phenomenon of striking beauty and overwhelming presence in certain parts of the world. It is therefore natural to ask what effect these northern lights have had on the native cultures in the auroral zones. Since the sun, moon, and stars all have a place in the mythology of most primitive cultures, it is not surprising that mention of the aurora is prevalent in the legends and folklore of the people who live within regular view of it.

This paper does not attempt to delve into all the various historical sightings and accompanying explanations of the aurora but rather to relate some of the myths and legends built around the northern lights. There exist extensive listings of historical references to the aurora [Petrie, 1963], but it is not until one consults the folktales of the northern cultures that these sightings have any legendary importance. Auroral displays are connected to and explained by myths of

great variety, and even today the northern lights appear in short stories and ballads such as the works of *Service* [1944].

The body of this paper is mainly the result of an ongoing literature search for specific details as to just what various people believed was the cause of the aurora. This is not meant to be exhaustive but rather to give a wide variety of accounts both in geographic area and in basic content of the myth.

North American Eskimos

Naive simplicity often characterizes explanations that Eskimo folklore gives to natural phenomena. Folklore indicates that the early Eskimos were usually content with the all-sufficient answer, 'caused by spirit agencies,' and required no further explanation. To the Eskimos near the Hudson Strait, the auroras were simply the torches of spirits who were leading the souls of those who had just died to paradise. The swishing noise was

caused by the voices of spirits trying to communicate with people on earth. These Eskimos thought that by answering them in a whisper you could send messages to the dead through the spirits [Aurora, 1970].

To the Eskimos of Alaska, the west coast of the Hudson Bay, and west Greenland, the aurora represented the struggles of the spirits as they played football, as is shown in the following excerpt from the account of the Fifth Thule Expedition by *Rasmussen* [1929]:

The dead suffer no hardship, wherever they may go, but most prefer nevertheless to dwell in the Land of Day, where the pleasures appear to be without limit. Here, they are constantly playing ball, the Eskimos' favourite game, laughing and singing, and the ball they play with is the skull of a walrus. The object is to kick the skull in such a manner that it always falls with its tusks downward, and thus sticks fast in the ground. It is this ball game of the departed souls that appears as the aurora borealis, and is heard as a whistling, rustling, crackling sound. The noise is made by the souls as they run across the frost-hardened snow of the heavens. If one happens to be out alone at night when the aurora borealis is visible, and hears this whistling sound, one has only to whistle in return and the lights will come nearer, out of curiosity.

Variations on this theme include the belief of Angmagsalik Eskimos of east Greenland that the aurora was caused by children who were stillborn or were put to death, and they were believed to be playing ball with their afterbirth [Weyer, 1969].

Other Eskimo explanations of the aurora include that of the Copper Eskimos of the Coronation Gulf, who thought the aurora was a manifestation of the spirits that brought good weather [Weyer, 1969]. To the Point Barrow, Alaska, Eskimos the northern lights were greatly feared, and they always carried a knife as protection against them or threw dogs' excrement and urine at them [Weyer, 1969].

For several tribes of Indians the aurora borealis was explained through lengthy myths. The lights themselves were thought to be a manifestation of some action by the legendary hero about whom the myth was created. The aurora plays

the part of an advisor to Chief He-Holds-the-Earth in an Onondaga Indian genesis myth [*Mythology of All Races*, 1964, pp. 35 and 36].

The Ottawa Indians of the Manitoulin Islands in Canada said that the aurora was a sign from their benefactor, Nanahboozho, who created the world [*Hamilton*, 1903]. This demigod made of a piece of mud a large island which he placed in the agitated waters, where it continued to increase until it formed the earth as it is now. He continued to reside with men for some time after the flood, instructing them in the use of many things necessary for their well-being. Hamilton continues:

He then told them he was going away from them, that he would fix his permanent residence in the North, and that he would never cease to take a deep interest in their welfare. As proof of his regard for mankind, he assured them that he would from time to time raise large fires, the reflection of which should be visible to them. Hence the northern lights are regarded by the Indians as the reflection of the great fire kindled occasionally for the purpose of reminding them of the assurance made to them by their benefactor.

In the northwest there were several esoteric fraternities or secret societies in which membership was hereditary. The Kwakiutl had one such society, the Cannibal Society, whose members believed in a great Cannibal Spirit in the north named 'Baxbakualanuchsiwae,' which stands for 'the first to eat man at the mouth of the river', (the Arctic Ocean was conceived as a river running north into arctic regions). From the abode of the Cannibal Spirit, the Kwakiutl said, red smoke used to rise. Sometimes this 'cannibal pole' as it was referred to, was the rainbow or the Milky Way, and it is possible that the Cannibal himself was originally a war god typified by the aurora borealis [*Mythology of All Races*, 1964, p. 249].

A beautiful story of the Dog-Rib tribe of the Chippewyan Indians is the Legend of Ithenhiela [*Bell*, 1903]. The story is placed in the great Canadian Northwest, far to the east of the Mackenzie River. In

the story an escaping servant boy, Ithenhiela, throws down a clod of earth that becomes hills, a piece of moss that becomes a muskeg swamp, and a stone that becomes the Rocky Mountains. Finally, he climbs a tree that grows up to the sky, where he assists in recovering the medicine belt that allows the sun to shine. As a reward the great chief gives Ithenhiela his beautiful daughter Estanda, and they live forever in the sky. When the northern lights danced across the sky, the Indians saw in them the fingers of Ithenhiela beckoning them to the home he had found so far away.

Another American Indian explanation for the aurora comes from the Fox Indians. 'In the winter' [*Jones*, 1911-1912], 'flames of fires flash upwards from the place where the Northern Sky meets the earth. They are the ghosts of our slain enemies trying to rise. They are restless for revenge. The sight of them is an ill omen; it is a sign of war and pestilence.'

Scandinavian and Scottish

Only a few references to the aurora borealis are found from northern Europe; in most of these, the lights are connected with fighting.

According to the Finnish Lapps, the aurora borealis was the dead in battle, who as spirits still continued battling with one another in the air. The Russian Lapps declared that the aurora was the spirits of the murdered; these lived in a house in which at times they gathered together and began stabbing one another to death, covering the floor with blood. They were afraid of the sun, and hid themselves from its rays. The aurora appeared when the souls of the murdered began their slaughter; hence the Lapps feared it [*Mythology of All Races*, 1964, p. 81]. In Scotland there is a tale of the 'slaugh,' or spirit world, which is constantly at war [*Mackenzie*, 1935, p. 222]:

They fight battles in the air as men do on earth. They may be heard and seen on clear frosty nights, advancing and retreating, retreating and advancing against one another....

The 'Everlasting Battle' is also fought by the Fir Chlis (aurora

borealis) and the blood of the wounded 'falling to the earth and becoming congealed, forms the coloured stones called blood stones, known in the Hebrides also by the name fuil siochaire (fairy blood).' The writer has heard stories of the 'nimble men,' or 'merry dancers,' engaging in clan fights for the possession by rival chiefs of a fairy lady. The red cloud (aurora) seen below the streamers when they are particularly vivid is called the pool of blood.

Siberian

Northern Asia, although high in latitude, is a good distance away from the auroral zone, and hence references to the aurora from this region are scarce. The Chuvash, a Siberian tribe, believed in the 'Suratan-Tura,' a birth-giving heaven. The name is connected with the aurora borealis, since they believed that the heavens gave birth to a son during this phenomenon. This Suratan-Tura was said to lessen the agonies of a woman in child birth [*Mythology of All Races*, 1964, p. 398]. The Chukchee in the northeast corner of Asia believed that the aurora was a dwelling chiefly for those who died a violent death [*Mythology of All Races*, 1964, p. 82].

The Estonians near the Baltic Sea saw in the northern lights a heavenly war. On the island of Osel they said that during the holy nights when the heavens would open one might have seen two armed fighting men, eager to give battle to one another, but god would not allow it and separated them [*Mythology of All Races*, 1964, p. 81].

Aurora Australis

The only land mass in the vicinity of the normal southern auroral oval is Antarctica, which has no native population. One of the two mythological references the author has found relating to the 'southern lights' comes from New Zealand. The Maori believed that the aurora australis was a great fire which was lighted by their ancestors whose canoes had drifted far to the south into the cold antarctic sea [*Aurora*, 1970].

This last reference comes from

Norman Tindale, an anthropologist who lived for many years with an aboriginal race in Australia (private communication, 1974):

The only recollections I have of the aurora australis are in the mythology and traditions of the Tangane-kald, the Ramindjeri of Encounter Bay, and the Kaurna or Adelaide tribe. They regard the remote, and to them inaccessible, Kangaroo Island as the home of the dead. In one language it is called Karta, and they infer that the spirits of the dead are living there because they can see the lights of their campfires. I feel certain that they are seeing the aurora; Kangaroo Island has not been inhabited for at least 7000 years.

Conclusion

For researchers today the aurora may well be a fascinating and complex phenomenon, but to fully appreciate its beauty and importance, one must also realize that to some of

our ancestors it was a manifestation of god.

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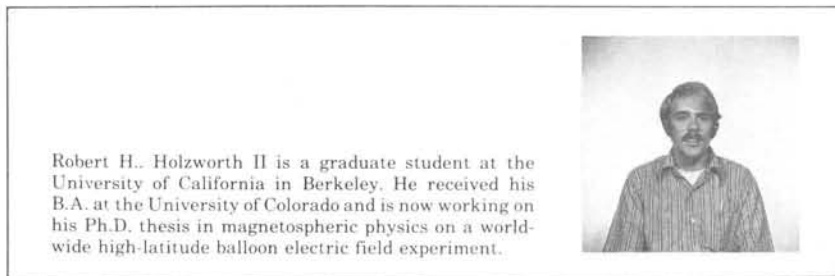
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International Conference on the Nature of the Oceanic Crust December 4-6, 1975 La Jolla, California

PURPOSE: As Phase III of the Deep Sea Drilling Project (DSDP) is concluded, and the International Program of Ocean Drilling (IPOD) commences, it is an opportune time to summarize and evaluate data obtained on the igneous and metamorphic rocks of the oceanic crust. Major objectives of the meeting will be to 1) assess the present level of understanding of the oceanic crust, and 2) identify major questions and problems which can be solved during IPOD.

PROGRAM AND FORMAT: The subject matter of contributed and invited papers will include petrology, mineralogy, geochemistry and physical properties of DSDP hard rock cores. The program will also pertain to the oceanic crust objectives of IPOD. Ample time for informal discussion will be scheduled. Following the meeting there will be a field trip to visit California ophiolites.

CONVENORS COMMITTEE: Fred A. Frey (Chairman), Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, 54-122 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139 (617-253-2818)

Ian D. MacGregor (Petrology/Liaison with Ocean Crust Panel)

James Natland (Petrology/Liaison with DSDP)

James J. Papike (Mineralogy/Petrology)

Edward Schreiber (Seismology/Geophysics)

Norman D. Watkins (Paleomagnetism/Geophysics)

FIELD TRIP: A three-day ophiolite field trip is planned that will include the Point Sal ophiolite (Leader: Cliff Hops) and the Smartville ophiolite in the Sierra Nevada foothill belt (Leader: Eldridge Moores) beginning directly after the Oceanic Crust conference and concluding in San Francisco for the Fall Annual Meeting. The approximate cost will be \$15. To make a tentative reservation and receive further details write to the field trip coordinator: R. G. Coleman, U. S. Geological Survey, 345 Middlefield Road, Menlo Park, California 94025.