The Three Faces of Katahdin

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This paper developed from the 1987 Algonquian Conference held in Washington, when Vincent Erickson and I did some research at Georgetown University Archives and found an early manuscript of the Pamola story by Virgil Barber who was missionary at Old Town between 1828-30 and in 1832 (LaPomarda 1977:16).

Speck (1935:4, 75-79) had three classifications of Penobscot beliefs in the supernatural: the Supreme Being, Gluskabe the Transformer, and Supernatural Creatures and Phenomena of the Wilderness. Tales of Katahdin, the Man, follow those of Gluskabe because Speck concluded that to the Penobscot Katahdin was the next most important Supernatural Creature.

Mt. Katahdin is unique as being one of two New England Mountains that retains its Indian name (Bent 1915:258). Katahdin, meaning ‘high hill’, rises alone almost a mile in height, and is a prominent landmark easily seen from sections of the traditional territories held by the Penobscot, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy and Norridgewock tribes. The spirit of the mountain called “Pamola” or “Bumolai” meaning ‘comes flying’ (Speck 1928:193) could take one of three anthropomorphic forms: the spirit of the night air, the storm bird, or a giant. Each had his own personality: one was “almost harmless”, another “hideously destructive”, and the other “rather friendly” (Eckstorm 1924:3).

1. Pamola, The Spirit of the Night Air, Almost Harmless or Benevolent

The Penobscot Pamola has been described by Speck (1928:193) as: “Once a year he flies across the sky, propelling himself with bull-roarers, giving three cries, one at the horizon, one at the zenith, and one at the other horizon. He may be stopped by an ascending column of smoke and will then grant supplications for aid.”

Francois Neptune, a St. Francis Wewenoc, gave a benevolent Pamola version. An esteemed hunter who had a streak of bad luck saw Pamola’s reflection in the water where he was about to drink. He hides, but is tricked
to come out. Pamola apparently knows the problem and tells the hunter not to be afraid but to climb on his back and he will take him to a good hunting spot. Pamola travels very fast through the air. When he lands, he tells the hunter that he must hurry because other shaman will awake soon. Pamola must return the hunter to his camp and be back before they arrive. The hunter had good hunting ever after (Speck 1928:193-194). Pamola’s primary duty was to help the hunter.

2. *Katahdin the Giant, Destructive and Evil*

The oldest version of Pamola was recorded by Gyles who lived as a prisoner of a Maliseet Medctic family from 1688 to 1696 (Drake 1851:105). Gyles referred to Pamola as “the hairy one”. Pamola was used as a disciplinary threat by a group unaccustomed to using physical punishment; Pamola was to be feared. All the adjectives used to describe Pamola in this tale except “hairy” have been lost. The term “hairy” emphasized an image of a wild, part animal, part man creature creating a scary figure to a tribe that had little body hair. Later descriptions would include wings, claw-like fingernails, and hoofs.

The early adventurers who dared to ascend Katahdin above the tree line found that their Indian guides made every attempt to dissuade them from going beyond the tree line, the domain of an evil Pamola (Morrison 1982:187) who was ready to pounce on and carry off anyone arrogant enough to enter his territory. They would never be seen again.

The late Peter Paul described Pamola as one who flew so high that he could be heard but not seen and would descend and seize anyone who had offended him. If a hunter in his camp heard Pamola, he would assume a low profile until he was sure that Pamola had passed well beyond his territory. It was possible to unknowingly offend the Spirit. We were not the first to invent a spy in the sky!

Leland and Prince (1902:364) defined both Pamola and Chi-bel-lowkq as a “night air sprite”, but further described Chi-bel-lowkq as a “monster consisting solely of head and legs without a body. It was always seen in the crotch of a tree.” Adney argued that one would only see him if he called on him for help (Adney 1887). The late Peter Paul identified Vetromile’s sketch of Pamola, as:

Chi-bel-lowkq meaning ‘scary voice’, a scary spirit of the night having very long legs but a body so small that his crotch was in his chest. He flew so high that you couldn’t see him but you could hear him for miles. The nonbeliever would say that it was only the wind that you heard. Indians who were in great trouble and needed extraordinary help could call on him with a loud whoop, but woe to the Indian who did not have good reason to call him. One hoped that he had not unknowingly offended the spirit so he would make
himself as inconspicuous as possible until Chi-bel-lowkq was well out of his territory. Only then was he assured that he wouldn’t be snatched up and carried away to the mountain.

Those who are familiar with Pamola will recognize his characteristics in Paul’s description of Chi-bel-lowkq; it becomes obvious that Leland and Prince misunderstood their informant when they wrote that Chi-bel-lowkq “was always seen in the crotch of a tree”, instead of “his crotch was in his chest” as shown in Vetromile’s sketch of Pamola. By 1900 there were two labels for the same spirit.

There were two similar stories depicting this mutation of Pamola, a version for boys and another for girls. Vetromile (1866) ties both stories together (cf. Sprague 192:215–220); others published each as unrelated stories. The hunter’s version is first. A young hunter goes near Katahdin for his fall hunt and is snow bound by an early storm that dumped several feet of snow. After several days of assessing his situation the hunter decides that his only recourse is to call on Pamola for help. Pamola answers the hunter’s call, notes his bravery, and offers his help, taking him to his mountain. Subsequently the young hunter married Pamola’s daughter. About a year later the hunter was permitted to return to Old Town on the condition that he never marry. He would be welcome to return to Katahdin any time. He received a warm welcome on his return to Old Town. One day he was persuaded to marry; the morning after the ceremony he was never seen again. Pamola had whisked him back to the mountain hideout.

The girl’s version tells of a young girl who would not believe in Pamola unless she saw him. One day when her family was camping near Katahdin and she was alone, Pamola appeared to her and reproached her for not believing in him. Then he carried her to his mountain. About a year later she became pregnant and was told that she could return to her village and have the baby who would have extraordinary powers that were to be used to help Indians. The child would have to be watched carefully because of his special powers. The boy was born. When meat was needed, he had only to point his forefinger at a deer and it was killed. One day he pointed at a man killing him. Sometime later the Indians wanted her to marry. She refused knowing that Pamola would return her and her son to the mountain. Finally she was persuaded to marry. On the evening of the wedding celebration she disappeared and was not seen again (Sprague 1922:217–220). We see Pamola wanting to help the isolated hunter in need; a proud Pamola who admired the arrogant girl who must learn to respect tradition; and in both situations an angry, vengeful Pamola who took advantage of human frailties.

Leland was critical of Vetromile’s version that gave Pamola two very opposite characterizations: evil and benevolent (Leland 1884:257). Eckstorm, a severe critic of Vetromile, concluded that Vetromile was correct on this
point (Eckstorm 1924:4-5), but preferred Leland’s version obtained from Penobscot Maria Sakis (Eckstorm 1924:12).

The Barber (1828) manuscript is the oldest account of the girl’s version. The girl’s story appealed to Barber who found it to be moralistic concerning women’s gossip. He used the format of a finely crafted epic poem to create the story of the girl’s encounter with Pamola. Although it predates Vetromile’s by more than 30 years, both stories follow quite closely. Upon Vetromile’s arrival from Europe he attended Georgetown University and obtained his D.D. in 1846 (Hart 1881:32). Barber was on the faculty of Georgetown until his death in 1847. Vetromile remained at Georgetown until he was assigned to the Maine Indian Mission 1854 (LaPomarda 1977:22). He possibly became aware of Barber’s poem during his preparation for the Maine Mission.

Abby Alger (1897:15-18) introduced new elements into a Penobscot girl’s version. A disobedient girl runs off alone, then a handsome man comes along and carries her off. There were three Thunder sons: the two oldest “cool the hot air, revive the parched fields and the crops, and destroy only that which is harmful to the earth.” The youngest was fierce and cruel. He “slays men and beasts and destroys property.” Soon she wanted to return home and was permitted to do so. The two older brothers represent the benevolent qualities of Pamola; the youngest the evil side of Pamola. Thunder was a friend to the Wabanaki.

More recent Passamaquoddy beautiful girl versions refer to the girl as “Red Rose” (Atkinson 1920:121-122). Pamola permits Red Rose to return to help the Passamaquoddy every 100 years.

3. The Storm Bird, Culloo, Friendly or Evil

Stories of Culloo, a giant bird sitting on top of Katahdin flapping its wings creating the wind were popular. After a period of extremely high winds a mighty hunter goes to the bird, tricking it, and preventing it from flapping its wings, calming the air so that the waters become stagnant and unfit for man. The hunter must return and convince Culloo to flap its wings gently, because wind is necessary for the life of the Indians. The Micmac wind bird sits on a high rock on the coast. For the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet and St. Francis Wuchosen represented the good giant bird who sat on the mountain flapping its wings creating the wind that made proper living conditions for the Indians. Micmac versions use no other name for the bird but Tumilkoontaoo, ‘Broken Wing’, (Rand 1894:360-363). Some Wind bird stories name Gluskap as the hunter. A Tobique device has the Chief consult Gluskabe (the Maliseet add a suffix indicating that Gluskabe no longer is, but was) who designates the “Cariboo boys” with the task of taming Wuchosen (Mechling 1914:45).
The Missisquoi Abenaki account credits Gluskabe with taming the wind eagle. The big bird's mountain home is unnamed and we are only told that it is "far from here" (Bruchac 1985:10); after they moved from Norridgewolk to Missisquoi Katahdin lost its identity.

Another early version that includes Pamola's storm-creating power was recorded by the Rev. Marcus Keep circa 1845. In this account the beautiful girl is secretly meeting Katahdin. As she is of marriageable age, her parents plan a wedding for her. They with many of the Penobscot went to the game-plentiful Katahdin country for the wedding. They enjoyed magnificent weather while they hunted and prepared for the wedding. Their hunting was very successful. A small distant cloud went unnoticed by the happy people preparing the wedding feast. Suddenly the sky was black. There was a deluge of hail and rain with bursts of roaring thunder. When the storm passed, the girl was gone and the clouds flew to Mount Katahdin. The people concluded that Pamola had taken the girl to the mountain (Eckstorm Collection, University of Maine).

The Passamaquoddy also connect thunder and lightning to Katahdin. Leland (1884:259–267) obtained several thunder stories from Tomah Joseph, probably the father of the Tomah Joseph who guided Roosevelt at Campobello. The Sabatis Tomah, who died in 1954, was his son; the masterful story teller of his generation, also had these stories in his repertoire. Alger (1893:651) collected a Penobscot Thunder story about ten years after Leland obtained his Passamaquoddy versions.

Although the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot stories differ, each follows the themes of the Katahdin the Man story. The roaring wind of a thunder storm picks up a young hunter and takes him to the village of the Thunders. He is a made a thunder in a "thunderfying ceremony" and is given wings to wear so that he can accompany the Thunders when they play ball. The big bird element appears as a bird to the south that the Thunders are always trying to kill, but they never succeed. When the Indian wishes to return home, he is permitted to do so. The Thunders help the Indians by shooting "thunder-bullets" to the earth that were good luck charms for the Indian who found them. Leland's informant Peter Sabatis found a thunder-bullet on Campobello Island. In 1953 Sabattis Tomer showed me his prized, good luck thunder bullets. It took the same sort of courage to pass the terrifying "thunderfying ceremony" as it did to face Pamola. Leland (1884:257) could not see a connection between the spirit of the night air and the evil Katahdin but admitted that Pamola "was perhaps at an early period the spirit of lightening. Gyles recalled an evil "Galloua":

... A Boy was hunting with his bow and arrow at the foot of a rocky mountain, when the galloua came diving through the air, grasped the boy in her talons, and although he was eight or ten years of age, she soared aloft and laid him
in her nest, food for the young. The boy lay still on his face, but observed two of the young birds in the nest with him, having much fish and flesh to feed upon. The old one seeing they would not eat the boy, took him up in her claws and returned him to the place from whence she took him. (Drake 1862:92-93)

The fearful form of Pamola dives from the sky snatching up the boy, but when the young birds will not eat him, the good Culloo returns the boy to his camp. The boy's behaviour in the nest facing the young birds was regarded as that of a fearless hunter.

Penobscot John Neptune said that he encountered the evil Pamola about 1845 when he was camped at Katahdin and gave the following description: "... a great beast, with mighty wings that dragged on the ground, with a head as large as four horses, and with horrible beak and claws" (Eckstorm 1924:5). John said that the dreaded Pamola woke in the middle of the night banging on his door trying to break it down, but it was frozen solid and did not give so Pamola went on his way.

A Penobscot version of the Pamola story was told in the 1950s by a good story teller, the late Walter Ranco. He referred to a very large, ancient tree at the fork in the road near the entrance to the village as the "Pamola tree". His story follows:

Dances and community events often were held at the Pamola tree. In the old days the Indians danced all night. One woman was unfaithful to her husband. She loved to dance and at the dances tried to find another man. Her husband couldn't control her. One night a stranger appeared at the dance. He was handsome and well dressed, much better than any of the chiefs. She succeeded in attracting him and danced with her all night. One thing that was strange about him was that his finger nails were like claws. Near the end of the dance a moccasin fell off showing a hoof instead of a foot. He saw that she became afraid of him so he grabbed her and started to take her away. She screamed but no one heard her. She did not stop screaming until they arrived at Mt. Katahdin. Some people who were camping at Chimney Pond saw the mountain open up and then close. The woman was away for a year and then came back. Pamola told her that if she wasn't faithful to her husband, he would take him away. She still enjoyed dancing but remained with her husband. Gradually she became restless and forgot about Pamola's warning and became as bad as ever. One night Pamola came and took her husband away. He was never seen again.

It is interesting to see how this version was recast to relate to a contemporary primary problem. Some may want to classify Ranco's tale with those of the almost harmless Pamola because he was trying to help an Indian, but Pamola was introduced as a fearsome fellow.

In the 20th century Mt. Katahdin has served as the site of tales where shamans such as John Neptune performed outstanding shamanistic feats such as producing oranges after being encamped in the shadow of Katahdin.
for several weeks in midwinter when temperatures often fall to -30 degrees F, hanging clothes on a sunbeam or column of smoke, or producing a supply of tobacco when the hunters had run out for a week or more.

4. Importance

The importance of the Pamola stories is that they were the earliest recorded Wabanaki folk tale and cover a period of 300 years, from about 1675 to 1975. The tale provides significant insight about 17th-century Wabanaki. Changes can be noted during the acculturation process. Under Christian influence Pamola's image has become more satanic with clawlike fingers and hoofs.

Leland, (1884:112–113) who was one of the first folklorists to collect and study Gluskabe stories, thought that the Gluskabe version was older than the hunter version. The earliest published Gluskap story was in Joseph Bar­ratt's The Indians of New England in 1851. Although Jesuit records include Indian cultural heroes, the Recollects and Sulpicians, the first Maine/Maritime missionaries omit mention of Gluskap in their known records. If the missionaries did not accept the Gluskap stories, probably the Wabanaki did not feel comfortable telling them to the whites until the mid 1800s. The Gluskap cycle was just becoming known when Leland began collecting Wabanaki folkstories. Gluskap does not appear in the published Pamola stories until Rand's collection of 1874. Gluskap, Pamola, and Pamola's son had stony eyebrows, symbols of very powerful figures. Gluskap came to terms with the wind bird but never conquered him. His other challenge that he failed to conquer was a baby! The hunter versions are much stronger in that they imply that the situation does not call for a cultural hero, but any good hunter could become involved with Pamola. Although Pamola's main concern was to help Indians, the Wabanaki were dissuaded from taking advantage of his good side. He was feared in the role of a disciplinarian. Some form of the Pamola tradition was known to all the Wabanaki tribes: Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, Micmac, and St. Francis. The Pamola stories include the following characteristics: physical strength, mighty shamanistic powers, the gift of knowing the plight or situation of all Wabanaki, ability to fly, a dual personality, help Indians, and a disciplinarian.

5. Conclusion

Eckstorms three classifications of Pamola are over-simplified to fit the complex Pamola images that I see. Did Speck's Wewenoc helper Pamola have the same face as Paul's dreaded spirit of the night air who could carry people off to a terrible fate? The Evil Pamola sometimes uses a storm to aid him in carrying off his victim. The Thunder brothers possess the ability to fly and have traits of the storm bird, night air spirits, do-gooders, and
Vetromile's version of Pamola
(Vetromile 1866)
evil giants who snatch up people. Vetromile’s arrogant disbeliever meets a punishing Pamola; Alger’s disobedient child a forgiving Pamola. There may be subtle differences in words or pronunciation that are lost in translation that defined to the Indian which of Pamola’s faces was involved in the story being told, but I found it difficult to match the stories to Eckstorm’s classifications. Where is the line drawn between the benevolent and the evil of a strict disciplinarian who will do extreme good or terrifying punishment? Further study of this folk tradition should provide new insight into the Wabanaki.

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