

# Hearing Between the Words: Toward the Slow Study of Traditional Riddles

by David E. K. Smith and Mary Kancewick

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In the manner of the Denaakk'e-Koyukon Dene-Athabaskan riddling tradition, we first ask your permission to join us in riddling.

*Nę tse kurutłtsara.*  
I am going to propose riddles to you.

Taking your continued reading of this article as agreement, we propose a traditional riddle.

*Tłá-dzor-karas'ána*  
Here is a riddle:  
  
*Nonur radarast'ol.*  
I go reaching beyond the rocks.

We ask that the reader approach this riddle with us as a co-puzzler who has been offered a cultural capsule to unpack.

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The riddles of cultural riddling traditions, and especially those of endangered or lost riddling traditions, contain enigmas that can never be fully understood outside their time, place, language, and culture. For that reason, we maintain that the exercise of pursuing greater understanding of such riddles—while holding in mind the key premise that understanding will inevitably be ever-limited—is in itself an important, worthy pedagogical goal. Riddle study thus becomes an exercise in observation and perception, of limitation and self-correction, and of infinite persistence—skills essential to cross-cultural, cooperative decision making. We offer that the slow study of traditional riddles, especially of locally Indigenous traditional riddles, should in this spirit be employed across curricula. It is our hope to engender in educators a new willingness to source Indigenous riddle traditions to help students learn to face incomprehensibility with open mindedness, contextual sensitivity, and infinite patience and persistence and to move toward an evolving understanding that promotes respect, sharing, and cooperation.

The authors are non-Native residents of the lands upon which Athabascan peoples have lived for thousands of years, and upon which the authors have resided for three or more decades. We will therefore attempt to model this process of slow study using a riddle from the Dene-Athabascan tradition of Alaska. We are a young educator and an elder poet who strive to honor the lands and the peoples of a now-shared state. It is important to note that the collective term “Alaska Native” predominates in the state because of its legal use in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. The collective term references the various Indigenous peoples who populate the state, including the Iñupiaq, Yup’ik, Aleut, Athabascan, and Southeast Coastal Indigenous peoples. The word “Native” when referring to Alaska Natives is always capitalized. When speaking of a single cultural group, the group’s name for itself is preferred. The riddle offered here is a riddle of the Denaakk’e people.

### **Traditional Riddling in the Alaska Classroom**

Riddling traditions are ubiquitous worldwide and have long been recognized for their educational merit as mind exercises and their role in transmitting culture. In cultures where such traditions continue, there has been a recent push to promote their recognition and to support these educational roles (Akinyemi 2015, Januseva and Lozanovska 2013, Gachanja and Kebaja 2011). Where such riddling traditions are endangered or lost, as in the case of the Dene-Athabascan traditions of Alaska, riddles with their answers have been presented to students as examples of environmental observations in social studies units, as an introduction to metaphor in language arts units, and as an imitative framework for museum scavenger hunts. Dene-Athabascan riddles have been included in such curricular materials developed by the Alaska Native Education Board (Dauenhauer 1975a, 1975b, 1976), the Indian Education Program of the Anchorage School District (Partnow 1975, 1985), the Alaska Department of Education/University of Alaska Fairbanks Department of Geography/Alaska Geographic Alliance (Farrell 1994, Partnow 1995), as well as the Anchorage Museum (Partnow 2013) and in Canada (*A Dene Way of Life* 2006). The six atrium columns of the Anchorage Museum presently feature a Dena’ina riddle each, set low enough for most school-aged children to access.

To determine whether these materials reached students, we spoke with educators, teachers of teachers, and curriculum creators in Alaska—including Patricia Partnow, who helped develop many of the curricula mentioned above. We found no data to indicate to what extent or how successfully any of these materials have been used. Our search revealed a persistent lack of awareness among Alaskan educators of the existence of traditional riddling.

To date, Alaska Dene-Athabascan riddle sources include the collections of Jetté (1913, Denaakk’e-Koyukon, 110 riddles), Chief Henry (1976, Denaakk’e-Koyukon, 28 riddles), and Wassillie and Kari (1981, Dena’ina, 36 riddles). Guedon (1971) includes five Nee’aaneegn’-Upper Tanana riddles in her PhD dissertation and Kari (forthcoming 2021) includes two (Lower) Tanana riddles in an upcoming language dictionary. Of the 11 Alaska Dene-Athabascan language groups, only four have documented riddle traditions: Denaakk’e-Koyukon, Dena’ina, Upper Tanana, and (Lower) Tanana. The riddle collections show minimal overlap. The best documented riddling tradition is that of the Denaakk’e-Koyukon people, with two primary sources, one the work of an outsider ethnographer and the other the work of Native speakers of the language. Thus, in this

article, we focus on the Denaakk'e-Koyukon tradition. This not to say that the other traditions should not be explored. The Denaakk'e-Koyukon language is spoken in 11 remote villages along the Koyukuk and middle Yukon rivers. The language has three distinct dialect variations: Upper, Central, and Lower. Out of a population of about 2,300, some 300 people speak the language, about 13 percent. The language vitality is rated as "moribund" (Koyukon, Alaska Native Language Center).

### **Approaching the Riddle**

As noted earlier, Alaska educators have used traditional riddles in limited contexts, but previous users did not explore fully the cultural puzzle that they provide. To this end, we see potential in approaching the traditional riddle more broadly as a cultural capsule. Puzzling through a riddle arising outside one's culture, especially from a lost or endangered riddling culture, requires asking many questions and holding multiple possible answers simultaneously. We begin by offering questions and observations from our (limited) perspectives, hoping to prompt questions and observations in the reader and as learners together increase our understanding of the riddle's possibilities. Such a shared process of thoughtful exploration is how we propose that riddles, as approachable capsules of culture, be reassessed as a rich pedagogical resource.

The chosen traditional riddle has been offered first in the original Denaakk'e-Koyukon Dene-Athabaskan language. Let's begin by unpacking these terms.

The word "Athabaskan" refers broadly to the interrelated complex of the languages of the peoples Indigenous to Interior Alaska, western Canada, the southern Oregon and northern California coast, and the desert Southwest and also refers to the peoples who speak these languages. The word "Athabaskan" has no relation to what the peoples call themselves, but rather is an Anglicized version of a Canadian Cree (not Dene/Athabaskan) word meaning "'where there are plants distributed in a net-like pattern,' referencing an expanse of reeds or reed-like grass in shallow water" (Krauss 1987). By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the word named a major lake—Lake Athabasca—that featured such shallow reedy expanses and was a border area between the Cree and the Chipewyan, who were part of what later came to be known as the Athabaskan language group. The name "Athabaskan" was given to the language group about 1826, by Albert Gallatin, friend and Secretary of the Treasury to Thomas Jefferson, who shared Jefferson's interests in American Indian language classification (Gallatin 1836).

The term that Athabaskan peoples have long used for themselves is *Dene* (sometimes written in an earlier time as *Ten'a*). This word has been commonly translated as and understood to mean "people" (Sapir 1915); however, the literal translation is more evocative: *de* means "flow" and *ne* means "mother-earth." As expressed by Canadian elementary school educators, "This encompasses an understanding that we as Dene people flow from Mother Earth and we are a people of the Creator and Creation" (*A Dene Way of Life* 2006, 2). The term *Dene* is widely used in Canada, and its use in Alaska is growing. The word *Dene* has been exclusively applied to northern Athabaskan speakers across Alaska and Canada. The designation "Koyukon" is a Russian spelling for an Iñupiaq word that a Russian trader applied to a tributary of the Yukon River, along which the speakers who call their language Denaakk'e, meaning "like the people" or "like us," live (*Koyukon* n.d.).

## Concerning Translation and Contextual Ethnographic Commentary

We've posed a Denaakk'e-Koyukon Dene-Athabascan riddle in English translation. Reading the riddle in English, you might think that you know the answer. But can your answer match the answer that the creator of the riddle intended if you know nothing about the creator, or about the language or culture or history or environment in which the riddle arose? Riddling is an allegorical and symbolic tradition set within the framework of cultural and environmental reference. A guess based upon your own contrasting language, history, culture, and environment is very different from the harder effort of an answer informed by a genuine attention and respect for another people's context—with the simultaneous understanding that some things will not translate, some things will be slow to be understood, and some things might never be understood.

With our proposed riddle being read in English translation, we must immediately ask ourselves, how much can the translator be trusted? Our chosen riddle was recorded by the Jesuit missionary Father Julius Jetté and published in his collection of traditional riddles in 1913, after he had lived among the Denaakk'e-Koyukon people and studied the language for about 15 years, while the riddling tradition was a living part of the culture. Jetté's collection is the earliest, largest, and most annotated documentation of Alaska Dene/Athabascan riddles and has subsequently been used as a key resource by both Native and non-Native scholars (see Dauenhauer 1975a, Jetté and Jones 2000). Jetté documents that there were riddles he did not understand. That self-awareness could have been respectful, but Jetté attributes his lack of understanding to "the narrow scope of an uncultured intellect" (1913, 185). Jetté recorded detailed observations of riddle language and cultural context, but he may have been critically blinded by the biases that caused him to describe the Denaakk'e-Koyukon people as "simple natives" and "savages," and the riddles as "crude" and "artless" (181). We have to ask ourselves, what might he have missed or misinterpreted in the context of his cultural biases? An example of cultural extension: Jetté renders the expression translated most directly as "Here is a riddle," as "Riddle-me," assuming an equivalency with his own cultural tradition over a more closely held translation. When offering the chosen riddle, we used the more direct translation of the traditional opening phrase over Jetté's matching of equivalence.

In his description of the Denaakk'e-Koyukon riddling tradition, Jetté alludes to the educational function of riddles, saying that riddling was how children and Elders alike would "sharpen their wits or quicken their memories" (182). He notes that the time for riddling begins just after winter solstice and seems to say that riddling might continue until summer solstice, as the Denaakk'e-Koyukon believed that the riddling helped along the lengthening of the days. He presents this as superstition, perhaps missing a cultural metaphorical connection between practicing and strengthening intellectual powers, and the strengthening of daylight. Richard Nelson (1983), who spent 16 months living in the villages of Huslia and Hughes, notes that "for the Koyukon, [the environment] is also sensitive to human behavior, because the natural and human communities originated together in the Distant Time and have never become completely separate" (33). Jetté notes that between summer solstice and winter solstice, riddling was taboo, as it could interfere with the natural course of nature. He does not make the connection that summer and fall were and are the hunting, fishing, and gathering times, the time not to practice, but to apply intellectual powers.

Jetté says that unlike stories, which were told in the dark when everyone was in bed, riddles were proposed and discussed “in the light” “night after night for hours” at lively “evening parties” that included both children and Elders. Jetté fails to make clear whether the riddling parties were held outside by moonlight and/or firelight, or inside by oil light. Importantly, Jetté notes, “To be considered correct, the answer has to be the very one which the riddler has in mind. It matters not whether a different one, offered by the guesser, would perhaps fit the question more aptly: for the aim of the Ten’a (Dene) in solving a riddle, is to get at the other man’s thought, and no wise to answer the question on its merits” (184). Emphasizing the importance and difficulty of finding the riddler’s intended answer, and clarifying Jetté’s reference to “in the light,” Dena’ina Athabascan Elder Albert Wassillie’s (1981) comments in the introduction to his collection of Dena’ina riddles, “Sometimes the solutions to riddles took a month or more to be correctly reached. Night after night, answers would be put forth as the people sat around the fire.”

Jetté (1913) tracks the frequent use of personification in the riddles. He observes that the riddle terms seem to incorporate an older, more poetic version of the language, testifying to the tradition’s antiquity, and that figurative language is very much emphasized—figurative language seems to be the point. Jetté suggests that at least some of the riddles are improvisations upon long-memorized lore. He writes with awareness that “our unfamiliarity...and our different view of it, would carry our thoughts in a widely diverging direction” (185). Jetté also asserts that, already then, more than a hundred years ago, the riddling tradition had begun to wane because of distractions and pressures of outside contact. Wassillie (1981) notes some 50 years later, “The telling of riddles is rapidly becoming a lost art” (2). Endangerment of riddling traditions in Indigenous cultures has been consistently linked to colonialism (see Akinyemi 2015).

### **Reaching Beyond the Rocks**

Jetté’s (1913) direct translation of our chosen riddle, #70 in his collection, goes like this: “the rocks beyond I-go-reaching.” His edited version goes like this: “I reach beyond the distant hills.” Did the Denaakk’e-Koyukon people equate “rocks” with “hills”? The village of Nulato where Jetté was based is surrounded by low-lying tundra-covered hills. Jetté might be onto something there. But might the “rocks” reference the more distant, more “rocky” mountains? The cultural anthropologist Richard Nelson, writes, “During the long nights, when a full moon circles high, the snow-covered mountains are often clearly visible at great distances, luminescent against the sky’s blackness. And indeed, the light shines far beyond them” (Nelson 1983). Is there more we are missing? Is there an endangered or lost metaphorical depth to the term that is translated as “rocks” (see Istrom and Pirainen 2012)? Did the Denaakk’e-Koyukon people know or believe that the moon is itself rock? For our translated version of the riddle, we took elements from both Jetté’s renderings, keeping the “rocks” for their essential ambiguity but adapting the verb structure for English readers. Access to Elder speakers of the Denaakk’e-Koyukon language would aid in this discussion. The key Elder resource in this case would be Denaakk’e-Koyukon Elder Eliza Jones, who worked 20 years with unpublished Jetté materials to complete the *Koyukon Athabascan Dictionary*. Now 83, she lives in the remote village of Koyukuk without email. A snail-mail letter was sent February 22, 2021, without response, as of submission date.

What else might we surmise? We might recognize that the riddle is being posed during the months of moonlight, and that the brightness of moonlight on snow provides significant illumination for a

substantial time in the subarctic. We might recognize that, especially at its nadir and in its fullness, this subarctic moon can clearly be seen to illuminate the far reaches of the landscape. On the other hand, we might remember that the riddles are told in the first place to encourage the return of the sun, which from its low angle on the horizon could be seen to be reaching, straining to return, from a distance. In the traditional Dene-Athabaskan story about how Raven brought humans light, Raven steals the moon first, but makes a bigger impression with the sun (Marshall 2011). Denaakk'e-Koyukon storytelling imagines the moon and sun as brother and sister (Nelson 1983). An Upper Tanana Elder tells a story about a boy empowered by the moon (David 1975). There is a Gwich'in Athabaskan story about a boy who follows the sun, working his way south, seeking lands with sun for six months rather than three months of the year (Wallis 1997, Yaska 2019).

Jetté's (1913) commentary admits that the Native language speaker would have a further linguistic clue: The verb form in the riddle can be understood in such a way that it would not apply to the sun. Did you reach the conclusion that the moon might be the answer? However, Jetté lists the sun as a second answer. A slightly different inflection of the verb form would open this possibility. In other words, we would have had to have been there—to hear the way the words of the riddle were said, before we could proceed to “hear between the words.” Traditional riddling is an oral tradition. The words of the page do not give us the inflection, or the facial expression, or the body language—any of which might have provided clues to the answer intended by the riddler.

We stop here, without a definitive answer for this riddle, but we have opened ourselves to what might have informed the riddler's intent. We understand now more about the culture and how the riddler might have intended the riddle to have been understood and answered. We will puzzle upon this riddle, perhaps forever, as clues continue to accrue.

### **Embracing an Ambiguous Conclusion**

Traditional riddles are compact cultural capsules that, cautiously unpacked, can reveal glimpses of another cultural universe. The interpretation of a riddle is a process that should be undertaken carefully and critically. It is in the process that we learn about a people and about an environment and about a way of life and about a tradition, and also about the way our own preconceptions and ignorance and laziness can get in the way of approaching better understandings. Jetté writes that, through riddling, the Denaakk'e-Koyukon become “proficient in the art of . . . ‘hearing between the words’” (Jetté 1913, 185), a highly prized accomplishment. Nora and Richard Dauenhauer (1984) point to the Denaakk'e-Koyukon cautionary tale of Gaadook (see also Pilot 1975) to emphasize the importance of this skill to this culture. The story of Gaadook, as the researchers, one Native and one not, write, is “about the socialization of a child who learns to communicate indirectly”:

In the beginning, he sleeps often and is otherwise very lackadaisical in doing his work. His mother gives directions indirectly and metaphorically—often in forms similar to riddles, especially when speaking about animals to be trapped. The child takes the instructions literally, with disastrous results. The story is complex and involves a transformation in which the child re-enters society as a fully awakened, useful and productive member, with skills in indirect communication. (1984, 26)

## Toward a Pedagogical Model

Working to emulate the teachings of Gaadook's mother, we have modeled a path for using riddles to help students to "hear between the words." We attempt to elucidate specific pedagogical strategies for targeting the traditional riddle to cultivate cultural intelligence. The guide may be applied to any chosen riddling tradition in any order that promotes the riddle investigation.

- *Choose a Riddle Tradition:* Traditional riddling is vibrant in many cultures all over the world, and many endangered and extinct traditions have been documented. You might consider looking for riddling traditions close to your current home, your homeland, or from your students' backgrounds.
- *Explore the Context:* Collaboratively investigate where your riddle comes from. Is the tradition living, endangered, or lost? Who uses this tradition and what language do they riddle in? From what natural and cultural environments do the riddles emerge? How do the people of this riddle tradition see the world? How has that worldview been affected by colonial forces? What is the historical context?
- *Unpack Relevant Terms:* What terms describe or define the people, place, or culture? What can the history of the terminology teach? Consider especially what the people from the riddling culture call themselves, their language, and their lands, in contrast to what others call them.
- *Know and Attempt to Follow Riddle Tradition Rules:* As you approach the riddle, attempt to abide by the rules of the riddling tradition. Is there a specific time of year that this lesson should be taught? Or perhaps a time of day? Should you be inside or outside? Is there a riddle ritual? Are riddles framed by introductions or conclusions?
- *Choose a Riddle:* Choose a single riddle that speaks to the study group collectively. The word riddle is singular here with purpose. A long list of riddles with given answers does little to spark inquiry and imagination. One riddle when studied deeply can provide expansive, fascinating insight into a culture and encourage extended puzzling as an attitude and a process.
- *Learn about the Language:* Take the opportunity to discuss issues of translation, if the classroom language is not the original language of the riddle. Talk about the impossibility of one-to-one translation, about the choices of approximation every translator must make. Are there issues of potential translator reliability or bias to take into account? How are words and sentences constructed and meaning communicated in the language? How do grammar, syntax, tonal inflection, and body language affect meaning? If possible, listen to the riddle in the original language, or at least language samples.
- *Learn about the Culture:* Explore related forms of oral tradition, including proverbs, stories, and songs, to connect content. Explore the landscape. Explore the way of life.
- *Consider the Purpose:* Consider the aim of the riddler in solving a riddle. Is it to get at the riddler's thought, not necessarily to answer the question? Is it to build relationships between the riddler and riddle or within the community as a whole? Perhaps the riddler hopes to build critical-thinking skills, pass down cultural knowledge, or simply enjoy shared play.
- *Wonder:* Encourage and embrace uncertainty. Be careful not to provide definitive answers, but remain in the realm of possibility and probability. Approach the riddle from as many perspectives as possible. The process does not end. Use the steps above not as a list but as an iterative cycle to continue to add more and more layers of meaning.

## Conclusion

Dene/Athabaskan riddlers knew that riddling was not about the answer but about the process, about what that process can teach. For contemporary teachers and students, a respectful path and process might be extended engagement in slowly unpacking, to the best of always limited abilities, what a tradition has layered into a riddle. Introducing lists of riddles with answers and assigning imitation—the primary pedagogical approach at present—fails to recognize the importance of an investment in extended process. It is a better approach to emphasize continuous learning and incrementally increased understanding over the immediate and false mastery of a single “right” answer. Riddles are about relationships, about the relationship between the riddler and the subject of the riddle, and between the riddler and the riddlee, and between both and the culture.

In this article, we aimed to model a shared experience for teachers and students to work collaboratively to “hear between the words”—and between the worlds—through exploring cultural context and engaging in cautious interpretation of the cultural capsule that a traditional riddle provides. We touched upon a fraction of many possible questions, potential allusions, and approximate understandings, toward approaching, not an answer, but rather an opening, a peek into the heart of a people through a single riddle. Through this exploration, we hope to have modeled the attitude of attention and care that creates the conditions for small and large enlightenments, the conditions for building working bridges of ongoing cross-cultural learning. We urge teachers in all places of Indigenous presence to acknowledge and support riddling traditions where they exist, and, where such traditions are endangered or lost, to recognize their riddles as worthy of such slow study.

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