

# The Coming of the Thunder People: Denisovan Hybrids, Shamanism and the American Genesis

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Abstract: Algonquian language-speaking groups of the Great Lakes and St Lawrence River region of North America preserve traditions regarding the *Animiki'*, generally translated into English as “thunderbird,” “thunderers” or “thunder people.” Primarily these are sky manitous (spirits), who bring forth lightning, thunder and rain storms. However, separate traditions held by these peoples talk about the *Animiki'* being shape-shifting giants birds that can assume human form by removing their “feather blankets,” and even have mortal families. The author proposes that earthly *Animiki'* are a memory of Denisovan and arguably Denisovan-Neanderthal-modern human groups that thrived in parts of North America through until the first millennia BC, when they became the extremely tall ruling elites and shamans of the Adena mound-building culture (the so-called “Adena elite” theory). Knowledge that modern Algonquian language-speaking populations such as the Ojibwa and Cree likely possess Denisovan ancestry, while the Denisovans themselves are now thought to have been of large stature, adds weight to these suggestions.

Key words: Denisovans, DNA, Ojibwa, Cree, *Animiki'*, thunderbirds, Jes'sakkīd', autism, ADSL & CBTNAP2 genes, Adena elite theory.

In 2010 the existence of a previously unknown archaic human population was discovered following the DNA sequencing of a finger bone over 41,000 years old. It had been found two years earlier in the Denisova Cave, a Stone Age occupational site located in the Altai Mountains of southern Siberia. Here also three molars, two of enormous size, were retrieved. These too were found to belong to this same group of archaic humans, who are today known as the Denisovans after their place of discovery.

Although to date these remain the only confirmed fossils relating to this extinct population, the sequencing of the Denisovan genome by the Department of Human Evolution at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, has allowed us to determine that many modern-day human populations carry Denisovan ancestry (see fig. 1). Most of these populations are located in central, southern and eastern Asia.<sup>1</sup> Others are found among the indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific.

We know also from archaeological discoveries made in the Denisova Cave that prior to their disappearance around 40,000 years ago the Denisovans displayed clear evidence of advanced human behaviour. This included the creation of the beautiful Denisovan bracelet, a green stone bangle of immense sophistication, now accepted to be as much as 60,000-70,000 years old. There is compelling evidence also that the Denisovans used bone needles to manufacture tailored clothing, developed highly

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advanced stone tool technologies, fashioned the earliest known musical instrument in the form of a bone flute or whistle, and perhaps even domesticated and rode horses.



*Fig. 1. Map showing the distribution of Denisovan DNA in modern populations based on the Altaic Denisovan genome (after Sankararaman et al 2016). Black circles 3-5 percent. Grey circles with black rings 2-3 percent. Grey circles 1-2 percent. Values are approximate only. Black rings indicate locations of more recent discoveries of Denisovan ancestry (after Qin and Stoneking 2015).*

That so-called archaic humans achieved such a sophisticated lifestyle quite separately from that of modern human populations, leads us to the potential impact of the Denisovans on the development of our own civilization, a matter examined by the present writer in new book *The Cygnus Key*.<sup>2</sup> And what about the Americas? What might have been the Denisovans' impact on the continent prior to the submergence around 8500 BCE of the Beringia land bridge, which for tens of thousands of years had provided safe passage between the Russian Far East and Alaska?

## Denisovan DNA

We know, for instance, that various First Peoples in both North and South America possess significant levels of Denisovan DNA.<sup>3</sup> This includes the Ojibwa,<sup>4</sup> one of the largest tribes in North America. Their territories extend from Ontario in Canada down through the Great Lakes region into Minnesota and Wisconsin. Originally, however, their homeland was far to the east in the St Lawrence River basin, in what is today Quebec. The Cree (or Oji-Cree) also possess Denisovan DNA, although not quite to the same level as the Ojibwa.<sup>5</sup> Their ancestral home was immediately to the north and west of the Ojibwa in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and the Northwest Territories. They have around 200,000 members today, most of whom live in Canada.

## The Anishinaabeg

Both the Ojibwa and Cree form part of what is known as the Algonquian language-speaking group, named after the Algonquin or Algonkin tribe. This collective of First

Nations refer to themselves, often above the use of their own individual tribal name, as the *Anishinaabe* (plural *Anishinaabeg*), a word meaning, simply, “original people,”<sup>6</sup> while their shared language is today known as *Anishinaabemowin*. Those belonging to this interlinked network of tribes, all of which are located in the northern and northeastern parts of the North American continent (see fig. 2), include the Potawatomi, Mississaugas, Cree, Chippewa (a form of Ojibwa), Ottawa, Ojibwa, and the Algonquin themselves. Despite the ethnic and cultural unity of the Anishinaabeg, it is only the Ojibwa and Cree that possess significant levels of Denisovan ancestry (other tribes that do have it include the eastern Algonquin, whose surviving territories are beyond the northeastern limits of the Great Lakes region, as well as the Tlingit of the Pacific Northwest).<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 2. Map showing the territories of First Peoples of the Great Lakes and St Lawrence River region of the United States and Canada.

### Asian Origins

The ancestors of the Algonquian-speaking peoples are thought to have entered North America from East Asia. This was made clear in a comprehensive study of First American DNA based on the genome sequencing of individuals from populations in East Asia, Australia, Oceania, North America and South America.<sup>8</sup> Its findings suggest that the earliest peoples to arrive in North America came from East Asia around 23,000 years ago. By 12,500 years ago the population had split into two distinct branches. One moved southward contributing to the emergence of the first indigenous populations to occupy southern North America, Central America, and South America. The other branch headed eastward, forming the ancestors of various First Peoples including the Algonquin, Chippewa, Ojibwa and Cree. If so then how exactly did the Ojibwa and Cree come to possess so much Denisovan DNA? Did their ancestors gain it prior to arriving in North America, or did it come from pronounced

Denisovan hybrid groups who already lived on the continent? One major clue comes from a most unlikely belief found among the various Anishinaabeg tribes. This relates to stories concerning the prior existence on the continent of a mythical population known as the Thunder People.

### Rise of the Animiki´

In Ojibwa lore one of the most important groups of manitous (spirits) were the so-called *Animiki´* (*a-ni´-mi-ki*),<sup>9</sup> a name usually translated as “thunderbird(s),” “thunderer[s]”<sup>10</sup> “thunder god[s],”<sup>11</sup> and, most enigmatic of all, the “thunder people.”<sup>12</sup>

The thunderbird was considered a mythical bird, similar to an eagle or falcon.<sup>13</sup> It controlled elemental forces such as thunder, lightning, storms, and rain (see fig. 3). It was looked upon also as the divine source of the magic worked by the Ojibwa’s caste of wild shamans known as the *Jes´sakkīd*.<sup>14</sup> They were seen by early settlers as “jugglers,” “conjurers,” and even as tricksters. Yet to the Ojibwa the *Jes´sakkīd´* were healers, prophets, seers, as well as the “revealer[s] of hidden truths,”<sup>15</sup> their magical power the gift of the thunderbird.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to this the Ojibwa recognized the Milky Way as the Thunderbird’s Path,<sup>17</sup> while the thunderbird itself was identified with the constellation of Cygnus, known more commonly today as the Northern Cross.<sup>18</sup> This is located where the Milky Way forks into two separate streams, a celestial location considered by many First Peoples to be the entrance to the land of the dead.<sup>19</sup>

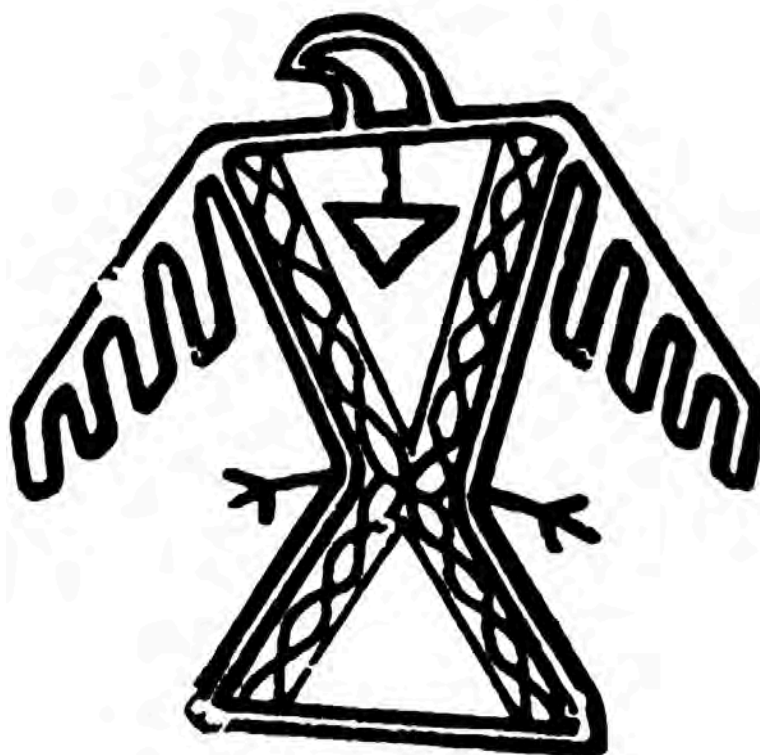


Fig. 3. Traditional abstract representation of a mythical thunderbird manitou.

## The Thunder People

Even though thunderbirds very clearly existed as important spirit manitous, Ojibwa myths and legends from northern Ontario speak of the Animiki', or Thunder People, as "giant birds" with clear anthropomorphic features.<sup>20</sup> They lived in remote mountainous areas, and were supposedly encountered by the first Anishinaabeg.<sup>21</sup> American ethnologist Alanson Skinner wrote in 1923 regarding the Algonquian-speaking Sauk of Wisconsin that to them thunderbirds, the so-called "Feathered Ones," were "giant eagles inhabiting the western Empyrean, but some maintain that they resemble human beings or, at least, are anthropomorphic at times. They dress like men, and wear especially elegant fringed leather leggings."<sup>22</sup>

Earthly Animiki' had the power to conjure thunder and lightning, the latter emitted from their eyes.<sup>23</sup> For this reason they were greatly feared,<sup>24</sup> explaining perhaps the sheer potency of their memory among the Algonquian-speaking peoples. Is it possible that stories of the Thunder People preserve the memory of the former presence in the Great Lakes-St Lawrence River region of pronounced Denisovan hybrids? Was it from them that the Ojibwa and Cree gained at least some of their Denisovan ancestry?

## Denisovan Genes

The connection between the Thunder People and mountainous terrains is interesting indeed. Tibetan and Sherpa populations of the Tibetan plateau possess a special gene, known as EPAS1, which allows them to live at extremely high altitudes. This gene, it is now known, was gained through interbreeding with Denisovans somewhere on the Asian continent.<sup>25</sup> They, in turn, must have developed this gene across tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of years. This fact alone tells us that elevated, mountainous plateaus were the favoured terrains of at least some Denisovan groups. Such a finding increases the likelihood that stories of the Thunder People preserve the memory of surviving pockets of Denisovan hybrid descendants, who reached North America, most obviously via the Russian Far East, at a very early date. Most likely this occurred even before 23,000 BC, when the ancestors of the Algonquian-speaking peoples are thought to have entered the continent.

Of possible importance here is knowledge that the Inuit of the Arctic region possess two special genes that enable them to live in extremely cold conditions. These genes (TBX15 & WARS2) are now thought to have been inherited from the Denisovans.<sup>26</sup> So in addition to existing at very high altitudes, the Denisovans must also have lived in extremely cold environments for much of the time. Elevated mountainous regions fit these conditions perfectly. This therefore provides additional evidence that the Thunder People were perhaps hybrid descendants of the Denisovans.

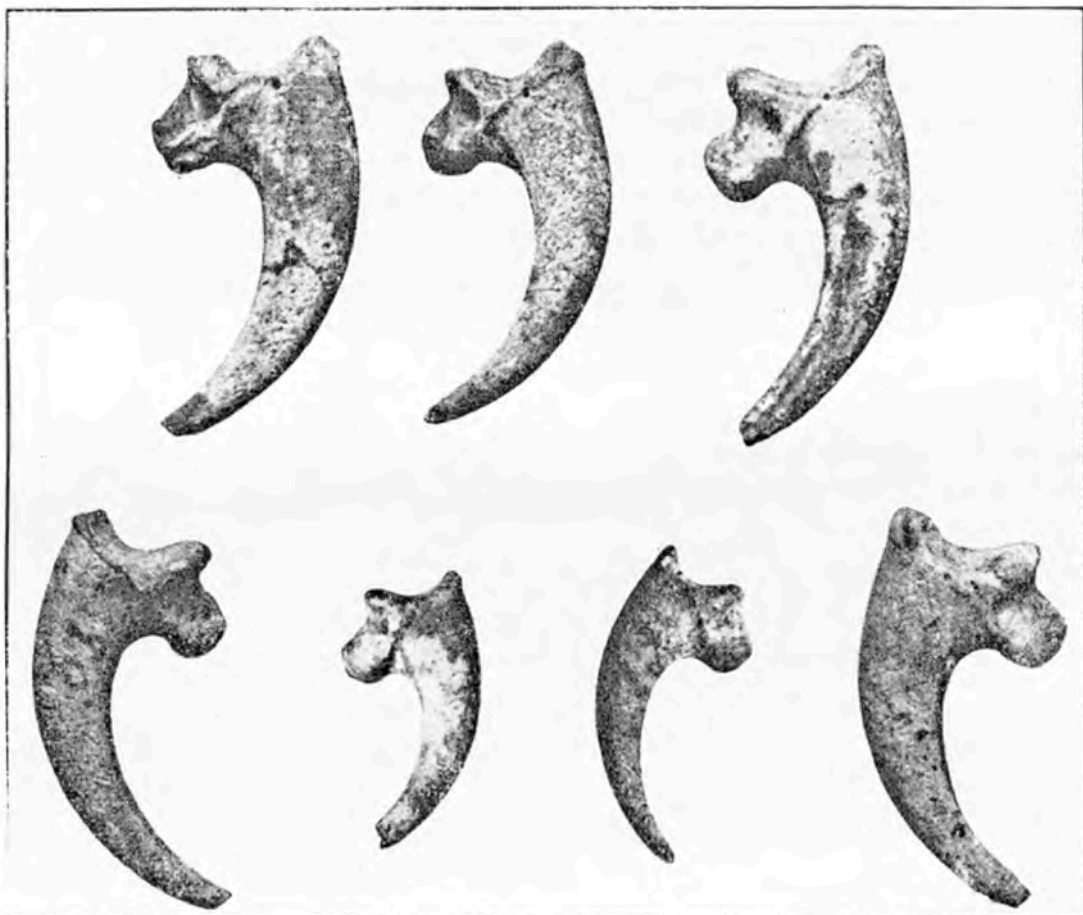
## Thunderbird Shamans

If all this is correct, then stories regarding the earthly Animiki' most likely relate to the existence of flesh and blood beings. These archaic humans were considered to possess extraordinary powers, including the ability to control thunder and lightning,

and bring forth storms and rain. What is more, their identification with the mythical thunderbird indicates that they might well have worn coats of feathers belonging to the eagle, the principle animistic form of this mythical creature, and even those of corvids such as the raven.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, we know that in Europe Neanderthals used dark feathers of raptors, vultures and corvids to create garments of dark feathers.<sup>28</sup> They also wore necklaces of eagle talons, along with those of other large birds (see fig. 4).<sup>29</sup> Such distinctive forms of dress or decoration are unlikely to have been for aesthetic purposes alone. More likely they had a symbolic function, hinting at the existence of early forms of shamanism not only among Neanderthals, but also among the Thunder People of the American continent.

### The Roots of Animism

This would no doubt have included the use of animism to create a link between the world of the living and perceived invisible realms, usually only experienced during dreams or altered states of consciousness. Shamanic rites involve assuming the spirit of a particular animal or bird to make the transition from this world to the realm of the spirit.



*Fig. 4. Bird talons used by Neanderthals to create necklaces. These examples were found during excavations in the Krapina Cave, a 130,000-year-old Neanderthal site, in NW Croatia, in 1899-1901 (after Kálmán Lambrecht 1933).*



## Path of Souls

During shamanic experiences of this kind spirit forms would usually be encountered. These might have included ancestral spirits, in other words the spirits of dead ancestors, as well as denizens of both the Beneath World, or underworld, and the Upper World, a sky realm accessed via the Milky Way. On both the Eurasian and American continents the Milky Way was seen as a path or river along which the souls of the deceased, along with those of the shaman, were able to reach the sky world, often in the form of a bird. Paraphernalia a shaman might use for such practices included the wing bones and feathers of birds to achieve astral flight, skulls to link with the spirit or eyesight of the chosen animal or bird, and talons or claws to psychically attack potential enemies. So where exactly did the concept of animism come from in the first place?

## Autistic Gene

To achieve a link with their chosen animal or bird a shaman utilises a natural empathy with the creature in question of a type that has commonly been associated with individuals belonging to the autistic spectrum.<sup>30</sup> Autism itself has long been linked with the roots of shamanism.<sup>31</sup> What is more, a new study proposes that autistic genes generated by modern humans in harsh ice age conditions provided them with the mindset to leap ahead in everything from greater image retention abilities, to higher aptitudes in identifying and analysing patterns of geography and movement.

According to the study's authors, medical researcher, Barry Wright and archaeologist Penny Spikins, both of the University of York, such autistic talents enabled early modern humans to develop more efficient hunting tool kits, recall in absolute detail thousands of square miles of hunting terrain, and remember and analyse complex patterns of animal behaviour.<sup>32</sup>

All this might be so. However, from the genome of the Altaic Denisovan we now know that this archaic population possessed two key genes (ADSL & CBTNAP2) linked with autism in modern human populations.<sup>33</sup> This does not mean that all Denisovans were autistic. There is, however, good reason to suspect that the Denisovan brain operated in a manner *similar* to that of modern human individuals displaying autistic or savant-like talents. Not only might this explain the Denisovans' rapid acceleration in early technologies, along with their advanced human behaviour, but since isolation is a common trait of autistic people, this might help explain why Denisovans, and even the Thunder People, thrived in remote mountainous regions, enduring harsh climates for most of the year.

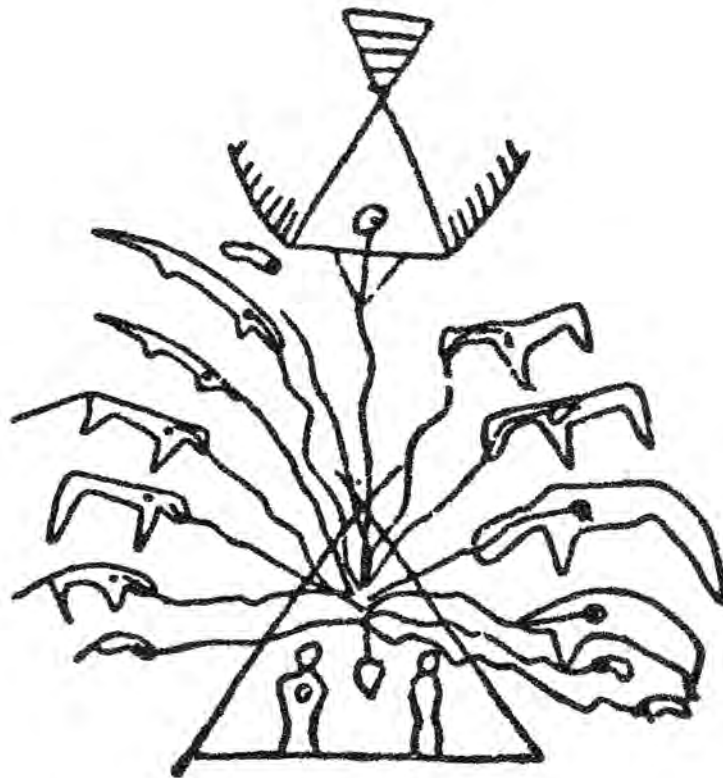
What is more, an autistic mindset might also help us to understand how the Denisovans, as the forerunners of the Thunder People, were able to achieve such a strong mental empathy with creatures of the natural world. If so, did this in turn lead to the development of both animism and shamanism, which, as we have seen, included the adoption of animal and bird paraphernalia to make a connection with the spirit realms?

## Thunderbird families

Of relevance here is the fact that the Animiki´ are said to have assumed human form “by tilting back their beaks like a mask, and by removing their feathers as if it were a feather-covered blanket.” Moreover, we read that there:

...are stories of thunderbirds in human form marrying into human families; some families may trace their lineage to such an event. Families of thunderbirds who kept to themselves but wore human form were said to have lived along the northern tip of Vancouver Island. The story goes that other tribes soon forgot the nature of one of these thunderbird families, and when one tribe tried to take them as slaves, the thunderbirds put on their feather blankets and transformed to take vengeance upon their foolish captors.<sup>34</sup>

Very clearly the “feather blankets” might better be described as feather garments or animalistic costumes like those worn by shamans. The reference to certain families claiming descent from the Thunder People could even help explain the increased presence of Denisovan DNA among the Ojibwa and Cree. The fact that the Jes´sakkīd´, as the Ojibwa shaman, saw his gift of magic power as deriving from the Animiki´, and usually held the bird in the “highest position in his estimation,”<sup>35</sup> is also important here. Ojibwa illustrations of the Jes´sakkīd´’s wigwam-like lodge, called the *Jēs´sakkân´*, show the thunderbird directly above the structure’s round smoke hole, while other spirit animals are seen either side of the structure (see fig. 5).



*Fig. 5. Ojibwa illustration showing the animal spirits or manitous drawn upon by the Jes´sakkīd´ to conduct healings and ceremonies inside their lodges called Jēs´sakkân´ (from Hoffman 1891). The Thunderbird, as the chief source of magical power of the Jes´sakkīd´, is seen directly above the lodge’s smoke hole.*



Was the Jes'sakkīd' part of a long lineage that originated with the Denisovans themselves? Is this why these wild shamans remained completely separate from the Ojibwa's regular priesthood known as the Grand Medicine Society? If correct, then it seems possible that the ancestors of at least some Anishinaabeg were descendents of an archaic hybrid population of pronounced Denisovan ancestry, who descendants were remembered in legend as the much-feared Thunder People—giant birds that could shape-shift into human form by removing their “feather blankets.”

In this form the Animiki' could mate with mortal humans and produce offspring, some of whom might well have survived through to historical times. The Denisovan fossils recovered so far from the Denisova Cave are particularly large in comparison to those of modern human populations.<sup>36</sup> This suggests that at least some Denisovans were of enormous size and stature.

### Giants of Legend

So is it possible that the Thunder People were not just Denisovan hybrids, but also the giants of legend, whose skeletal remains have been found in Native American mounds across the United States?<sup>37</sup> It was a hypothesis proposed by the current author as far back as 2014.<sup>38</sup> Yet as attractive as this theory might seem, it is unlikely to be confirmed any time soon. All skeletal remains of First Peoples held in national institutions and museums within the USA were repatriated at the beginning of the 1990s as part of the NAGPRA law. So until oversized human bones and teeth discovered in a true Native American context are able to be DNA tested, little more can be said on the matter. Despite this it does seem increasingly likely that the lineal descendants of the Animiki' or Thunder People of the Great Lakes region went on to become the elite of early Native American mound-building cultures such as the Adena, circa 1000-200 BCE,<sup>39</sup> as well as the ancestors of indigenous shamanistic groups such as the Jes'sakkīd of Ojibwa tradition. This last idea is backed up by the high level of Denisovan DNA found even today among the Ojibwa and Cree (**figure. 6** exclusively reveals what the Animiki' or Thunder People might have looked like. Note the figure's archaic facial features, large body frame, feather coat, and oversized spear point. The picture was commissioned by the present author and executed by London artist Russell M. Hossain).

### Echoes of the Past

If all this is correct then we should be able to find further evidence of pronounced, over-sized Denisovan hybrids in many parts of the North American landmass. Most obviously they will be remembered in Native American tradition as mythical beings of great size and stature, who possessed supernatural powers including the ability to control thunder, lightning, storms and rain. Their memory will be attached not only to familiar animistic forms such as thunderbirds, eagles, falcons, vultures, ravens, and snakes, but also to the highest and most primordial mountain shrines and retreats. These might include sites bearing “thunder” or “snake” place-names, as well as locations where extreme weather patterns have long been recorded. Their former presence might also be linked to find sites associated with exotic materials

traditionally thought to have originated in the sky world. This will include the dark, volcanic glass known as obsidian, which among the Yuki of California, for example, is said to have been hurled to earth from a single large block by a spirit named Milili.<sup>40</sup> He apparently bore the shape of a giant eagle or condor.

Such legends and stories will probably be found everywhere from the American Northwest all the way down to California and Arizona in the south. Where they do exist take note, for they could reveal key information about the sacred places and power spots of the very first peoples to inhabit the American continent. These, as we now suspect, included the hybrid descendants of the Denisovan populations that thrived in places like the Altai Mountains of southern Siberia down to around 40,000 years ago. It is all these ideas and more that are presented by Dr. Gregory Little, an expert on the origins of America's mound-building cultures, and the current author in a brand new book titled *Denisovan Dawn: Hybrid Origins, Göbekli Tepe and the American Genesis*, published in 2019 by Inner Traditions International.



*Fig. 6. Artist impression of an Animiki' by Russell M. Hossain. The Thunder People's possible origin as pronounced Denisovan hybrids is reflected in the figure's archaic features and greater height, as well as the cold mountainous terrain seen in the background.*

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<sup>1</sup> Qin and Stoneking 2015, figure 4. The paper cites that 0.17 percent of Ojibway DNA is Denisovan implying that 0.17% is the overall mean average for the tribe with many above and many below. From this information it seems highly likely that within the Ojibwa population there are many members who have very little Denisovan ancestry, while others might have as much as 3%.

<sup>2</sup> Collins, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Qin and Stoneking 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Qin and Stoneking 2015, 2669 fig. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Qin and Stoneking 2015, 2669 fig. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Hoffman 1891, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Qin and Stoneking 2015, 2669 fig. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Raghavan et al 2015.

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- <sup>9</sup> Kratzer, Rall and Forror 2008; Price 2012; Stephany 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> Hoffman 1891, 82.
- <sup>11</sup> Hoffman 1891, 9.
- <sup>12</sup> Jones 1916, 382.
- <sup>13</sup> Hoffman 1891, 73, 82.
- <sup>14</sup> Hoffman 1891, 9.
- <sup>15</sup> Hoffman 1891, 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Hoffman 1891, 157-158.
- <sup>17</sup> Houston-Jones 2009, 2. The Ojibwa name used is *Pinesi Miikana*, which technically translates as the “path, trail, road, way (*mikana*) of the great bird (*binesi*).” However, *binesi* (or *pinesi*) was a word used also for the thunderbird, due to its large size. See Baraga 1992 (1878), s.v. “Binesi,” II, 86a; s.v. “Mikana,” II, 237b. See also “Native American Legends: Binesi (Pinesi),” <http://www.native-languages.org/binesi.htm>.
- <sup>18</sup> Kratzer, Rall and Forror 2008; Price 2012; Stephany 2007.
- <sup>19</sup> Lankford 2007b, 186, 208.
- <sup>20</sup> Jones 1916; Smith 1995, 77 (as recounted by Ojibwa elder William Trudeau in 1988).
- <sup>21</sup> Jones 1916.
- <sup>22</sup> Skinner 1923, 35.
- <sup>23</sup> Jones 1916, 384.
- <sup>24</sup> Jones 1916, 384: “They fear the Thunder-birds.”
- <sup>25</sup> Huerta-Sánchez, 2014.
- <sup>26</sup> Racimo et al 2017.
- <sup>27</sup> Hoffman (1891, 116) records a series of Midē’ chants used in Mide’wiwin initiations, each denoted by a simple mnemonic device. One chant includes the words *Pī-nē’-si ka’-ka-gī’-wai-yan’ wen’-dzhi man’-i-dō’wid*. This Hoffman translates as, “The bird, the crow bird’s skin is the reason why I am a spirit,” to which he adds: “Although the crow [*ka’-ka-gī’*] is mentioned, the Thunder-bird (eagle) is delineated [i.e. the chant’s mnemonic device is the thunderbird].” Thus the intimation is that the initiate’s attainment of spirit flight is attained through the animistic use of a crow’s “skin” (*wai-yan*, or *waiân*) a reference surely to the use of shamanistic paraphernalia. If so, this indicates an inter-relationship in totemic terms between corvids and thunderbirds. However, Hoffman’s identity of *ka’-ka-gī’* as “crow” is incorrect. In the Ojibwa language *ka’-ka-gī’*, also written *kagâgi*, means “raven,” and not “crow,” which is *andek* (see Baraga 1992 [1878], s.v. “crow,” I, 63a; s.v. “raven,” I, 206b; s.v. “*waiân*,” s.v. II, 395b).
- <sup>28</sup> Finlayson et al 2012.
- <sup>29</sup> Romandini et al 2014; Gannon 2015.
- <sup>30</sup> Grandin and Johnson, 2005/2006.
- <sup>31</sup> Winkelman 2002.
- <sup>32</sup> Keys 2018.
- <sup>33</sup> Choi 2012.
- <sup>34</sup> “Thunderbird (mythology),” World Heritage Encyclopedia.
- <sup>35</sup> Hoffman, 1891, 104.
- <sup>36</sup> For a full review of this subject see, Collins 2014, available to read at <http://www.andrewcollins.com/page/articles/denisovan.htm>, and Collins 2018, chs. 40 and 41.

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<sup>37</sup> Two greatly-feared Animikii are said to have inhabited Mount McKay, otherwise known as Thunder Mountain (see Jones 1916, 384), or the Sleeping Giant of Thunder Bay. In Ojibwa tradition this mafic sill, lying to the south of Lake Ontario, is identified as Nana Bijou, a giant who revealed the secret location of a silver mine to a chief named Shinwauk. After the silver was used by the Ojibwa to create jewelry, the existence of the mine came to the attention of the Sioux, who were enemies of the Ojibwa. They sent a spy into the Ojibwa camp to learn the whereabouts of the mine, and when this was found out they sold this precious information to the white men, who decided to exploit the mine for themselves. However, Gitche Manitou, the Great Spirit, saw what was happening and hid the entrance to the mine, so that no one would ever find it again. For his role in this great loss to the Ojibwa, the Great Spirit turned Nana Bijou into stone, hence his role today as the Sleeping Giant of Thunder Bay (for the full story see Veileneuve 1981). It is tempting to connect Mount McKay's association with the Animikii with the story of the giant Nana Bijou, which, if correct, suggests that the Thunder People were synonymous with the giants of North American legend.

<sup>38</sup> See Collins 2014, in Little 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Little 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Fox-Hudson 2007, 295.