

MÂSW, THE EAST CREE TRICKSTER, RECREATES THE WORLD

TOLD BY JOB KAWAPIT

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY LUCI BOBBISH-SALT

WITH COMMENTS BY MARGUERITE MACKENZIE

I will tell the story about Mâsw, but his stories are numerous as he had a lot of different adventures. I will tell only some of his story.

MÂSW RECREATES THE WORLD

He spent most of his time travelling around on foot. No one exactly knows the place he called home.

As he was walking around one day, he heard someone crying mournfully. He walked over to the sound of the crying. There he saw Kingfisher crying, “Little Brother, why are you crying so?”

Kingfisher answered, “I am crying from hunger. I am so hungry. The *Chîhchîkwâyushishich*, ‘Young skinny-tailed ones’¹, used to hunt for me and all the other animals. Now the *Kâchâmishikunich* ‘Cut-off back of fish ones’ have prevented them from hunting for others; only for themselves”.

To this, Mâsw answered, “Little Brother, you look like you have walked quite a distance to get here. Why don't you go back the way I came. There is a small winding river and there you will find many spawning fish². You can eat these, since you are so hungry.”

“Okay,” said the Kingfisher.

Mâsw asked, “Little Brother, where are the '*Kâchâmishikunich*'?”

¹ These animals may be wolves, as they prey on caribou.

² In other versions the trickster constructs a weir to catch the spawning fish. This is normally done as a way to catch a large number of whitefish in late summer. The weir is constructed by blocking off part of the channel with stones and herding the fish into the pool created, where they can be scooped up.

The Kingfisher answered, “They’re over there.” And she told him exactly where they were.

“What they do during the day is, they spend their time sleeping,” Kingfisher told Mâsw. “In the evening they get up and play their game³. No one can watch them as they play. The way they know if someone watches them is that their game does not work out. The only place from which anyone can watch them is that hollow tree in the water⁴. So when they know that someone is watching them from that tree, they swim out to it and proceed to shake it violently and usually whoever has been watching from inside the tree is killed by the shaking.”

"Little Brother, did anyone ever try to pack themselves tightly inside there so they would not be harmed?"

"No," said the Kingfisher.

“This is what I will do when I go over inside that tree to watch them. They will not be able to harm me, because I am an important person.” (I guess he thought himself to be important.)

“Now Little Brother, you go now to the place where the fish are spawning that I told you about. Go and eat and have your fill since you are so hungry.”

So Mâsw went to watch the *Kâkichâmishikunich*. Sure enough, there they lay sleeping. He also looked for the hollow tree about which the Kingfisher had told him and he saw it there in the water. He gathered small trees and boughs and lay them out ready for his use. “I will come back later to pick them up when I come to watch the *Kâchâmishikunich* at play,” he thought to himself.

That evening he came to the hollow tree and climbed inside. He packed himself in so tightly that he could hardly move at all with the small trees and the boughs he had made ready earlier that

³ Although Luci asked what kind of a game was being played, she was not able to get a description from the story-teller.

⁴ In another cycle of *atiyûhkin* about the culture hero Châhkâpesh, told by the Naskapi story-teller John Peastitute, the strategy of hiding in a hollow log is used to trick a group of bad people.

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day. Having done this, he began to watch the *Kâchâmishikunich* at play. Of course their game did not work out and immediately they knew that someone was watching them from the hollow tree.

They quickly swam to the tree stump with Mâsw securely packed inside. They started to shake the tree violently but Mâsw was not harmed as he was safely and tightly packed in. Thinking that they had surely killed whoever was inside, they left. Mâsw crawled out from the tree.

He made two harpoons and spears. Harpoons with three barbs. He made two of these. Meanwhile the *Kâchâmishikunich* were sound asleep. He crept quietly towards them. He used his spears on them but made sure he did not kill them. He knew that if he killed them that there would be a flood.

He left them. He then proceeded to make a raft. When he was done, he loaded up the animals two by two, one female and one male caribou, one female and one male bear until he had loaded up all the animals. He also loaded his raft with all the different kinds of vegetation that grew on the earth. Having done this, he left. "This will be my last journey," he said to himself.

As he walked along, suddenly he heard someone singing. This person's singing was accompanied by the sound of a rattle. He heard him singing this song, "*Nimâmân, nimâmân, nimâmân, nimâmân*, I am a healer, I am a healer, I am a healer, I am a healer." Mâsw went to see who was doing the singing and playing the rattle. There he saw Frog walking by.

"Well, Big Sister", (This was his older sister, and the waterdog⁵ was his older brother; these were the only two people that were older than he was.) "Big Sister, what are you singing about."

"Well, Little Brother, Little Brother, it is Mîsw, it is Mîsw, (Big Sister told him what was going on without actually saying Mâsw's name correctly.) He left the wounded *Kâchâmishikunich*. He speared them with harpoons with three barbs. I am the only one who can help them. This is my

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final try at helping them. I already pulled out two of the barbs, now there is only one left. I am sure my final attempt will save them.”

Mâsw was angry when he heard her say this. “Big Sister, who was that again, you said?”

“Oh, Little Brother, Little Brother, I said *Mîsw, Mîsw*. It was he who wounded the *Kâchâmishikunich* with spears.”

“Oh, you!” he scoffed at her. ‘Even she tries to make fun of me like the rest of them.’ With that, he gave her a swift kick. She fell back with her fingers and toes all flared out. He peeled off her skin. Making himself small, Mâsw put on the frogskin.

He started out taking her rattle with him. He tried to sing the song Big Sister was singing, “*Nimâmân, nimâmân, nimâmân, nimâmân*, I am a healer, I am a healer, I am a healer, I am a healer.” Mâsw could hear the *Kâchâmishikunich* coming.

“Well, well, isn’t this the one who tried to heal us coming and singing this way. I wonder what is wrong with her, her voice sounds different. Maybe it is because this is the final time she is coming to take out the rest of the harpoon.” they said.

Mâsw went towards them. Of course the *Kâchâmishikunich* were not expecting him at all and were not ready when Mâsw came towards them breaking out of the frogskin as he did. He pushed in the spear as hard as he could into the first one, killing it and then he did the same with the second. The water began to rise immediately and was starting to engulf him. He ran, dove into the water and came up onto his raft.

The land was now flooded. He floated around on his raft. He turned to the Waterdog, “Big Brother, go to the end of the raft and face the other way. Our little brothers and sisters are

⁵ The term ‘waterdog’ *nipîutimw* is found only in the East Cree version; in the Naskapi version this being is a giant monster named Achân. In both cases the being is ugly enough to frighten the other animals. The neighbouring Innu (Montagnais), using their own pronunciation, also tell of a cannibal called Atshen.

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frightened by your appearance.” The Waterdog did as he was told. Mâsw floated on the water on his raft.

All of a sudden he noticed some logs from his raft floating by. “Who is trying to gnaw away my raft? Show yourselves!” he said. And there appeared some giant beaver. He told them, “Little Brothers and Sisters, swim around my raft showing your teeth, closing your eyes as you go by. In doing this, you will be showing how happy you are at trying to break my raft. This is what you are trying to do, isn’t it?”

The giant beaver did as they were told. They swam around the raft showing their teeth. As they swam by unsuspectingly, Mâsw hit them hard in the teeth, breaking them. So the giant beaver were not able to gnaw away at his raft. He continued to float around on the water.

Next his raft started to tip over to one side. “Show yourselves! Who is trying to tip my raft over?” And out of the water came these giant lynx. “Little Brothers and Sisters, go to the end and lay your tails across the raft. By doing this, you will show that you are happy in attempting to tip my raft over”, he told them. The giant lynx did as they were told. (Everyone always seemed ready to do whatever he told them.) He had also told them to close their eyes. As they swam by again, Mâsw chopped off their tails, killing them. (Any animal whose tail is cut off always loses a lot of blood.) This is why the lynx today has such a short tail. This is how the legend goes. It was all Mâsw’s doing.

Mâsw continued to float around on this raft. “Little Brothers and Sisters,” he said, “We should now try and make the land. My little sister and brother, the caribou, will be getting hungry.” In saying this, he also meant all the other animals who eat the vegetation from the land. “They will be getting hungry.” He tried to create the land. “Well, Little Brothers and Sisters, I do not think we can make some land as we do not have sand and reindeer moss⁶. And reindeer moss is the primary source of food for my little sister and brother, the caribou. It is imperative that you attempt to get some.”

Mâsw had a long piece of string. He used this to tie the animals around the waist when he lowered them into the water, the otter, the beaver, the muskrat, and even the seal. They all drowned. He revived the animals by blowing on them. He told them as he lowered them in to the water, “Tug on the string when you start to feel like you are drowning.” After all the unsuccessful attempts, he told them, “It looks like you will not be able to get any sand or reindeer moss.”

Although he was sure that the seal would be able to do it, he, too, soon drowned. So he turned to the mink, “Little Sister Mink, it is your turn to try and get a little bit of sand and moss.” Mâsw blew on her. “Little Sister, you must really try and get a little bit of sand and moss.” He lowered her into the water on the string. He noticed that he was using more and more string, more than the others, more than the seal and the otter. Dare he hope? Then, he felt the string go slack and it felt like she had reached the bottom. It felt like Little Sister was running on solid ground! Suddenly his heart sank! She was tugging on the string!

“Oh, my Little Sister has drowned!” he said. He pulled on the string and dragged the little animal onto the raft. She was completely bloated up from the water. “Oh my poor, little sister”, he said. Her tiny fists were clenched into little balls. He opened her little paw and in it saw a little bit of sand. “My little sister has come up with some sand,” he said. He opened the other and there was a little bit of reindeer moss. “My little sister has come up with a little bit of moss,” he said. He immediately started to blow on her, saving her life.

“Little Sister, you have helped in re-creating the world. Now the only thing is that you will no longer be able to stay underwater as long as you used to. This is because, this time, you have been in the water for much too long. But you will still get your food from the water as you did before. You will eat fish like you used to,” Mâsw told her.

⁶ In the Naskapi version three different types of moss or soil are necessary for the creation of land: white, red and yellow. In the Cree/Naskapi language there is no differentiation between soil/ground/earth and moss, as the floor of the boreal forest consists almost entirely of moss.

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Mâsw started to create the world. He did this by blowing on the sand and moss. As soon as the caribou saw a little reindeer moss, they started to eat. “Uh, uh, Little Brother and Sister, do not eat it yet. You will finish it before it can grow. Wait until there is more.” He blew on it some more. It got so they could not see the end of it.

“Big Sister Frog, you go and survey the land. Go and see how big the land is.” Frog hopped away.

Soon she came back. “Little Brother, I cannot see the end of the land. I cannot see the end of it. It must be very big.”

“If Big Sister cannot see the end of it, then it must be very big indeed,” he said. He started blowing on it again.

After a while, he turned to the young caribou, Little Sister Caribou, it is your turn to go out and survey the land and see how big it is. As you go along you can eat from the high areas of the land. Before you turn back, go up to the highest mountain.”

Little Sister Caribou ran off. She did as she was told by eating from the high areas of the land when she got to them. Before she turned back, she climbed up on the highest mountaintop. From there she did not see the end of the earth. She came back to Mâsw.

“Big Brother, I cannot see the end of the earth. I think it is very big now. I did go up on the highest mountain before I turned back,” she said.

“All right”, Mâsw said to her, “Yes, it must be very big now.”

Mâsw continued to blow on the land. After a long while, he said, “Brother Loon, it is your turn to survey the land, when you come to a lake, fly around and make your call. Just before you decide to return, this is when you will fly the highest”, Mâsw told Loon.

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Loon did as he was told. He flew off. Whenever he came to a lake, Loon would do his call.

When he made his last turn before coming back, he flew as high as he could, but Loon could not see the end of the earth. When he came back, he said to Mâsw, “Big Brother, the earth must be very big because I cannot see the end of it. I flew as high as I could before I came back,” he said. “I still could not see the end of the earth. Yes, it must be very big now.”

Mâsw blew on it again. “Little Brother,” he said to Loon, “I think the earth is big enough.

“Yes” said the Loon.

“Little Brothers and Sisters, it is now time for you all to go abroad,” Mâsw told the animals, “to go to your usual surroundings. But first, we must decide how many months there will be in a year. We must decide how many summer months and how many winter months there should be.” The animals all agreed.

The Loon said, “Big Brother, however many spots there are on my back, that should be the number of months.”

“Oh, Little Brother, do you not think that is a wee bit too many? Think of the time future generations will have to wait for the earth to thaw. I think it is too long a time to wait for the spring thaw.”

Then Caribou piped up, “Big Brother, however many hairs there are between my hooves, that is how many months there should be.”

“I think that would be too many months. Think of the time future generations will have to wait for the earth to thaw. I think it is too long a time to wait for the spring thaw.”

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Then Frog⁷ held out her fingers and toes. As you know, she has only three fingers and three toes. “Little Brother, Little Brother, I think this number would be just the right number of months in a year.”

The other animals shoved Frog aside, making her fall onto her back and saying, “Does she really think she should be the one to decide on the number of months there should be in a year?”

Mâsw replied, “Wait, wait, let us listen to our Big Sister. Maybe what she suggested is not such a bad idea. It might be exactly the right number of months there should be in a year. There would be six winter months and six summer months. Altogether there would be twelve months. Yes, this might be the right number of months. This way the future generations would not have to wait too long for the spring thaw after a cold winter.”

This is how the number of months was decided, six winter months and six summer months. Altogether there are twelve months in a year. Frog’s suggestion was the one taken by Big Brother Mâsw and the animals.

After this the animals all went back to their usual habitats. “Go back to the places you were before, Little Brothers and Sisters,” Mâsw told them. This was how Mâsw created the world again.

MÂSW AND THE GIANT BEAVER⁸

One day as Mâsw was walking along, he came to a small stream, a stream with giant beaver in it. The stream was very swollen because of the dams the beaver had built. “Well, well, we will

⁷ It is unclear whether this is the same Frog the healer met earlier in the story.

⁸ The giant beaver (*Castoroides ohioensis*) was one of the largest rodents ever known. It reached a length of about 2.5 m and weighed up to an estimated 218 kg. Unlike modern beavers (*Castor canadensis*), giant beavers had ridged cutting teeth, deep skulls, and probably roundish, muskrat-like tails. Fossils that are over 70,000 years old have been found in Toronto, Canada, and in the Old Crow basin of the Yukon. This animal died out with mammoths, mastodons, and ice-age horses about 10,000 years ago. Information can be found at C.R. Harington, Canadian Museum of Nature, March, 1996 Reproduced courtesy of the Canadian Museum of Nature, Ottawa reproduced at <http://www.beringia.com/02/02maina6.html> and at <http://www.nature.ca/notebooks/english/giantbev.htm>.

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hunt beaver here, yes, we will hunt beaver here,” Mâsw said to himself. The beaver were watching him without his knowing.

“Our Big Brother has come to the stream. What can we do to trick him?” They turned to the three-old beaver⁹ and said, “Three-year-old, go to where he is and float close by him as if you are dead.”

The three-year-old went out into the water, swam towards the shore where Mâsw was. She floated to the top, pretending to be dead, and was swept onto the land right to the place he was standing. So when Mâsw looked down at the water he saw the three-year-old beaver right away.

“Isn’t this splendid,” he said, “it looks like killing these beaver will be an easy task. One has just been swept up onto the land.” Taking the beaver, he said to himself, “Yes, we will once again have beaver to eat. Let’s first have some beaver. Once we have eaten some beaver, then we will do some serious beaver hunting.” He took off his bowstring, made a carrying strap¹⁰ for the beaver and took it up onto the land.

He hung the beaver on a branch along with his flint. The flint is used in starting a fire. The flint is treated in the same way as matches are, by not letting them get soaking wet. This is how people took care of their flints. They made sure they did not get too wet. He had wrapped the flint carefully. He hung his flint on the tree branch along with the beaver¹¹.

“Now we have to make roasting sticks for each of the body parts¹², the stomach, the food sac, the large intestines, and all the other parts of the beaver.” Mâsw said to himself.

⁹ Cree has different terms for animals of different ages, in particular caribou and beaver.

¹⁰ The normal method of bringing a beaver back to camp in winter is to pull it on the snow by means of a special decorated cord (*niimaapaan*) tied around a small stick stuck through the nose; the animal slides easily on the long fur of its back. Alternatively, in summer, it may be tied and carried on the hunter’s back, as in this story. There are specially decorated cords for a number of species (for details see Tanner 1979).

¹¹ Perhaps to dry the fur and to keep it away from the dogs.

¹² The internal organs are the first parts of a freshly killed animal to be eaten, often cooked at the kill site if far from camp.

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The beaver knew when Mâsw was not close by. He started to move around, finally breaking the branch on which Mâsw had hung him. He ran towards the water. Mâsw heard the branch breaking. “The snow is making a sound from the cold.” (Meanwhile this was in the summer, so how could it be?) “The snow is making a sound from the cold,” he said to himself.

When Mâsw went back to the place where he had hung the beaver, lo and behold, the beaver was gone! “Now where has that beaver gone?” he asked. He ran towards the stream. He saw the beaver slapping its tail in the water in the far distance. His flint was nowhere in sight.

Mâsw must have known that the beaver had taken the flint. He called out to the beaver, “Little Brother, bring back my flint! Little Brother, bring back my flint!. Again the beaver slapped its tail in the water. This time Mâsw saw something flying up in the air and landing on the shore. He ran over and saw that it was his flint. He unwrapped it and talking to it, he said, “Please don’t be soaked through, please don’t be too wet!” Sure enough, the flint was not too damp. He knew that he could still start a fire with it.

“That darn beaver! Little Brother is making me very angry,” he said. “You wait and see! You beaver will be hunted until not one single one of you is left,” he said. “Now how can we do this? Let us lie on their dam. When they come out of their lodge, they will surely have to go over the dam.¹³”

Meanwhile the beaver were watching Mâsw all this time. “What are we going to do about our Big Brother?” They turned to the female beaver and said, “Female Beaver, make him sleep, make him sleep.”

Female Beaver swam out to the place where Mâsw was lying down. Female Beaver said, “You are falling asleep as you carry the twigs to the dam.”

¹³ The dam and the lodge are often far apart, but nevertheless the dam is considered a good place to set a beaver trap.

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“What do you mean, sleeping? I am not sleeping. I am waiting for you to swim by,” Mâsw told the beaver.

Beaver went back to the rest and said, “Our Big Brother is not yet asleep. I will go back in a while.” Much later she went back, swimming to where Mâsw was lying down. “You are falling asleep as you carry twigs to the dam.”

“What are you talking about? I am telling you I am not falling asleep! I am waiting here for you to swim by,” he told the beaver.

Female Beaver went back to the others and said, “Our Big Brother is not yet asleep. I will go back again later.” After a long while, she went back to where he lay. Swimming close by, she said, “You are falling asleep on the job!”

“What do you mean, falling asleep? I am telling you I am not falling asleep. I am waiting for you to swim by.”

“It’s not working, Mâsw, our Big Brother is not falling asleep.” This time it was a long while before she finally went back. Calling out to him, she said, “Big Brother, you are falling asleep on the job!” This time Mâsw did not answer. He was asleep.

The beaver said, “Wait until he is really sound asleep. Then the kits will be the first ones to go over the dam, then the two-year-olds, the three-year-olds, the four-year-olds and finally the adult beaver. They said, “The last one to go over the dam will throw some clay at his head.” They did as they had planned. The last one took some clay and threw it at his head as he lay sleeping. The clay went right into his ears, blocking them. The beaver paid him no further attention and swam away.

When the beaver got over the dam they swam down the stream. They had gone quite a way when Mâsw finally woke up. He got up and ran, following the stream. “We must have fallen

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asleep, we must have fallen asleep!”¹⁴ The beaver were swimming away, splashing water as they went downstream. To top it all off, his ears were full of clay! “Oh those darn beaver, they are trying to make a fool out of me! They are really going to get it now!!”

Mâsw kept going down the river. He could see the spray of water the beaver made as they swam, away in the distance. He ran across to the other side of the river. But as soon as he got to the other side, the beaver were already in the distance splashing along as they went. So finally he ran to the mouth of the river, right out to the bay. When he got there, the beaver were already way out in the bay. He ran into the water. Putting his hand in the water he caught a young beaver¹⁵. “Yes, we will be feeding on beaver today. You will be hunted until there are no more of you left,” he said to himself.

After he had eaten the beaver, Mâsw continued walking. The water current in the bay made him go faster. *Wâstihkân*, near Chisasibi, was one of the beaver lodges. Close by this area he pulled down a tall white spruce tree, sharpened it and speared it into the beaver lodge¹⁶. The beaver headed out into the bay and seeing its form in the water, Mâsw speared it again with the spruce tree, securing it to the bottom of the bay. This is one place where Mâsw killed another beaver.

The next place where Mâsw found the beaver was *Utâskihp*. This is a small island which was also a beaver lodge. On the east end of this island one can see a group of sandbars. These are the beavers’ caches of food.

In the middle of this little island is a high hill and on the shady side there is a small lake. This is where Mâsw came up from under the ‘beaver lodge’. On the west end of this island are some sharp red-coloured rocks.

¹⁴ The use of the plural ‘we’ is reminiscent of the conversations the trickster has with his ass in other episodes, especially when he has asked his ass to keep watch over food. In this case he is talking to his flint.

¹⁵ A common way of catching beaver in ponds, in the season of open water, as they are driven out of the lodge and grabbed by hand.

Also on the mainland one can see a pile of broken rocks on the outcrop. The rocks are also red in colour. This is where Mâsw had killed the beaver by hitting their bodies against the rock outcrop. He had killed them here on the mainland and had splattered their blood on this outcrop making the rocks red.

The beaver led him on this chase until they reached the Great Whale River. One can see the place where someone had left footprints. This was very long ago. They say it was Mâsw. He had run through here while chasing the beaver.

Mâsw tried to make the beaver go through the channel between *Minitunikw*¹⁷ ‘spirit island’ and the mainland. He managed to get them to go this way. But the beaver went all along the shore of the bay with Mâsw coming closely behind them.

He kept running after them. When he got them to go in *Iyâtiwâkimîhch* ‘At the bay of a lake’ they went to the end of the lake and disappeared into the water and Mâsw had no idea where they had gone. At this place there is a spot called *Kusâpihchikin*¹⁸ ‘Shaking Tent’. This is where Mâsw did the ‘Shaking Tent Ceremony’ to find out where the beaver had gone. From doing the ceremony he saw that they had gone to Fort Chimo¹⁹. This is where the beaver had apparently come up. So Mâsw ran to that area.

I am not sure exactly, either at *Wîyâshâkimî* ‘Shining water’ or *Âhchikunipî* ‘Seal lake’, there is a lake there, they say. And at this lake the rocks are red, as red as blood. The lake itself is called

¹⁶ Another method of killing beaver is to drive them out of the lodge by banging on it, and then clubbing or spearing them as they enter the canals where they seek refuge, having first blocked all but one canal (tunnels in winter) Tanner 1979.

¹⁷ Just north of Whapamagoostui.

¹⁸ The Shaking Tent is a ceremony performed by various Algonquian groups during which a shaman is able to call and speak with spirits. A small conical tent is constructed, with the poles firmly embedded in the ground; after the shaman enters the tent behind to shake violently and many voices can be heard inside it. One of the uses of the ceremony is to be able to see or communicate with animal spirits or beings far distant. The Cree word *kusâpihchikan* ‘shaking tent’ contains a morpheme for the verb ‘see’. Descriptions can be found in Feit 1994 and Preston 2002.

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Michîmin 'bad berry?'. It is at this place that Mâsw managed to kill another beaver. He made the rocks red with blood from hitting and killing the beaver against these rocks.

Again in the north, I do not know the place myself, because I had never seen it. There is a mountain there called *Ushtikwânikin*, meaning 'The Skull'. They say it is a very high mountain. It is said it is a skull from one of the beaver Mâsw had killed there. This where he ate one of them. They must have been gigantic, those beaver Mâsw had killed.

The beaver led him along the north shore²⁰ towards the east to the place of the Naskapi. The people there tell of the places and the beaver lodges where Mâsw had hunted the beaver. This must have been the place where Mâsw managed to kill all the giant beaver. He had told the beaver, "You will continue to be hunted until not a single one of you is left."

¹⁹ The closely related Naskapi of Quebec were formerly associated with Fort Chimo, now known as Kûjjuaq, before resettling near Schefferville to the south. The term used is Pwât Chaimu, the Cree pronunciation of the English toponym.

²⁰ The north shore of the Seal Lakes?