

Alaska Native Oral Tradition

by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer

Of the twenty distinct Native American languages spoken in Alaska, we focus here on three as representative: Tlingit, Koyukon Athabaskan, and Yupik Eskimo.

Tlingit Oral Tradition

Tlingit society is characterized by ownership and reciprocity. Songs, stories, designs, personal names, and land are considered the real property of particular clans. The form and content of oral tradition are set in a context of reciprocity of “balance.” The two moieties (or divisions) of the Tlingit people, Eagle and Raven, balance each other. Their members address love songs and most oratory to each other, and in host-guest relationships at feasts share in each others’ joy and work to remove each others’ grief. A song or speech must be answered — not competitively, but only that it not “wander aimlessly.” Speeches and stories contain thematically balanced interaction of the physical and spiritual, the living and departed, humans and animals, people and land.

The major Tlingit oral genres are songs, oratory, and narrative. Narratives include instructive and humorous Raven stories, and clan crest or shaman spirit acquisition legends. Folktales — defined as deliberate fiction — are conspicuously absent in Tlingit oral tradition, as are some forms popular in the European tradition, such as ballad, narrative verse, and epics in metrical forms. Instead, Alaskan traditions are characterized by a variety of repetitions and share an aesthetic different from that of composed and published literature.

Oratory is highly valued in traditional and contemporary Tlingit society. A public speaker must understand genealogy, the Tlingit clan and kinship systems, heraldic designs on totems, regalia and tribal art, tribal histories, legends and other narratives, songs, and protocol. He must also know how to connect these poetically, using simile and metaphor to give comfort, encouragement and strength to people in time of grief, and to create bonds among individuals, families, clans, and communities and between the material and spiritual worlds. A few lines of Tlingit oratory exemplify this:

... These terns. Your fathers’ sisters would fly over the person who is feeling grief. Then they would let their down fall like snow over the person who is grieving. ... That’s when I feel as if your fathers’ sisters are flying back to their nests with your grief. ...

An example of Tlingit narrative is the Glacier Bay History, which opens with ownership — how the land was owned, named, and occupied by specific groups. Themes of balance are presented — people and the land, people and the animals, the physical and spiritual, the “eternal return.” Then, in the narrative, the balance is upset by a violation of tradition. It continues with death, destruction, and exile, and the ultimate restoration of social and spiritual balance through sacrifice. Thus the history docu-

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ments the link of a specific clan group to certain land, heraldry and literature through the spiritual efforts of an ancestor.

Athabaskan

Of the Athabaskan languages extending from Alaska and western Canada through California and Oregon, to the Apache and Navajo in the Southwest, eleven are spoken in interior Alaska.

Athabaskan narrative is composed of themes which can be told in highly distilled form or greatly elaborated on, depending upon the situation. One tradition bearer called this "cooking it up and boiling it down." Sometimes the storyteller advances the narrative and the audience contributes the details. Thus the narrator serves as prompter and the audience plays an active role in telling the story or creating the event.

Riddles—long considered by folklorists not to exist in Native American oral literature—are in fact alive and well in most Alaskan Athabaskan tradition. A favorite is "We come upstream in red canoes [salmon]." Riddles provide training for oratory, which is also important in Athabaskan oral tradition. Through this device people learn to master simile and metaphor, which are later applied in speeches. In keeping with the highly competitive nature of Athabaskan oratory there is a verb "to sit someone down," meaning to reach a level of metaphor so complex that others cannot respond.

A good example of Koyukon meta-poetics is "Gaadook," a story 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.

Athabaskan songs may be highly personal and private. Some are considered esoteric and having power only for the owner and cannot therefore be performed by others. Much value is placed on songs; one riddle compares using an old song instead of composing an appropriate new one to using an old arrow. Many songs are Zen-like in their humor and artistic response to the absurdity of predicaments in which the composers find themselves. Much of the humor is self deprecating, and created by including English words in the songs.

Yupik

The Central Yupik speak one of the four Eskimo languages in Alaska. Yupik tradition bearers generally distinguish two categories of stories: *qulirat* and *qanemcit*. *Qulirat* concern the mythical past and are part of a long oral tradition which includes accounts of creation, origin legends, and stories about anthropomorphic animals. *Qanemcit* include anecdotes and historical accounts—for example, personal encounters with ghosts or other beings, accounts of famines or illness, and feats of great shamans or hunters whose names are generally known. Within these two categories are several genres, such as war stories told by men, or stock character stories told largely by women which might involve a grandmother-grandchild pair or an isolated household of husband and wife, sometimes with a child. In these stories people are identified by general kinship

terms. "Grandchild" in these cases is often synonymous with "orphan," and the story may relate how this person was mistreated and later avenged himself. Often these socially marginal characters are spiritually powerful and save or restore the community. The stock character stories generally contain implicit moral teachings, concern a person's instructions to do or not to do something, and describe the consequences which follow from disobeying the injunctions. Unlike the Athabaskan case, Yupik stories and songs were not and are not owned. Stories are frequently located by specific place names telling where events are said to have occurred.

Beyond stories are other oral genres, including songs and ritualized insults. A variety of songs are composed for specific dances or ceremonies; others are included in the stories and sung by people or animals. Additionally, there were power songs, not much discussed today but once used to make things happen: what was sung about came true. Insults were part of traditional exchange rituals. They were couched in clever metaphors or allusions, and the person insulting someone tried to make the barb as inciting as possible, while the person receiving tried to maintain his composure. Sometimes this led to physical fights, but at other times the insult was simply returned (outdone) by the recipient at a later date.

In Yupik oral literature generally, there is a strong emphasis on the idea that whatever a person does reverberates in the human, animal, and supernatural worlds. For example, if dead kinsmen are not fed and clothed through their living namesakes, they will come back to seek what they need. If animals are shown proper respect, they will allow themselves to be caught; if not, there will be scarcity. Proper respect includes making beautiful hunting gear, properly disposing of animal remains, and observing a variety of taboos. If human values are not upheld, disaster will result for whole villages. Expressed values include (among many others) caring for elders, generosity with food, and maintaining a good natured approach toward others.

The Native people of Alaska refer to themselves as "the people." "Yupik" means "real person" and "Tlingit" means "human." The oral traditions of all Native people of Alaska teach the individual how to be human—to know who he or she is and how one fits into society and the cosmos. Even mundane daily chores such as handling garbage have cosmic significance. The categories of sacred and profane are perceived in a very different way than in the secular mainstream American world view.

Stories and songs allude to each other; both record history, and are often reflected in visual arts, such as Chilkat robes, masks, carved dance headdresses and helmets. Alaskan oral traditions are laconic and highly contextualized. A Native American tradition bearer once told a famous anthropologist, "our songs are so short because we know so much." Mainstream Americans can learn much from Native American traditions on how to live in harmony with each other, with nature, and with the cosmos.

Suggested reading

Publications of the Alaska Native Language Center, 3rd Floor, Chapman Bldg., University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701.

"*Because We Cherish You . . .*": *Sealaska Elders Speak to The Future*. Transcribed, translated, and edited by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer. Juneau: Sealaska Heritage Foundation, 1981.

Yupik Lore: Oral Traditions of An Eskimo People. Bethel: Lower Kuskokwim School District, 1981.

Scollon, Ron and Suzanne. *Linguistic Convergence: An Ethnography of Speaking at Fort Chipewyan, Alberta*. New York: Academic Press, 1979.

_____. *Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1981.

Suggested films

Haa Shagoon. 30 min. color sound. University of California Extension Media Center, 2223 Fulton St., Berkeley, CA 94720.

Summer of the Loucheaux: Portrait of a Northern Indian Family. 28 min. color sound. Tamarack Films, 11032 76 St., Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5B 2C6.

Various films on Alaska Native village life:

Tununeremiut (The People of Tununak), *From the First People*, *On Spring Ice*, *At the Time of Whaling*, *Atka: An Aleut Village*. Leonard Kamerling and Sarah Elder, Alaska Native Heritage Film Project, Rm. 210 Chapman Bldg., University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701.