

Role of Literature as a Source of History, Values and Identity

(Excerpted from a paper presented at the Bilingual/Multi-Cultural Conference, February 1988, by Edna MacLean, then Special Assistant to the Commissioner, Alaska Department of Education)

One day in the mid 1960's while still in college, I received the biggest shock of my life when I realized that I did not know the literature, history, art, and some of the traditional customs of my own people, the Iñupiat of the North Slope Alaska. I felt empty when that realization hit me. There was a void. I knew western man's literature, history, art, and customs but did not have substantive knowledge of my own cultural ancestry.

I knew the dates of arrival of Columbus to America, the arrival of the pilgrims to America, the Civil War, and so forth. I knew why these events were important; but I did not know the important historical events of my own people. I felt terrible; but at the same time I felt anger. Angry at the schooling process which had excluded the history of knowledge of my ancestry.

Fortunately, I was near a good public library which contained some literature on Eskimos. I even found an article about my father who had impressed a scientist with his ability to build a small house without the help of a blue print. The author of the article was impressed with my father's spatial assessment abilities. You can imagine the pride I felt reading about my father and the house that he had built.

This has not been an easy paper for me to write, because by talking about myself a lot, I am bordering on breaking one of the cultural mores of being Iñupiaq. But I believe that my experience need not be repeated if our schools would truly reflect the linguistic and cultural heritage of the communities they serve. Thus I would like to share the learning experience that I pursued on my own, searching for my history, my ancestral history.

Also, I have a wish that someday, in the near future, I will ask an Alaska native high school student about the history of the group that he identifies with and have him tell me with confidence and pride the history of his people.

Like I said, I was fortunate to be near a library which contained many books about Eskimos when I felt the need to learn more about myself, my ancestry.

The first book that I opened had pictures of Iñupiat living in snow-houses. I remember thinking to myself "oh, how neat!" The book was about Canadian Inuit. That was the first that I truly began to identify with the Inuit of Canada and Greenland. It was not the first time that I had seen pictures nor read about the Canadian Inuit, but it was the first time I identified with them because I was searching for my ancestors, the grandparents of my grandmother. These were people who ate the same food that I ate and wore the same clothing that I wore in Barrow, Alaska. The only strange thing about them was that they lived in snow-houses! That was my thinking then.

Let me assure you that I have since learned through life history interviews that I've conducted with Iñupiaq elders of Barrow that my ancestors also lived in snow-houses as they traveled hunting different game. Like the Canadian and Greenlandic Inuit my ancestors were nomads moving from one hunting environment to the next.

Needless to say there were misinterpretations about the activities of the Iñupiat in many of the books that I found. The misinterpretations along with the lack of depth of material written about the Iñupiat

made me determined to dig a bit more deeply.

Upon my return to Alaska, after completing my university education, I began listening to and studying the oral literature of my people.

During my last two years in college I had studied Far Eastern literature. I was fascinated by the beauty of the myths of the people of India. It never occurred to me that my own people had legends and poetry through song that contained as much beauty and philosophical content.

You can imagine the excitement of finding tapes full of Iñupiaq legends and stories at the Alaska Native Language Center and Rasmussen Library at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks.

The first thing that struck me in the oral literature was the abundance of activities in the spiritual and supernatural realm. In the legends that I listened to, Iñupiat were able to "communicate" with animals, could transform themselves into other beings, and could also influence the activities of animals and humans through song.

In the course of my private "literature class in Iñupiaq" which has spanned several years, I have come to understand that according to the Iñupiat, "long before day and night had been created, or the first man made his appearance, there lived an old woman, indeed very old, for the tradition of her having had a beginning, if there ever was such a one, had been lost. We must bear in mind that during the first stage of the world everything remained young and fresh; nothing grew old. The old woman was like a young girl in her appearance and feelings, and being the only inhabitant of the earth, naturally felt very lonesome and wished for a companion. She was one time chewing "pooya" when the thought arose in her mind that it would be pleasant to have an image to play with, so taking her "pooya" she fashioned a man, then by way of ornamentation placed a raven's beak on his forehead. She was delighted with her success in making such a lovely image and lying down to sleep placed it near her side. On awakening her joy was great, for the image had come to life and there before her was the first man."(Driggs, 1905)

Iñupiaq legends tell of the "Tuluņikrsaq"the Raven-Spirit who is also a man. He is credited with having secured land and light for humanity. According to Iñupiaq legend there was a period of darkness when there was no light. This was the time when humans did not age. The Raven-Spirit "Tuluņikrsaq" secured the land and the source of light from an old man, his wife, and his daughter. Light appeared only after the Tuluņikrsaq stole the source of light from them. As he was fleeing, the Tuluņikrsaq dropped the source of light which then exploded and dispersed units of light throughout existence.

Our languages and our cultures can be sources of pride and identity for us. The oral literature of our ancestors sends us messages based on their experiences and their interpretations of them.

Besides legends and accounts of life experience, our ancestors left us with a wealth of short stories usually based on animals with human attributes. One story which comes to mind was told by Oscar Swan, one of the Iñupiaq teachers in Kivalina, Alaska. It seems that an "aviņņaq", a mouse, decided to venture out of his hole and assess the rest of the world. When he stood on his hind legs, lo and behold, to his surprise he was able to reach the heavens! When he reached down he felt the ground. When he reached in all directions he was able to touch the limits of the world! He concluded that he was the largest person on the face of the earth. The poor mouse had surfaced from his hole onto the ground into an old Iñupiaq "atuņak", a boot sole, turned upside down! The top of his heaven had been the sole of the "atuņak", and the outer limits of his world had been the sides of the 'atuņak'".

When I think of this story I am mindful that I should consider all facets of a situation before I make any conclusion; and that I should not limit myself to what is around me but to explore and search for other information, lest I be like the poor mouse.

Another attribute of Iñupiaq culture evident in our literature is that the roles of women and men had not been stratified. The type of role undertaken depended on the ability and capability of the person. In one of the legends told by one of our foremost historians, Uqumailaq, I found these words:

“Once there lived a large number of people and their chief along a river in the interior. Their chief had a daughter. She did not mature slowly. She had a bow and arrow as she grew up. She hunted like a man using the bow and arrow. When she saw a wolf she would stalk it and would eventually kill it with her bow and arrow. She did likewise with wolverine. Although she was a woman she was a skillful hunter.”

Woman as hunter is not a common theme among our oral literature. But the presence of such themes indicates to us that the society of our ancestors was egalitarian. In fact, one cheerful little Iñupiaq elder-woman told me that she belonged to a whaling crew, and the only reason she had never struck a whale was because she was so tiny! From the legends and from more recent accounts I learned that men and women have equal status and one was limited only by one's abilities.

Throughout our literature the attributes essential to being a good hunter or good provider are identified as quickness of movement, mental alertness, physical excellence, capacity for endurance of pain, stamina, and knowledge of and respect for nature. These qualities are still applicable to the world of today. We must be quick, alert, be in good physical condition, be able to endure pain, have stamina, and know and respect the land and animals because they are our sustenance.

A hunter and his family spent much of their time traveling on the ice searching for food. The ever-changing environment of the ice and probably the need for a way to quickly pinpoint the location of a seal or any other object or activity on the ice produced the elaborate set of demonstrative pronouns that we have in Iñupiaq. Instead of using landmarks, we have words which serve as indicators for the location of an object. Each pronoun gives information about number, proximity, visibility, vertical position, and whether the object is inside or outside, moving or not moving, or lengthy or not lengthy. There are no permanent markers out on the ice, therefore a word which provides a mental map is very useful.

As I listened to numerous legends I would sometimes be pleasantly rewarded with a song. Much of our literature is interspersed with songs. The songs are powerful. There are songs to call animals. Songs that heal. Songs that harm. And songs to relate oneself to the land. Here are the words of a song sung by a Greenlander as he is overwhelmed by the emotion he feels for the land. (The following was written in one of Knud Rassmussen's letters, October, 1930.)

*O, warmth of summer gliding over the land in waves!
Not a gust of wind, not a cloud*

And in the mountains, the belling reindeer, the sweet reindeer in the bluish distance!

*O, how it pulls me!
O, how it fills me with delight!
Sobbing with emotion, I lie down on the earth.*

The literature of any culture, whether it be in written or oral form, contains the history, values, and mores of that culture. The themes of our literature reflect our values, the things that are important to us.

I have touched upon only a few of the themes upon which Iñupiaq literature is based. Through legends and life experience accounts, the Alaska Native people told their history. In our elementary and secondary schools, Alaska Native children learn the literature and culture of western man; it is equally important for these students to learn and study the literature and culture of their ancestors.

I have purposefully restricted my presentation to the Alaska Native situation because I feel an urgency. If we do not succeed in transmitting the knowledge of our ancestors to our children here in Alaska, there is no other place for them to go to learn them. Alaska is their ancestral home. If Alaska Native languages and cultures die here in Alaska, they die forever. We cannot let that happen.