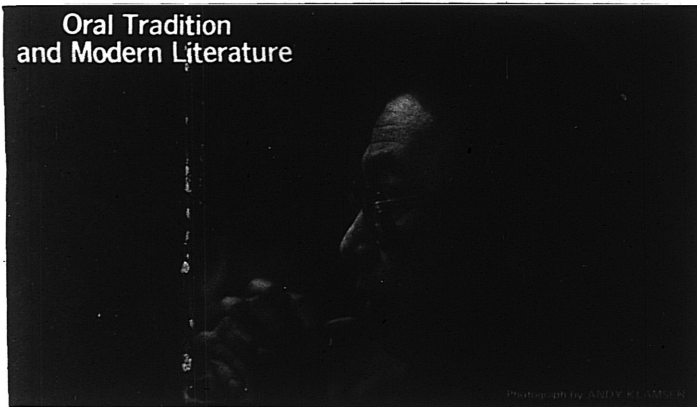


# "Once Upon A Time..."

## Oral Tradition and Modern Literature



Photography by ANTON K. STOLIK

By YURI RYTKHEOU

*Editor's Note - The writer is a Chukchi author, born in the village of Uelen at the easternmost tip of Siberia, the closest settlement to Alaska across the Bering Strait. Mr. Rytkheu, part Eskimo, shares common ancestry with some Natives of the Bering Straits region. The story was originally published by Unesco Press and la Baconniere and is translated from the Russian by A.B. Werth.*

It is clear from the foregoing, that oral folk tradition plays a considerable part in the modern literature of the newly literate peoples; although writers rarely draw on this material when dealing with present-day society on the grounds that it provides no solutions for burning topical problems. I would like to refer again, at this juncture, to the work of Chinghiz Aitmatov, which demonstrates convincingly that oral traditions still have a very real contribution to make.

There are in contemporary literature a number of examples of the use of mythological themes for the solution of vital artistic problems. Literary experts could probably quote many examples, from the works of John Updike to those of the Yukagir writer Seymon Kurtslov; but the question still remains as to how to use this invaluable material for the enrichment of contemporary culture, how to find a place for it not only in books, archives and recordings, but also as a source for literary

creation. And this is a question to which I can see no answer. Indeed, there probably can be none, for every modern writer evolves his own individual attitude to the rich oral heritage of his own people. I would remark only that reference to the living sources of popular creation has not infrequently led to discoveries in the realm of art.

I myself in my own literary work often borrow from Chukchi folklore, directly or indirectly. I sometimes have the impression that present day discussions about the contribution of literature to spiritual life, attitudes and moral standards have lost their relevance. There exist certain unwritten rules for the creation of works imbued with true humanity and optimism, such faith in the triumph of good over evil, such subtle humour and such sensitive understanding of the social climate as we find in oral folklore.

These were I think the qualities of oral folk traditions that made them so important in shaping the attitudes of man and his offspring. In this respect, they have much to teach us; and it is my conviction that every writer whose roots go deep into the life of his people will always turn to this unsullied source for the strength and inspiration he needs for his work, his spiritual development and an enlightened understanding of the world in which he lives.

Hurricanes in the land of the Chukchi have not decreased in force with the passage of the years; they are still as ferocious as they were

in the days of my childhood.

But the yarangas no longer line the shore, lit by flickering tapers fashioned from clumps of moss floating in seal-oil; and the silence is no longer broken by the crackling of walrus skins flapping in the wind.

Radios blare, announcers read out the latest news from Anadyr, Magadan, Moscow, Leningrad, Paris, Tokyo, New York, London... and the television screens bring into the homes of the trappers and reindeer breeders pictures of the distant world beyond the storm-tossed seas, the snowy mountain ranges and the impenetrable wastes of the taiga and tundra. The shelves along the walls are piles with newspapers, journals, illustrated booklets and popular science works. And it might seem as though there were no room left for the ancient art of oral folk poetry.

Both the house-owner and his wife have had at least eight years of secondary schooling. During the years of the Soviet regime the Chukchi people, for centuries illiterate, have caught up, and are now amongst the most avid readers of the Soviet Union.

But still, late at night when the lamp burns dim on the bedside table, and the blizzard rages outside, you may suddenly hear the word:

ENMEN...

The history of this word is far, far older than that of "once upon a time". It is the opening of every story, fairytale, ancient historical legend or "tale of bygone days". And the magic work enmen may still be heard on the whale-boat, starting off with its catch on the long trek home; in the tundra, when the reindeer are grazing peacefully on the snowy slopes of the hill.

Listening to the tales of yore, you may sometimes catch an echo of a familiar book, a subject lifted straight from the pages of a printed novel into the plot of an oral tale, a theme from some European literary classic... but this implies familiarity with both the oral folklore of the Chukchi and the printed literature of the world.

In other words, the creative spark is still unquenched, for all the weight of thousands of books, the monotonous voice of the radio or the pictures flickering on the television screens. Indeed, this spirit tends to permeate all the new material brought to the people by literature, radio and television.

Nutetein, the well-known Eskimo singer and dancer once said to me: "The dimensions of man are not height and breadth alone, but also his inner being, his past history. It is when measured thus that he becomes three-dimensional, and significant."

So it is with the contemporary writer. He can only be truly three-dimensional and significant if his roots reach deep down into the treasurehouse of national oral folk tradition.