

"Once upon a Time" — Oral Tradition and Modern Literature

Editor's Note — Yuri Rytkeu is a Chukchi and Eskimo author, born in a village of Uelen on Cape Dezhnev, the closest Siberian settlement to Alaska. He has written more than 20 books, including novels and collected short stories. These essays are from "Cultral Trends II" published by the Unesco Press and la Baconniere. They are translated from Russian by A.B. Werth. The author now lives in Leningrad.

Outside the walls of the yaranga (translators note: Yaranga is a traditional tent made of seal or reindeer skins) the mighty winds of the hurricane sweep away everything in their path. The frail skiff tosses to and fro in the wind, in constant danger of being carried out into the Arctic Ocean. The skins of polar bears, seals and reindeers, hung out to dry, flap in the wind crackling like rifle reports. All living things able to move have taken refuge from the storm—the beasts in their lairs, the seals deep under the ice, the willow ptarmigans in their snowy nests; and man huddles in his yaranga, which is barely distinguishable, to a traveller from distant lands, from an animal's lair.

But whereas the dumb beasts in their lairs shiver with cold and hunger, terrified of the storm, the men in their yaranga laying in store of meat and fat, wait calmly for the blizzard to blow itself out. Snug in their tales of animals transformed by magic into men, legends of doughty warriors and intrepid whalers, of the fearful adventures of hunters borne off on the ice floes out into the ocean wastes to lands unknown.

The tale of the hunter lost in the ice-field is recounted year after year, a recurring theme, a convenient prop for all manner of fantastic stories.

One of these runs as follows:

The luckless hunter accepts his lot and, driven by the instinct for survival, the strongest urge of every living being, adapts himself to his unusual, surroundings, his new way of life. The Arctic Sea, for all it seems to be a desert, is in fact inhabited by creatures in their element there. And the hunter is transformed into a teryky, a cross between a seal and a human. His body, stripped of clothing, becomes covered with a coat of short, thick hair. This is the outward transformation of



the involuntary exile of the ice; inwardly, the change goes for deeper. He ceases to be able to talk, losing the gift of speech which, in the eyes of the Chukchi people, is the essential characteristic of man; and his psychology changes too. He lives the life of the beasts of the sea, obtains his food as they do, and very rarely goes on shore. But the teryky is overcome, from time to time, by a feeling of homesickness, driving him back to the land from whence he came. He returns to his old haunts, where he is sometimes seen by members of his family and is even known to lie with his wife. She may then give birth to children but, more often, to teryky—hapless, weakminded creatures unfit for modern life.

Such are the tales I heard on stormy nights in my native village of Uelen, huddling in our ancient yaranga, long since disappeared.

These and similar tales taken from the books I read formed the world of my childhood. The teryky were every bit as real to me as the ghosts peopling the haunted castles of the tales of chivalry I heard recounted in my childhood and boyhood days.

I was already at school, and living in a world of fantasy compounded of distant past, the wondrous present and the enchanted future; a world where past and future alike, that which had been and that which was to be, were suffused in magic.

Tales of magic, ancient legends, historical fables, proverbs and sayings, songs and dances created an atmosphere without which life would have been unthinkable, just as if the world today were suddenly deprived of libraries and of all the books amassed by mankind over the ages.

In our family, the types of oral traditions varied with the generations. Tales of magic and moral stories were generally the prerogative

of grandparents, past masters in the art, who possessed both knowledge and the skill of pointing a moral in the most resplendent terms.

Serious stories—factual and historical accounts—were by and large the realm of the middle generation. They told, most of them, of relations with the neighbouring Eskimo or Koryak peoples. The Eskimos lived only a few hours by dog-sleigh from my native Uelen, and tales about the wars against those people were recounted with the utmost attention to detail, especially since most of our families had relations amongst them. This type of oral literature was subject to a kind of invisible censorship, imposed by life itself and by the desire for close, neighbourly relations with the peoples round about.

The same applied, roughly, to erotic tales, which I contrived to overhear, though they were never intended for the ears of children. Such tales were told mainly in male company, amongst groups of young unmarried men, or men who, for one reason or another, had remained bachelors.

Tales of horror were mostly reserved for the dark watches of the night, when the oil lamps had guttered out. The grown-ups for some reason chose this moment, when all was pitch dark within, the silence was broken only by mysterious rustlings entering the tent on sudden puffs of wind, to talk of man-eaters and fabled monsters feeding on human blood.

I happened once to see a modern horror-film. Vivid though it certainly was, it gripped me far less than its prototype, recounted in the darkness of the Chukchi tent, surrounded by the mysterious rustling of the polar night or the vicious howling of the blizzard. Authors of modern horror stories and films tend to get one important fact—that man is by nature joyous, optimistic and wary, or rather inquisitive and skeptical; he is not easily taken in by artificially fabricated horrors.

Daily toil, the hunting of the beasts of the sea, the pasturing of the reindeer in the wastes of the tundra were suffused by the colour and enchantment of our proverbs, sayings and aphorisms. I noticed that the tendency to interlard daily speech with ethical maxims was particularly marked when the company included young people just embarking on life.