

Once Upon a Time —

The Transmission of Oral Tradition

By YURI RYTKHEU

Why is it, I wonder, that research on oral traditions, especially those of the peoples of the North, has concentrated mainly on fairy tales? Or on heroic epics in an artificial elevated style divorced from everyday life? What has become of all the realistic stories and historical legends, sufficiently precise and authentic, many of them to take the place of written sources?

Could it be that these traditions represented the kind of mass culture which is gradually vanishing, like an out-dated fashion?

I do not believe that this is so.

It was, in part, the fault of the collectors of folklore, who always thought it to be best to record the tales told by old men, full of the wisdom culled in the course of a long life, striking figures in their shaggy white breeches and white fur boots. What the collectors of fairy tales fail to realize was that this was the garb donned by those expecting ere long to make the journey up through the clouds, those who had ceased to be of any value to society. The customs amongst the Chukchi, the Eskimos and other Arctic peoples were pitiless: when man had ceased to fulfill his main purpose—to act as support for the young generation taking over—he was required, of his own accord, to relinquish his place by the

hearth and give his share of the food to those whose need was greater. In these circumstances, of course, his life belonged to the past, and the tales he recounted to the collectors of folklore naturally reflected his attitude. Those who were still in the prime of life, whilst regarding oral folk traditions with due respect were, as one of my fellow countrymen put it in no uncertain terms, averse to “the public display of affection”. It is regrettable, at all events, that many valuable examples of popular oral tradition of interest to the modern world should have faded from human memory.

The bulk of the vast store of oral tales and legends, rich though it is, cannot, I think, be said to constitute the mass culture of the era before such material was recorded in writing; though some of it undoubtedly does. It is even possible that oral poetry contained the germs of pornography and misanthropy. But it should be stressed once more that there existed a kind of censorship imposed by the tacit laws of society, restricting the propagation of such traditions. The Chukchi people have a proverb about the power of speech: “words can kill a man”, to me.

I heard these tales of the Chukchi, unlike modern written literature, contained a wealth of circumstantial detail about place

and time of year; though the hero of the tale was seldom named, only his tribe and the language he spoke.

I also heard tales from people of my own age, and even from Russian children who had lived long amongst the Chukchi and succumbed to the charm of the yaranga with its aroma of blubberoil and to the whole artistic and intellectual atmosphere of the reindeer breeders' and fishermen's encampment.

Note — Yuri Rytkheu is a Chukchi author, born in the village of Uelen at the eastern tip of Siberia. Essay excerpted from “Cultural Trends II” published by Unesco Press and la Baconniere, and translated from the Russian by A.B. Werth.