

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

ANDERSON, WANNI W., compiler. *The Dall Sheep Dinner Guest: Iñupiaq Narratives of Northwest Alaska*. Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 2005. x + 294 pages. Maps, illustrations, index. Hardcover, US\$39.95; ISBN 1-889963-74-7.

The Dall Sheep Dinner Guest: Iñupiaq Narratives of Northwest Alaska is the newest addition to a rich collection of Iñupiaq narratives of northwestern Alaska. The editor, Wanni Anderson, has done ethnological, folkloristic, and archaeological research in Alaska since 1966 and has authored *Folktales of the Riverine and Coastal Inupiat* (with R. T. Sampson, 2003), *Kuuvangmiut Subsistence: Traditional Eskimo Life in the Twentieth Century* (with D. D. ANDERSON et al., 1998), as well as many other publications on folklore, play, and games.

This publication, to borrow the publisher announcement, is a collection covering the “rich storytelling tradition of the Iñupiaq Eskimos of Alaska.” It is a very readable and informative volume, with fifty pages of Introduction outlining past collections (3–5) and regional variation of Iñupiaq oral narratives (17–18), with a succinct but ample synopsis of the Iñupiaq culture and society. The latter is an invaluable aid to understanding and appreciation of the eighty-four narratives and variations thereof.

It is not necessary to dwell upon the importance of narratives, particularly to a people without a written language, as a vehicle to convey historical knowledge and social norms. Anderson’s statement that “Iñupiaq storytelling was a significant aspect of Iñupiaq expressive culture and a social event” (7) is equally applicable to all non-literate peoples. In the “modern” period, narratives take on the added importance of fostering and bolstering the ethnic identity of indigenous and other minority groups. Narratives have recently also become important as legal evidence in negotiations with the nation-states with which they find themselves (RIDINGTON 2002, 119). The Supreme Court of British Columbia did not accept narrative as legal evidence (MACEachern 1991). However, as this judgment was overruled by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1997, Indigenous narrative is now conditionally admitted as evidence in legal negotiation (SUPREME COURT OF CANADA 1997).

Based upon informant statements, Anderson concludes (19–20) that there is one level of Iñupiaq narrative classification, sub-divided into three categories: old story (*unipchaaq utuqqaq*), not-so-old story (*unipchaaq*), and real incidents (*uqaaqtuaq*). Real incidents referring to a happening occurring at a specific time and location and to specific person may become legend (not-so-old story) with the passage of time (19).

BURCH (2005, 50) states that the Iñupiat (plural of Iñupiaq) differentiated between legend (*unipkaat*, corresponding to Anderson’s *uqaaqtuaq*) and historical chronicles (*uqaluktuat*, corresponding to Anderson’s *uqaaqtuaq*). Burch also notes that narratives that are recorded in English are often in “village” English, rather than “standard” English (2005, 50). In order that the reader (“standard” English readers) may understand the narratives, they are edited into “standard” English.

Anderson, in the preface (x) clearly states that most of the stories in the book were translated, thus suggesting that the original versions were recorded in Iñupiatun (it is noted that some stories, such as “The Girl Who Had No Wish to Marry,” were originally collected in English). However, Anderson does not state whether or not the translations published or the original English texts are edited from what Burch calls “village” English into “standard” English, leaving the reader to wonder how much of the “local flavor” has been sacrificed to standardization.

In the text, many of the terms unique to Iñupiatun are briefly explained in brackets to aid the reader to understand terms not readily rendered into English (i.e. *aqsrautraq* [Iñupiaq football], 122). However, this reviewer, possibly because of a “non-standard” English background, was not able to understand “creamed fat” (*akutuq*). A glossary more detailed than that supplied on page 52 would enhance understanding. Rasmussen describes *akutuq* as caribou marrow mixed with suet and blubber (OSTERMANN 1952, 232).

The correlation noted between the Iñupiaq “The Fast Runner” (96–100) and the Igluligmiut narrative of “Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner” (ANGILIRQ 2002), made famous by the film of the same name, piques one imagination. Did this narrative travel with the Thule people who started from northwest Alaska to Greenland about one thousand years ago? In the Iñupiaq version, the un-named fast runner avenges the murder of his sister, whereas in the Iglulik version, Atanarjuat avenges the murder of his brother. The plot of Atanarjuat is more intricate, as Atanarjuat must contend also with a curse laid by a miscreant shaman. Although beyond the scope of Anderson’s book and this review, future research of the area between the Iñupiaq and the Igluligmiut could possibly show how the Fast Runner theme developed over distance and time.

The title of this book, *The Dall Sheep Dinner Guest*, is one episode in the epic legend (*unipchaaq*) “The Qayaq Cycle” (55–77), which took as long as one month to narrate (9). “The Qayaq Cycle” tells the life story of the cultural hero Qayaqtuāgiññaqtuaq, who, in his journey to avenge the killing of his four brothers, encounters and defeats all sorts of monsters, animals taking on human form, and other wondrous beings. Qayaq himself transforms into a pike, an old woman, and a falcon.

He also introduced natural birth, an act welcomed by people who thought that a baby was born only by cutting open the pregnant woman’s abdomen, thus killing the mother.

The episode of the “Dall Sheep Dinner Guest” tells of a young man dressed in a beautiful sheepskin parka who joined the lonesome Qayaq in a meal. Qayaq’s big toe, showing through a hole in his *mukluk* wanted to eat the young man. In great fear, the young man ran to the top of a mountain. That is why Dall sheep no longer inhabit the lowlands.

The legend was recorded by Rasmussen at Kotzebue in 1924 (OSTERMANN 1952, 229–53). In Rasmussen’s record, the subject of “big-toe-eats-stranger” story was not a Dall sheep but a lynx (ibid. 234). Rasmussen’s version of Qayaqtuāgiññaqtuaq is more detailed and vivid in description, possibly because in 1924 the legend was told more and better remembered.

All in all, *The Dall Sheep Dinner Guest* is very readable and a welcome addition to the rich tradition of Iñupiaq legends.

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