

The Epic of Qayaq: The Longest Story Ever Told by My People.
By Lela Oman. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996.
Pp. 144, illustrations, \$22.50 US, ISBN 0-295-97531-8 pbk.)

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Two very different books contribute to recent interest in oral tradition and storytelling. Each is steeped in an oral tradition which complements its literary form. *The Bedbugs' Night Dance and Other Hopi Sexual Tales* and *The Epic of Qayaq: The Longest Story Ever Told By My People* perpetuate long histories of Hopi and Inupiat storytelling; they may be read as written translations of oral performances. The two books differ stylistically, however, in the approach each takes to the translation of oral stories into written literary forms and genres. *The Epic of Qayaq* is written by a bilingual author who contextualizes the stories in written English idiom. *The Bedbugs' Night Dance*, in contrast, is published simultaneously in Hopi and English. It retains many speech patterns and expressions from Hopi and refuses to be categorized as Native literature "written in English." Neither book attempts to emulate oral speech repetitions and cadences in its written form; the authors have chosen instead to incorporate elements from oral tradition into their texts at the level of the narratives themselves. In terms of traditional genre distinctions, *The Bedbugs' Night Dance* resembles a collection of thematically linked short stories written out of a Hopi cultural context; *The Epic of Qayaq* is formally constructed as an epic.

Lela Oman translated the stories which comprise *The Epic of Qayaq* directly into English after years of participating in Inupiat storytelling performances. It is a beautifully illustrated text; the works of Inupiat visual artists complement Oman's literary images. Recited orally, the adventures of Qayaq take weeks to tell. The book recounts his experiences as Qayaq wanders through northern

Alaska and Canada, traveling on foot and by kayak along four rivers and up to the Arctic Ocean. When he begins his journey, he is a restless adventurer, but Qayak's role changes during the course of his quest for adventure. As Qayak uses supernatural powers to help various Inupiat communities, the narrative transforms him into a cultural hero whose exploits serve "to save the human race from evil."

Many versions of this narrative exist in Inupiat tradition, and Oman has neither edited this one to remove (impure) European elements, nor to accommodate Christian notions of morality. Qayaq, for example, takes a new wife in each of the communities that he visits, and he often sleeps with them prior to marriage. Oman also includes stories like the Inupiat version of Adam and Eve in the context of Qayaq's adventures, thereby suggesting a literary history which includes both pre-European and post-European contact elements. *The Epic of Qayaq* is ultimately both literature and history; it provides us with an example of how storytelling theorizes the world of Inupiat experience and constructs cultural knowledge through narrative form. The various stories which make up the narrative of Qayaq's life are cohesive elements of the written epic; they are at one and the same time discreet tellings and stories within stories. They retain their connections to each other through both the epic form and their cultural content.

Qayak's story reveals, for instance, how non-verbal forms of communication remain central to Inupiat culture. As Oman writes of the relationship between Qayaq's wife and her helpers, the narrator states: "They returned her love, showing it in obedience and in their shining eyes, never, never, in words" (p. 42). In *The Epic of Qayaq*, as in many other First Nations oral narratives, cultural knowledge is neither openly asserted nor divulged in a question-and-answer exegesis of the text. Instead, knowledge is constructed through the narrative itself and must be inferred from the story. The reader, therefore, is invited to share a certain knowledge with the storyteller, and is then invited to construct further cultural knowledge from the narrative in a re-presentation of the oral storytelling situation.

The different stories that make up Qayaq's tale loop around themselves in a cycle of repetition and recursivity. Oman creates the written epic from many episodic tellings, combining stories from different times and places, and performed by a multitude of storytellers. She, like any credited storyteller, fashions and re-fashions the narrative, making it both uniquely her own and also claiming the story for the Inupiat community in general. Oman states: "Here in my own selfishness, I could say that the story began from my own two rivers, Kobuk River and Selawik River" (p. xvi). While the epic has often been considered oral in origin, and the written epic categorized as secondary to the oral, *The Epic of Qayaq* shows that the distinction between poetic (oral) epic and (written) prose forms is no longer a meaningful one. In the process of translating from the oral to the written, Oman contextualizes her own

experiences of the Qayaq story into an epic that could be set against the best offered in the Western tradition.

An entirely different sort of community storytelling reveals itself in *The Bedbugs' Night Dance and Other Hopi Sexual Tales*. These stories are not only sexually explicit, they are also funny. *The Bedbugs' Night Dance* reveals a humour in Hopi oral tradition that is unexpurgated of its sexual overtones and ambiguities. Ekkehart Malotki, collector, editor, and finally, author of this collection, argues that these stories contain a form of Hopi humour which has historically been censored by anthropologists and even by the Hopi themselves. The Hopi know when *not* to tell a story, and one did not, even early in the twentieth century, tell bawdy tales to Christian missionaries and anthropologists. *The Bedbugs' Night Dance* is refreshing to read and reveals a relaxed attitude towards sexual matters in Hopi culture, an attitude that contrasts with Western (European) notions.

In one story, "The Prayers for Rain by the Shungopavi Chief," *kwasis* and *lowas* rain down on libidinous women and men only too eager to possess the sources of their own pleasure. A story like this gives a whole different connotation to the English expression, "It's raining cats and dogs." Malotki's decision not to render certain Hopi terms into English, including *kwasi* (penis) and *lowa* (vagina) is a good one. The reader is drawn into the world of Hopi experience and at the same time prevented from interpreting these tales as a sort of Westernized eroticism.

The stories preserve the characteristic flavour of orality with the narrator(s) greeting and addressing their audience/readers directly. Key information is repeated in a variety of ways, although oral repetitions of phrases seem to have been edited from these written versions. While the different stories do not seem to interconnect at their surface level, except in terms of their thematic interest, a wealth of more general cultural information is embedded in them and can be inferred by the reader, as in *The Epic of Qayaq*. The initiated reader constructs a certain knowledge from the information that is already there in the stories — and that knowledge is not always sexual in nature, as Malotki points out. But these are stories the likes of which will not be found in the legends of Greek or Roman tradition.

The different kinds of knowledge embedded in both of these books should provide rich sources of reading pleasure, and of research, for years to come. *The Bedbugs' Night Dance*, along with *The Epic of Qayaq*, make a unique contribution to the literature on orality, as well as to academic anthropology and literary studies. Moreover, the oral features embedded in these books suggest an ongoing orality which is unlikely to be erased through print.

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