FOR CENTURIES, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF ALASKA, Canada, Washington and Oregon have upheld the artful tradition of oral literature. These creations were handed down from one generation to another, under stringent protocols designed to keep intact their cultural significance.

The most substantial form of oral literature is the epic, which may take many days to relate. The shortest form is the riddle, a brief set of clues that requires an answer from the audience. Of intermediate length is the parable — a single instructive incident from "another time."

Other forms of oral literature include songs, recitations of lineages and rights, ritual greetings to visitors, ceremonies for distributing gifts, ceremonies for honoring the dead and ceremonies celebrating marriages or births.

Traditional Alaskan storytelling is a rich art, originally part of a brilliant universe of oral tradition that included shaman’s songs, potlatch greeting songs, epithalamia, and much more.

Lela Kiana Oman’s Qayaqtuagaqniqtaq, or The Epic of Qayaq: The Longest Story Ever Told By My People, is an Inupiaq Eskimo epic, told to her when Oman lived at the mining camp of Candle, Alaska. Her own account of how she first heard these stories and from whom is detailed in the introduction.

During the day, Oman worked as a cook in the Candle roadhouse. During the late evening, when the roadhouse was closed and her own five children were asleep, she wrote down these stories.

But earning a living as a cook, a social worker and bilingual teacher occupied Oman’s time for many decades. It was not until 1992 that she spoke about the epic at the Eighth Inuit Studies Conference in Quebec.

The epic follows the adventures of Qayaq, a traveller who wanders by boat and on foot in northern Alaska and Canada and even makes an excursion among the Tlingit. Qayaq is the youngest of twelve brothers; the eleven older brothers have all left home on adventures, never to return. His mother assigns him a quest: "to save the human race from evil."

The epic includes the story of the Inupiat Adam and Eve, the story of a great flood and a tale that is a corollary to the Biblical tale of Jonah and the whale. To the Kwakiutl of Vancouver Island, it was Halibut who crawled out of the water, threw off his scales, tail and fins, and emerged as the first man. To the Haida, man crawled out of a clam shell at the northern tip of Haida Gwai (today known as the Queen Charlotte Islands). In Oman’s version (in her “Preamble”), the first people are a man and wife who suddenly come to consciousness on a mountain peak. Food and game are plentiful, and many children are born to them. Years later they discover other people living on the other mountain of this limited world, and their children intermarry.
Oman feels the story originated in the area where her parents grew up — the riverine valleys of the Kobuk and Selawik. However, versions of this story are known to the Eskimos of Russia, Canada and Greenland as well, which indicate it is circumpolar in nature.

Oman's story is straightforward. It is perhaps a digest of the original epic, which could have taken as little as a week or as much as a month to tell. To grasp its full import, consider some of the traditions of the oral storyteller.

Although they are given full play in forms like songs, figurative devices such as metaphors and similes are rare in indigenous Alaskan stories. Iconography and symbolism are also rare, so that a seven-headed monster is a monster with seven heads — not a symbol of the seven deadly sins, as such a creature would be in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

Eskimo stories often came with venues. Some would be told only on solemn and highly formal occasions. Some were told to children and grandchildren on domestic occasions or at particular camps (sites of temporary nomadic residence), such as the ground squirrel stories told at spring's ground squirrel camps. Stories were never intended for secular public performance where persons who were not members of the tribe might be present.

Titillating details or clues are a frequent storyteller's device. For example, at the very outset of Qayaq's adventures, he kills a seal and hauls the head into his skin boat. Magically, the head of this dead mammal growls at him! This is a clue (both to Qayaq and the audience) that the head has unusual powers and may come in handy later on. Clues like this inject suspense.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of Northwest stories is the theme of transformation. This is not the temporary transformation of princes into frogs or geese as in the tradition of the Brothers Grimm. It is a permanent ability to change shape. Bears take on the appearance of men and marry human brides. Sea otters imitate humans and precipitate boat accidents and drownings. Raven turns into a spruce needle, a human foetus and then a human grandson. Fish have their own "villages" and "hearth" beneath the water, can speak to humans and advise them. In Northwest tradition, the resemblances between human lifestyles and animal lifestyles are meant to show that animals are worthy of the same kind of respect from humans that humans give to one another.

Epics always take place in a "Story Time," that once upon a time when animals and people were closer in the great chain of being, could communicate and thus learn from one another more directly than through simple observation of "the other."

Northwest stories — like oral stories handed down throughout the world — are generally not for amusement alone. Usually they have an important social purpose. One purpose is to supply examples of what true heroes do. Heroes are almost always male and single, so that they may wander; they are not constrained to return to the village regularly.
with game to feed an extended family. Like the ancient Greek hero Ulysses, Northwest heroes typically undergo initiations of increasing severity, slay monsters, demonstrate strength and cunning, collect important tools/wealth/power/skills. They free the enslaved and punish hubris, arrogance, greed and cruelty.

Secondly, heroes also demonstrate how cleverness and sly tricks can, as in the British folktale of "The Little Tailor," compensate for lack of size and strength.

A third purpose is to demonstrate the importance of adhering strictly to tribal ethics such as respecting animals, fish, and other sources of food.

Stories may be whimsical such as "The tree that became a man" in Edward Keithahn’s *Alaskan Igloo Tales*, but they tend toward the moral and the cautionary — just as do Mother Goose rhymes and the Brothers Grimm tales.

Common themes run through these stories: the lure of adventure/foreign territory; respect for tradition; revenge; conflicts of loyalty; the journey to maturity and judgement — often via a series of encounters with creatures that are not human; responsibility to the band/village/tribe rather than to the self; transformation (appearance vs. reality); courage; perseverance; ingenuity.

Among Northwest peoples, human existence is viewed as a series of tests and trials, of propitiations, of encounters with powerful chiefs/shamans and powerful supernatural forces.

Stories come in a variety of lengths. Shorter tales, like the story of how Raven’s feathers became black, may take only a few minutes to recount. Such a tale could be told to relieve the tedium of a brief task, like fetching water.

The leisure necessary to telling an epic often came during the coldest days of winter, when paths were choked with snow, rivers with ice and even the game dug in.

Story time might also surface during evenings of a memorial ceremony (often performed a year after a death).

According to some sources, epics are told in a definite sequence that cannot be varied. Other sources say the storyteller may choose the sequence. The issue of order aside, a series of episodes is recounted during several evenings. No other story is begun until the epic has been heard to its completion.

Some sources say the storyteller may be interrupted by his audience, who may shout out corrections if he falters or mis-remembers. (This interesting notion makes storytelling a community effort, with the teller perhaps the person with the best voice or pronunciation — but not, perhaps the best memory.)

The custom of storytelling occurred among all Alaska’s people. Charlie Joseph (1895-1986) of Sitka was raised in a traditional Tlingit settlement at Lituya Bay when only Tlingit was spoken there. He recalled, "In the evening, stories were told. I don’t remember when we missed an evening of telling stories. It was like going to school today, when my grandfather told all the stories, the ancient stories
[Haa Tuwunaagu Yis, for Healing Our Spirit, Dauenhauer, p. 540).

Readers will notice that Oman’s story sometimes loops back upon itself and repeats certain elements. If a hunter after a moose in thick brush loses his quarry, he circles back until he finds the trail again. Just so the storyteller circles back — especially if the story is epic in length, and being told on consecutive days. The storyteller’s motive for circling is that he or she fears the listeners will be unable to take up the story’s thread again without this aid. (Modern teachers employ this useful mnemonic device.)

The aim of bringing Oman’s work to the world in a transcribed format has been to allow the reader to experience the epic fully — not to make it sound literary.

Some references to everyday objects and scenes in the text may remain suggestive but as undescribed as they were in the original. This is because the original audience for the Epic of Qayaq was a homogeneous group, and no description was necessary. As Bill Holm wrote in his Foreword to the Coast Salish tale Eye of the Changer (Alaska Northwest Publishing, 1984), “Words can build pictures and evoke sunsets and storms, but they can only hint at the lines of sleek canoes, the gnarl of a root, the sweeping branches of the cedar or the angle of the adz handle.”

Like an actor, the storyteller employs dramatic pauses, differing tones of voice, dialect or accents and laughter. These techniques do not always survive on the page, so evocative adjectives and adverbs have occasionally been added in their place.

Northern peoples often use a pronoun (especially “he”) where, to English speakers, a noun would be clearer. There may even be two “he’s” in a sentence, each referring to a different antecedent. Nouns have been inserted in such confusing instances.

Northern peoples employ circumlocution when discussing beings or activities that embody spiritual power or luck in the hunt. A bear, for example, is too powerful to mention directly, so he might be referred to as “that big brown one.” The indirect reference shows polite deference and avoids alarming a potential quarry. Where indirect reference could be unclear to a modern audience, a more direct reference or an appositive has been added.

Throughout, however, editing has been applied sparingly so as to preserve as much of the original’s flavor as possible.

Readers who wish to compare the Epic of Qayaq with another Northern epic should seek out K’etetaalkkaane: The One Who Paddles Among the People and Animals: The Story of an Ancient Traveler by Catherine Atla (Yukon Koyukuk School District and Alaska Native Language Centre, Fairbanks, 1990).
Like Qayaq, K'etetaalkkaanee is a young man who leaves his mother and undertakes a quest to pursue his dreams and gain spiritual power or "medicine." As he paddles all summer and walks all winter, this hero meets obstacles and overcomes dangers, witnesses the transformation of animals, establishes customs and illustrates wisdom.

Catherine Attla was born in 1927. She heard the story of K'etetaalkkaanee from her grandfather, Francis Olin, a medicine man of the Kokuyuk River. She recorded the story in Denaakk'e, the Koyukon Athabascan language. It was translated into English by Eliza Jones and published as the third in a series of stories Attla has preserved.

The closest analog to Oman's epic is The Longest Story Ever Told: Qayaq: The Magical Man by Ticasuk (Emily Ivanoff Brown). Published in a limited edition by Alaska Pacific University Press (Anchorage) in 1981, this book is not well known. In Brown's story, Qayaq has four brothers and an uncle. He is able to find the female temptress and killer of all four brothers, and takes revenge on her.

Brown first heard part of the legend from a Mrs. Auligi of Shaktoolik when she was seven, camping in the mountains of the Bering Seacoast. She heard other bits and pieces at boarding school in Salem, Oregon, and elsewhere. At 64, Brown became a student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks precisely to master those skills that would enable her to preserve this epic and other stories, and completed extensive research to find the "missing parts" of the story. According to Brown's version, Qayaq was born at Siilvik Lake, near Eschscholtz Bay, in the western Brooks Range. His parents' village was Selawik.

Comparing Oman's and Brown's versions on the Qayaq sequence is a fascinating exercise. In general, in Brown's, there is considerable concern for preparation before the quest and for the feeding of the extended family. In Oman's, the beauty of the landscape and pleasure in this beauty are themes returned to again and again.

To compare and contrast a specific episode, the episode of the giant bird, in Oman's scenario it is Qayaq himself in human form who discovers the bird's "Achilles' heel" and kills it. The powerful bird recalls the mythic roc in the "Sinbad the Sailor" episode of The Arabian Nights, and the too-ing and fro-ing over the tundra battlefield has the formal order of battles outside the walls of Troy.

In Brown's version, however, this mythic formality is absent. The giant white bird is, although outsize, familiar — a huge ptarmigan; and Qayaq defeats it by transforming himself into another creature colored for winter, an ermine. The ermine crawls beneath the snow cover, bites the bird's artery, and sucks blood from its leg until it faints. Then Qayaq assumes human shape again and cuts off the bird's head. The ends of the two versions are identical, but the means are quite different, with Oman emphasizing both the speed and distance the great bird can cover and Qayaq's persistence, and Brown emphasizing stealth, the ermine's ability to tunnel beneath snow,
Oman's "Preamble" bears a striking resemblance to another Northern story, the first section of *The Eyeshade People*, a lengthy Upper Kobuk Inupiaq narrative told by Robert (Nasruk) Cleveland of Shungnak. This story is one of twenty-four contained in *Unipchaanich Imagluktugmiut: Stories of the Black River People* (National Bilingual Materials Development Centre, University of Alaska, Anchorage, 1980). Robert Cleveland was born in 1884 along the Kobuk River. Cleveland's stories were recorded in 1965 — at a time when Cleveland himself felt his memory was not what it once had been. After Cleveland's death in 1973, Minnie Gray of Ambler, Cleveland's daughter, transcribed the stories, which were then translated by Ruth Ramoth-Sampson.

When Cleveland tells the story "At the Time of the Flood," he emphasizes its local relevance: "Actually, it is more than just a legend," he says. "It is about what happened in this area, the valley, during the great flood." To emphasize the point, he adds that he has himself seen remnants of the dwellings of the people of the flood high on the mountain sides — just as Qayaq reports seeing remnants of their boats.

Storytellers like Oman, Attla, Brown, and Cleveland are stewards of culture. With no written language to preserve traditional Athabascan and Eskimo stories, their stewardship is invaluable. Unfortunately, however, as stories are handed down over successive generations, and as they are translated from their original language into others, some cultural details inevitably fall by the wayside, and the story may be condensed to a mere string of "he did this, he did that."

Language is the most complete embodiment of a culture, and a story without its original language is only a shadow of, or scrapbook of, the original.

Nevertheless, when so much of Northern indigenous cultures has been washed away in the flood of new influences of the last 250 years, one can only be thankful that dedicated individuals like Lela Kiana Oman have persevered in preserving what follows.

Without her patience and dedication, we would have nothing.

With her, we have this shining glimpse into an Inupiaq treasure chest.

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