



The Creation Legend of the Yup'ik People

Yup'ik People – Alaska / Siberia

Raven flew over the water and wondered what he was going to eat next. It was very much like Raven to be thinking about what he was going to eat next. He had grown tired of fishing and decided it was time for something more interesting.

He flew to seal and cried, 'Seal, do you not tire from swimming all the time? Wouldn't it be nice to lay on something solid and rest?'

Seal agreed.

'Try then –Raven continued– to swim to the bottom of the sea and get some mud so that we can make land.'

Seal swam down and down and down. But before he could reach the bottom, he knew he would run out of air and turned back. He apologized to Raven, who understood.

Next Raven went to muskrat. 'Muskrat, would you try swimming to the bottom of the sea and bring some mud up? We are going to make some land.'

Muskrat, too, swam down as far as he could, but was unable to make it even as far as seal. He returned and apologized to Raven, who understood.

He set out across the sea, looking for the animal who could make it to the bottom of the sea and bring up some mud. It seemed as though it wasn't going to be possible until beaver dove swift, kicking with his

great tail, down, down to the bottom of the sea. He scooped up the largest amount of mud he could manage and brought it to the surface.

‘Oh, how wonderful!’ Raven exclaimed.

Raven then asked turtle if he would let the mud on his back to become the land. Without hesitation, turtle agreed. As the island that turtle became grew, Raven flew about creating plants and mountains and rivers and streams. Seal rested on its beaches and muskrat and beaver moved to its rivers and streams.

One day, Raven was flying along the beach. There before him, he watched a strange pod wash upon the shore. It was quite large, much larger than Raven himself. He swooped down immediately to inspect it. And as he walked near to it, it broke and a strange creature unfolded out onto the sand. Raven stared with intense interest at this creature. It was a very odd creature and didn't look like anything he had ever seen before.

Raven went closer as it began to move. The thing stretched this way and that before standing up on very long legs. Looking around, the creature asked, ‘What am I doing here?’

Raven was perplexed by this question. For as long as he could remember, all of the creatures knew what they were doing at this place. There was no need for question. But Raven was so enchanted by the creature, he decided to help it.

‘You are here to be’, Raven said.

‘Be what?’ the creature asked.

‘To be yourself’, Raven replied.

‘Who am I?’ the creature asked.

Raven cocked his head to the side in soft amazement. The question of the creature held him in a muted grip of awe. No animal had ever thought of itself as a ‘who’ before. They had always identified themselves as ‘whats’. Raven was not one to be mean, but he had to admit at being bored of most of the animals. They thought mostly of

eating and of sleeping. Raven had many different thoughts, but no-one to share them with, no-one who was a who.

‘Well –Raven thought briefly–. You are a human.’

The creature, the human, seemed moderately impressed by this, but not overly. Raven knew this would not be good enough and continued thinking. He wanted the human to understand his difference with the other animals. The fact that it was something more than a ‘what’, that it was a ‘who’. But how to let the human know this.

Finally. ‘You are a human being. Human is your form, the part of you which looks the way it does and moves in the way it moves. It is the physical part of who you are, but it is not all of you. By asking who you were, you showed that you know you are more than your form, more than just the physical. This something more is the being. It is your beingness that makes you different, makes you special’.

The human being smiled.

After a bit, the human being said the first important thing, ‘I am hungry’.

Well, Raven thought, it was bound to happen sooner or later, this being hungry. Raven showed the human being about berries and the human being ate and ate. But Raven knew this would not due for very long. Something that is a being likes variety, like Raven. So Raven went to the stream and created a couple of small lumps in the mud. As the human being looked on, Raven swept his wing over the mud lumps and they came to life and scurried about. The human being became very excited.

‘Catch them. You can eat them’, Raven said.

And to that, the human being ran about, trying to catch the the small creatures. He returned after some time to the stream, munching away on mice and shrews. But Raven could see that wouldn't even be enough. So he made some larger lumps in the mud and after sweeping his wing over them, kicked them into the water and they swam off.

‘Catch them. You can eat them as well.’

And again, the human being ran about, splashing around in the water this time.

‘No, no –beckoned Raven–. To catch these, you must be patient. The fish are faster than you in the water. But if you wait patiently, if you wait still, they will forget you are there and you can catch them when they swim close.’

The human being thanked Raven and after a while was munching on the fish.

Before long, the human being said the second important thing, ‘I am cold’.

Raven thought for a moment and went back to the stream. In the mud, he made a very large lump. Raven went to a willow and took four of its long, skinny branches, sticking them into the mud. After waving his wing over it, the lump turned into a caribou, jumping onto its long legs and bounding off.

‘To catch this, you must be fast and strong. You must be smart. While are fast and strong, you are not fast and strong enough to catch caribou on your own. You will need tools. And you must know how the caribou will move so you know where it will be when your weapon reaches it. It will be much work, but you can catch it. And when you do, you can take its skin and keep yourself warm.’

The human being thanked Raven again and after a while, he was warm.

Before long, the human being said to Raven, ‘I am lonely’.

Raven was at first offended. Was he not interesting enough company? But Raven soon understood: The human did not have a companion as large as himself.

Raven went again to the stream and made another lump. He would look at the human being, trying to make some resemblance. He was about to wave his wing over it, but knew this new human needed a

beingness as well. He looked at the human being and noticed the twinkle in his eye.

Ah hah! Raven thought. And he flew up into the sky and plucked one of the stars. He put the star into the new human's forehead and waved his wing over it.

The new human being stood up and looked at the man. They looked at each other, noticing they were different. At first, Raven felt badly about not being able to make the new human being the same as the man, but the two human being assured him this was OK. They liked the differences between them.

With this, Raven had an idea. He made it so the two had the power to create more of themselves. When the two human were near each other, their beingness, the stars within them, grew stronger, brighter. Raven called this love and when the love was strong enough, it made a new being and this grew in the woman until it had a body of its own.

The man and the woman thanked Raven and after awhile, there was a large family.

The family had no place to live, so Raven showed them how beaver and muskrat houses. Soon there were dwellings and a small village. Raven made more caribou and fish.

But before long, the human beings were taking much more than they needed. He tried to talk to them, but they were unafraid. So Raven went back to the stream and made a very large lump of mud. He found shells and broke them into thin sharp pieces and put them on the lump in various places. He had made thick lumps for the legs instead of just willow branches, and a big mouth with more broken shells for teeth. The humans had come to see what Raven was making. But when Raven waved his wing over the lump, it jumped up, snarling and ran after the humans. It caught one and killed it outright. When the bear left. The humans ran to the dead human and gathered around it in awe and fear. Raven flew down and took the star from it and as the humans cried. He flew the star back to the sky.

When he came back to the humans, he said, 'You can be very happy. You can be as happy as you like. But you cannot forget that everything has the right to be happy as well. And besides, if you are not careful with how much you take, if you take more than you need, or make too many of yourselves, what is here will run out. And then you will all starve and die'. The human beings shook with fear. 'I do not say this to scare you. I say this so you will understand the way of things. If you live by this way, you will be very happy for as long as you want. When you are ready to die, I will take your stars as well back into the sky.'

The human beings were comforted by this and lived with more reverence of that which was around them. They soon began to make kayaks to hunt the seals in the sea. And the women began to figure out how to use all the different parts of the animals for making clothes. They made baskets from the summer grasses. They taught the men how to use the parts of the animals for their boats. They made clothes that wouldn't let water in.

But before long, the human beings had forgotten about the way, because there was nothing to be feared in the sea, like the bear on land.


Again Raven went back to the stream and this time made an even bigger lump. He found two big willow stumps, using his beak to make them sharp and only as long as the strongest part. He put these where the mouth would be. He waved his wing over the lump and it lived. It lumbered into the sea. When the first human being found it, the walrus tore apart his kayak and stabbed him many times. When the body washed up on the shore, the other human beings gathered around it and Raven took the human's star back to the sky.

'Remember the way', he said. Nothing more.

To this day, all human beings know about Raven and the way of the human beings. They revere Raven for all he did for the human beings,

everything he taught, even when it meant hurting or scaring them. They always knew he was doing the best for them. □

Adaptation by the Tradition Bearer of the Yup'ik People, Jack Dalton (1999).

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Comments

The adapter of this delightful story, the Tradition Bearer of the Yup'ik People, Jack Dalton, tells us that it is based on a legend passed down by the people of Paimiut, in the western corner of Alaska. In this myth, the educational intention of the Yup'ik stories is clearly observed, when they convey the need to care for the environment, as well as for the species which live alongside them.

The Yup'ik are a group of Aboriginal Eskimo peoples from the Alaska and Siberia regions which stretch along both sides of the Bering Strait. Their stories give account of their deep traditional ecological sense, but also, and in a more direct way, their values and customs. This is because, for them, 'All living things have to be respected' (Ayunerak et al., 2014). In fact, and like many other First Nations of North America, the Yup'ik had a series of rituals and behaviours in which they showed their respect for the animals they hunted for their livelihood.

Fish were always brought into the house in a pan in case the fish was accidentally dropped where people walked. This prevented disrespect of the fish. They poured water into the seal's mouth when brought to the house or village in order to quench its thirst because it was a water animal. This was a way to show great respect for the seal that had been killed for food. (Ayunerak et al., 2014)

This code of ethical behaviour towards animals was based on a way of understanding relationships between species.

Subsistence required good relationships between humans and animals and maintaining this relationship was the only way people survived long ago. Respect for the land as well as the sea ensure the

seasonal provision of food given to us through *Ellam Yua*. (Ayunerak et al., 2014)

Ellam Yua is, for the Yup'ik traditional people, the Spirit of the Universe/Unseen One, 'He was the creator who made everything'.

The community life of the Yup'ik revolved around the *qasgiq*. This was a highly revered building that, while serving as a community dwelling for men (women and children lived in other houses around the *qasgiq*) was used by the entire community for traditional ceremonies and entertainment. In the *qasgiq*, the community listened to the elders talk about *Yuuyaraq* (the Way of Life), *Alerquun* (the Rules of Life) and *Piciryaraq* (the Truth of Life). It was the place where Yup'ik ethics and values were taught, where boys and girls were instructed in the cycle of life and death, but also in survival skills, in which not only boys were trained, but also girls. Teaching was carried out by role modeling, through the parents' own behavior, demonstrating with their actions how things should be done.

Thus the *qasgiq* were the spiritual and community hearts of the Yup'ik. But, they were abandoned with the arrival of epidemics, which made it necessary to use the *qasgiq* grounds for graves. However, coinciding with this, Christian missionaries encouraged the construction of single-family dwellings that, with the passage of time, would end up collapsing the Yup'ik's community way of life, also significantly altering their value systems. Ayunerak et al. (2014) write about the effect that missionaries had on the Yup'ik People:

The missionaries were welcomed into the communities, but looking back it is clear now that some of the policies the missionaries instituted had lasting effects on the Yup'ik people. For example, in some communities today, school-aged children can no longer speak their Yup'ik language, while in other communities, there is no longer any Eskimo dancing. Among the most disruptive outcome of contact and outside influence is the erosion of the core values; the loss of what made the traditional Yup'ik people a community.

It is obvious that the worldviews transmitted by the missionaries, and by the modernity of western colonisation, have plunged this ancient culture into an existential crisis. This crisis can lead to extremely negative consequences for humanity in general, given that our species' needs multiculturalism for its survival.

We would like to express here our deep appreciation to Jack Dalton for allowing us to include his version of this Yup'ik story in The Earth Stories Collection.

Sources

- Ayunerak, P.; Alstrom, D.; Moses, C.; Charlie, J. & Rasmus, S. (2014). Yup'ik Culture and Context in Southwest Alaska: Community Member Perspectives of Tradition, Social Change, and Prevention. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 54(0), 91-99.
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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: Earth, Our Home.- The protection of Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Principle 5e: Manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems.

Principle 6b: Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, and make the responsible parties liable for environmental harm.

Principle 7e: Ensure universal access to health care that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction.

Principle 7f: Adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world.

Principle 8b: Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.

The Way Forward: It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility.

