



The Eagle Mother's Gift

Nunamiut Iñupiat People – Alaska, USA

Once there was a time when humans knew no joy. Their whole life was work, food, digestion, and sleep. One day went by like another. They toiled, they slept, they awoke again to toil. Monotony rusted their minds.

In these days there was a man and his wife who lived alone in their dwelling not far from the sea. They had three sons, all spirited lads, anxious to be as good huntsmen as their father, and even before they were full grown they entered into all kinds of activities to make them strong and enduring. And their father and mother felt proud and secure in the thought that the boys would provide for their old age and find them food when they could no longer help themselves.

But it happened that the eldest son, and after a while the second one, went a- hunting and never came back. They left no trace behind; all search was in vain. And the father and mother grieved deeply over their loss and watched now with great anxiety over the youngest boy, who was at this time big enough to accompany his father when he went hunting. The son, who was called Ermine (Teriak) liked best to stalk caribou, whereas his father preferred to hunt sea creatures. And, as hunters cannot spend all their lives in anxiety, it soon came about that the son was allowed to go where he pleased inland while the father rowed to sea in his kayak.

One day, stalking caribou as usual, Ermine suddenly caught sight of a mighty eagle, a big young eagle that circled over him. Ermine pulled out his arrows, but did not shoot as the eagle flew down and settled on the ground a short distance from him. Here it took off its hood and became a young man who said to the boy:

‘It was I who killed your two brothers. I will kill you too unless you promise to hold a festival of song when you get home. Will you or won't you?’

‘Gladly, but I don’t understand what you say. What is song? What is a festival?’

‘Will you or won’t you?’

‘Gladly, but I don’t know what it is.’

‘If you follow me my mother will teach you what you don’t understand. Your two brothers scorned the gifts of song and merrymaking; they would not learn, so I killed them. Now you may come with me, and as soon as you have learned to put words together into a song and to sing it--as soon as you have learned to dance for joy, you shall be free to go home to your dwelling.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ answered Ermine. And off they set.

The eagle was no longer a bird but a big strong man in a gleaming cloak of eagles’ feathers. They walked and they walked, farther and farther inland, through gorges and valleys, onward to a high mountain, which they began to climb.

‘High up on that mountain top stands our house,’ said the young eagle. And they clambered on over the mountain, up and up until they had a wide view over the plains of the Caribou hunters.

But as they approached the crest of the mountain, they suddenly heard a throbbing sound, which grew louder and louder the nearer they came to the top. It sounded like the stroke of huge hammers, and so loud was the noise that it set Ermine’s ears a- humming.

‘Do you hear anything?’ asked the eagle.

‘Yes, a strange deafening noise, that isn’t like anything I’ve ever heard before.’

‘It is the beating of my mother’s heart,’ answered the eagle.

So they approached the eagle’s house, that was built right on the uttermost peaks.

‘Wait here until I come back. I must prepare my mother,’ said the eagle, and went in.

A moment after, he came back and fetched Ermine. They entered a big room, fashioned like the dwellings of humans, and on the bunk, quite alone, sat the eagle’s mother, aged, feeble, and sad.

Her son now said:

‘Here’s a man who has promised to hold a song festival when he gets home. But he says humans don’t understand how to put words together into songs, nor even how to beat drums and dance for joy. Mother, humans don’t know how to make merry, and now this young man has come up here to learn.’

This speech brought fresh life to the feeble old Eagle Mother, and her tired eyes lit up suddenly while she said:

‘First you must build a feast hall where many humans may gather.’

So the two young men set to work and built the feast hall, which is called a *kagsse* and is larger and finer than ordinary houses. And when it was finished the mother eagle taught them to put words together into songs and to add tones to the words so that they could be sung. She made a drum and taught them to beat upon it in rhythm with the music, and she showed them how they should dance to the songs. When Ermine had learned all this she said:

‘Before every festival you must collect much meat, and then call together many humans. This you must do after you have built your feast hall and made your songs. For when humans assemble for a festival they require sumptuous meals.’

‘But we know of no humans but ourselves,’ answered Ermine.

‘Humans are lonely, because they have not yet received the gift of joy,’ said the mother eagle. ‘Make all your preparations as I have told you. When all is ready you shall go out and seek for people. You will meet them in couples. Gather them until they are many in number and invite them to come with you. Then hold your festival of song.’

Thus spoke the old mother eagle, and when she had minutely instructed Ermine in what he should do, she finally said to him:

‘I may be an eagle, yet I am also an aged woman with the same pleasures as other women. A gift calls for a return, therefore it is only fitting that in farewell you should give me a little sinew string. It will be but a slight return, yet it will give me pleasure.’

Ermine was at first miserable, for wherever was he to procure sinew string so far from his home? But suddenly he remembered that his arrowheads were lashed to the shafts with sinew string. He unwound these and gave the string to the eagle. Thus was his return gift only a trifling matter. Thereupon, the young eagle again drew on his shining cloak and bade his guest bestride his back and put his arms round his neck. Then he threw himself out over the mountainside. A roaring sound was heard around them and Ermine thought his last hour had come. But this lasted only a moment; then the eagle halted and bade him open his eyes. And there they were again at the place where they had met. They had become friends and now they must part, and they bade each other a cordial farewell.

Ermine hastened home to his parents and related all his adventures to them, and he concluded his narrative with these words:

‘Humans are lonely; they live without joy because they don’t know how to make merry. Now the eagle has given me the blessed gift of rejoicing, and I have promised to invite all men and women to share in the gift.’

Father and mother listened in surprise to the son’s tale and shook their heads incredulously, for he who has never felt his blood glow and his heart throb in exultation cannot imagine such a gift as the eagle’s. But the old people dared not gainsay him, for the eagle had already taken two of their sons, and they understood that its word had to be

obeyed if they were to keep this last child. So they did all that the eagle had required of them

A feast hall, matching the eagle's, was built, and the larder was filled with the meat of sea creatures and caribou. Father and son combined joyous words, describing their dearest and deepest memories in songs which they set to music; also they made drums, rumbling tambourines of taut caribou hides with round wooden frames; and to the rhythm of the drum beats that accompanied the songs they moved their arms and legs in frolicsome hops and lively antics. Thus they grew warm both in mind and body, and began to regard everything about them in quite a new light. Many an evening it would happen that they joked and laughed, flippant and full of fun, at a time when they would otherwise have snored with sheer boredom the whole evening through.

As soon as all the preparations were made, Ermine went out to invite people to the festival that was to be held. To his great surprise he discovered that he and his parents were no longer alone as before. Merry people find company. Suddenly he met people everywhere, always in couples, strange looking people, some clad in wolf skins, others in the fur of the wolverine, the lynx, the red fox, the silver fox, the cross fox--in fact, in the skins of all kinds of animals. Ermine invited them to the banquet in his new feast hall and they all followed him joyfully. Then they held their song festival, each producing his own songs. There were laughter, talk, and sound, and people were carefree and happy as they had never been before. The table delicacies were appreciated, gifts of meat were exchanged, friendships were formed, and there were several who gave each other costly gifts of fur. The night passed, and not till the morning light shone into the feast hall did the guests take their leave. Then, as they thronged out of the corridor, they all fell forward on their hands and sprang away on all fours. They were no longer humans but had changed into wolves, wolverines, lynxes, silver foxes, red foxes--in fact, into all the beasts of the forest. They were the guests that the old eagle had sent, so that father and son might not seek in vain. So great was the power of joy that it could even change animals into humans. Thus animals, who have always been more lighthearted than humans, were man's first guests in a feast hall.

A little time after this it chanced that Ermine went hunting and again met the eagle. Immediately it took off its hood and turned into a

man, and together they went up to the eagle's home, for the old Eagle Mother wanted once more to see the man who had held the first song festival for humanity.

Before they had reached the heights, the Eagle Mother came to thank them, and lo! The feeble old eagle had grown young again. For when humans make merry, all old eagles become young.

The foregoing is related by the old folk from Kanglanek, the land which lies where the forests begin around the source of Colville River. In this strange and unaccountable way, so they say, came to humans the gift of joy.

And the eagle became the sacred bird of song, dance and all festivity.

Told by Sagluag from Colville River. □

Collected by the Danish and Inuit explorer Knud Rasmussen (1932).

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Comments

Knud Rasmussen (1879-1933) was the polar explorer and ethnographer who compiled this and many other stories from the Inuit Peoples. Born in Greenland to a Danish father and an Inuit mother – Rasmussen's native name was Kunúnguaq – he grew up among other children of the Kalaallit People, learning the hunting techniques of the polar regions, driving dog sleds and enduring the harsh weather conditions of the Arctic.

Rasmussen is well known for his Thule Expeditions, carried out between 1912 and 1933. To highlight his Fifth Expedition (1921-1924), in which he tried to unravel the origin of the Inuit and collected a number of anthropological, ethnographic, meteorological, geological, botanical and zoological data (Rasmussen, 1927). On this trip, he travelled 18,000 miles by dog sled, from Greenland to the Pacific, traveling across the ice cap in northern Canada and Alaska, and being the first European to cross the Northwest Passage in this way.

In this story, told by an inhabitant of the Kanglanek settlement, a certain Sagluag, we have made small changes to adapt the story to the principles and values of the Earth Charter, shifting the word ‘men’ to ‘humans.’

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The creation myth shared above belongs to a sub-ethnic group of the Inuit, namely the Iñupiat of northern Alaska, and more specifically it is a version of the Nuniamut group, which is the collective of the Iñupiat who live inland, as opposed to those living on the Arctic coast.

This myth of origin gave rise to an ancient celebration among the Iñupiat, the Kivgiq, the Eagle-Wolf Messenger Feast, a festival combining song, dance, feasting and celebration, which takes place over several days in mid-winter, when the sun re-emerges over the horizon after two and a half months of polar night. Preparations for this festival were made throughout the summer before and until the first frosts of autumn. Game was gathered, fish were caught and dried, and new costumes and dresses were woven for the celebrations.

The Messenger's Feast was always accompanied by an impromptu market based on barter, where Iñupiat from inland could source goods unique to the coast, and vice versa. But the main function of this celebration was that it provided an opportunity to maintain the cohesion of the Iñupiat People, their animist spirituality and their culture in a part of the world that does not exactly favour social encounters, with settlements far apart and an extremely harsh weather. In this way, relatively isolated cultural patterns were brought into contact in order to exchange elements and consolidate (Riccio, 1993). On the other hand, Kivgiq, after the isolation of the long, dark winters, was a relief from the long daily monotony, a relief that had to be celebrated in community. In any case, it was an itinerant celebration, as food and goods had to be gathered before issuing an invitation throughout the region, and probably no community could afford to organise more than one Kivgiq per decade.

But the arrival of miners of European descent in the 1890s with the gold rush began to change things for the Iñupiat. After the miners came ‘civilisation’, with its short-sightedness and its missionaries, who

almost extinguished forever the rituals and celebrations of the peoples of the region.

With the arrival of the European and American whalers between 1910 and 1930, diseases finally arrived - cholera, polio, diphtheria, etc. - leading to what became known as the "great death", which of course affected the elderly, including the custodians of traditions and shamans. This was an irreparable loss for the Iñupiat culture, which lost much of the foundation of its culture and spirituality. As a result, the pressure exerted by Western missionaries became more oppressive. In fact, the language and cultural expressions of the Iñupiat were banned and persecuted, including the Eagle-Wolf Messenger Feast, which ceased to be held in 1910.

After that, around the middle of the 20th century, the traditional Iñupiat songs, dances and rituals began to recover to some extent, but now without the sacred character they had once had for the people, entering a process of secularisation in which the performers no longer represented the scenes and images of the spiritual and mythological world, but simply songs and dances for tourist consumption.

It would be almost 80 years before the Iñupiat would once again celebrate Kivgiq, the Messenger's Feast. It would be in January 1988, in Barrow, in the far north of Alaska, where more than 2,000 Iñupiat gathered to celebrate their common sense of belonging, to share their culture, and to see long-lost family members again. But, to resurrect this important celebration and ritual, they had to draw on the memories of the elders, who said:

I've never been to one, but my father, my parents, and my grandparents talked about the Messenger's Feast, what kind of activities they had, and why it was used. (Riccio, 1993, p. 116)

The new Kivgiq was a rediscovery of cultural traditions and values that had fallen into disuse due to decades of massive alcohol and drug abuse caused by the cultural and social trauma of the introduction of Western culture. It was, to some extent, a rebirth of Inuit Iñupiat culture.

Songs, regalia, dances and celebrations became a way of reconnecting with the past and with the people's own roots and, more

specifically, with the myths and rituals in which this culture originated. This is where the Iñupiat creation myth of the gift of song and dance given to humanity by the Great Eagle Mother is inserted. And with it, the recovery of a different way of seeing the world, different from the Western worldview that has plunged us into the current climate and extinction crisis, as the French philosopher Bruno Latour points out. Latour states that it is necessary to recover the millenary cultures that were not modernised, pointing out that there are ‘more than 250 million aboriginal human beings that modernisation has tried to annihilate, but has not succeeded in doing so’ (Latour & Pita, 2019). It is here that celebrations and rituals such as those that originated in the Iñupiat myth we have included here, acquire their full meaning.

The Messenger’s Feast has remained elusive, ephemeral, irrational, subjective, contradictory, and consequently outside the framework of Western performance and historical scholarship. (Riccio, 1993, p. 119)

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

The Way Forward: ...and the joyful celebration of life.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Earth, our home.- Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life's evolution.

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

