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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

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By Ann Fienup-Riordan.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4sn3q24b>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 30(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2006-03-01

DOI

10.17953

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Wise Words of the Yup'ik People: We Talk to You Because We Love You. By Ann Fienup-Riordan. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. 347 pages. \$60.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

Ann Fienup-Riordan has worked among the Yup'ik communities in the Kuskokwim-Yukon Delta for more than twenty-five years. This is no small feat as the Delta region encompasses a vast area of about two hundred and fifty thousand square miles comprising the coasts of the Bering Sea and Norton Sound, the Yukon and Kuskokwim drainages, the Kilbuk and Ahklun Mountains, and enormous stretches of delta tundra. The villages of the delta tundra, so difficult to access and so modest in naturally occurring resources that can be extracted and sold on the market, has remained more isolated than all other Eskimo and Aleut villages known to this reviewer. In their isolation, delta residents have maintained many traditions that have waned elsewhere, including widespread use of the Yup'ik language. The entire area—coast, river drainages, and delta—is dotted with villages, and in all likelihood Fienup-Riordan has visited them all during the course of her research.

Whereas Edward W. Nelson introduced the English-speaking world to the Eskimos of the Kuskokwim-Yukon Delta region in 1899, Wendell Oswalt's work among villages on the Kuskokwim drainage in the 1960s reintroduced anthropologists to the little-known Yup'ik Eskimos. Oswalt's ethnohistorical analysis *Bashful No Longer* (1990) provided the fullest ethnologic account of Kuskokwim society to that date. Fienup-Riordan has worked intelligently and arduously to provide ever fuller accounts of Yup'ik culture, with publications dating back twenty-two years. *Wise Words* is a fine contribution to her oeuvre. *Wise words* are *qanruyutet*, the basic tenets of Yup'ik moral instruction, the rules taught by the ancients that educate a person to use his or her mind so as to be in harmony with the world.

Wise Words was made possible by a National Science Foundation grant to the Calista Elders Council (CEC), which funded eight two- and three-day conventions held in five villages between September 1998 and April 2002. It was the intention of the CEC organizers to bring Yup'ik elders and youth together. Elders addressed questions about Yup'ik culture and the youth learned what their elders had to convey. The goals of the conventions were to improve Yup'ik language use and raise the consciousness of all Yup'ik in maintaining control over their land and local affairs, while creating a renaissance of many aspects of Yup'ik culture. It is our good fortune that Fienup-Riordan and Alice Rearden, a Native Yup'ik speaker, were on hand to record every session, translate every utterance from Yup'ik to English, and organize the mountains of cultural information.

The conventions were arranged around topics of considerable interest to Natives and to non-Native scholars: family values, traditional ceremonies, marriage and parenthood, and discipline and counseling of children. During the conventions it was commonplace for a discussion of family values to move into the discipline of children or the obligations of parenthood. Without doubt, Fienup-Riordan and Rearden had a large task of sorting topics for this fine book, while almost surely learning about connections among many beliefs

and practices that they had not known prior to undertaking this project. *Wise Words* does not rely solely upon the discussions that occurred during the conventions. Several elders proved especially knowledgeable and proficient, and these people were interviewed at length on several occasions following conventions. In addition, Fienup-Riordan incorporates information she learned from elders in the region in the decade prior to the conventions.

The project was especially interesting to this reviewer because it was reminiscent of much of the North American Indian and Eskimo ethnology that was produced during the first forty years of the twentieth century. The students of Franz Boas at Columbia and the students of his student, Alfred Kroeber, at the University of California, Berkeley followed the leads of their academic advisors and sought information, tribe by tribe, from the oldest and best-informed members of each tribe as to what acts, objects, ideas, and sentiments were practiced, produced, or observed by their grandparents. That is, the memories of the oldest generation of Natives were culled to learn about what things were like sixty to eighty years earlier. The ethnographies and ethnologies that were created, referred to as the “ethnographic present,” sought to render empirically warranted accounts of Native cultures before they were influenced, or were only modestly influenced, by Europeans. The current project parts ways with those of the early twentieth century in one significant way: the Yup’ik project seeks to restore Yup’ik culture and language, not merely to record it before it is lost forever.

The ethnologists of the first forty years of North American Indian ethnology read like a who’s who of remarkable contributors to our knowledge of Native North America: Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber, Robert Lowie, Edward Sapir, Edward Gifford, Elsie Clews Parsons, Cora Dubois, Leslie Spier, William Duncan Strong, Paul Radin, Ruth Benedict, Ruth Bunzell, Harold Driver, Omer Stewart, Homer Barnett, Leslie White, Ronald Olson, and Philip Drucker are some of the scholars whose works are consulted by serious students of Native American culture and also by Natives who wish to learn how their cultures once were. Indeed, one of the motives for Fienup-Riordan’s research was to plumb the memories of the oldest and best-informed residents throughout Kuskokwim-Yukon villages so that the knowledge of the ancients (let us say the knowledge of the elder’s grandparents and great-grandparents) could be conveyed to youth and, when organized into text, can stand as an empirically warranted account of much of the ideology of Kuskokwim-Yukon Yup’ik culture prior to European contact and influence.

A total of eighty-one people (drawn from twenty-eight villages and classified as elders) attended one or more of the conventions, and several were interviewed following the conventions. The oldest (twenty-three) were between the ages of eighty-three and one hundred; the largest group (forty-seven) was between the ages of sixty-two and eighty-two; and the youngest (eleven) were between the ages of forty-eight and sixty-one. Most of the elders, then, are not old in the sense that they personally experienced much of what they discussed in the conventions. Indeed, all of them have lived most of their lives between World War II and the turn of the twenty-first century, a period of enormous changes in the region and elsewhere in Alaska. What

is remarkable is how much information has been retained among the people who participated in the conventions. Fienup-Riordan and Rearden have worked through the explanations attributed by elders to the ancients in order to provide an expansive and detailed account of what should be (or what ought to be) in Yup'ik culture, what the consequences should be if cultural admonitions are followed, and what consequences should befall people if those admonitions are interdicted.

The CEC conventions specifically encouraged elders to speak out, to speak to the children of the villages. It was averred that elders had spoken less and less since white people moved through and among them, introducing technological, economic, political, social, and religious phenomena that were foreign and threatening to Yup'ik life. And speak they did. As Fienup-Riordan (7) puts it, "they were holding nothing back."

It is rare for a social scientist working among Eskimos not to note that Eskimos, in general, are highly instrumental. They recognize problems and create solutions to them in direct and parsimonious ways. Prior to the advent of personal computers in villages, I've seen men curious about a portable manual typewriter take it apart then reassemble it simply to learn how it worked and how it differed from an IBM selectric typewriter. I've seen their genius at creating parts from the most unlikely sources to repair outboard motors. Much of the prescriptions and proscriptions, admonitions, and violations of interdictions that are related in *Wise Words* fit with the instrumental nature of Eskimo culture.

Early on in a section titled "We Talk to You Because We Love You" Fienup-Riordan assembles information about how and when elders should speak to younger generations. We learn from the testimony of elders that regardless of the specific topic "speakers should focus and not add extraneous information." The reason for specificity is clear: elders address "bad situations" into which people can get themselves and the consequences of those situations. So without extraneous comment and to hold their listener's attention, instructions are given in reserved tones. There is no yelling, which is proscribed, nor expression of anger.

Throughout *Wise Words* similar themes are repeated again and again. Elders provide admonitions to younger generations about how they should behave and suggest that if they behave according to the elders' precepts then good results would occur. For every admonition, however, there could be a good result or a bad result. Bad results are the consequences of violating interdictions. If a person is told to do A but not B, but the person does B, that is, violates a proscription, the result will be bad.

Thus, we are treated to a road map of right and wrong behaviors that will yield good or bad results. It is imperative that people who venture on wayward paths listen to their elders and heed the messages that they receive. A person must be a good listener to avert calamities.

Fienup-Riordan makes a most interesting point about *qasgi*, the erstwhile community meetinghouses in every village. *Qasgis* have long since disappeared from villages, but they were places in which men convened to discuss subsistence activities and community affairs, in which shamans' performances

were held, and in which boys were assembled to learn the rules of life. "Every aspect of the listening child's behavior was carefully prescribed. . . . [They] were admonished to focus all their senses on the speaker so that what was said would stick inside their minds" (21). Elders lamented the loss of *qasgis* and recognized their importance in creating a renaissance of Yup'ik culture.

It was also the case that youths learned by watching. This reviewer has never worked among people who taught so much and learned so much from precept unaccompanied by verbal explanation as do Eskimos. Much learning among the Yup'ik was by precept; Yup'ik elders did not launch into a verbal criticism if lessons were not learned properly by precept. A person was not told that he or she was stupid or even inattentive. Rather, at the appropriate time the elder provided a pointed lesson, gently delivered, in which the consequence of the failure to learn properly would produce a bad result if the mistake was repeated.

The emphasis on learning the dos and don'ts of Yup'ik culture was underwritten by the Yup'ik concept of mind. The Yup'ik recognized mental activity—reasons, intentions, thoughts, motives, passions, and desires—as being part of the body. How one used his or her mind distinguished one. As Fienup-Riordan puts it, the human mind was thought to be inherently powerful, capable of pushing others toward positive and negative outcomes: a person's gratitude is powerful as are their hurtful feelings (45). By angering a poor person, one's anger can push that person into negative circumstances. But if the person is grateful, it will push one toward personal happiness.

The Yup'ik strike me as similar to other Eskimos (Siberian Yupik, Cupik, Inuit) among whom I have worked inasmuch as generosity and compassion toward elders and orphans and to members of one's own large family have few bounds. The Yup'ik understanding of the admonitions for generosity and compassion "derives from the understanding of the power of the human mind." I had never thought of it that way, but that is the way that Yup'ik elders explain such admonitions, making a rather seamless whole of thought and action. Generosity has been demonstrated again and again within, between, and among Eskimo communities. People in need are given food and supplies. Some people, particularly elders and orphans, are more often recipients while the younger generations are usually the donors. I asked two well-educated Inuit men, commercial fishermen and village leaders (Unalakleet, Norton Sound), when generosity reached a limit. One responded, "You give until it hurts, then you give more." The second man echoed the statement.

These ideas of generosity and compassion fit into a larger animistic cosmogony that encompasses wind, water, soil, plants, animals, and the behavior of the universe. Yup'ik people and their total environment is sentient in the Yup'ik view, and rules regarding the proper behavior toward every feature of the animistic world in which they live are necessary to understand, observe, and pass on to younger generations so that the world will remain whole.

The admonitions, proscriptions, prescriptions, and consequences for following prescriptions or breaking proscriptions are amply reported in the text. There are far too many to give but a flavor of their extent. Should a

person not follow his or her mind in times of personal sorrow, that person would be faced with hardship (49). For example, one elder reported that his mother told him while he was holding a dead child in his arms and devastated by his loss that he should “step over” and “pass by” his loss and “live in a way that will allow you to be strong and join others who are doing things like nothing has happened. . . . If you do that, your deep sorrow will leave you.” The person is responsible for his or her own actions, for the choices he or she makes.

Children were admonished not to argue or fight, while their parents were forbidden to shout or to use heavy hands in dealing with their children. Shouting at children or administering corporal punishment could “break” a child’s mind causing “stubbornness and disobedience” (63). Indeed, the child may become a thief, a liar, and abusive when fashioning a life on his or her own.

The concept of *qanruyutet*, the basis of Yup’ik ideology, is the organizing rules of the “ancestral voice.” The *qanruyutet* teaches “compassion and restraint because one’s actions have a powerful effect on the minds of others” (75). The *qanruyutet* holds that for every action there is a reaction in the Yup’ik universe in which all objects are animate. Thus, the rules for compassion toward others, sea mammals and land mammals, fish and birds, trees and bushes, grasses and sedges, relatives and friends, water and ice, wind and snow, births and deaths, will, when followed, result in feelings of gratitude and good fortune for one’s self and for others. Acts of willfulness, on the other hand, result in hurt feelings and failure. The *qanruyutet* provides principles that ought to guide people in making choices, because all choices have consequences.

Wise Words is an appreciated contribution to Eskimo ethnology. This reviewer especially appreciates the listing of Yup’ik kinship terms of address and some of the behaviors that accompany uses of those terms, and I also appreciate the mentioning of some of the social problems that occur in everyday contemporary life. These problems and ways to eliminate them are part of what this book is about. In reconstructing Yup’ik ideology through the elders’ memories of the explanations of right and wrong behavior provided by their grandparents and great grandparents, Fienup-Riordan has contributed considerably to our knowledge of the Yup’ik past and the hopes of some of the Yup’ik for the renaissance of Yup’ik culture. It is a hope of many Yup’ik elders that when they speak to children, the children will listen and come to understand the consequences of their actions.

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