

## **TRADITIONAL BELIEFS OF THE DOLGHANS IN THEIR NARRATIVES**

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The information an anthropologist usually gets at the field work is, besides daily observations and immediate participation in the life and activities of the people, in the form of narratives that tell about one or another event or situation that actually has occurred. A part of such informative material constitutes complete pieces that can be characterised as specific folklore prose items that usually are classified as memorats or legends. In case they are based on something non-existent or fantastic, they are classified as a myths.<sup>1</sup> When they are just narratives about everyday life, they are pigeonholed as legends.<sup>2</sup> In the narratives that are related to world view or traditional beliefs, these two genres are interwoven especially tightly and it is most convenient to call them fabulates. The specific character of fabulates is the absence of variants of nation-wide distribution, but they present numerous valuable facts, to which some attributes of folklore and artistic elements are added. Although the narrative may be the only one of its kind and not retold by others, its content may be transmitted orally and in further perspective it may develop into a memorat and get fixed; but it may also remain a single occasion as such. It seems that the border between folklore and non-folklore oral communication is not so rigid, but rather a zone of transition.<sup>3</sup>

It has been stated repeatedly in the treatises that in the beginning of its development, folklore is genetically tied to the traditional way of life - it is one of the main standing conditions for continuous and creative folklore to circulate. It is a permanent factor that ensures a living tradition and its transmission.<sup>4</sup> In folklore, fabulates reflect the immediate ethnography of the Dolghans, as A. Popov said.<sup>5</sup>

The following article relies upon the narratives recorded by the author from the Dolghans in the course of the expeditions of 1980 and 1988. Naturally, in the present case it is possible to deal with only a few of the traditional views.

The Dolghans of Khatanga (Novorybnoye village), like many other peoples, regard water as a holy substance. They regard the Water-Tangara as a god. Water must be treated with respect. The Dolghans of Khatanga Bay - hunters, fishermen, reindeer-herders - must face danger many times during their lives, as they go underwater fishing: when ice starts to break up on the bay, or when one has to cross the ice with one's herd, especially during the spring migration. There are many short narratives about the behaviour of people who

are caught with the current.

*Water is also a Tangara. There is such a song, an old woman sung it. People listened to it, so did I. A very sad song. She was on the river when the ice broke off. She was drifting and singing to the Waters that it should have mercy on her and drive the drift ice to the shore. In her song she told the story of her life. How she was born and married. Children would be orphans if she died. She gave a golden ring to the Waters. Eventually, the water drove block of ice to the shore.*

Another narrative of a similar content speaks about Kristofor M's father, a man who is now living in a neighbouring village. The floe drifted away with reindeer and herdsman. For a long time they begged the waters to carry the block of ice to the shore, but it did not happen until Kristofor's father had killed a white reindeer of his and thrown it into the water.

Such migratory narratives of the native inhabitants of the Taimyr Peninsula show how important it is for the religious system to support folklore. It also makes different narrators to associate similar narratives with a particular person, whether one's own relatives or just contemporaries. Events similar to the latter narrative have been retold by several Dolghans living in other parts of the Khatanga.

*A woman and her daughter sat on the shore for a long time and threw the then very expensive and rare crackers into the water, asking it to return the body of the drowned man. They begged the waters: 'Give our father back to us!'*

These narratives manifest a confident attitude to the water as a powerful element that carries away a person for various reasons or reminds him of the necessity to be attentive towards it. Finding himself on drift ice, a man persistently and for a long time begs for his escape from peril, and this does not happen until, having lost all hope, he has given the waters the best he has with him at the moment. A person who has heard such stories since his childhood and who grew up within the tradition would no doubt act in a precisely similar manner if he found himself in an analogous situation.

One may also observe a certain fixed attitude to animals who are considered to have suffered through the Water.

*Once it so happened that a marbled seal had got very far from the water. High tides had carried it to the shore it to the shore and it seems to have crept in the wrong direction. People found it when checking the traps. They were really astonished. But one mustn't touch such animals. Because they are like condemned by the water and it was the water who did it to them.*

*Once a white bear came to Khatanga. It was frozen all over. Came*

*to the people. The waters had condemned it and driven it here. You should not touch it. The water had rejected it, the Khatanga river.'*

People think that animals cast out by the Water should not be used, otherwise the Water takes possession over the person who has clothes of that animal on, or in general, the person who uses things made of the body of that animal.

Talking about death and afterlife, usually one might hear their saying: 'Nobody has returned from there.' And yet, some of the narratives are in such a shape that they make even the narrator himself smile. A short narrative about an unusual situation has been recorded at the Novorybnoye village:

*They say in Syndassko, in 1976, it so happened that a Dolghan died. He was already put into the coffin. On the third day, as the funerals were to be, he stood up and said: 'It's too soon you are burying me.' People asked him afterwards, what was it like in the other-world. He said he had seen all his relatives. They were leading a poor life - even bummed him for a smoke. Packed him off from there, said that he had come too early: 'Go on with your service!' The Dolghans say that a man has 44 deaths during his life-time. When the last death comes, he goes to the other-world.*

So, the other-world is regarded as a place where all the relatives gather and the deceased finds himself in a community comprised of relatives. They do not work so actively as in this world and are always in need - 'lead a poor life'. The idea of 44 deaths that a man has during his life-time has spread from Taimyr into the south-east to the Mongol area where 44 cruel and insidious Tengris cause all sorts of troubles to human beings.<sup>6</sup> A transformed reflection of this tradition can be found in the heritage of the Dolghans.

Fabulates about events in personal life that are remembered especially vividly because of their dramatic or surprising character and that are composed spontaneously, may sometimes be told as an answer to a question of the anthropologist. Frequently, one can observe how the details, while performing the fabulate, become so elaborate that it would be impossible to recall them from memory. The narrator decorates his/her talk in an artistic way. It is but natural to suppose that the narrative has got all the necessary preconditions for becoming a stable item with all the attributes of a folklore piece. Especially if the narrative illustrates the existing folk beliefs.

In 1988 I recorded a series of the corresponding narratives from an elderly Western Dolghan lady Polina (Pelageya Romanovna) Bezrukikh who, according to the documents, was born in 1914. She raised a dozen children and by now she has 34 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Knowing the tradition well, she is experienced and has a very sociable character. A wonderful tenderness, kindness, selflessness, boundless cordiality and tactfulness are re-

markable even among the Nordic people, of whom these qualities are especially characteristic. Regardless of her sociability, inherent optimism and a sense of humour, Polina Romanovna is not considered a good narrator, to say nothing of a story-teller. And yet, in the course of our interview it turned out that she had a talent for narrating, describing different situations in a picturesque, artistic way.

She was born in an old Russian family at the lower reaches of the Yenisei. Apart from Samoyed influence, Dolghans had a strong impact on her family. Polina Romanovna was married to an Avam Dolghan whose family included also some Nenets of the Yenisei. Their children grew up in a Dolghan environment and became Dolghans. The narrator remembers her Russian origin, but according to her self-consciousness and passport she is a Dolghan. Her descent, childhood and the subsequent life are manifested as fixed features of her world-view that fit into the culture context of both the Dolghans and the Russians living at the lower reaches of the river Yenisei. Her Russian language is very peculiar. One may observe a distortion of sibilants which is characteristic of the native inhabitants of the central part of the Taimyr as well as other peculiarities.

Memorats are presented by Polina Romanovna in a very picturesque way with minute details. She constructs the frame of the situation, shapes it according to the plot, adds dialogues. An ordinary situational recollection takes the form of a folklore piece with fixed attributes. It seems as if the narrative shifted away from the personality of the narrator and acquired an independent existence. The narrative is ripe for a spread independent from its author. All her narratives, in one way or another, reflect the actualisation of the traditional beliefs in everyday life. Several of them concern the omens to be fulfilled in the future. The omens are traced from the occurrences of objects that at first sight have no relation at all to the future events.

Very interesting is the long and artistically elaborated narrative about her mother's and grandmother's death that can be traced back to her childhood. Too early menses of the girl portended misfortune, someone's death. Soon, her grandmother died, and then her mother. Her mother's death coincided with her having caught a big fish together with her brother. It seemed as if the sturgeon had come to them and let them stun it.

*'As though it had put its head on my way on purpose! I hit it. I was a small girl and I instantly knocked the giant sturgeon out. As if it had wanted it to happen. And at once it was with its belly upwards.'*

Here, it is noteworthy that it was prohibited for the members of her mother's family to eat sturgeon. After the funerals, the fish was taken away to the processing station.

The narrative shows how widespread was the idea of exchanging one life for another, the replacement of a real or potential human life with that of another human or animal, among Russians. Such an idea is based on a generally accepted truth that everything in the nature is interrelated and in mutual balance: the acquisition of something means the loss of another thing or being. One can observe the survival of an ancient idea according to which a human life is connected with the life of an animal. Sturgeon is considered an especially holy fish. Even today, when salting fish, the Nenets women of the Yenisei river do not touch sturgeon, pike or burbot, leaving these for men to process. The Komi women of the Yamal Peninsula behave in a similar manner with the sturgeon.<sup>7</sup> The occurrence with the big sturgeon can be interpreted so that the death of a human being caused a simultaneous death of an animal or a fish. Possibly, there are some relics of it being regarded as an ancestor. For example, the Nganasans sometimes associate the death of a human being with the perishing of a certain tree.

In Polina Romanovna's narratives her post-marriage adaptation to the nomadic life of the Dolghans, the atmosphere of their dwelling, living conditions and interpersonal relations. It is especially noteworthy what struck her in the customs of the Taimyr peoples in comparison with Russian milieu. Similarly with etiologic legends and myths, her narratives sometimes end with a traditional final phrase which affirms the validity of the belief or custom that the narrative is based on. Some memorats have been recorded about childbirth, about the customs that do not let close ties between a mother and child be broken. At this point, we shall present a summary of one such example.

The situation was aggravated by the fact that there was no assistant woman-midwife in the tundra campsite whose help the Dolghans used to seek. The only people present were the mother of the woman in childbed, an elderly lady, and Polina, then very young. In the course of the narrative it comes out that mother should not help her daughter in childbirth. The elderly lady gets very nervous indeed. Polina asks mother to instruct her and tries to help the woman in childbed. Mother ties the umbilical cord, but very loosely. Polina ties it more tightly and, not knowing the traditions of the Dolghans properly, asks mother to cut it through. She does so. After some time, the midwife arrives and scolds the mother for having cut through the umbilical cord - both the baby and its mother could have died. The danger is reduced by the fact that the umbilical cord had been re-tied tightly by a stranger. At the end of the narrative it is stated with some suspicion that it is not recommended for a mother to be present at her daughter's giving birth to a baby, let alone cut the umbilical cord of the new-born.

The narrative confirms the belief known among other peoples of Siberia,

particularly those of Taimyr, that close relatives (especially mother, daughter, daughter's child) are, as it were, tied by an umbilical cord to the same thread of life (so it is said, for example, in a folk tale), and when it is cut through by someone tied to it, it brings to ruin the whole severed unit and disrupts the continuation of life.

Polina Romanovna spent her whole married life around the hearth. She had a very close relationship with fire. Polina would always take heed of it, the speech of the fire told her how she should behave. Ignoring it sometimes brought about dire consequences, had an effect on the well-being and health of the members of the family. In the narratives connected with fire, a whole complex of relations between close relatives comes into light. It is to be felt particularly in one of them where the narrator tells the details of the death of her five-month-old daughter which was caused by heedlessness to a warning of the fire against a danger. A guest who comes from afar should not pass between the fire and the owner of the house at once; he must sit by the threshold for some time and warm himself, drink tea, as if letting the fire get familiar with him. Only after that may he go further into the house. The narrative reflects a close relationship between a child and the birth assistant-midwife who helped it into the world. Potentially, one may observe how she turns out to be the one who saves the child in a critical situation, or the person in whose presence the child will not die. It seems that if she is not at the death bed of the child whom she had received, she will lose a part of her own life. According to generally accepted norms, such behaviour is incorrect.

Under no circumstances should someone be hit with a poker that is used for stirring the coals in the hearth. It is a part of fire and such punishment equals to murdering by fire. It is especially dangerous if the mistress of the hearth punishes in this way someone related to the same fire, for example, her son. The son's wife is not so closely connected with the mistress of the fire, but she is with the son. Hitting the pregnant young wife with a poker causes the death of the son.

For some dangerous situations there are preventive measures, others are inevitable. In case the fire warns against a misfortune, it is associated with the first thought that the mistress of the hearth has after the speech of the fire. In this case one should use a spell of free formulation, asking the fire for help, as it can foresee things that people can not, and thus it can prevent the misfortune.

Some narratives describe clairvoyance attributed to children. They can forecast weather, the arrival of guests, some events happening far from their home. Dream-telling can also acquire etiologic character. They may explain, for example, why a dead person should not wear a head-dress fringed with the fur of a wolverine.

The aim of the narratives is to preserve the necessary sacral contacts together with the rituals attached to them.

This short article did not allow us more than just a brief stop at some of the beliefs of the Dolghans. Not all of them have lost their topicality. It seems that as long as children are taught in the boarding schools, separated from their families and the everyday life of the Dolghans, they do not pay attention to how their parents, grandfathers and grandmothers react to critical situations. However, when they have reached a ripe age and bear responsibility for their intimate people and families, several traits of traditional beliefs are manifested quite clearly. Especially Polina Romanovna's daughters who have their own families and children follow her habits and methods for preservation of life. Naturally, some of the old norms of behaviour are lost forever. Young Dolghan and Nganasan women have often been heard to express bitter regret about their grandmothers having known, but they being no more - then we did not ask, and now there is no one to ask from. These remarks reflect their insecurity in the face of a possible danger. This, in turn, proves the fact that the persistent norms of beliefs and traditional behaviour transmitted from generation to generation guarantee a feeling of security, stability, reliability, we can feel a living connection with the world that surrounds us.

Translated by Kai Vassiljeva

### Literature

<sup>1</sup>Putilov, B. Predislovie. In: *Mifologicheskie rasskazy russkogo naseleniya Vostochnoi Sibiri*. Novosibirsk, 1987, pp. 7-9.

<sup>2</sup>Propp, V. *Folklor i deistvitelnost*. Moscow, 1976, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup>Chistov, K. *Narodnye traditsii i folklor*. Leningrad, 1986, p.32

<sup>4</sup>Putilov, B. Problemy tipologii etnograficheskikh svyazei folklor. In: *Folklor i etnografiya: Svyazi folklor s drevnimi predstavleniyami i obryadami*. Leningrad, 1977, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Popov, A. *Dolghansky folklor*. Moscow, 1937, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup>Mikhailov, T. *Buryatsky shamanism*. Novosibirsk, 1987, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup>From the obsevanances of the author in the course of field work.