

УДК 821 5121

## Versions of the “Man – Bear Combat” Plot in the Works of Siberian Writers

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Received 21.01.2015, received in revised form 20.02.2015, accepted 14.03.2015

*Some typical recurrent plots such as a plot of human – bear interaction are characteristic to the literature of the Native Siberians. A plot of a combat between a man and a bear is present at the works of almost all Siberian writers. This is due both to the circumstances of life in the taiga where it is difficult to avoid a meeting with that animal and to the folklore traditions. Many Siberian peoples worshipped the bear; the bear was considered to be the human’s ancestor. The Mansi, Khanty, Nanai, Nivkh, Tofalar, Even, and Evenki peoples celebrated the special bear festival. The bear cult is supposed to be very ancient. The fact that it is common for the people belonging to different language groups proves the similarity in their way of living determined by the similar geographic factors.*

*The article discusses two versions of the “man – bear combat” plot. The first version is typical of V. Sangi’s writings. It considers a combat as an ordeal which is successfully overcome by a character. G. Keptuke’s book gives another version of the plot. A character is maimed in a combat because of his conceit and violation of an ancient custom. The plot describing an encounter of a man with a bear is one of the most common in the works of Siberian writers.*

*Keywords: plot, motif, a combat between a man and a bear, Nivkh literature, Evenki literature.*

*The article is financially supported by the Russian State Scientific Fund, Project № 14-14 54001 “Complexes of plots and motives in the literatures of the Native Siberians”.*

*DOI: 10.17516/1997-1370-2015-8-7-1427-1435*

*Research area: philology.*

In mythology and folklore of the peoples of Siberia the bear has traditionally been one of the main characters. Study of the bear cult is reflected in numerous works of historians, folklorists and anthropologists (Rassadin, 2013; Kerner, 2003; Sokolova, 2002; Burykin 2001, Vasilevich, 1971). However, in terms of literature, there is no comprehensive work, which would analyze stories, typical or characteristic of the

Siberian peoples’ literature, including plots of the interaction between a man and a bear, which is probably the most common plot of this literature. The plot of the combat between a man fight and a bear is one of the examples of this plot. This can also be explained by the realities of life, in the forest it is difficult to avoid a meeting with this beast, and the meeting always becomes memorial, constantly repeated, in more detail; it

becomes the basis for a literary narrative. Also folklore and ethnographic tradition certainly had their influence, as a bear frequently appears in folklore stories. Mansi, Khanty, Nanai, Nivkh, Tofalar, Evenki, Even peoples have had the bear cult and the festival devoted to the bear. This cult, according to scientists, is very ancient, and its prevalence among peoples belonging to different linguistic groups, is due primarily to settlement geography, similar way of life and living conditions (Burykin, 2001).

Some stable and repetitive in different nations beliefs are also tied with a bear: for example, Nivkh, Evenk and other people thought that the bear cannot be spoken about badly and in disapproval. Often, people use different words to substitute the name of the bear. Preparation and procedure for bear hunting are also regulated. There was also the order of flaying and dressing the killed bear, rather complicated in its sequence: while performing each new operation, it was necessary to pronounce certain words. This rite has been described in detail by G.M. Vasilevich, without citing the whole paragraph, let us quote the significant for further analysis sentences: “The order of flaying and traditional words have remained until recently among the majority of the Evenki people... Usually, having killed the bear, they gave its meat and lard to all people being close” (Vasilevich, 1971b, p.168). Many marked and described by G.M. Vasilevich tradition have been reflected in the different writers’ plots related to hunting or meeting with a bear in the forest. The reason is that in newly created written literature and in the languages, having just recently acquired a written form, of the peoples of Siberia there dominates the plot structure, that is, for the most part the writers in their books describe their own life experiences and the traditional lifestyle and culture of their people.

There are similar stories in the works of Iu. Rytkeu with a proviso that his characters

come into confrontation with the polar, rather than the brown bear. The fight with a bear in Iu. Rytkeu’s works is defined by M.A. Bologova as belonging to the 1<sup>st</sup> group of plots “(male) tests” (Bologova, 2012, p. 279). The struggle of a man with such a formidable predator always has the test character, and is often interpreted as the test necessary for the development. A young man has to pass this test to become a real hunter. For some people it was customary to test young men; to prove their strength and commitment to family life they had to participate in a bear hunt, so the involvement in such a hunt was of the initiation nature.

**The plot of “a successful fight between  
a man and a bear” in the books  
of Vladimir Sangi: a traditional test  
with an unconventional outcome**

The plot of the fight between a man and a bear in the books of V. Sangi has always had the nature of the test: in the novel “The Marriage of the Kevongs” (Zhenit’ba Kevongov) a main hero, a young man Ykilak should prove that he is strong and brave man and could feed future wife as the result of relatively unfair demands. The form of the test is killing the bear. The young man carries out this task. In the novel “False Estrus” (Lozhnyi gon) a young hunter who for the first time accompanied the old and experienced hunter into the forest for wintering, for the first time took part in the hunt for a bear and could not shoot just from fear. In “The Last Tribute to Tradition” (Posledniaia dan’ obychaiu) a young hero also must have a test according to the ancestors’ custom, he had to endure constant mocking at his studying in the distant city from a close relative, but during the hunt this very “urban” man did not quail and beat the beast. In “Blue Mountains” (Goluby gory) a young hero, who from the very beginning was taunted by an old man, also wants to prove that he is strong and brave enough, when

he offers to help the old man to kill a bear, which takes away deer at night.

However, in “The Marriage of Kevongs” and the story “The Last Tribute to Tradition” a confrontation with a bear becomes a test not only for the main character, but also an examination for at least one person, usually the antagonist of the main hero. This foe usually becomes the initiator of hunting. The letter of such a character begins the story “The Last Tribute to Tradition”:

“... A bear is easier to kill than a dog: it’s big, as half of a house. One can shoot it with his eyes closed. Come on. Let’s hunt for pleasure” (Sangi, 1981b, p. 317).

His name is Zakun, and he is a relative of the protagonist. Zakun has already informed all people around that he will hunt a bear. According to custom, the main character cannot refuse, although he understands that his relative is a kind of a braggart and actually does not know anything about hunting for a bear. It turns out that Malun, having learned in Leningrad and prepared to become a teacher at his small home town, has to pass the test, already prepared by his vain and boastful cousin Zakun. The hunt implies two people going together, and if the hunt is successful, both participants will earn honor and respect. Nevertheless, Malun feels that his relative wants to get the predator, using his skills, on arrival, he sees that bluster and arrogance are inherent in Zakun, who demonstrates these qualities in a variety of situations. Even on the very day of the hunt, when at one point it begins to seem that the beast can escape, he feels that “when a bear leaves, they will lose more than just a day spent on the tedious hunt. The whole village knows that the teacher is on mission. Perhaps, he has lost all the hunting skills, developed by his relatives in the early childhood, during the years of study in the Russian city. And most importantly, that damned cargo. Do not let the bear go!” (Sangi, 1981b, c. 323).

Zakun, wishing Malun to accompany him on a bear hunt by ancient custom, does not comply with the prescribed rules of the important traditions: he disparages the bear. Malun constantly points out that, during the preparation for the hunt Zakun goes in for unacceptable from the point of view of the traditions comments and statements. The main character is even forced to interrupt a speech of his relative, referring to the fact that “the custom orders this” (Sangi, 1981b, p. 319). He thinks that the Nivkh people have recently talked about the bear only respectfully: (Sangi, 1981b, p. 319).

“Mock – good’– that’s how it was called by adults talking to children, thus claiming the bear’s mediation between the earth people and mysterious omnipotent, which supposedly defines the welfare of people”. (Sangi, 1981b, p. 319).

Not only the Nivkhi and Evenki people, but also other nations believed that people can not speak badly and in disapproval about the bear. In the book of G. Keptuke “Little America” (Malen’kaia Amerika) a grandfather has also once broken one of the oldest taboos: he showed off before the hunt and was punished by a bear, and so he barely survived after a meeting with this harsh owner of the taiga. The tradition, “tribute” to which is given by Malun in the story of Vladimir Sangi, is a very ancient one and is found not only in Nivkhs’ legends. G.M. Vasilevich wrote about such a tradition among the Evenki people: “The bear is beaten mostly in a den... Having found the den, one of the hunters prepares to fire, while another by sticking a pole into the hole, tries to disturb the bear. The fire the bear as soon as they notice a bear’s head in the hole. Having killed it, they instantly flay it. In the past, a bear was dressed by a representative of a different kinship” (Vasilevich, 1971b, p. 168). “The Marriage of the Kevongs” describes this rite in detail. The precise following the prescribed

customs guaranteed a successful outcome due to centuries-old experience of hunters.

However, Malun himself was soon forced to make some "corrections" in the strict observance of the custom, based on the situation, as life is different to what it is thought to be. When the coward Zakun saw the predator, began to it the "devil" and pleaded in spite of the already discovered beast to turn back, for the first time Malun violated the customs of their ancestors: he shouted at his relative. Escaping Zakun did not help Malun in a dangerous fight, Malun had to cope alone, showing incredible poise and courage. For the second time the hunter let himself fall back on custom, when he was flaying the bear. According to the custom of the ancestors, the owner of the carcass must have been Zakun. He should have shared it among all villagers. Yet Malun had to fight with an angry beast, while turning yellow Zakun climbed a tree. And Malun felt the true owner of the prey. Having told nothing to his relatives about what had happened, Malun in silence divided the carcass under the cheers of the elderly, proclaiming him a real Nivkh, who has not forgot their native customs:

"They thanked the hunter and whispered something to themselves in confusion... and the skin ... It was hung the next day, nailed to the southern wall of Zakun's house. So the custom orders" (Sangi, 1981b, p. 324).

Men invited Malun to a new hunt. He did not sleep all night, remembering what had happened. He developed a fever from only memories. If during the hunt, he was surprisingly calm and reasonable, now he could not find the peace. In the morning, he told about his duty to teach at some school and went from his native village, contrary to the plans to stay here for teaching. The writer puts an end to this story. Malun paid "the last tribute to the tradition" of ancestors. But in the end he realized that he could not live according to them, he did not want and could not

do it. Fulfillment of the custom makes him leave, instead of staying in his small native village, that means that the young man runs from the traditional values, rather than continues them. Fulfillment of the custom leads to the opposite result. It turns out that the result of successful testing is not a communion with the traditional life and the society, but rather the flee from it. Nothing is reported about where the hero leaves for. However, he was educated in Leningrad and had a different experience of contact with another culture there, so he certainly could choose it.

At the beginning of the story the hero draws in his mind a comparison between the interest of Russian youth, his fellow students, to the traditional culture of the Nivkh people with neglecting and utilitarian Zakun's attitude to the traditions of their ancestors, which he treated for his personal benefit. Malun's groupmates in Leningrad were seriously interested in everything that is connected with the traditions of his people. Russian guys questioned him about Nivkhs' songs and the bear festival, many stories were recorded and translated into Russian. They were really into the traditions and culture of his people. And here at home, Malun faced with the fact that a representative of his people, his relative Zakun wants to use the custom as a reason to raise himself in the eyes of others. The old custom does not perform many of its previous functions. Once it was the basis for the kinship's unity. The tradition of apportion everybody during the flay, the tradition to eat bear meat, gathering all the men, women and children on holiday, express the tradition's original tribal and collective nature, which has been repeatedly characterized by ethnographers. In V. Sangi's story hunting does not unite two relatives, it rather disconnects them. One of the characters, who raised initial doubts, becomes a hero, another show cowardice, spiteful and inappropriate behavior.

Exactly the same story happens in the novel “The Marriage of Kevongs”. Lidiain escaped and hid behind trees, while Ykilak was fighting with the bear. He was tormented by doubts: what if Ykilak would be killed by a bear? Nonetheless, Ykilak’s brother, Hirkun, helped to cope with the beast. When Lidiain finally decided to approach the place of battle, it had been over, the brothers were smoking a pipe near the prostrate animal carcass. They did not say a single bad word to Lidiain, the coward who demanded from Ykilak to pass this test. They did not tell to anybody about how he behaved. Real heroes in Sangi’s books are usually laconic. They know how to do their job, while intrigue and cunning are not for them. So vile and evil people gain the victory over them everyday. So Ykilak, having proved his abilities, courage and strength, could not marry Languk, and contrary to all the rules will be invited to another test, a duel with his rival. Tired after a confrontation with a bear, he loses in this “duel”. The situation is similar to the situation in his novel in “The Last Tribute to Tradition”. Malun also behaves nobly, having killed the female bear in an unequal battle, he said nothing about that Zakun, having forced him to go on the hunt, chickened out at the crucial moment, climbed a tree and left his shelter only when a predator was dead.

In “The Marriage of Kevongs” a tragic finale was determined by repeated violation of the custom. Having successfully passed the test, the young man does not get his bride according to the age-old tribal customs. The girl, who fancied the main character, tried to run after him, but to no avail. The foundation of traditional patriarchal world is collapsing. It crashes at the will of the people themselves, and the moral destruction precedes the physical one. The final line of the novel is a cry of a father: “What has happened, people! What’s wrong in this world? What has happened, pe-e-e-people?” (Sangi, 1981a, p. 160).

The question is rhetorical and tragic at the same time.

Sometimes a fight can imply a somewhat different motive, an unfinished confrontation in the past, when the hunter was considerably affected by the departing bear, and years later, he again unexpectedly meets this very beast, recognizing it by its special marks remaining ever since. In the “Blue Mountains” old Kurlan is to enter into battle with the beast for the second time: once he could not kill a bear, which assassinated his best driving deer, in addition, the bear “squeezed” the hunter himself, but it lost a claw on the paw, too. Thanks to this mark, reflected in the footsteps of a paw without a claw, the old man knew that this beast once again got into the habit to carry the deer from the herd. Kurlan is old and does not want to engage in battle with a strong predator. However, the young hunter called Hakun offers to help him and the old man agrees. The fact is that the old man once publicly shamed a young man who was carrying geese from hunting. The old man chided the young hero:

“... Aren’t you ashamed to kill an innocent bird? What do you think it has flown halfway around the world to get to your insatiable stomach?! If every idiot kills three geese, they soon will disappear from the ground. What a hunter! A brave man! You have found something to shoot. You have to break the bears’ chins. There are not less bears in the woods than the dogs in our village. Go on, beat them!

A lad wilted. He hastily turned into an alley and disappeared into the gate of the house” (Sangi, 1981d, pp. 309-310).

And now the man came to the old man to offer help in the hunt for the bear and to restore his reputation. The gnarly old man agreed, and they went together to hunt a predator. As a result, a huge menacing bear is killed, but the wounds that the beast had time to give to the old man proved fatal. Before his death, he dreamt of the

Blue Mountains, which he had never visited. According to the legend, on the highest mountain of the mountains there lives its owner Pal-zyng and the bears are only his dogs there. But hunters who fell in battle with the bear do not just die, Pal-zyng takes them to his land, and they turn into "mountain people", "the happiest people" and patronize living relatives. In light of this legend in the final act of the story of the hunter appears as heroic and courageous. According to the legend, he should go to the owner of the mountains and become a patron of living people.

Thus, in the books of Sangi a fight becomes a "developer" of the true nature of a man: it brings both the best and the worst of human qualities.

**The duel, where a person loses to the bear,  
a punishment for the violation  
of the old covenants**

In her book "Little America" Evenki writer Galina Keptuke wrote about one grandfather in the chapter "Grandpa goes to die in Skovorodino", among other stories the grandfather tells about his longstanding meeting with a bear in taiga, while answering the questions, why and how he became blind. He said he was too sure of himself; he broke the old Evenki ban not to boast, not to provoke the bear, the owner of the forest, to the battle. The boastful words reached the ears of the bear, and these ears are believed by the Evenki people to be special; they are on the shoulders, namely these ears help the bear to hear everything that people say. Grandfather recounts what for every Evenk was once obvious: you cannot swear the bear and the hunter cannot brag before hunting, otherwise the beast can hear it, and it will not be a good luck for the hunter.

It would seem that scarcely had the grandfather said that he should meet the bear to try out his brand new gun, when his relatives immediately pointed out to him that he should not have said such words. Contrary to the traditional

beliefs, the hunter acted very unwisely, for which he paid high price: when he was riding on a deer along the path, where the bear lurked about, the bear knocked the hunter off the deer and scratched his face with its paw. But that is not all. There was a second meeting with the "host" of the forest, which was much more terrible. At the second time, when the bear jumped on him in the taiga, the grandfather had to fight it severely. Had he only shot once and injured the animal, it got even angrier. Felled and fallen on the ground, the hunter could not even grab the knife that the Evenki people usually wore on their backs, so he placed his rifle forward and it was immediately broken by the powerful beast. The grandfather saved himself, when he started screaming out loud and asked the bear to forgive him for his previous boastful words. Then shaman Sodorchan predicted a long life to the dying of wounds hunter. According the Evenki's superstition, if a wounded bear dies, the hunter gets a long life (Vasilevich, 1971b). And so it happened this time: the dead bear was found nearby. The grandfather remembers the shaman with gratitude, as he was able to instill in him the will to live, in addition, he said that the grandfather would see with one remaining eye, because at that time the children were young and the grandfather had to feed his family.

The similar episode we can also see in the first part of "The End of the Big House" in the trilogy "The Wide Amur" by Grigorii Khodzher. The hunter also paid for his boasting, for a lot of chatting before hunting for the bear:

"One piece of bear meat he will carry to his mother-in-law for a soup, he will give two ribs to his uncle, and a big chunk to his brother. So he divided meat of the bear, which was lying in its den and listened to him talking. When they came to the den, he forgot where it was. We sat down to smoke, and he walked away from us going straight twenty steps, and then the bear jumped



out of its den and ripped his mouth. At least the tongue was not pulled out...” (Khodger, 1964).

The wound of the hunter was sewed by a Russian doctor, who won the trust of the local population due to this successful treatment. This small episode is needed to show the positive side of the character of Vasili Erofeevich, the doctor. On the one hand, this story has the character of an ironic tale about hunting, on the other hand, it is very significant. The story about the abuse of the old ban becomes a fable with morals. The hunter, boasting about his future luck, suffered a very strange way: the doctor notes that his arms, legs and hips are safe, but the face bears scratches from claws, and, most importantly, he has a torn mouth now. For local hunters it is not surprising, they make fun of a braggart, saying that now he will have to live “with his mouth stitched up”.

The story “Little America” by G. Keptuke has a symbolic episode of the duel between the Evenki shaman and another sorcerer, “sinsesin”. The shaman and the sorcerer argued. The sorcerer called a snake that suddenly appeared in front of the shaman. The shaman called his assistant, a bear. The sorcerer got scared that the bear would eat his snake and hid it. So the shaman defeated the sorcerer. Here the bear took part in the fight

of a completely different character. It appeared at the call of the shaman as a subordinate force, helping him to overcome alien spirits. In this episode, one can see clearly that for the Evenki people the bear is not only and not so much a dangerous animal, but rather a patron spirit, and as the other character of the story says, it is “a relative of the person”, calling for a respectful and honorific attitude.

We cannot say that all options of the plot of the fight with a bear are extinguished here. So, we have deliberately not touched those variants of the plot, which are associated with the celebration of the bear festival and its description in literature, since they require special consideration. The subject of the analysis was only those scenes where a hunter finds a bear in the forest, and confronts it. For a man it is always a test of not only his stoutness, maturity, strength, but also of his loyalty to the customs of his ancestors, courage, honesty, integrity. Typically, this test becomes an important milestone in changing the character’s fate. Normally the collision of a man and a bear brings to light and to mind the ancient beliefs connected with a bear, and their violation can also significantly affect the character’s fate and, ultimately, the plot development.

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## **Варианты сюжета «поединок человека с медведем» в творчестве сибирских писателей**

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*Для литератур народов Сибири характерны некоторые устойчивые повторяющиеся сюжеты, таковыми являются, например, сюжеты о взаимодействии человека и медведя. Сюжет о поединке человека с медведем есть почти у всех сибирских писателей, что объясняется как таежными суровыми условиями жизни, при которых сложно избежать встречи в тайге с этим зверем, так и фольклорными традициями. У многих народов существовал культ медведя, он считался предком человека: у манси, хантов, нанайцев, нивхов, тофаларов, эвенков, эвенов был посвященный медведю медвежий праздник. Культ этот, по свидетельствам ученых, очень древний, а его широкая распространенность среди народов, принадлежащих к разным языковым группам, обусловлена в первую очередь географией расселения, сходным бытом, условиями жизни. В статье рассмотрены два варианта сюжета «поединок человека с медведем». Первый вариант часто встречается в книгах В. Санги: поединок становится для героя серьезным испытанием, которое он успешно проходит. В книге Г. Кэптукэ представлен иной вариант развития сюжета: герой поплатится за свою самонадеянность и нарушение древнего обычая и будет наказан увечьем. Сюжет о столкновении человека и медведя – один из самых распространенных в литературе сибирских писателей.*

*Ключевые слова: сюжет, мотив, поединок человека и медведя, нивхская литература, эвенкийская литература.*

*Работа выполнена при финансовой поддержке РГНФ, Проект № 14-14 54001 «Сюжетно-мотивные комплексы в литературах народов Сибири».*

*Научная специальность: 10.00.00 – филологические науки.*

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