# Folkloric narratives in modern youth culture (on verbal creative work of youth communities in Mari El Republic)

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**Abstract.** The article focuses on defining types and character of interaction between verbal creative work of youth communities and subcultures with traditional (folk) culture. Different kinds of narratives (fairy-tale, fanfic, baika) made within subcultures are considered to contain some specific ways of the interaction mentioned. An attempt is made to apply the criteria of traditional folklore to subcultural texts.
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**Keywords:** subculture, verbal creative work, traditional culture, mythological codes, folkloric patterns, fanficion, baika, meme.

## Introduction

One of the main features of verbal creative work of youth communities and subcultures in Russia is their clear-cut tendency to reproduce their own values [1: 171–172]. Unlike mass literature created for sale, this culture exists to be consumed and used by its representatives [2: 6]. The matter is of great interest for setting and solving various social, psychological and cultural problems [3].

The article focuses on phenomena and texts made by young authors who, in the process of creation, resort to different aspects of folk culture being aware or unaware of the fact of borrowing. Text collections of the student community (universities of Mari El Republic and some of Tatarstan), private collections and materials of popular sites and forums of Tolkien's fans (tolkienists), Harry Potter fans (potterheads), gamers, anime fans, cosplayers underlie the research. In the process of collecting, classifying and interpreting the material the authors applied to such methods as interviewing, participant observation, continuous sampling, comparative historical analysis and typological analysis. In this article the term *narrative* is defined as an extended monologue about an event from the past (syn. *narration*, *story*).

For the research the authors have picked out two relevant issues:

1. The use of traditions of narrative folklore in creative work of youth communities.

2. A possibility to regard verbal creative work of subcultures as a phenomenon of modern urban folklore.

As for the first issue, it concerns the communities that are etymologically connected with a literary work. For instance, tolkienists' texts are defined entirely by the contents of *Lord if the Rings* by J. Tolkien; potterheads focus their fan art on *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling, etc. In this case

authors (of fairy-tales in Tolkien's fandom, of fanfics in Potter fandom) reproduce and develop fairy-tale and mythological codes (archetypal hero, mythological antagonist, quest, magical objects). It is important to note that the codes used in such texts do not belong to a certain culture (Scandinavian, British, Slavic etc.) but refer to the literary source within which they have already been interpreted or reproduced. In other words, representatives of a youth subculture do not tend to address a definite traditional (folklore) culture, but a substratum offered by the author of the book worshiped in the subculture (the canon).

A special attention among interpretations is paid to the so-called conversions (pushing off the model, providing the typical pattern with opposing semantics). The typical forms of conversions are

1. Depriving sacred book / movie characters of their elevated features.

2. Describing explicit scenes with their participation.

3. Turning an originally negative character into a romantic one.

4. Merging the protagonist and the antagonist into one character (when a dragon fighter is a dragon himself).

In this connection there are two issues that draw the researcher's attention to tolkienists' fairy-tales:

1. Depriving the duel and the dragon fighter of heroic features ("the blockhead in brass outfit").

2. Foregrounding the dragon.

3. Providing the dragon with positive features: "their voice has a pleasant hoarseness", unlike knights, they are able to experience a wide range of emotions – from hate to the warm-blooded, hunger for power and arrogance, to sympathy and mercy, as well as shame, ill-confidence and

embarrassment ("the dragon blushed – every scale got scarlet").

Studying conversions lets one understand the way a community interprets the general cultural code, find out whether the community tends to re-establish or to destroy traditions of the 'parent' culture. It is considered that book and movie fans are inclined to be loyal to the latter and are eager to maintain values coming from outside. Among the so-called potterheads the most acknowledged and highly appreciated fanfiction texts are those which maintain and develop Rowling's traditions while parodies are popular but regarded as a minor output. At the same time subcultures' attitude to a national tradition and cultural codes presented in the canon is different. Tolkienists, unlike potterheads, do not limit themselves to Tolkien's texts but address the British tradition on the whole, being sometimes real experts in it.

The authors of the article have studied texts written mostly by Russian fans so it is not quite correct to speak about their following the British tradition only. Its usage is defined by the original literary work; the same concerns fanfics by English-speaking authors (translations are popular in the Russian fandom). Nevertheless, one can notice some tendencies regarding the use of national traditions in fanfiction. In fact, both Russian and English-speaking fans prefer some kind of mythological eclecticism while reproducing fairy-tale or mythological characters borrowed from different cultures in the same story. However, the potential to do it as well as the emphasis on archetypal cultural codes can be found in the original literary works by J. Tolkien and J. K. Rowling.

Gamers' communities are a vivid example of a tolerant attitude to the Babel of mythological concepts and characters. Game developers are not confused about using fairy-tale or mythological realities that belong to different epochs, cultures, and were once introduced as creative work of a group or a person. Actually, they seem inspired by it. By now some game developers have mastered the principle of involution, of turning the cultural text into a microform.

As for the usage of fairy-tale and mythological motives, game designers' fantasy seems to have no bounds. There are a great number of archetypes applied in constructing game quests (see products by Big Fish and Elephant Games). The narrative basis for the hidden object adventure genre is a variety of devouring actions (a gigantic crab as a kind of fish and a part of the world system; the heart of Wooden Captain located in the fish; eating meat of the white fish and mastering the beasts' tongue as a result). The narration is built by means of common

magical markers (transformations, enchantments, magical drinks). Characters are presented as guards of entrance (an old man in the forest, three witch sisters), as carriers to the otherworld (a dragon), its inhabitants (goblins, trolls, golems, gremlins). A live forest, magical stones, mirrors, lamps, paintings, keys, dolls, coats of invisibility and other such-like objects shape the nature and world of things [4].

Some texts tend to explicitly refer to folkloric patterns; it is one of the acknowledged approaches to the process of text creation including the level of parody. One should mention that subcultural authors prefer to keep to traditions of popular and recognisable genres of folklore (fairy tales, legends, scary stories, ballads, bylichki, anecdotes). The most evident markers of these genres (models of structure and traditional formulas) are used.

One of the most popular genres in youth culture is the so-called baika (байка) – a short amusing story about an important or/and funny event that might have taken place in reality. One can assume authors actively used the genre of bylichki (memorates) while making this kind of stories.

The modern baika like folkloric bylichki tends to confirm some belief. That is why the central character of the text is the witness of the event and the narrative method is a first person narration or a third person narration as if the story were told by some witness and later rendered by another person reproducing that witness's narrative.

The artistic world of baika like the one of bylichki is often mysterious. The action takes place after the sunset (in the evening, at night, at twilight) when it is hard to say what is real. The events are set in a deserted place (in the forest, next to a lake or a river, at a ravine, in some confined space). The sinister atmosphere is defined by the setting.

The climax of both narratives is a motif of facing a weird scary phenomenon introduced into the narration by means of particular adverbs (like *suddenly*) and such lexical constructions as '*And I saw*', '*And it had just got silent when', 'And there was such an awful cry'* etc.

Both genres are usually spread at night before going to bed, enjoying one's time at the fire, "V.S. told us an interesting story. We sat at the fire." [5].

The classical communicative situation of telling bylichki reproduces itself in the cyclic recurrence of telling a baika. The narration acquires the cyclic character due to the fact that all the participants of communication possess equal skills and knowledge concerning the genre. Some kind of competitiveness is also typical of the baika, "We sat and, one by one, told stories. Each story was more heart-piercing than the previous one" [5].

The phatic function continues to play an important role in the narration. This kind of texts leaves a lasting impression with listeners and they experience a wide range of emotions – from careless laughter to mystical horror.

In the baika one discovers some remnants of dealing with supernatural phenomena, an idea of an 'otherworld', existing next to the real world. The difference underlies in the fact that in youth creative work there are more forms of its manifestations than in traditional folklore. In traditional bylichki the characters are deities and spirits of the pagan low-mythology while the baika provides the listener with a Christian interpretation of incredible happenings or offer a great variety of explanations depending on religious or esoteric views shared by the narrator [6].

Verbal creative work of youth communities has captured a fact of resorting to ritual practices, in the first place, to rites of initiation. Such a relevant constituent of youth subcultural projected world as liminality can be interpreted correctly only within the context of traditional culture. Tatyana Shchepanskaya was the first to study initiation in youth subcultures (hippies) in a broader context of rites of passage [7]. The researcher managed to put traditional actions and realities of the System into the scheme of separation, transition and reincorporation rites. Among the youth communities in Mari El elements of initiation are encountered among bikers, metal fans, Goths (subcultures with a strong emphasis on isolation) and among students, an open community but knowledgeable about the essence and rules of initiation rites.

The technological aspect of youth culture is also close to the folkloric one. One can speak, with some caution, about the principles of classical folklore functioning in the process of making and spreading texts of youth culture: orality, traditional nature, impersonality, variability, syncretism, polyfunctionality and some others. In different subcultures this or that principle of classical folklore may be foregrounded.

Popularity of youth communities makes them established on the Internet. The new specific location cannot but transform the criteria of traditional folklore. A text once introduced on sites and forums becomes a part of virtual community and written culture. In such a case, one of the main principles, orality, becomes emulation of orality caused by pragmatic needs of convenience and speed [8: 24]. New forms of orality can be found in potterheads' creative work, or in any subculture producing fanfiction. There exists some connection between authors and readers due to the system of feedback via commenting and reviewing.

Thus, one can speak about some syncretism of texts created in youth communities. They can be illustrated with a colourful background of the site, they sometimes have photo and video attachments; the narrator's speech can be marked graphically with smileys and specific punctuation. In this connection, there are unusual kinds of fan art and fanfiction when the reader needs to keep in mind a peculiar melody while reading (audiofics) or the text is written in the present tense, with prolongued descriptions, to emulate a movie effect (clipfics). Now the latter form is outmoded as there is a lot of free software that can be used for making real movies or cartoons. Fans can also make texts in turn (round robin) and according to conditions set by one of the fans (challenge fic) [9].

As for the principle of traditional nature in subcultural creative work, it can be understood as creation of their own traditions, on the one hand, and as orientation to folkloric models, on the other. Thus, many works contain a powerful collective core as a verbal component what explains topic recurrence, stability and popularity of typical characters, stereotyped speech formulas. Specific texts can be popular with a limited group of people united by this or that attribute. But the events described are rather typical and people outside the community are able to understand the stories and retell them. This type of texts gets the status of fabulates (real folkloric texts) both within the community and beyond.

One should pay attention to the principle of variability and its transformation within youth communities. Applying this criterion to the student community and tolkienists one can discover variants of texts depending on the situation of performing. The narrator's monologue becomes penetrable for various additions, qualifications introduced through remarks and dialogue elements. Every time the story is told, the text may acquire details while the structure remains open.

The folkloric text possesses another important feature – polyfunctioinality. The researched texts correspond to folkloric nature, for they fulfill a set of traditional functions. One of them is the communicative function as texts in communities are made to realize communication objectives. The next function, the regulating one, aims at establishing and controlling relations between the community members. The entertaining function has much to do with the game function and help young people deal with life challenges.

The informative function is of minor importance and is relevant in the context of getting neophytes into know about some professional secrets. Besides, one can state the didactic function (the instructive nature of some stories) and the aesthetic function (comical, ironic or fantastic stories striking

the mind and imagination) and, to some extent, the ritual and magical function that meets the aims of initiation narratives.

Nowadays it is possible to speak about a new genre born on the Internet – the Internet-meme. Its advent is directly connected with the technological aspects of youth culture mentioned above. The Internet-meme is regarded as a phenomenon of "spreading certain information spontaneously on the Internet by means of reposting it in all possible ways (e-mail, chats, forums, blogs, etc.)" [10: 162]. On the one hand, the meme is a kind of precedential texts, on the other hand, the meme is humour for those 'who understand': the comical effect is aimed at a particular audience [10: 162].

It is surprising how differently the meme works within and outside the subculture. There are two tendencies to meme development connected with potterheads and books by J. Rowling. The first one derives from the Internet-audience that does mot share potterheads' values and treats *Harry Potter* negatively or indifferently. So, outside the potterheads' community there are demotivators of humorous and ironic nature where the realities of the canon become a subject matter, not a form. Thus, the popular meme 'Why not just…' picturing Boromir from *Lord of the Rings* movie is provided with the capture: "Why not just / forget Harry Potter". As a rule, outside the potterheads' community, *Harry Potter* realities do not become a separate meme but are included into universally acknowledged memes. There is a different tendency in the potterheads' community: any particularity of the canon or fandom can turn into a meme. Memes emerge around vividly expressed personal qualities of the characters: "Study like Hermione / Eat like Ron / Live like Harry", "Got Granger? / Got no need in brains"; around studies as a problem uniting characters and reader: "Examus Passimus / Retakus / Avada Retakus"; around an occasional similarity with other blockbusters (*Thor, Avengers, Lord of the Rings*). Also, potterheads resort to popular memes, e.g. "Keep calm and…": "Keep calm and love Draco Malfoy", and the famous troll face that often accompanies Snape. There are ready-made models for making demotivators in the community portraying owls and symbols of Hogwarts faculties but they are consumed and appreciated only within the community.

## Conclusion

To sum up, in modern youth culture folkloric models are presented in various forms: resorting to the mythological basis of the book worshipped by the community; orientation to folkloric models of the culture of the community; the technological aspect of folkloric culture. One can trace some consistent patterns in their usage. The profound semantics of folkloric models seems secondary while ways of functioning and productive structural or image models are foregrounded. Thus, the notion of secondary folklorism is most relevant for describing the relations between subcultural creative work and traditional culture. At the same time, some genuine forms, like memes and demotivators, emerge to establish a new kind of interaction between the tradition and innovation.

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