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## **Russian Post-Soviet Folklore: Modern Oral Folk Stories about Merchants**

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### **Abstract**

The verbal genres are of great importance in the oral lore of any nation. Nowadays more and more attention is drawn to popular stories of the past, of people who lived long ago, and so on. This article focuses on the stories about merchants that are classified as memorates (precursors of legend) and chronicles. The perception and image of merchants in the narratives under consideration are of particular interest. Modern storytellers show the representatives of the merchant class as creative people of great soul, deep faith, and high morals rather than money-grubbers. The verbal story is characterized by narrators' striving to describe the events, preserving the factual authenticity. Like any folk text, an oral story is a collective genre: it is orally transmitted, it has variations, i.e. each storyteller participates in its creating and existing in their own way. Although there are text variants, the main storyline usually does not vary in oral narratives. Thus, modern oral stories about representatives of the merchant class of the past times do not break with the tradition that is an attribute of folklore. That gives grounds for arguing that such a thematic type of oral narrative as a story about merchants is independent. The independent position of the genre under study is also proved by its attributes that distinguish it from other types of folk prose. The article discusses the genre characteristics of oral stories about merchants, gives their thematic classification, and explains the style features. The texts have significant potential for historical reconstructing the persons and events associated with a particular region. They also reflect the general trends in Russian literature – to avoid a one-sided view on the past, to perceive and understand everything from the standpoint of truth, goodness, and beauty. In addition, the authors of the article focus on the issue of naming characters in oral stories about merchants. The role of the storyteller (narrator) as a subject of naming activity, as well as general mechanisms of character naming, is also shown. Naming the characters is presented as a process determined by the genre features of the folk stories under study, the corresponding ways and techniques of depicting reality.

**Keywords:** Modern folklore, Oral stories about merchants, Memorates, Classification, Poetics, Naming, Features of life.

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## **Introduction**

The genres of oral folk prose are attracting greater attention of modern folklore sciences. The issues of genre features, poetics, current existence and development of urban legends that are different from myths and fairy-tales are of great importance.

The folklore studies of the 19th century have no records and researches of urban legends, but there are some separate rumors, myths, stories, and etc. that were recorded by the writers of that time (for example, Pylyayev, 1889; 1891).

At the beginning of the 20th century (1910–1920), the St. Petersburg School of local history that was founded by I.M. Grevs began to study the folklore of that city. Later the books ‘True Story and Myth of Petersburg’ (1924) and ‘Ways of Studying a City as a Social Organism’ (1925) by N.P. Antsiferov; works by V.V. Straten (1927) were published.

E.Z. Baranov (1928) drew attention to Moscow’s legends. The researcher made his notes in a real environment where those legends existed – in a live conversation. At that time there was published ‘Merchants’ household portrait of 18–20th centuries’ (1925).

Unfortunately, the researches that had been started in the first decades of the 20th century were stopped for political reasons in the USSR and were resumed only in the 1980-s in modern Russia (Ivanov, 1982).

The researches of G. Bennet (1987), P. Smith (1984), W. Labov and J. Waletzky (1967), and others are of particular interest in foreign folklore studies. The special editions of the ‘Fabula’ journal are devoted to the present-day narrative, mainly the urban legends (1985; 1990).

The subject of our research is urban legends about merchants that exist in the folk environment. This is just a small list of types and examples of these legends: a life event, an experience, a funny story, an urban legend, a fictional story, a tall tale, an interpretation of dreams, and even rumors or gossip. Such narratives are part of everyday speech of modern inhabitants of cities, towns, and villages. Being unnoticeable and harmoniously included in speech, ‘an oral narrative belongs to the language of everyday communication to a greater extent than any other genres of folklore does’ (Veselova, 2003).

## **Materials and Methods**

The theoretical and methodological basis of the research was the works written by the leading Russian folklorists and literary critics: A.N. Azbelev (1966), I.S. Veselova (2003), I.P. Karpov [2010; 2012]; and by the foreign researchers – P. Smith (1984), G. Bennet (1987), W. Labov, J. Waletzky (1967).

When defining the genre, we agree with terminological treating a verbal story given by E.Y. Ivanova, ‘in folklore studies the ‘verbal story’ concept is used in two senses. The first one is a broader, specific concept that includes all genres of verbal prose. In this sense, a legend, a joke, and a fictional story can be called a verbal story. The second one, which is a narrower concept, refers only to the folklore genre of storytelling’ (Ivanova, 2005). For ease of recognition, the folklorist-researcher treats folklore prose works as ‘folk legends’, while the works under consideration as ‘urban legends’ (Ivanova, 2005).

The empirical evidence was recorded and accumulated by S.I. Grakhova when researching local history and folklore under her supervision, interviewing the urban population in the towns of Yelabuga and Mendeleyevsk, interviewing the rural population in Yelabuga and Mendeleyevsk districts of the

Republic of Tatarstan in the period 1995–2020. The texts were recorded along with the information about the narrators.

The methods of the research are as follows:

1) field research methods (finding out and recording the folklore material) – participant observation and informal conversation-interview;

2) methods of folklore analysis: descriptive, comparative, and correlation methods.

### **Results and Discussions**

Oral stories as a genre of folk art are characterized by their orientation towards authenticity, i.e. some reference within a text to the real event that happened (the time, place, and participants, various details, and direct confirmation of authenticity) (Veselova, 2003). However, the objective of urban legends is that of processing the information, i.e. the narrator's interpreting it and the listener's understanding it, rather than the narrator's transmitting it.

As a rule, a narrator models the storyline according to the patterns available in the traditional fund. I.S. Veselova points out that we are dependent when choosing the events of a legend, because we focus on the listener's being interested. We include personal experience in the narrative according to the available facts and using the range of 'common elements': motives, structure, etc. (Veselova, 2003).

In this regard, the observations made by American ethnolinguists V. Labov and J. Waletzky, are interesting. Thus, they describe six common elements within the narrative structure: abstract – a certain advertisement made for a listener; if a listener gets interested in the abstract – a story will take place; description of the environment or location (setting or orientation) serves to orient the listener in respect to place, time, and characters; complication; resolution; coda returns the listener to the present, drawing them back out of the world of the story into the world of the storytelling event.; evaluation involves 'a direct statement, lexical intensifiers, completion or repetition, symbolic action or judgment of a third person' (Labov & Waletzky, 1967).

According to our observations, the plotlines of the urban legends about merchants are based on three elements: attracting the listener's attention (introducing the narrative), the main events (unfolding the narrative), and the final remark, often an evaluative one (completing the narrative, a conclusion). As a rule, urban legends are one-plot stories, describing some bright event or situation.

We have given modern stories about merchants a lot of attention as the history of the town of Yelabuga as well as the town of Mendeleyevsk is connected with the names of people who belong to the famous merchant dynasties: the Stakheyevs, the Girbasovs, the Ushkovs, etc. The existing forms of legends are various – rumors, arguments, tales, memories of relatives, etc. However, only those having traditional plots or at least some traditional motives have been included in the field of our research.

Oral stories about merchants have appeared in these places recently (the first records date back to 1995) due to the cognitive, informative and aesthetic orientations as the attitude to this theme has changed significantly. So, the popular plots of stories recorded in Yelabuga and in the district are as follows:

– how Stakheyev returned the barges with grain from abroad to help the starving peasants in the Volga region;

– how merchants helped to restore houses in Yelabuga after the great fire of 1850;

– how the Eparchial women’s school was constructed (now the Yelabuga branch of the Kazan (Volga) Federal University) by Glafira Fyodorovna Stakheyeva in memory of her husband Vasily Grigoryevich;

– how the water pipeline was constructed by merchants. The town was among the first ten towns in Russia that were electrified at the beginning of the 20th century.

These legends have come from the media, popular science literature. The town’s museums and events provide people with interesting facts and information. Here is an example of the legend about I.V. Shishkin (record: Yelabuga, 2009) told by a town resident V.S. Nedyshilova (born in 1946),

‘My neighbor told me a story. She read in a newspaper that our ancient tower was saved by Shishkin who was the famous artist’s father. He, she says, was the governor of the town at that time. He was really concerned with the antiquities of the town. Well, he himself donated money to restore the tower and persuaded other merchants to do a noble deed... People in the old days were more responsive. They approved of his idea, collected money, and restored the tower. It’s still there. The symbol of the town...’ (Grakhova, 1995-2020).

The stories about merchants are ‘memorates’ – ‘stories in which people recount experiences from their lives’ (Azbelev, 1966) and chronicle information – ‘all sorts of recollections, arranged in the chronological order’ (Azbelev, 1966). Authenticity in folk stories is achieved by giving the characters the names of famous people of the past, giving their social position, occupation, and the place and time of action. However, we do not consider the legends under study to be historical documents (Grakhova & Gapsalamov, 2014). They are more likely narratives that are based on observations and general knowledge of contemporary storytellers where fiction is combined with general historical or particular facts that have attracted their attention and excited them. A storyteller strives for a psychological characterization of the situations, has a personal attitude to the characters, events, and their consequences; sometimes leads listeners to the desired conclusion (Grakhova & Gapsalamov, 2014). The legends show the merchants whose customs and morals are closely connected with the everyday life of ordinary people and mostly reflect people’s understanding of good and evil. The main character reflects the Russian national nature. This is a person of truth and high morals, who respects traditions, Orthodox customs, and family relations.

The storylines of the well-known legends about merchants are developed around their ‘deeds’. The legends reflect people’s idea of a selfless, sympathetic person. Here is one of the most striking examples,

‘My grandmother told me that her grandfather was also in some Yelabuga merchant’s service. I asked who he was, but she didn’t remember his last name. But the story that happened to him, she often told me.

Her grandfather’s name was Pyotr Sergeyeovich. He was a merchant’s worker and served hand and foot. He had a family: a wife and two sons. In the spring the youngest son fell ill so seriously that the doctors could do nothing. Pyotr Sergeyeovich was in despair and could not concentrate on his work. The merchant noticed that and called him to his office and demanded an explanation of him. But Pyotr hesitated and remained silent. Well, he was as silent as the grave! The merchant did not like it, but he felt that something was wrong. He could not believe that such a good worker just forgot about everything and neglected his work. The merchant let him go but ordered to work harder.

In the evening the merchant unexpectedly, without warning, appeared in the house of Pyotr Sergeevich. He saw everything with his own eyes. He scolded the worker for his silence. The merchant learned that the boys did not have any warm clothes. The merchant left, and an hour later a good doctor arrived, examined the sick boy, and prescribed some medicine.

The next morning the merchant came to the shop. Pyotr was already there and handled the goods. The merchant asked the worker about the child's health, and then he measured out some excellent cloth and various fabrics to make clothes for the sons, and gave some money to buy the medicine and shoes ....

My grandmother said that the merchant did not even demand any money of the employee, but he only made sure whether his instructions were properly followed...'  
(N. Balobanova, born in 1949, Record: Yelabuga, 2001) (Grakhova, 1995-2020).

Another example is a legend that describes the narrator's childhood experience of meeting one of the representatives of the Stakheyev dynasty,

'I was very young then. We lived in Maksimkovo. I remember my father came home and told us, the children, that while we were sitting at home, everyone was staying out as Stakheyev was to pass by. Wow, my brothers and sisters got so excited! They took me, the little one, – and ran out of the house. My father just laughed.

We ran to the road that went past the village. All the village children were there. They jumped, chattered, and played games. I didn't know how long we were there, but I remember that someone shouted, 'He is coming!' Everybody rushed to the road. I was the only one who stayed alone by a bush.

A carriage rolled slowly. There was a man there. He was a kind of a magician or something like that: he grinned from ear to ear, his mustache bristled, and he squinted at that. 'You little monkeys! How do you know I'm coming?!', and he laughed....

Later I learned that when on a trip he always took gifts for children: coins, ribbons, sweets. Passing by the village, he always stopped and made gifts to the children. And at that time, we were treated to gingerbread cookies and candies. He gave the girls ribbons... And I was a little girl. Well, I was standing near the bush; I was too shy to approach. Having noticed me, he squinted, 'Who is hiding there?' My brother picked me up and brought me to him, 'This is Anyutka, our little sister!' And Stakheyev gave me a ribbon and a lollipop, well, such a hard sweet on a stick. Well... I don't know any more about him, but I remember this meeting' (A.A. Kuznetsova. Record: Yelabuga, 1995) (Grakhova, 1995-2020).

The narratives show not only the vivid image of the merchants, but also the psychology of the storytellers and their worldview. The storytellers concentrate on the qualities that are the most valuable and important ones when creating the image of a merchant. From the storytellers' points of view, these qualities are simplicity, sociability, and sympathy. The merchants are ingenious, reliable, and strong. The merchant class in the legends under study appears as a powerful class and Russia's stronghold.

One of the attributes of the urban legends about merchants is their parable pattern. As a rule, it is the main part of the legend, which can be treated as 'the situation of action'. The merchant's action is a typological attribute of the story, a key plot-forming element, and the semantic center of modern

texts of this folklore genre. This is a kind of 'archetype' filled with different contents, though it is structurally constant. So, the 'situation of action' has a trinity structure: initiation, the situation itself and completing; consists of a subject (an active doer), predicate (an action), an object (a person, who undergoes the action; the storyteller is partly acted upon too: an urban legend makes them an 'object'), and the circumstances of action (different conditions).

For example, let us consider the situation of action from the above story told by N. Balobanova: the merchant helped Pyotr Sergeyeovich to overcome the difficult situation and to treat his son. To begin with, the merchant noticed the changes in the worker's behavior. This is one of the essential details in the story, the simplest component that, when combined with the others, forms the plot. This motif initiates the situation. As an active doer, there appears the merchant who was concerned about his business. When the upset worker could not 'focus on his work', the merchant decided to find out everything. The passive character is Pyotr Sergeyeovich: he and his family are acted upon by the merchant who does good deeds. The situation comprises several microelements:

- the merchant "unexpectedly, without warning" visits his worker;
- finds out the details of the problem: a serious illness of the younger son;
- sends for a good doctor;
- pays for the medicine, makes the gifts.

To complete the list of microelements of the situation, one should pay attention to the adverbs accompanying the merchant's actions:

- adverbs of time ('in the spring'; 'in the evening'; 'an hour later'; 'the next morning');
- adverbs of manner ('seriously'; 'unexpectedly');
- adverbs of place ('called...to the office'; 'appeared...in the house'; 'came to the shop').

These adverbs help to understand the importance of the moments that accompany the merchant's actions. By the way, some moments are told by the narrator, and some are implied (the listener can guess about them).

The situation is completed shortly, '...the merchant did not even demand any money of the employee, but he only made sure whether his instructions were properly followed...'.

The situation of action in the composition of an urban legend is framed by the episodes from the people's everyday life (participants of the event). The storyline ends with the narrator's opinion of action. Sometimes the listeners have the opportunity to draw some conclusions from the story. In this case, the story looks like a parable that has the moral. Everything that has been said above can be argued by the short passages from the urban legends about K.N. Shcherbakov:

'Once Shcherbakov found out that somebody stole his timber, he and his clerk went to the forest to wait in ambush, then they watched how two men came, felled a big fir tree, sawed up, well, more than six meters of the tree, put the pieces on their shoulders and carried them in the direction of the village of Yakovlev. The merchant followed them to the edge of the forest – they covered two verstas<sup>5</sup>, and they did not even sit down to rest. Shcherbakov admired them for their strength and gratuitously

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<sup>5</sup> Versta – old Russian unit of measuring distance, approximately one kilometer.

gave them timber for all their outbuildings...' (A.N. Mukhina, born 1929. Record: Kosteneyevo village, Yelabuga district, 2005) (Grakhova, 1995-2020).

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'Once Shcherbakov was going past the field. Then suddenly his carriage got into a hole. The merchant looked around and saw a peasant who was working in the field. He called the peasant, gave him an Imperial (a gold coin), and asked him to fill up the hole. The man filled it up... The roads were Shcherbakov's concern, he was not greedy' (P.N Akayev, born in 1966. Record: Kosteneyevo village, Yelabuga district, 2011) (Grakhova, 1995-2020).

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'Here is a story about Shcherbakov. The peasants were interested to know how the merchant had got rich. One day they asked him directly, 'How did you make the money?' And he answered them, 'I found a barrel of gold.' The people were satisfied with that answer – lucky him!..' (P.N Akayev, born in 1966. Record: Kosteneyevo village, Yelabuga district, 2011) (Grakhova, 1995-2020).

Another aspect of studying folk stories about merchants is naming. Firstly, our research has attempted to study and describe general patterns of character naming in the urban legends about merchants. It is important to study the phenomenon of naming as a process determined by the genre features of the legends under study, the appropriate ways and techniques of depicting reality. Secondly, the role of the storyteller (narrator) as a subject of naming is also an issue of great importance.

It is necessary to point out that the narratives under study create the image of merchants, which is different from the traditional satirical images in fairy tales, anecdotes, and other types of literature (ignoramus, tyrant, moneygrubber, etc.), which were created in the 18th century. The fundamental changes in perceiving the merchant's image are taking place due to the present-day orientations of cognitive, informative and aesthetic nature. The attitude to merchants has significantly changed: from a completely negative attitude to a neutral or a positive (even admiring) one.

We treat 'personal naming' as 'the process of giving a character the name that is meaningful' while 'naming' is 'a word or word combination indicating a character and their attributes' (Karpov, 2010). There are several elements of creating a real situation in folk narrations about merchants: a subject (a narrator), and an object (a merchant), in some texts there are some other object characters (a clerk, a boy, a groom, a cook, etc.). A narrator as a subject of folk poetry is part of the contents, the form, and the system of creating a situation.

The central element of creating a real situation is a narrator: his/her vision of the situation, words, name, and attitude (or leading the listener to certain conclusions). A narrator shows the universal or particular life events within some chronotope, i.e. in time and space. When telling a story, the audience comprises a narrator and listeners (a listener). The objective of a narrator is to present a life event, which once has made impression on them, in an emotional and artistic way using figurative expressions rather than to give bare information from the past history of the merchant class.

Personal names in oral stories are given in the tradition of folk culture: a folk hero is a generalized character. All the names exist in certain contexts, which are real semantic fillers of their contents. Thus, most characters have their proper names (Stakheyev, Ushkov, Shcherbakov, Glafira Fyodorovna, etc.); they can be named due to their social position or occupation (merchant, peasant,

groom, shoemaker, etc.). The common and general names include characters' descriptions expressed by adjectives or participles, which are easily nominalized (Karpov, 2010) merchant (person) – a merchant, lazy (person) – a lazybones, kind (person) – a kind soul, crooked (person) – a crook.

Complex names or increasing the names in a small text by successive additions are characteristic of folk stories. Folklore studies treat the phenomenon as 'cumulation'. The stories under study use the cumulation principle in two groups of names.

1. The first group contains proper names, nicknames, attributive names that are function nouns ('my grandfather', 'my great-grandmother', etc.), common nouns ('a man'), some of them may be ironic ('a simpleton', 'a crook') or, on the contrary, approving ('a kind soul').

2. The second group is made up of complicated names ('they are, as a rule, philanthropists, patrons', 'I then thought he was a kind of a magician or something like that', 'he was a kind soul, a man of strength').

In short stories (sometimes passages), the names of the main characters are of greater importance. The repetition of names emphasizes their ideological significance, a narrator's attitude to the characters. For instance,

'I have remembered this story since my childhood. I heard it from Fyodor Sergeyeovich, a friend of my grandfather. He said that his grandparents were in the Stakheyevs' service. Those grandparents had children. The elder, Vasyok, who was about ten or eleven years old, was good at fishing. The men laughed at him, saying that the little one knew a name to conjure with. One couldn't remember a day without fish.

One early morning he tried to catch fish on the bank of the Kama River. He used three fishing rods, so there were plenty of fish. At that time the merchant, Stakheyev, was going along the road to the pier. He saw Vasyok, went down to him. Stakheyev saw that there was a full basket of fish: perches, and tenches, and even pickerels.

– Well, he said, you're nimble, young boy!

He was standing next to Vasyok, admiring how smartly the boy fished. And then he said,

– I see, young boy, though you are small, you can fish like nobody else. I'm a merchant, you know, so I have something to offer to you. Your parents are very good, and you're nice. So, I offer you money for fresh fish that you'll deliver to my house.

Vasyok was frozen with an unexpected offer, but Stakheyev smiled softly and shook the boy's hand to confirm their deal. The boy also shook the merchant's strong hands. Thus, there began their cooperation. When Vasyok grew up, he became the merchant's assistant in trade business' (S.I. Tatarintsev, born in 1965, Record: Yelabuga, 1999) (Grakhova, 1995-2020).

In the above-mentioned folk poetic work, there are two object characters: the merchant, Stakheyev and the boy, Vasyok. However, one more character is named, a certain Fyodor Sergeyeovich. As we can see, all the characters have their proper names. Taking into account the genre attributes of folk tales, it says about the legend's historical authenticity. So, the name of Fyodor Sergeyeovich is mentioned in the story to 'fix' in the listeners' minds that the story is heard from a certain person, 'a friend of my grandfather'.



Stakheyev and Vasyok perform the function of historical persons in the legend. Stakheyev is a merchant, 'a man of business' (both in the literal sense and in the figurative one, i.e. a person able to reflect, analyze, and generalize). Vasyok is a peasant boy, talented and hardworking. In the passage under consideration, they both are talented by nature and keen on working. Having noticed the boy's ability, the merchant supported him psychologically. After having praised the boy ('... *you're nimble...*'; '*... you can fish like nobody's business*'), Stakheyev passed over to his proposal, '*I'm a merchant, you know, so I have something to offer to you. Your parents are very good, and you're nice. So I offer you money for fresh fish that you'll deliver to my house*'.

The final part of the story tells us about the future lives of the characters, '*When Vasyok grew up, he became the merchant's assistant in trade business*'.

The story has a number of approaches to naming the characters:

\* Self-characterization: '*I am a merchant*' (Stakheyev).

\* Situational, that is when the names of the characters 'depend on their positions in a particular situation' (Karpov, 2010) For example, '*... was good at fishing*', '*... knew the name to conjure with*' (Vasyok).

\* Evaluating, for example, '*... smiles softly and shook the boy's hand to confirm their deal*', '*the merchant's strong hands*' (Stakheyev).

In the oral folk stories told in the form of fiction tales, the evaluation approach is used when naming the merchants. The narrator uses evaluation arguments that express both their personal attitude to the merchants and people's views on the behavior of an individual in various situations, '*I can say only good words about merchants, because they were, as a rule, philanthropists. They possessed dignity. My mother was familiar with the people who were in Yelabuga merchants' service. And my great-grandfather worked at Stakheyev's pier. The Stakheyevs did a lot for our town. In a word, they were very good people. The present-day 'merchants' leave much to be desired*' (V.G. Lakusheva, born in 1952, Record: Yelabuga, 2011) (Grakhova, 1995-2020).

## **Conclusion**

We can distinguish a number of typical features in the oral story as a genre of folk prose:

1) Oral performing, available perceiving, dynamic plot, and simple language. Oral stories have no obligatory form of performing; they do not need to be specially memorized in contrast to, for example, songs or prayers. The memoir-illustrative style of speech involves transmitting the story as a personal or other person's experience.

2) As a rule, oral stories are often based on historical facts or real events. Meanwhile, by tradition, they are partly fictional. All these attributes along with developing bearers' artistic awareness of the genre, recognizing its aesthetic function make oral folk stories popular.

3) When representing characters in oral stories about merchants, naming is of great importance. Mostly, the names of characters show how a narrator treats them. Naming depends on the genre of oral narratives, the narrator's desire to describe a social status, the type of consciousness, and world perception of the character. In addition, naming in folk tales is a way to show the narrator's attitude to the character, to the situation described in a story. The names of the characters, which include a personal name, their social status, occupation, and character, involve evaluating and reflect the emotional unity of a narrator and the folks.

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