



Chingiz Aitmatov's Ballad to Life

by
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If we consider Aitmatov's¹ "Jamila" as a melody celebrating Soviet life,² then his "Piebald Dog Running Along the Shore" is a ballad celebrating the unity and eternal flow of life itself. Based on two myths, Loover Duck and Fish Woman,³ "Piebald Dog" is the story of Kirisk, an eleven-year old Nivkhi boy going to sea for the first time to learn to hunt.⁴ The trip is being made exclusively for his benefit as an introduction to the sea. Those accompanying him are grandpa Organn, Kirisk's father Emrayin, and Mylgun, Emrayin's cousin. They belong to the tribe of Fish Woman, a tribe that lives along Piebald Mountain in the Sakhalin region. They hunt seals on three islands: Little Dug, Middle Dug, and Big Dug.

The Nivkhi practice animism. They believe that a supernatural power worthy of worship animates the material universe. Human beings, they believe, do not die, they join the elements. They worship the sky, the wind, stars, even inanimate things. Their boat was hewn out of a poplar trunk by Organn over three summers. At the time, Organn conversed with the boat mentally, called it brother kayak, and thanked it for its efforts. Now, initiating Kirisk to the life of the hunter and breadwinner, he entrusts Kirisk to the boat. As the elder, it is his duty to teach the boy to become independent, to be aware of the unceasing conflict between water and land, and to develop endurance and the will to survive.⁵

Unlike Kirisk, whose only concern was the hunt, Organn's thoughts were with the Fish Woman. Often, he closed his eyes, smoked his pipe, and ruminated. In his mind, he swam with Fish Woman, the matriarch of the Fish Woman tribe.⁶ Emrayin and Mylgun rowed. Emrayin, the voice of reason, was young, broad-shouldered, and bearded. Mylgun, quick-tempered and abusive, was young and stocky. They intended to bring back three seals.⁷

Kirisk knew that the tribe had kept his going to sea a secret from *Kinri*, evil spirits that hate to see cooperation between fathers and sons. When leaving, his mother had said, "Off you go to the 'forest'." He also knew that his return would be celebrated. There would be singing and dancing followed by the shaman assigning him his own star. At the present, however, the sea

¹ For Aitmatov's life see, Bashiri, "Chingiz Aitmatov: Life and Works," *EurasiaCritic* monthly magazine on Eurasian Politics, and online at www.eurasiacritic.co.uk, July, 2008, pp. 74-79.

² For an analysis of "Jamila," see Bashiri, "The Art of Chingiz Aitmatov's Stories," https://www.academia.edu/8113745/The_Art_of_Chingiz_Aitmatovs_Stories

³ For both myths, see Nina Kolesnikoff, *Myth in the Works of Chingiz Aitmatov*, University Press of America, 1999, pp. 55-58.

⁴ For information on the Nivkhi (same as Nivkh), see Wixman, pp. 145-146.

⁵ Cf., Kolesnikoff, *Myth*, p. 61.

⁶ For the role of Fish Woman in relation to fertility, see Kolesnikoff, *Myth*, p. 57.

⁷ For the significance of number "three," see Kolesnikoff, *Myth*, pp. 61-62.

filled him with apprehension and anxiety. Realizing that, Organn kept him busy with questions. As he was observing the sea and taking it all in, Kirisk shouted, "I see Little Dug ahead!" The grown ups, knowing the location of Little Dug, dismissed his words as youthful imagination.

Kirisk's most awaited moment arrived when they landed on Little Dug and he learned how to spot seals. Regarding the hunt itself, Emrayin had taught him where to aim and how to fire the gun. Steps that, at the time, had seemed simple. At the moment of shooting, however, he felt overwhelmed and fell short. He failed his first test and became embarrassed. Mylgun, on the other hand, killed a seal. After carrying out the ritual of eating raw liver and sharing pieces with Little Dug, they headed for the Middle Dug. They hoped to hunt two more seals there.

To their dismay, the "Little Dug" that Kirisk had spotted earlier, turned out to be a wall of mist that in the form of two broad, converging pincers was advancing in their direction.⁸ A monstrous storm, it came at them in full force, hit the boat tossing it in every direction, as if trying to plunge it to the depth of the sea.

In the darkness, as the storm roared, Organn asked Kirisk, "Is the cask of water near you?" Hearing that it was, he instructed, "Hold on to it as tight as you can. Our lives depend on it!" Then, as the boat took on water, Organn and Kirisk bailed the water out. Everything, including the catch, was tossed overboard and the Winchester guns were washed overboard. Only two oars and the cask of water remained.

Following the storm, a thick, dark fog crept in and stayed. Organn feared the fog might linger as long as ten days. To the grown ups it spelled rationing water and self-sacrifice. Organn rationed the water: small portions twice a day. Organn himself did not drink. The hope was that by conserving water and rowing hard, it would be possible to break through the fog. The strategy failed. The fog lingered, water became scarce, and rowing proved futile. Yet, in spite of thirst, Emrayin and Mylgun rowed for hours on end.

Out of desperation, they prayed to the sky to show its stars. It did not. They prayed to the Shaman of Winds, but not even a breeze was sent. After two days struggling with thirst and fog, Emrayin decided to stop rowing. His decision upset Mylgun who cursed the Shaman of Winds in most offensive terms⁹ and threatened to capsize the boat. Emrayin humored him by moving the boat. Mylgun was not satisfied. He wanted to row faster. They rowed as if they were in a competition. That made them even more thirsty, and more conscious of their dire situation. Little water was left.

Organn said, "The *Agukuk* flies straight from land to land.¹⁰ It can save us." Mylgun, in a derogatory tone, asked, "What if the *Agukuk* does not fly?" Organn replied calmly, "Then we won't find our way." Mylgun continued bad mouthing the Shaman of Winds, threatening her with the oar. Eventually, feeling miserable, he sat down sobbing.

As the elder, Organn discussed his decision to leave the boat with Emrayin. Emrayin did not agree. "It is for Kirisk's sake," Organn argued. Emrayin was finally convinced. After running his massive hand through Kirisk's hair, Organn left the boat. Kirisk woke up to find grandpa was gone. Thirst and fog made Mylgun sick. Then burning with thirst, he went insane and began drinking sea water. Eventually, he went overboard.

⁸ Aitmatov, "Piebald Dog Running Along the Shore," *Piebald Dog Running Along the Shore and Other Stories*, Raduga Publishers, 1989, p. 45.

⁹ For the degree of vulgarity of Mylgun's words see "Piebald Dog," pages 60-61. For Nivkhi reaction to the same see Kolesnikoff, p. 59.

¹⁰ *Agukuk* is the Arctic owl.

Only the father and son remained. For a while they rowed together in the dark and talked. Emrayin tried to talk to Kirisk about his decision to leave him alone, but could not. Instead, he advised him, “No matter what happens, stay in the boat!” Kirisk drank the last of the water and went to sleep. Emrayin covered him with his fur jacket and left the boat.

When Kirisk awoke, his father, too, was gone. He was alone in a boat, in the fog, in the middle of the sea, and he was thirsty. Intermittently, between crying and sleeping, he kept repeating, “Little blue mouse, give me water.” Words that his mother had taught him to repeat to ward off thirst.

According to Aitmatov, the boat symbolizes the world.¹¹ By the same token, Kirisk symbolizes the Nivkhi culture entrusted to the boat. Having seen how selflessly Organn, Mylgun, and Emrayin had sacrificed their lives for him, Kirisk, totally exhausted and near death, felt at one with them. Their zest for life, their resilience, and will to live kept him hoping. While conversing with the spirit of grandpa Organn, as wind, the spirit of Aka Mylgun, as wave, and the spirit of Emrayin as guiding star, he fell asleep. Organn’s ideal of perpetuating the tribe, Mylgun’s hope of sustaining it, and Emrayin’s desire to direct its future kept recurring to him as a dream.

Before long, the sound of the waves against the boat, and movement of the boat, woke him. The sky had opened up, the wind and waves were moving the boat forward. He could see the *Agukuk*, flying over his head, leading the way. As he peered into the distance with teary eyes, he saw Piebald Dog Mountain in the distance. His ordeal was over. As he had expected, his tribe celebrated his return and the shaman, after prayers and blessing, assigned him his own star.

¹¹ Aitmatov, Chingiz. “Kirpichnoe mirozdanie ili energii mifa,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 29 March, 1978, p. 4.