

The Gift, the Taiga, the Shaman's Ritual. A Tribute to the Ethnography of the Tsaatans

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The Tsaatans (the Dukha) are a group of Tyvan reindeer breeders who stayed behind with their herds after the closing down of a collective, kolkhoz-like enterprise in Northern Mongolia. For decades, they functioned within the framework of a people's state and the economy of the kolkhoz. In the 1990s, when all the state companies folded up, this group of Turkish-language reindeer farmers become an attraction 'on-duty' in the emerging democratic Mongolia as well as almost the main target for various charities and NGOs. In this paper, the Tsaatans' experience of social and spiritual reality is the very subject of the authors' consideration. Such categories as gift, social exchange, ecology and local knowledge are used in order to describe the circulation of meanings within their world. The description of the culture, as it turns out, derives to large extent from pastoral knowledge and shamanist praxis/knowledge.

The Tsaatans, (the Dukha), are a group of Tyvan reindeer-breeders who stayed behind with their herds after the closing down of 'negdel', a cooperative farm in the district, (*somon*), Caagan Nuur in Northern Mongolia.¹ These people first came to Mongolia in the 1940s, when they fled the conscription into the Red Army and famine, moving from Russian Tyva, their homeland, across one of the ranges of the Sayan Mountains. For decades, they functioned within the framework of 'the people's state and kolkhoz' economy. In the 1990s, when all the state companies folded, their life style again became more traditional. At the same time, they became an easy 'victim' of state and international ethno-tourist agencies as well as a target for all sorts of charitable organisations. When the barriers of the socialist state had been removed, this group of Turkish-language

¹ The article is based on the fieldwork I did among the Tsaatans in the years 1996 and 2003. That was a part of a wider project conducted by researchers from the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at Warsaw University.

reindeer farmers become an attraction 'on-duty' in the emerging democratic Mongolia. Internet portals are full of information about trips to the Tsaatans, the help provided for them, their life and the Taiga where they live. One especially fascinating topic is their magical rituals and shamanism. They experienced quite a renaissance of their beliefs after the political transformation (Mróz & Wasilewski 2003). Not long ago, any such practices, or just possessing any objects connected with them, risked repression.

The Tsaatans are a group made up of over thirty families (the *urcs*, i.e. tents in which a family lives). They live in the mountains of the Red Taiga. Herds of the reindeer, that they look after, are animals acquired by them for a token price during the privatisation in 1995 (at the moment, there are less than 600 of the animals left). Other occupations of the Tsaatans are hunting, tanning, gathering. During the *negdel* times, they also worked as fishermen and dealt with fish processing (Mongolians did not use to eat fish – the state *rybkombinat*, a fish plant was one of the typical absurdities of the socialist economy).

The breeders' world has been subjected to a serious change for the last few years. For the last dozen or so years, the reindeer, raised by the Tsaatans, have been suffering a progressing deterioration – the animals are plagued by infectious disease and their number has been declining year after year. This is, to a large degree, the result of neglect and poor farming standards, but also of the result of poor access to veterinary care and lack of subsidies, which has taken place after the collapse of the *negdel*. The change is, at the same time, an external process – local institutions are changing, land and property law and new initiatives of privatization still occur. However, a particular pattern of living is present there as well as a particular relationship with the Taiga, animals, spirits of place and spirits of ancestors. The world, in its local mode, seems to still rest on the rules of the shamans' beliefs and cosmologies.

On the one hand, those breeders are still a little bit frightened about their beliefs, they still remember the oppressions and besides they are ashamed of what they believe and practice. (The shamanic beliefs were used by the former authorities as an argument to highlight the "primitive nature" of the breeders.) On the other hand, the breeders seem to not want to say much about that theme or even they know too little (or they are not capable of saying much). Then the theme of the pastoral, based on the shamans' worldview medical knowledge, and a field I would call ecology, may serve as ground for further interpretations and re-constructions. This is a picture, a transcript of a rapidly changing, one could say declining,

cultural environment. Then, the knowledge I gain must have been built on pieces and fragments of traditional medicine, economic attitudes, beliefs, rituals of everyday life, shepherds' and hunters' codes, customary law and its relation to the official.

Change and continuity: environment

It should be assumed that whoever uses shamanism for profit punishment will then reach him and their *urc* will be worse-off because of it/will get poorer. If someone cuts off the antlers of a reindeer with blood still circulating in the beast, the blood will make joints swell painfully. If somebody picks one of the most powerful healing herbs *wam sumbru* (*Sussurea*) in sunlight, they will bring about rain- and hailstorms. Crucial is the obviousness and regularity of the consequences. James G. Frazer presented such forms of magic action as a series of action and reaction, as a sort of magic automatism (1967). Putting aside the controversy of these problems, I would just like to say that 'causes' and 'results' are used here out of necessity coming out of the European formula "if A – then B" (Clifford Geertz has assumed that – after Franz von Benda-Beckmann – at the starting point of his essay on fact and law in comparative perspective and on local knowledge (1983) they continue/evolve as kinds of asymmetric necessities). There is in it some local concept of change and continuity, on which I will try to expand.

The image of the change or passage of time is closely connected with the Taiga, the world inhabited by the herdsmen.² It is a world filled with the presence of beings for which it is hard to find an expression in the language I use. Spirits, the *ongons*, are, at the same time, a type of the powers of a family and a person, guardian spirits, shamanic idols; but also colourful ribbons sewn into a shaman's costume or just hanging in a consecrated place inside a tent (*urc*). Not showing respect to them, by revealing them before a stranger or directing one's feet to them when in bed, may result in illness. In a similar way, all eczema and rashes can be caused by polluting a river by taking a bath in it, or throwing waste in it or burning rubbish in the tent's hearth. A common denominator would be the polluting of ongon or a consecrated place, because all of the above actions

² The Tsaatans living in the Taiga are the reindeer breeders and there are also those who live on the steppe, near the *somon* center, and breed other, typical "Mongolian" animals as cows, yaks, sheep and goats. Both groups breed horses.

are a kind of 'infringement of the power' – how it would be likely called in the language of phenomenology of religion. And the rule, when broken, undoubtedly takes place: the reaction of the Tsaatans happens at the level of an automatic gesture, it can be a movement of the hand that stops me from moving to the left or a sudden, quick covering of the ribbons after we enter the tent; 'a gesture does not require of me to think', wrote Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his behaviour analyses (1999). The rules of everyday behaviour of the Tsaatans do not leave any doubt, which means that when they are applied the riverbed *is* the resting place for ancestors and spirits/souls, it is a river of time, so to speak: the winding streams remind them of snakes or the ribbons of the *ongons*. The streams, the river, I was told, get together and reach a great sea-source and that's why any dirt, any waste can not contaminate the floating water.

Inhabitation of the Tsaatans in the Taiga can be presented as a set of daily repetitive activities – the Tsaatans collect herbs, cut trees, search for pastures which get worn out, then kill their animals and hunt. Their connection with the surroundings is most of all a kind of dynamic and renewable structure. The herbs of the Taiga such as *wam sumbru*, *gawsraa*, *czionyn uws* and several others species appear in particular places year by year. The Tsaatans claim that when young people, who do not respect the proper rituals of collecting plants, pick them it can happen that the herbs disappear. However, the cause – as they explain – is purely mechanical: the youngsters forget to leave a part of roots in the soil and in such a way the colony degrades. Definitely, it is not connected with any fatal or non-comprehensible phenomenon. *There are very rainy years and other not so rainy, it changes... sometimes there are not many herbs, sometimes there's a lot, but they do not disappear and their power does not weaken... it's impossible* – a 34 years old Otgonbajar assumes (she is one of the best experts on the healing herbs which grow in the Taiga). The situation of weather changes looks similar. Clouds, storms, winter frost proceed differently in particular years, but, in general, as phenomena they do not cause anxiety or lack of comprehension. The statements concerning weather change depend on a concrete situation or a speaker. In addition, it seems that the Tsaatans do not pay special attention to it.

On the one hand, the changes of the world surrounding them like the Taiga or climate seem not to have the first rank significance, on the other – a rainy summer or too cold a winter can decide the shepherds' success, therefore the phenomena are thoroughly observed and discussed. Water here has the same characteristics: healing springs, rivers and streams flow constantly and never change. The water of the stream, river or spring can

never be polluted by people. *One cannot pollute the water, which doesn't freeze in winter* – a 36 years old shepherd says. Polluting the place by throwing rubbish into the river or leaving it by its shore causes the change of water characteristics, but it is treated as a kind of active rule – the anger of the water deity *lus*, the pollution of the absolute pureness of the flowing water. Rivers – as the Cataans state – gather in Yenisei to flow into the sea and no rubbish should reach there. The streams changing their run in the opposite direction also do not cause anxiety as a phenomenon, especially because Menge Bulag River, in one section, reverses its run depending on the level of waters. A non-comprehensible change, the one that would prove for the arrival of a new, different time, seems to not happen here. It's worth noting at this point that in numerous researches on the groups of the Mongolian nomads they were defined as “the culture of continuity”. In pastoral Mongolia, the majority of maintained ritual activities³ are the ones that aim at keeping the continuity or even constancy – of time, territory, vegetation and family (Szynekiewicz 1981).

Ritual and bargain: ecology

Then, the sense of continuity and change can be seen through the structure of ritual or, to put it in another words, through the way the Tsaatans deal with the ongons, their deities. It is usually connected with such notions as “illness”, “lack” and “failure”. The ongons, which are worshipped with drops of milk, thuya's smoke (*arc*) and a prayer, help to fight weakness. At the same time, through a shaman's lips, they demand an offering. The Tsaatan shaman decides the form of a gift, but this giving is very often a kind of bribing or even an out-witting. A shaman assigns a reindeer for an offering, he regales the spirit with it and buys successive concessions like access to the knowledge about an ill person. Ongon is also encouraged to settle within the ill child, the offered reindeer (*seter*) becomes its mount – and in future it will participate in rituals and healing fortune-telling. It is a very concrete knowledge. The ability to exchange goods or information makes the shaman's craft. It is impossible to acquire this knowledge. I would insist that we deal here with a specific game. Shaman Bajra Moko

³ The spatial symbolic representations of Mongolian yurta (Wasilewski 1985) and Caatanian tent (*urc*) (Minkowski 1999) are maintained in an especially intensive way. The rules of construction, the rules of setting directions and the rules of circuitous movement are constant, renewable structures – they are a transcript of a particular cosmology.

explains that he can induce, by entreaty, several months of life for a terminally ill person if he prepares, for the ongon, a tripartite pole plaited with black and red ribbon. The pole will stand for the life of this person and *for the ongon* – as Bajra says – *this person will be already dead*. The motive for out-witting and exchanging goods, especially the motive of exchange, is particularly clear in the synchronic analyses of the shamanic ritual. The Russian shamanologist Yelena Novik showed in her book, on the structure of shamanic rituals, that the dialogue between shaman and deity is a kind of game and bargain (Novik 1984). A shaman exchanges with the spirits three kinds of goods: info-knowledge, the causative power and finally material goods – food, animals, etc. The game, developing on most sophisticated levels, is a constant movement. Novik presents it as a kind of “wrestling”, a “fight”. A shaman visits the settlements of ongons – spirits, establishes a dialogue with them and asks for information – recipes; he offers and he cheats. Novik refers here to the invariant motives of fairy-tales analyzed by Vladimir Propp, i.e. she finds in the shamanic ritual analogical motives and those are the pairs of activities such as “interview-payment”, “request-agreement”, “indigence-liquidation”. She presents these motives as a kind of dynamic arrangement of particular goods within a series of differences, which originate in “harm”, “damage”, but also “gift” and “offering”. The first movement is causing the difference, unsettling balance, however these are not the best words for it as this movement is constant – Novik writes about the “zero” movements, which are often opposite to the regular functions of subjects (bad spirits *abaasy* heal, and protective spirits bring indigence, etc.). This is a particular kind of dynamic (a)symmetry. In the Russian shamanologist interpretation, this is a record of incorrect movements in the sphere of language or myth as well as the social sphere. What is an interesting fact is that the analyses of Jacques Derrida (1992), concerning exchange and gift in the sphere of language (this subject needs further attention, of course), aim at the similar direction. Those are the aspects of culture observed through the acts of communication.

To emphasize the social dimension of beliefs and behaviours, I will recall now the events of powerful obviousness, all of them connected with breaking the rules (autonomy) of the ongons, the evil deities/spirits (*lus/savdak*) and hosts of a place (*edzene*). The results of such activities are immediate. A rash, according to the breeders, covered our hands just after washing them in the stream. *Savdak* of the meadow causes the reindeers to have their horns grow crooked and twisted. One of our interlocutors, having told us about his grandfather and his uniquely strong ongon, was

instantaneously thrown off by a horse (at first he explained it with the fact that the saddle moved to the front, but then it turned out that the reason for the accident was that he told the strangers what he shouldn't have said and moreover his horse used to sometimes transport the drum and the shaman's suit of his grandfather). The movement of consequences, or its illusion, has been frequently described by the researchers of magic. Those "consequences", in the case of the Tsaatans' culture, refer to the process of collecting the most powerful healing herbs such as *wam sumbru*, *nojen orchotoj* and *altan gagnur* roots. They should be collected just before the dawn, necessarily "without sun" (if an herb plant remains in the sphere of sunshine one should build a small tent over it to pick it and some people even say – which can be an arbitrary development of this ban – that after having consumed *wam sumbru* one shouldn't defecate in sunshine). Picking the herbs is sometimes accompanied by prayers and offerings of milk and tea. Something, for example a piece of cheese, should be left in the place. Others claim that another plant should be planted there. There are consequences of collecting herbs in the sunshine – and this is a common rule for the Tsaatans – such as rapid deterioration of the weather, storms and hailstorms. When a dynamic order is disrupted, as it can be in the case of collecting herbs, which demands a reciprocation in offering or at least a "cheating" that would stand for it, the consequences are inevitable. The pattern of exchange is an element of broader, dynamic structure and only superficially it can remind of the magical automatism stipulated by Frazer (1967). To a certain extent, the notion of ecology (Rakowski 2004) can serve as a proper guide here. Maintaining a strong relation with the common meaning of this word it will first of all stand for inhabitation. Inhabitation means here also domestication and it is a daily reference to the surroundings, as well as its cultivation. Also the concept of perspectivism/animism/totemism, used by Morten Pedersen (2001), may serve as a transcript of the sphere and its social dimension: Pedersen wrote about the ontologies of the North Asian indigenous people revealed by the exchange – of knowledge, power, goods etc. between human and non-human (animals, environmental objects) entities.⁴

⁴ The category of animism coined by P. Descola can be used here: Pedersen, in his article, writes about the Tsaatan hunters' interchangeability with a non-human – with a bear while hunting which proves for the animic ontology (Pedersen 2001: 415). It does not mean that Tsaatans' ontology cannot comprise both patterns of social/environmental relations, i.e. animism as well as totemism.

Hunting as an exchange: communication

Hunting, concerning its craft, rules and rituals, makes an outstanding field for this ethnological-ecological observation. All the spheres of life, laws and rules of behaviour, beliefs, the elements of spirituality and human relations are manifested here. It can be seen as a model image of social exchange as understood by Mauss (1954). Hunting turns out to be a kind of exchange. Obviously, it is regarded as a test of skills, but also it shows luck or its lack in reference to a particular person or family. Hunting has also a great economic significance as the meat of wild animals allows the keeping of reindeer and the skin, as well as other artifacts, like a medicament of bile bladder, can be sold with high benefits. Hunting is, moreover, a kind of secret activity in at least two meanings: it is kept as a secret for the Taiga powers and animals, which will be discussed later, and it is kept as a secret from the authorities, the village people and us, strangers. The latter comes from the fact of the administrative prohibition of hunting for several species, which provokes a specific game with the *somon* authorities. Hunting is one of the Tsaatans' illegalities.

Killing an animal of the Taiga is connected with receiving goods such as meat, skin and bile. Usually it is accompanied by an act similar to exchange: a hunter shares the goods with the others. The act of distribution is especially stressed. The most important organs, bile and the best meat are given to the "most remote" person that is the least related one, a stranger, *if you hunt with us, you would receive bile*, or to the oldest one. Such a person, due to his/her distance from others, is a symbolic representative of the world of the dead – the ongons-spirits, the hosts-spirits. What's more, on return the meat is precisely divided among all the tents. It is especially important in the case of hunting for a bear. Bear is an anthropomorphized deity for the Tsaatans' hunters – and, of course, such a phenomenon within cultures of hunters has been broadly discussed. Each Dukha hunter has another name for a bear, among others those are the words like "sage" or "honorable" – the name is always indirect (which is a typical behaviour in reference to the deity whose name shouldn't be uttered). After killing a bear, one cannot damage its head. A Tsaatan touches a head of the killed animal with his hand and then gives it to the oldest person or a stranger. The head is boiled and each person from the village is treated to the soup made of it. No one can refuse to try it. Let me add that while hunting for other animals like elk the rules are a bit "weaker". The most valuable part, that is *uc* (haunch), is given to the oldest and the least related kinsman. The communication with the Taiga, or rather the contact with its deities, develops according to the rules of

passing goods. Goods are distributed towards the alive ones, that is they are given away in the group of *urcs* encamped together and they are distributed towards the dead when they are given to a stranger met by accident, the oldest one or the least related kinsman. A gift demands a counter-gift, an offering for the Taiga. It is often a piece of meat or milk, dedicated to the hosts, before leaving a place of encampment. This contact through exchange reminds us of the shamans' communication with the spirits, described by Yelena Novik. It is a kind of offering, out-witting and "wrestling" with the taiga as the hunter's trophy is never guaranteed and any attempt to gain it can end with a failure. The "out-witting" often appears as an element of hunting. Arkadij Anisimov, in his famous work, describes a pantomime of Tungus hunters who pretend to be ravens (which eat the carcass) so that a bear's soul believes that it was not killed by men, that the bear had already been dead (1971). The Sámi convince a bear that it died by its own fault, because it played with a gun or they simply accuse a gun directly. The Tsaatans, similar to the Sámi, after killing an animal, utter the following formula: *I didn't want to kill you, it was an accident, it is a bad gun's fault and it killed you*. This is an out-witting which does not clear the fault away. This is a game of giving and receiving, of seducing and gaining. This is a kind of shaman's dialogue described by Yelena Novik: during the healing séances a shaman pretends that he has extremely valuable goods and he tries to "out-wit" the spirit of illness. Here also appears the motive of a sacrificial pole homologous to a trident used by the shaman Moko from Caagan Nuur to appease (or rather out-wit) the ongons. *Setting out for hunting one should prepare – 34-years old Badral explains – a bough with seven twigs. Pieces of fat and meat should be stuck on their sharpened ends. Such a bough should be set close to the settlements so that birds and little animals from the neighborhood could eat it*. Obviously, in shamanic rituals birds are carriers/images of spirits. A shaman often takes the shape of a bird and birds' figures escort him on his way towards higher worlds. The exchange accompanying hunting is then the exchange with souls and the dead. Therefore, it does not seem strange that the eyes of killed bear are put by the cauldron and called "stars" so that its soul can see that the meat is eaten with respect meaning – shared with everybody. The obligation of sharing meat is strictly obeyed in the case of any big animal as the condition of the goods' exchange, a primary act of distribution. The transfer of goods and intentions occurs also through leaving bones. After killing an animal, a hunter takes its skin and meat – what is left, the bones, go back to the Taiga. Bones are a typical example of a counter-gift for spirits/powers of the Taiga. It is worth adding here that

the bones are, in the shamans' vision of the world, a settlement of one of the three souls which inhabit the animal body as well as the human body (Purev 2003). Bones reflect the "most inner" souls, they are the reincarnating life of beings. This is a very general rule for the hunting cultures (Wasilewski 1985; Eliade 1989). It is not strange then that the Tsaatans, while talking about the past herds of shapely reindeer, which they had, use the word *bony*, they say *bony splendid deer* or *those reindeer had strong bones and also thanks to good fur they were strong*. Bones serve as a carrier of good luck and wealth – it is enough to mention the wishes for children in Mongolia: "may you never be short of marrow" (from the materials of J. S. Wasilewski). In this way, circulation and exchange of goods, among people, spirits of the dead, animals and the Taiga, takes place. There are elements of offering, game and out-witting and everything happens within a certain fundamental structure: gifts – benefits – wealth of the Taiga and man gaining them and giving them (the bones for instance) back.

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The mask of a native, whom we ask countless questions of, is a complete mask. As has been shown by the contemporary ethnology, it is impossible to see through it or to penetrate it, because our language fails where the other's truth begins. During a research, one can surely expect one thing: misunderstandings. However, misunderstandings prove the primary acts of communication – taking into account the exchange. On the Mongolian-Tyvan border, the exchange seems to be the fundamental act: each meeting in a tent (*urc*) begins and ends with gifts hardly conceived by a researcher. Communication – the exchange, the activity of first-rank importance for the Tsaatans, can be defined in this perspective as the turnover of meanings, the circulation of culture. During our research, the gift and exchange became the main interpretative categories – even if this was the result of our linguistic incompetence or poor condition of the breeders' knowledge. Distribution, exchange, gift and counter-gift have made a space, almost the Mauss' "social fact" which seemed to comprise "everything": words, gestures, emotions, skills, objects, the spirits of the Taiga, spirits of the ancestors.

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