

The proper funeral: death, landscape and power among the Duha Tuvinians of northern Mongolia

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The traditional funeral practice of the Duha reindeer nomads of northern Mongolia consists in placing corpses on the open ground in the wild forest (*xer*) to be eaten by wild animals. Under socialism, the Mongolian government issued a ban on open-air (*il tavah*) funerals and imposed compulsory burial of the dead in cemeteries (Delaplace 2006). This ban was a part of the Mongolian People's Republic's 'dead-body politics' (Verdery 1999) aimed at nationalising local subjects through the centralisation of burials. Moreover, it was a branch of its 'biopolitics' (Foucault 1982) as the state sought to govern the health of the population through their corpses. However, these policies were never fully acknowledged by the Duha, who regard burial beneath the ground as an inherently dirty, dangerous and thus improper activity, whereas open-air funerals are seen as the proper and clean way of treating the deceased. Burial may capture the souls (*sünc*) of the deceased underground and transform them into malevolent devils (*chötgör¹*) thus polluting the land and its inhabitants. In their effort to avoid such pollution the Duha often, and during the last years increasingly so, conduct open-air funerals; especially in the case of deceased shamans and 'ordinary' people suffering a 'non-ordinary' death as a result of violence, drinking or magic. This chapter thus aims to explore the Duha concepts of proper and improper burial, including how their 'return' to open-air funerals may be conceived as an effort to (re)gain control over local bodies, lives and lands.

The Duha are a Tuvian minority group of reindeer herders and hunters, amounting to only around 400 people, living in the forested and mountainous regions of northern Mongolia bordering Russia. They practise a kind of local shamanism, where they regard certain sacred amulets (*eren*) in the household and natural entities in the landscape as animated by the life and deeds of past kin. Such artefacts and entities continually mould the lives of the living kin. An amulet may for example bear the imprints of past and present kin members' amoral deeds, such as murder, theft or magic, which may spread misfortune among the living kin. The sacred artefacts of the Duha are thus, as Caroline Humphrey (2002) has proposed regarding the possessions of the Mongolians, 'expressive and transformative of persons-in-society' (2002: 83), since the relationship with possessions is 'constituted as a matter of character or personality, as an ethical rather than a legal relation' (2002: 65). The burial sites of the Duha materialise the ethics of the deceased subject, his kin and the state. For example, if the deceased died because of the transgression of traditional rules (*yos*) for proper conduct, such as heavy drinking or fighting, or if the bereaved treated the corpse improperly,² the burial place may turn into one that is devilish (*chötgörtei*) and polluted (*bohirdoh*), materialising the past amoral deed. Drawing on Robert Hertz (1960), death among the Duha may be seen not as 'a mere destruction but a transition' (1960: 48), where 'death is consummated only when decomposition had ended: only then does the deceased cease to belong to this world' (1960: 47). Among the Duha the advent of death marks the potentially pollutive and dangerous separation of the soul from the body, where the proper departure of the soul depends on the 'fast' and 'clean' decomposition of the corpse. The open-air funeral is thus regarded as the morally proper and clean way of treating the deceased.

Following the collapse of socialism in Mongolia the Duha have increasingly returned to their traditional open-air funerals. The question is, how can we interpret this 'return'? It may be seen as a part of the so-called revival of shamanism in the region, which has been interpreted as a 'way of making misfortunes meaningful' (Buyandelgeriyin 2007: 142), or a 'socio-psychological' way of dealing with 'identity crisis' by 'reconstructing ethnic identity' through shamanism (Shimamura 2004: 197–8). Following this lead the increase of open-air funerals could be seen as a local version of the 'dead-body politics' discussed by Verdery (1999), making the Duha corpses 'political symbols' engaged in the reordering of their 'entire meaningful world' (1999: 35). The Duha corpses seem to work partly as 'political

symbols' as neighbouring people recognise the Duha funeral places as exclusively Duha territory. However, the return to open-air funerals cannot be seen as a 'reordering of meaningful worlds' as such, since they serve to control rather than understand the potentially dangerous and unstable powers of corpses. Drawing on Pedersen (2011), the Duha turn toward shamanism may be viewed not so much as a projection of the political into the religious sphere, but rather as 'an ontology of transition' actualising the labile and uncertain character of post-socialist northern Mongolian society (2011: 35). As a result of the severe changes the former socialist state and the contemporary Mongolian state enforced and continue to enforce upon the Duha traditional way of life, many Duha feel they have lost control over their own bodies, lives and lands, a control they seek to regain through their increased use of shamanic rituals and open-air funerals.

A socialist, moral and hygienic burial

Before the revolution in 1921 the open-air funeral seems to have been practised widely³ by the Duha and Tuvan, as well as the Mongolians, which has been documented by early travellers in the region and ethnographers (Haslund-Christensen 1945; Kenin-Lopsan 1978; Pozdneyev 1971: 95). After the revolution the Mongolians started to replace their traditional open-air funeral with European burials in cemeteries. The revolutionary hero Sühbator was one of the first Mongolians to be buried in the Altan Ölgii cemetery in Ulaanbataar, which later became a resting place for numerous other socialist heroes and representatives of the Communist Party (Michel 2002: 1). In 1955 the Mongolian government issued a decree imposing compulsory burial of the dead in cemeteries and banning the traditional open-air funerals of the Duha and Mongolians (Delaplace 2006: 47). The reason behind this decree was, according to Delaplace, both to eliminate a tradition that was considered 'backward' and 'dirty' and 'to involve the dead in a socialist building project', where the graves of the dead were concentrated in cemeteries near the cities (Delaplace 2006: 47).

Although the Duha saw the decree as a violation of their shamanic tradition it was not implemented by the state to fight religious rituals and belief. Rather it was part of the socialist 'struggle against the feudals' (Baabar 1999: 293) and their 'amoral' and 'disrespectful' ways of treating the lower classes. The state perceived the open-air funerals as a feudal means of suppressing the masses: the

feudal Lamas were granted a 'respectful' burial beneath the ground, whereas lay people were merely thrown away in the open as just so much rubbish (Delaplace 2008). According to Delaplace (2008) and Billé (2010) this is reflected in the state's propaganda material, where the 'open-air funeral was described as a lack of rites and an unregulated (*jurmamgüii*) abandonment of bodies' (Billé 2010: 157). The regulation thus aimed first and foremost to foster a dignified memory of the dead, whereas giving corpses away to dogs and birds was said 'not to encourage one to respect one's relatives' and could 'provoke disdainful dispositions of them' (Delaplace 2008: 55–62). Moreover, the law seems to have served the socialist agenda of 'resignifying local spaces and bodies' by saturating them with the 'specific political values' (Verdery 1999: 39–40) of the socialist state. The socialist aspiration of the decree can be underlined by the fact that just a year before the new burial decree was implemented, the revolutionary hero Sühbator was removed from the Altan Ölgii cemetery to the newly built mausoleum in the central square of Ulaanbataar in 1954.⁴ Finally the decree seems to have served the bio-political aim of preventing the potential contagious effects of placing corpses in the wild. Health, hygiene and the fight against contagious diseases was an important part of the Mongolian People's Republic's policy throughout its history (Brown *et al.* 1976).⁵ However, the open-air funerals of the Duha seem not to have posed any actual contagious risk, as traditionally they must take place far away from human settlement and the corpses are usually eaten by wild predators – and thus quickly disposed of.

Between 1954 and 1956 the Duha, who had formerly lived as stateless forest dwellers in the taiga areas of Russian Tuva and northern Mongolia, gained Mongolian citizenship. With their new legal status followed dramatic changes in their traditional livelihood; their reindeer were collectivised and only a limited number of people remained in the taiga to look after the reindeer, while most other Duha were relocated in the fishing *negdel* (collective) in the nearby village of Tsagaan Nuur (see Parkas 1992). According to some of my informants the Duha living in Tsagaan Nuur were forced to abandon their traditional funeral practice, as conducting an illegal open-air burial was punishable by a huge fine. They reported that: 'Nobody in the village disobeyed the law, as they were afraid to be fined.' However, the Duha in the taiga continued to grant the deceased open-air funerals, since 'nobody in the taiga cared about the law, as nobody would check it. Yet, one of my informants told me that the various burial practices in the village and the taiga simply derived from practical concerns, since 'in Tsagaan Nuur [the village] we had the cemetery,

so people buried their deceased. In the taiga there was no cemetery, so we did, as we have always done: we left them in the open.’

The state’s project was thus only partly adopted by the Duha, and many of those who were forced to adopt it feared that their deeds had given rise to malevolent *chötgörs* haunting the burial places. However, an older Duha man who had lived most of his adult life in the city of Darhan, told me: ‘I am not a religious man. I do not believe in *Chötgör*. When I walk over a graveyard my eyes do not see anything and my ears do not hear anything [referring to spirits].’ Yet, all other Duha of my acquaintance never voiced doubts about the presence of *chötgör*.

The reason why the new burial practices were never fully embraced by the Duha may be connected to the tension between the socialist and local concepts of cleanness and morality. The Duha told me that they preferred to grant their deceased an open-air funeral, because it is ‘the clean way’ in contrast to the ‘dirty’ burial beneath the ground. This is illustrated in the following:

We have this tradition [open-air funeral] from the ancient times. We leave the body in the open, so dogs and birds can rapidly consume the body completely. If you visit the site seven days later, nothing is left. We do this to keep things clean. They are left in the open to ensure that their souls can leave and rise into the air. If they do, they come back and take care of their children and future kin [i.e. as reincarnations].

Interestingly both the socialist state and the Duha perceived corpses as subjects and used concepts of cleanness and dirtiness to define their different perceptions of what constitutes the morally proper and improper treatment of corpses. The socialist state defined open-air funerals as amoral, because corpses were treated not as human subjects, but as mere waste, and as dirty since an unburied corpse was considered a health risk. The Duha perceived burial underground as hindering the proper departure of the deceased soul and as a dirty practice potentially polluting the land of the living. Ironically, the state-enforced burials seem to have boosted the shamanic tradition: The burials produced numerous places haunted by *chötgörs*, which led to an increased need for shamanic rituals in order to appease these malevolent beings.

Polluted by socialism

The integration of the Duha as citizens in the Mongolian state in 1956 marked a transition from their traditional life as hunters in the taiga,

with limited knowledge of and access to the surrounding nation-states,⁶ to an integration as workers in the *modern* socialist state. On the one hand, this legal acknowledgement changed their traditional livelihood as nomads and hunters fighting for everyday survival in the taiga, turning them into workers in the socialist state with *free* access to various consumption and consumer goods, medical supplies and education. On the other hand, it implied a transition from a life structured around the flexible rules of their shamanic tradition to the more fixed laws of the Mongolian People's Republic, where their shamanic beliefs and rituals and other so called feudal practices – such as the open-air funeral – were prohibited (see Farkas 1992).

As in other parts of Mongolia, the Duha remember socialism generally as a time of 'prosperity, stability and security' (Pedersen 2011: 48), as it marked a jump from a life of severe poverty and insecurity⁷ to a life with the material surplus and social security of the socialist state. However, citizenship also forced the Duha to adopt a new way of life, where modern/socialist ideologies, laws, practices and consumer goods were introduced and mixed in new ways. This slowly but consistently polluted and transformed the spirits, bodies and land of the Duha. For example, an elderly Duha explained that their blood and bodies became polluted during socialism, because: 'we were taught to eat a new Mongolian diet [based on flour, rice and livestock meat] in the *negdel*, which polluted our formerly clean and medical blood'.

The introduction of compulsory burials is also said to have polluted and transformed the Duha land and its spirits, as one middle-aged male informant explained:

During communism many *lus* [water and earth spirits] were transformed into *chötögör*. You see, we were told to bury the dead, they burned our *eren* [amulets], and they dug holes in the ground to search for stones and so the *luc* were transformed into *chötögör*. *Chötögör* are ferocious, they may steal your soul.

And the shaman Gampo elaborated:

Today the *gazriin luc* [spirits of the earth] are ferocious, because people have polluted their homeland. Therefore *lus* are harming people. In the old days our homeland was clean, but today it is polluted. According to our traditions a dead man should not be buried in the ground. 'The natural law' [*jam*] is to place him on the open ground.

The Duha concept of *jam* refers to a set of rules attached to the land of *Oron Hanganai*⁸ (literally the forested land), but referring both to

the concrete visible landscape and beings (humans and animals) and its invisible inhabitants (spirits). The *jam* consists of some kind of fluid hierarchical order of living beings (spirits, humans and animals), where spirits are generally in a superior position, humans in a middle position and animals in an inferior position. Moreover each kind of being has its own 'way of being' (*asjigtai*) – its characteristic livelihood, character and corporeal characteristics – which humans must not interfere with. To live according to the rules is to place oneself in the right position in the hierarchy of living beings and avoid mixing one's own 'way of being' with that of others. For example, a bear is only in the character of prey if it is situated in a physically lower position than the hunter, whereas if it is placed in a higher position, e.g. sitting in a tree, it is forbidden to hunt it down. Moreover, it is forbidden to shoot it during hibernation, though it may be positioned underneath the ground physically lower than the hunter, because it would interfere with its 'way of being'. Humans, animals and spirits each have their own distinct way of being, but humans are also divided into different *beings* each with their rules according to their ties to a or several *eren(s)*.

In contrast to the spirits of the neighbouring Darhad people, who according to Pedersen (2011: 51) 'were unable to move within the "frozen" (immutable and changeless) infrastructure of everyday *negdel* life', the spirits of the Duha seem to have cracked the ice of the *negdel* life already during socialism. For example I was told several stories of how Duha and other locals during socialism had turned mad from encountering the *chötgörs* of the burial places outside of Tsagaan Nuur. For example an older Darhad told me how her two sons had turned mad – a state in which they were still held – because they had herded sheep close to a burial place, where they were startled by a sudden encounter with a *chötgör*. They lost their souls and became captured in a limbo of madness.

The Duha in the taiga also continued to grant their deceased ones open-air funerals during socialism. Inspired by Caroline Humphrey (2004), I propose that the Duha in the taiga managed to carry on the illegal practice of open-air funerals through establishing a kind of 'localised form of sovereignty' (2004: 420) 'nested' within the 'higher sovereignty' of the Mongolian state. Humphrey discusses how it was possible for the mafia in Buriyatia to establish a 'localised sovereignty', in the form of an illegal *marshrut* system of local taxi-drivers, which was 'nested' within the Russian state. According to Humphrey this was achieved because a great deal of what the *marshrut* system did ensured people's freedom of movement in the city and thus the

function of the city was ‘not provided for in the law’ and hence was “invisible” to it’ (2004: 423). In our case, the ‘nesting’ of the ‘local sovereignty’ of the taiga seems to have arisen from state officials’ fear of the invisible ‘powers’ of the shamans and spirits inhabiting the taiga, which seems to have limited their enforcement of the law in the taiga. Obviously officials’ fear of spirits was not provided for in the law, as from the socialist state’s point of view spirits were simply superstition. However, drawing on Taussig (1999) and Højer (2009), the officials’ fear of spirits may have been brought about as a result of the socialist state’s strategic effort to eradicate the so called superstition, which ironically brought superstition to life precisely because the efforts put into destroying it revealed it as ‘something which was important and powerful enough to necessitate destruction’ (Højer 2009: 579). The fear of the Duha shamans and spirits was evident in many of the stories I overheard in the taiga. People told me that even though officials knew of people who were secretly performing open-air funerals and shamanic rituals in the taiga they ‘never did anything to prevent the open-air funerals’ and ‘they seldom imprisoned the shamans’. However, in the cases where shamans were arrested they were always, according to the stories, ‘treated well’, because ‘the police feared them’.

Nested within the forest of dangers

Even today many Khalkha Mongolians and neighbouring Darhad people are afraid to travel into the taiga and wild forests (*xer*), which is the traditional homeland of the Duha, because they fear the Duha shamans and the invisible *spirits*⁹ that inhabit the area. I overheard numerous stories of how outsiders suffered various misfortunes initiated by their improper engagement with the *spirits* of the taiga. One such story was recounted by a Duha who had formerly worked as a border guard:

Our border patrols [referring to patrols of a non-Duha ethnicity] are struck by bad things [*muu yum*], because they don’t know how to deal with *lus savdags* [water and earth spirits] and how to make offerings. But people from the taiga [Duha] know how to worship *lus savdags* and behave well. If they pollute nature, they can clean it up again by themselves.

This former guard told how he once went on border patrol with a young Khalkha Mongolian border guard. On the patrol they shot a

moose close to Agi mountain. The moose was not killed – though it was hit with the bullet right in the heart – but escaped to the gorge on the northern side of the mountain, an area known by the Duha to be guarded by a tiny childlike master spirit (*eze*) named Avlin. The Mongolian border guard followed it to the gorge, a place that according to the Duha it is forbidden to approach. His transgression of this rule resulted in various misfortunes in his life:

That year the house of my friend [the young Khalkha Mongolian border guard] burned and this autumn his young wife passed away. Such a hardship has arisen. Also the son of our commander at the border post shot himself ten years ago. It happened because of our commander's misbehaviour, by not following the rules [*yos*]. It happened because he did not worship the upper *tenger* [the heavens], *lus* and *Oron Hangai*.¹⁰ Such things happen because these people don't know the places of *lus savdags*, *chötgörs*, *eren* and sacrificial places and the mountains with *ezen*s.

The 'localised sovereignty' of the taiga does not refer to a fixed geographical space nor to a fixed set of rules. It revolves around the fluid and labile space of *Oron Hangai*, consisting of its multitude of 'local sovereignties' materialised in the places and objects embodied by spirits, which have 'the capacity to determine conduct within the territory of a polity without external legal constraint' (Humphrey 2004: 418). To travel safely in the land of *Oron Hangai* one must continually try to sense the hidden rules of its places and beings. This entails a complex knowledge of the signs in nature indicating the presence of certain spirits and an intricate familiarity with the nature of various spirits and places. Moreover, the land of *Oron Hangai* is characterised by its 'lack of boundaries' (see Pedersen 2009) and its intermix of 'neutral places' (not inhabited by spirits) and 'powerful places' (inhabited by spirits). These places are continually in the making, as human deeds and lives give rise to new places of *power* and thus new rules to be followed. The enrolment in the sovereignty of the Mongolian People's Republic forced some Duhas – as we have seen – to violate their traditional rules and adhere to the legislation of the state, which gave rise to numerous places that are haunted by *chötgör*.

The contemporary turn toward the open-air funeral may be seen as a kind of 'dead-body politics' (Verdery 1999) of the 'localised sovereignty' of *Oron Hangai*. Yet, this 'dead-body politics' is an attempt to elicit the labile powers of the sovereignty of *Oron Hangai*, an idea that contrasts with the meaning that Verdery gives to dead-body politics as an ordering of meaningful worlds – a sovereignty that is

recognised by Mongols and neighbouring people who fear to transgress the 'powerful places' of the Duha, as reflected in the following story told by a young man of the neighbouring Darhad:

I went to the taiga last week to cut down wood and after a long day I took a rest under a tree. When I woke up I could not find my axe, and I went to search for it. It was very strange, because I was all alone in the taiga. But, then I passed this place, where I saw a human skull, and I knew it was a Tsaatan [Mongolian name for the Duha] funeral place. So I realised that this man had taken my axe. I should not have cut down woods in his vicinity. Only Tsaatans can approach such a place.

The agency of the corpse

According to the Duha humans have three souls: the soul of bones, the soul of blood and the soul of the mind and heart (*canaa-cetgel*). The first two are respectively tied to the bones and blood and disappear with the decomposition of the corpse, while the third moves freely around in the body. It may escape during dreams or in an instant of sudden fright – and following death it is finally detached from the body. The deceased may linger in his corpse or possession if he is not aware of his own death or if he does not want to give himself up to dying. The souls of the deceased are among the Duha, as among the Tuvans in general (Lindquist 2007), said to stay around the household and closest family for the first seven days after the advent of death, unwilling and unable to leave. Only after the seventh day is the soul capable of leaving this world, which it must ideally leave between the seventh and forty-ninth day after death. In order to ensure this departure it is of the utmost importance that the living kin follow the rules for a proper funeral. These rules are not fixed but differ from family to family; however most people seemed to agree on the following rules: the deceased must be undressed and wrapped from top to toe in white cotton cloth; the corpse must be placed on the sunny slope of a mountain, at a far distance from human settlement; the oldest relative must give a farewell speech to the deceased, persuading it to leave this world; sometimes belongings will be burned and a shaman or Buddhist Lama may conduct a ritual in order to guide the soul of the deceased to its proper resting place. The living kin undertake these practices in order to ensure the proper departure of the soul to – in the case of a lay person – some kind of afterworld or – in the case of a shaman – its embodiment in a certain spirit vessel/ amulet (*eren*) or a sacrificial tree (*tahih shutdeg mod*).

The soul of a lay person should ideally leave this world and travel to the heavens (*tenger*) and/or the land of *Erlegin*, which is said to be a forested world like this world, but characterised by darkness and 'only lit up by the rays [*tuja*] of dead people's souls.' Some people told me that the land of *Erlegin* is a kind of transitory place, where the souls of the dead wait to be reincarnated in the foetuses of future kin; others said that it is the eternal resting place of the dead. The soul of shamans is, however, bound to stay in this world. As one older female informant put it, 'they do not have the right to die and live in peace.' Three or four years after the advent of death the soul of a shaman will take up abode in her *eren*, shamanic dress and sacrificial tree, from where they empower and disempower their living kin. I perceive the shamanic paraphernalia of the Duha as 'agents' (Gell 1998), since they are the material form through which the powers of deceased shamans are passed on to present kin groups. The corpses and bones are also potential 'agents' materialising the moral rules and ethics of the Duha. If corpses have not been decomposed and in particular if the bones have not been cracked within the first seven days of the advent of death, the souls may linger in the bones and transform them into the 'agents' of devilish things (*chötgörtei yum*). Such devilish things arise from the improper embodiment of human souls in their material remains, polluting and transforming the souls of the deceased ones, their corpses/bones and their resting places into devilish beings, entities and places. The often violent agency of corpses thus seems to be the materialisation of the broken rules and ethics of 'the local sovereignty' of *Oron Hangai*, which continue to haunt the living.

According to the Duha the agency of the corpse normally ceases to exist when its flesh has been completely consumed and its bones fully broken by predators, which might also be the reason why people – according to one older shaman – in the old days used to smash the bones of the corpse during the open-air funeral. Still the deceased may retain its agency, though its material remains have disappeared, if it manages to stay within another object, such as a natural entity or an artefact. Yet, when the soul realises that its former body has gone it is likely to depart for the afterworld. This may explain why the Duha show great relief when they realise that a deceased was consumed fast, as one middle-aged Duha woman told me: 'My father's younger sibling left Ulaan Huu's grandfather at the entry way to Darkan. At first one crow came and left. Then five crows came and then another four crows and after that one eagle. We had left him there and went away and when we came back everything had disappeared. It was a very good sign.'

The subjectivity and agency of the object of the corpse thus rests in its materiality, where the corpse is considered a potential subject until a predator has recognised it as food and starts eating it.¹¹ Recalling Hertz (1960), the proper departure of the soul is thus dependent upon the fast and complete decomposition of the corpse.

In the case of the death of a shaman her ritual paraphernalia should be hung at a sacrificial tree, ensuring that the soul of the shaman will find her way back to her belongings and stay in this world, lingering in them. Sooner or later the material form of an *eren* as concrete amulet will decay and disappear, but the agency of the deceased shaman will remain, since it is also embodied in a sacrificial tree and the whole area around the tree. The very material permanence of places ensures the continued agency of shamans, since their powers are encapsulated not only in the sacrificial trees, which may die and decay, but also in the very place surrounding such trees. The *eren* of the Duha are both kinds of 'living memories' and sorts of 'living sovereignties'. The history of each kin group is materialised and remembered through their *erens* and sacrificial places, where each embodies a specific part of history, whereas their entirety materialises the totality of the group's history. The *erens* and sacrificial places of kin groups also embody certain sets of rules to be followed by their kin and spread illness and death among those who do not adhere to these rules.

However, socialism led to the pollution of numerous places and beings, which continues to leave its mark on contemporary lives. For example, a place in the taiga called Morlig is said to be inhabited by especially malevolent *chötgörs* originating in the souls of an entire camp of Buriad herders (men, women and children) who were executed as counter-revolutionaries by Russian Soviet soldiers in the 1940s.

Lawless lives in the forest of laws

The collapse of socialism marked the end of the state law on funerals, but also the end of social security, which the Mongolian People's Republic had provided for its citizens. As one informant explained, 'before the state at least cared about us, today it does not care' and 'because of the hunting laws, we are forced to live illegally'. In 1990, the fishing *negdel* in Tsagaan Nuur closed, leaving its former workers

unemployed. With limited chances of gaining new employment many Duhas decided to return to their traditional lives as reindeer nomads and hunters in the taiga (Farkas 1992: 17). Today the main subsistence of the Duha is hunting, which thanks to strict contemporary regulations is illegal. Yet, though the border guards in principle are tasked to enforce the hunting legislation in the taiga, and though the border guards often visit the taiga, no Duha has to my knowledge been fined for illegal hunting in the last ten years, though hunting is happening on a regular basis.

Today the Duha perceive the transgression of their traditional rules during socialism, and in the present, as one of the reasons behind the contemporary escalation of violent deaths among them. A matter of great concern for my informants was a series of unnatural deaths in a group of relatives, which were all simultaneously attributed to the decline of social security in the Mongolian state, the rise of alcohol abuse and crime and the transgression of traditional rules. The first deaths were two young Duhas, who had been killed in the village of Tsagaan Nuur apparently by a gang of drunken people; a third Duha was robbed and killed in a gold mine. The local police refused to investigate these crimes, because, according to one of my informants, 'they were just Tsaatans'. The fourth death was a middle-aged man, who, according to my informants, died as a result of the medical malpractice of a local doctor, as my informants explained: 'Nobody cares about us. In our region we only have drunk doctors.'

Though there was a shared consensus that these deaths were linked to wider social problems in the region, such as alcohol abuse, crime and the lack of proper medical care, many relatives of the deceased thought that the *real* reason behind these deaths was somehow linked to the transgression of the rules connected to the *eren* of their kin. Some thought that these unnatural deaths were all connected to a visiting shaman's improper offering gift, of raw mutton, to an *eren* in the family. A gift offering deemed improper in this family, particularly raw meat, is against the rules of their *eren* and among the Duha in general, since it has a history in the former state's introduction of a new *pollutive* diet. Moreover, this shaman was considered ignorant because she had left her homeland of the taiga to live and work as a shaman in Ulaanbataar and become part of the so-called market shamans certified by the state.¹² Later the family tried to appease their *eren* by offering it the appropriate 'white food' and by having a ritual performed for it by a local kindred shaman.

Some thought that these deaths were initiated by other new *erens* kept in the households of the deceased, as they all recently had *erens* made by the same shaman. Others thought that all the deceased had been infected by a *chötgör* roaming at a former burial site. Yet others proclaimed that the deaths had been caused by an *eren* inherited by a female shaman of this kin, as the rule of this *eren* was that it had to be inherited by a male. Finally, one non-kin member confided to me that she thought the deceased themselves, except one of them who ‘was indeed a good man’, were to blame, as they were ‘always fighting and drinking’.

During my stay in the camp, no consensus on the reason behind these deaths was reached, but various steps were taken to avoid future deaths: some families removed their *erens* from their household and placed them in the wild forest (*xer*) and the elder sisters of the female shaman tried to convince her to grant her *eren* to a male member of the lineage. Also, the most recent deceased was given an open-air funeral, though it had been very difficult, as he had died in the village. From there they had carried his corpse for two days on horseback to a distant mountain in the taiga. But as they explained: ‘We had to do it this way, because Baatar [an older Duha] told us, that he should have a Tuvinian funeral. A funeral according to the rules, so we thought it was proper to do it this way.’ However, the first three men were not granted open-air funerals, but simply buried in the village for practical reasons.

The families’ ‘lack of knowledge’ about how spirits were engaged in the series of deaths can – drawing on Højer (2009: 578) – be viewed as ‘knowledge of lack’, as most of them agreed that the deaths somehow derived from the kin’s transgression of traditional rules for proper conduct with the spirits, whose content was however unknown. The family’s efforts to circumvent future deaths by giving up their *eren*, offering them ‘white food’ and granting the last of the deceased an open-air funeral can be seen as attempts to prevent further misfortune. Confronted with their own ‘knowledge of lack’ of the spiritual causes behind these deaths the acts of giving up *erens* seem to be some kind of a *gamble* with ‘unknown spiritual powers’, where the only certain thing is that it *will* cause a reaction, which might – if lucky – turn out to be fortunate.

The Duha feel both abandoned and obstructed in their very livelihood by the post-socialist state and simultaneously haunted by the *powers* of the former state. Their lands and bodies have been polluted and their basic subsistence as hunters is deemed illegal by the state, leaving them in a marginalised and unprotected position,

where they are forced to lead an illegal – in the eyes of the post-socialist state – life in order to survive. The contemporary turn towards the open-air funeral – and the shamanic tradition in general – among the Duha may be seen as an effort to elicit the powers of their spirits and (re)gain agency in their own lives and lands. By turning toward the rules of *Oron Hangai* rather than the laws of the Mongolian state they seem to evoke ‘a localised form of sovereignty’ that is ‘nested’ within ‘the higher sovereignty’ of the Mongolian state ‘but nevertheless retain a domain within which control over life and death is operational’ (Humphrey 2004: 420). This ‘localised form of sovereignty’ differs substantially from Humphrey’s case, as the ‘localised sovereignty’ of the Duha encompasses the realm of both humans and spirits. I suggest that in their effort to (re) gain agency in their lives, the Duha engage in a gamble with the ‘localised sovereignty’ of *Oron Hangai* in general and the *eren* in particular. These powers continually set out the rules to be followed, granting merit to those who conform to the right rule and punishing those who do not.

Among the Duha the rules of the sovereignty of *Oron Hangai* as well as the Mongolian state have become blurred. Thus, the law of the state seems to have obtained the labile nature of the rules of *Oron Hangai*, since nobody is quite sure of its composition and whether and how it may be enforced. Although hunting is seldom penalised, the fear of being caught is reflected in various practices, such as the cutting up of meat outside the camp. Such practices are developed to hide illegal activities, and the associated shamanic actions serve to evoke the protection of the spirits. Today, the Duha turn to their shamanic tradition in order to elicit the powers of the spirits and avoid the characteristic misfortunes of the post-socialist era, such as murder, alcoholism, poverty, imprisonment or fines. In conclusion we may perceive the open-air funeral as a political gamble with dead bodies engaged to elicit local powers and navigate between sovereignties.

Notes

- 1 In this chapter I use Mongolian terms to elaborate on relevant local terminology. The language of the Duha was originally Tuvan, but since only elders speak Tuvan today and most others only speak Mongolian I have chosen to use Mongolian terms. However, I have retained the Tuvan term *eren* in my translation of Duha spirit vessel/amulet, rather than the Mongolian term *ongod*, as the Duha usually engage the Tuvan term *eren*.

- 2 An example of such improper treatment of a corpse was the death of a middle-aged Duha, who was wrapped in silk cloth instead of cotton cloth, which delayed the decomposition of the corpse. An instance which frightened his kin, who feared that his soul had not been able to leave this world, as they had heard – through a passing sheep-herder – that his corpse still lay fully wrapped and untouched by predators four months after his open-air funeral. Another example of improper treatment is the state-enforced burial beneath the ground.
- 3 However, among the Mongols the open-air funeral seems to have existed among other mortuary customs. As documented by Crubézy *et al.* (2006), four different burial customs were already practised before the time of Genghis Khan: ‘bodies could be buried, cremated, left exposed to wild beasts or in trees, whereas exposure could be followed by the collection of bones and their subsequent burial’.
- 4 In 2005 the mausoleum was dismantled and the remains of Sühbator were cremated and his ashes placed back in the Altan Ölgii cemetery.
- 5 Before the revolution the health system was confined to traditional Buddhist doctors and shamans, whereas in 1923 the new state started to develop the health sector according to Soviet/European standards with the assistance of Soviet/Russian medical professionals (Baabar 1999; Brown *et al.* 1976).
- 6 One older Duha explained: ‘When I was a boy, I did not know about Russia or Mongolia. I only knew that I was a boy of the taiga.’ Still, the surrounding states seemed to have been very present in the lives of the Duha, as the Mongolian government attempted to force them out of Mongolia and back to Tuva several times in the years between 1920 and 1950 (Wheeler 2000: 41–2).
- 7 The insecurity of being caught between the wider Soviet Union and Russia, where the Mongols repeatedly drove them out of their traditional pastures in Mongolia and back to their southern pastures in Tuva in the Soviet Union. Moreover, they feared brutal collectivisation and enforced military service in the Second World War, which many tried to escape in the 1940s. In this period several Duha families fled from Tuva to Mongolia, where they stayed illegally until they gained citizenship in the mid-1950s (Wheeler 2000: 41–4).
- 8 The concept of *Oron Hangai* refers both to the concrete, visible, local landscape and to its invisible spirits.
- 9 Such spirits include: *chötgörs* haunting places of bad (*muu*) deaths; the master spirits (*eze*) guarding specific places; the water and earth spirits (*lus*) connected to the waters and earth; and the *erens* left at the sacrificial trees (*tahih shutdeg modnuud*) of the Duha.
- 10 Literally the forested land, a concept referring both to the local landscape and its spirits.
- 11 It is only a potential subject, as the soul may have left to attach itself to some other object and may have properly left for the afterworld, leaving the corpse desubjected as an object.
- 12 Today many local Duha perceive shamans from the city as market shamans, whom they do not consider as ‘true’ shamans, but as ‘fake’

shamans primarily interested in making money from their rituals. In Ulaanbataar many shamans are taught to shamanise in the so-called shamanic schools, where they also take shamanic exams and receive certificates confirming them as 'true' shamans. However, many Duha perceive this schooling as both 'fake' and also inherently dangerous, as they are not taught the 'true' rules of shamanism, but 'fake' ones, which may pollute, rather than heal people.

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