

# Plural World Interpretations

The case of the Tyvans of South Siberia

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## **Abstract**

*Plural World Interpretations* are part of our everyday life even if we are not aware of the fact. They result from the simultaneous existence of different but equal models for interpreting the world we live in. These models are products of human constructivity and co.exist as parallel realities, complementing and contradicting each other. Based on fieldwork among the Tyva of southern Siberia, the book discusses the practice of dealing with this multiplicity of world interpretations and shows how individual actors oscillate flexibly between two of many possible models for interpreting specific situations and act on them. The rules Tyvans apply in varying contexts, the reasons behind their choices and the consequences they have to deal with, are analysed. The result is an account of contemporary culture that explores the flexibility and plurality of human interpretation, action and behaviour.

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## Introduction

*Plural World Interpretations* stands for the plurality of world interpretation models to be observed in the world today and for the human ability to handle them in a flexible manner. By analyzing the plurality of world interpretations among the South-Siberian Tyvans the present book proposes an alternative to socio-cultural studies that characterise societies as “traditional” or “modern.” Instead of making a strict distinction between traditional and modern elements of culture, the present study demonstrates their co-existence and co-operation. In addition, the term “plural world interpretations” will help to meet the challenge of adopting a widened perspective that shows tradition and modernity as equal, co-existing side by side.

The Tyvans themselves, as well as many Russian ethnographers, use the term „tradition“ in the conventional way, similar to Handler and Linnekin’s (1984: 286) description: „The prevailing conception of tradition, both in common sense and in social theory, has envisioned an isolable body or core of unchanging traits handed down from the past.“ Against this „naturalistic paradigm, which presumes boundedness and essence,“ Handler and Linnekin argue that while „tradition is a symbolic process ... ,traditional‘ is not an objective property of phenomena but an assigned meaning.“ On this understanding of the term, „the past is always constructed in the present“. Furthermore I agree with Hobsbawm und Ranger (1992) who understand tradition as „invention“. In this way, it becomes clear how all phenomena we call „traditional“ are permanently changing and how difficult it is to distinguish historical elements of culture from contemporary ones. Both traditional and modern elements of culture

are in a process of development and are the object of external influences. These are some of the reasons for not adopting classic terms like „tradition“ and „modernity“ in the present work and for replacing them by more specific terms.

Using the practice of individual actors as a frame of reference, the term „plural world interpretations“ enables us to describe contemporary culture as comprising many parallel models of world interpretation, which are both coexistent and equally valued as well as complementary and contradictory. Based on field data collected in the Republic of Tyva (Russian Federation) during 2004-2005, I shall demonstrate how individual local actors deal with the choice between many different models of world interpretation and how they use them flexibly, in order to respond to events and act in daily life situations. In doing so I propose to study the actual plurality of world interpretation models as well as the human ability to handle them flexibly in everyday life.

In this case study two of many different models of world interpretation could be identified. They exist as equally valued realities but can structurally be differentiated as “*model of human dominance*” and “*model of interaction between human and nonhuman subjects.*” Both models refer to coherent systems and are part of the repertoire of knowledge, behaviour and acting of West Tyvan agents. To them, these models count as equal and mutually contradictory. The models compete and oppose each other, but form a continuum within a single person to the effect that the human agent is constantly positioning him- or herself, depending on situations and contexts. The empirical material makes clear that West Tyvans use these models in various ways – replacing, complementing and mixing them according to their individual needs in specific contexts.

Furthermore this case study will demonstrate how local actors deal with the plurality of world interpretation models, how they switch from one to another and how they mix them in different situations and contexts. The rules of their flexible handling of plural world

interpretations, the reasons behind their choices between one of them or for a special mix of several models, as well as the consequences of their choices will be analysed.

The Tyvans of South Siberia (249.299 in 2010<sup>1</sup>) are one of the peoples that belong to the Turkish language family and that in recent years have become known to Western society by cultural elements like pastoralism (Humphrey 1980), their nomadic way of life and yurts, a neoshamanism that is very much alive (Zorbas 2007) and the tradition of throat singing (Deusen 2004, Levin and Süzükei 2006). The settlement area of the South Siberian Tyvans has the status of a republic of the Russian Federation (168.600 square kilometre, 2010 altogether 307.930 residents) and is located between the Altai Mountains and Lake Baikal in South Siberia, bordering on north-western Mongolia. The contemporary and historical culture of the Tyvans unites characteristic attributes of societies of northern Central Asia (Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) as well as south and east Siberia (particularly Altai and Buryatia). Common to the Republic of Tyva is a kind of pastoralism (Humphrey 1980, 1989; Humphrey und Sneath 1996, 1999) that rests upon the breeding of five species of livestock typical for northern Central Asia and South Siberia: Bactrian camels, horses, yaks, goats and sheep. Currently the livestock is complemented by cattle. Apart from the Tyvans in South Siberia, Tyvans are living in northern and north-western Mongolia (Taube 1981a/b, 1994, 1996) as well as in the Chinese Altai (Monguš 1994).

### **Theoretical background**

The term „*Plural World Interpretations*“, which gave this paper its title, is based on phenomenological and constructivist insights that view human beings as the creators of

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/population/demo/per-itog/tab7.xls](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/demo/per-itog/tab7.xls) (retrieved 09.12.2011)

multiple realities.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, socially constructed realities shape human interpretations of the world as well as human actions and behaviour, which, in turn, are based on these interpretations. The following definition clarifies how I use this term in the present paper: *Plural World Interpretations refer to human interpreting as well as human acting and behaving, based on these interpretations, which rest upon the flexible use of simultaneous and equivalent models for interpreting the world. These models of world interpretation are coherent systems having both structure and content. They supplement and contradict each other and are part of the knowledge, behavioural and action repertoire of human beings.*

In studying the flexible handling of just two of many possible models of world interpretation by individual Tyvan actors, I use the term *model* in the sense of a „*social construction*“ as defined by Berger and Luckmann (1966). Since the world interpretation of an individual Tyvan actor at any given moment comprises a selection of many different archetypes and patterns, I propose to regard these archetypes as models and *intersubjective constructions of society*. As models, they are neither natural realities nor human biological characteristics but rather products of human creativity. Both models of world interpretation discussed here are socially constructed and the members of Tyvan society are working constantly on their externalization (production, in the words of Berger and Luckmann 1966: 52), objectivation (to become an objective reality, *ibid.* 53-61) and internalization (annexation, to become a subjective reality, *ibid.* 129-147).

In the following descriptions of Plural World Interpretations I will also use the term *interpretation*. This term is not equivalent to *perception*. Interpretation means the human

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<sup>2</sup> “But there are several, probably an infinite number of various orders of realities, each with its own special and separate style of existence. James calls them ‘sub-universes’ and mentions as examples the world of sense or physical things (as the paramount reality); the world of science; the world of ideal relations; the world of ‘idols of the tribe’; the various supernatural worlds of mythology and religion; the various worlds of individual opinion; the worlds of sheer madness and vagary” (Schuetz 1945).

behaviour that follows the human perception. People perceive something with their senses and afterwards can interpret it in many ways. For interpreting the perceived, we use archetypes and patterns, predetermined by our culture, which I call models of world interpretation. Our subsequent behaviour is oriented to these exemplary interpretations.

The term „world“ is based on the constructivist concept of „*lifeworld*“ that go back to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1936, 1954) and were introduced into sociology by Alfred Schuetz (Schütz 1945: 533, Schütz und Luckmann 1973) as „*paramount reality*“. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann developed them further as “*world of daily life*” or „*social everyday reality*“ (Berger und Luckmann 1966: 23-25).

The “*social everyday reality*“ is a “*reality of commonsense*“ (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 20, 2012: 23). It is this reality that “is available to the commonsense of the ordinary members of society” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 19). As one of many realities, it precedes all other realities. “Among the multiple realities there is one that presents itself as the reality par excellence. This is the reality of everyday life. Its privileged position entitles it to the designation of ‘paramount reality’” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 21, 2012: 24). In this sense we need to allocate both models of world interpretation presented here, the dominance and the interaction model, to the “*everyday reality*.” They are part of and constitute the socially constructed “*world of daily life*” (“*everyday reality*”, *ibid.* 18-26).

As part of the “*everyday reality*” one can understand the dominance and the interaction model as „*social stocks of knowledge*“ (*ibid.* 41ff), consisting “of recipes for the mastery of routine problems” (*ibid.* 43). In the sense of “socially constructed” we enrich them permanently with new contents, when managing problems in a creative way. By repeating and copying them, their routines become common knowledge and factual reality. They pressure us, to apply

them for managing situations of everyday life. We adopt them by several processes of socialization and turn them into our subjective realities, which we then follow voluntarily and usually in a unreflected way (“primary socialization” and “secondary socialization,” *ibid.* 129-146). This process can be considered as a cycle that steadily goes on in the wide domain of our daily social interactions. The socially constructed “worlds” we live in are accepted as realities because we become introduced to them (socialization) by copying them or by attachment persons (e.g., parents) and authorities (e.g., teachers or other psychological peers) and because we share them with our fellow-human beings (intersubjectivity).

In this sense, both models of world interpretation presented here are shared by all Tyvans. They are intersubjective parts of Tyvan everyday reality.

Once we are aware of the fact that both models of world interpretation are products of human constructiveness, the human ability becomes plausible to handle flexibly a multitude of them. Because the particular models are distinct from each other, however, they belong in equal measure to the repertoire of knowledge, behaving and acting of the Tyvan community and its members. Diversity and variability of the models enable both, to interpret events and situations in a flexible way and to react to and act in them according to the needs of the moment.

It became apparent that Tyvans in their interpreting, behaving and acting draw on a collection of various contradictory and complementary models of world interpretation that are equal and occur simultaneously. Their flexible use causes seemingly contradictory statements about one and the same circumstance and induces different behaviour in comparable situations. For this reason we need to clarify the question, how human beings use the models of world

interpretation in their everyday life. In trying to solve this problem, all indications showed what Schuetz (Schuetz 1945 and Schuetz/Luckmann 1973) already realized: (1) both models are similarly perceived as “true” and “correct;” (2) the models of world interpretation are only coherent in themselves. Findings modelled on one of both models of world interpretation can not be related consistently to findings modelled on the other;<sup>3</sup> (3) in the sense of “multiple realities” both models of world interpretations have their own „*specific accent of reality*“ or „*reality accent*“ (ibid.). Schuetz and Luckmann argue that if I bestow the accent of reality upon one model of world interpretations, I accept it as true interpretations modeled on it. If the actor shifts the accent of reality to the other model, a new interpretation or truth comes into operation, which can be contrary to the first.<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, the models of world interpretation can be seen as *parallel truenesses* of one and the same person. An argumentation modeled on one of them can be perceived as true, if we bestow the accent of reality upon it. If the arguer switches from one model to another, that is, if he or she shifts the accent of reality from one model to another, then the previous argument may appear as illogical and the new argument, that is contradictory to the former one, may be accepted as true.

Schuetz (1945, Schütz and Luckmann 1973) describes this change-over as crossing the line between different “*finite provinces of meaning*”. “The passing from one to the other can only be performed by a ‘leap,’ as Kierkegaard calls it, which manifests itself in the subjective experience of a shock” (Schuetz 1945). James (1890) and Schuetz (1945, 1973) show that the change between different “*provinces of meaning*” is not a contradictory, but rather a skill typical for human beings. Likewise, this counts for the shifting between models of world

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<sup>3</sup> „By no means will that which is compatible within the province of meaning P be also compatible within the province of meaning Q. On the contrary, seen from P, supposed to be real, Q and all the experiences belonging to it would appear as merely fictitious, inconsistent and incompatible and vice versa“ (Schuetz 1945)

<sup>4</sup> “... there are different finite provinces of meaning upon which I may bestow the accent of reality” (Schuetz 1945)

interpretation. The example of the Tyvans shows that the plurality of models of world interpretation enriches everyday life. Because Tyvans who are able to choose between several alternatives, he or she can apply them for his or her personal [and general] needs.

### **Structure and Contents – two models for a contradictory whole**

HG 2

„The spirit masters of places, waters and Taiga are all *oran êèzi*. Every place has its spirit master. Together the *oran êèzi* save [visible] nature. Furthermore, they are part of nature. They protect and advocate nature. They control and defend nature. They also control human beings and keep them in check. If people behave badly against nature, the *oran êèzi* become angry. We Tyvans explain it in this way: if (for example) a human being cuts down a shaman tree, kills wild game or a bird or any another animate being, he will fare badly or become sick.“

This statement reflects common knowledge of many Tyvans. It juxtaposes options for interpreting, behaving and acting, which Tyvans classify as „traditional“ and „modern,“ in the categories „right“ and „wrong.“ Using the example of a breach of rule [antirules] against the tradition ways of life, Tyvans explained some of their most important social rules to me, i.e., not to destroy nature, or modify their environment, without the prior consent of spirit masters, to respect the mastery of the spirits over all existing beings, and to maintain respectful interactions with all spirit masters of the Tyvan natural environment. However, both normative ways to explain or interpret everyday occurrences, the modern and the traditional one, co-exist in Tyva. Both have an effect on behaviour and everyday acting and both are pitted against each other by most Tyvans I met.

Traditional rules prescribe to take nothing from nature without previously asking for the spirit masters's consent, and not to modify the environment according to human will. Yet most Tyvan men break this rule, for example by cutting trees or hunting wild animals. Similarly, most Tyvan women ignore this rule when collecting wild berries, onions or spices. Nevertheless, most Tyvans are aware of the *target condition* of correct behaviour in accordance with their traditions. What Tyvans categorise in their statements as „false behaviour,“ for example a self-serving and unsolicited intervention in nature, is in accordance with a mode of thinking, behaving and acting that scholars allocate to modern industrial societies. People of industrial societies mostly follow a model of world interpretation that I identify as “*model of human dominance*” (*dominance model*). This term denotes a model of world interpretation that postulates “*the human dominance over the environment, seen as a series of more or less passive objects of human agency.*” The principles of the “*dominance model*” are related to cartesian dualism, which, according to René Descartes (1596-1650), differentiates between „mental substance“ (*res cogitans*) and "corporeal substance" (*res extensa*). The latter are seen as passive objects of human acting. A comparison of human beings imbued with rationality and intelligence to all exclusively existent „things“ shows the following characteristics: (1) It separates human beings from their non-human environment and opposes them. (2) It differentiates between actively acting subjects (humans) and passive objects of human agency as the constituent parts of the non-human environment; the act takes place from the subject to the object. (3) The non-human components of the environment follow natural principles. Humans are able to understand the principles and use them to their own advantage. (4) Interaction is possible only between subjects (human beings). Animal instincts are a border case: they appear to modern humans as an interaction between humans and animals, but are not regarded as equal to the rationality and intelligence of humans. (5) Non-human components of the environment have no

rationality, intelligence or will. Humans by themselves have the ability to consciously and deliberately create human lives, even if the possibilities for doing so are limited by natural principles. (6) While human beings shape their own lives, they create their environment too. Only a false understanding of natural connections curbs the human ambitions to create their own world to live in.

In the specific ways in which Tyvans shape their lives, the *model of human dominance* is also a mode for interpreting the world, which to a large extent co-determines Tyvan everyday life.

The specific Tyvan model of human dominance is accompanied by a model of world interpretation, that many Tyvans call *their* „traditional world view“. The following excerpt demonstrates its requirements on people.

HG 24

„You must neither destroy nor kill, not the wild animals of the world, not the grass, simply nothing. If you would do so nonetheless, you would anger the spirit masters of the world [...]. All the lakes and high mountain ranges have spirit masters. If you wish to hunt the wild animals of the earth or collect medicinal herbs you must learn to be devout. Only in this way will the spirit masters of the world not become angry.“

HG 36

„The spirit masters of the forests are called „*arga èèleri*“ in Tyvan. They protect the animate nature, the plants and animals. If a human wants to cut a tree, collect berries or medical herbs, or to hunt, then he or she has to conduct a ritual. If he wants to cut wood for building a house – for example – he first has to ask the spirit master of the forest, where he plans to do it. [...]

He is not allowed to begin work before he has conducted the ritual smoke sacrifice [*saj*]. If he does not conduct a smoke sacrifice first, he will not be happy in the new house.“

All instructions of proper behaviour in the Tyvans world point to an absolutely necessary and respectful interaction between human and non-human components of that world. This model of world interpretations, and the action and behaviour patterned on it, gives Tyvan actors the need and the obligation to interact with the different components of the Tyvan world, such as stones, trees, fire, cars, or even spirit masters. Tyvan knowledge, to be part of a world consisting of human and non-human subjects or „actors“ (actor-network theory, see Law and Hassard 1999, Belliger and Krieger 2006), and comprising humans as well as spirits and other non-human subjects, gives Tyvan the certainty of being in permanent interaction with all non-human components of the Tyvan world. According to this model for interpreting the world, humans participate in the power of non-human elements of the Tyvan world (for example, religions considered as energies), undergo the influences and the will power of non-human subjects and perceive the reasons, why they are highlighted, controlled and dominated by non-human subjects (for example spirits), which they have to fear or are afflicted by. The model described is a specific Tyvan version of the *interaction model* that I want to define as a „*model of interactions in a world encompassing both human and non-human subjects.*“ It has the following attributes: (1) Humans are integral components of the world. (2) In addition to humans the world includes non-human subjects. (3) Interactions take place between human and non-human partners or actors. The term „interactions between subjects“ is not only related to humans. (4) Apart from humans, spirits, gods, animals and plants, articles of daily use, tools and machinery are seen as operative subjects. (5) An awareness, similar to the human awareness is not ascribed to all subjects. However, spirits and gods without will, intelligence, rationality and intentional acting are unthinkable. Furthermore, an assessment of

animals and plants is possible, for example, a hunter apologizes to a killed wild animal or a tree cutter apologizes to a felled tree, to avoid the negative consequences of his act. (6) The subjects of the interaction model are hierarchically arranged. The first place is held by the gods and spirits, the second by humans. Placed parallel are energies and powers without awareness that will act on all components of the world. Wild and domestic animals, plants, components of landscape, tools and articles of daily use seem to be subordinated to humans and spirits, energies and powers. (7) This hierarchy is not universally valid. According to the situation in which the interaction takes place, different subjects can be superior, equal or inferior. For example, a tree can not consent to being cut and a wild animal can avoid to being killed, preventing this by thwarting an obstacle.

The definitions of both models of world interpretation include a separation between structure and content. Content means, with Schuetz and Luckmann (2003: 657; 1973), „*intersubjective symbolic meanings*“ that are specific for different cultures and historical times. They exhibit an enormous „*diversity of socially-historical forms*“ (ibid.). Whereas the content of models of world interpretations is in a permanent process of modification, development and influence, their structure by contrast appears as global and permanent through time.

The limitation to only two models of world interpretation in the present study, does not presuppose that the Tyvans are unfamiliar with other models of world interpretation. Rather, the Tyvans have as many models of world interpretation as members of globalized Western societies. In Tyva, apart from the interaction and the dominance model of for example buddhistic-lamaistic variants (Monguš 1992, 2001) that are geared to Tibetan buddhism, we find different Christian variants originated by proselytisation of mainly the American Baptist church but also of the Russian Orthodox church and other European churches as well as animist models of world interpretation oriented on European and American esoterics and New Age. These are described by Johansen (2003, 2004) and Zorbas (2007), documenting

the change from shamanism to neo-shamanism. Such religious models of world interpretation belong to what Schuetz (1945: 551) calls „*realities of religion*.“ They may mix with other models of world interpretation or complement each other. By themselves and through their interplay with other models of world interpretation they have thus far not been investigated. A study of the dominance and interaction models will suffice for our aim to describe plural world interpretations, because they exhibit a *global* and *permanent* tendency and together are part of and compose the „*world of daily life*“ (Schuetz 1945: 533) that William James (1890: 290ff) called the „*paramount reality*.“ Furthermore, they provide the mental basis for the majority of alternative models of world interpretation. Both the dominance and the interaction model are related to other models of world interpretation, in the same way that Schuetz’s „*world of daily life*“ as a „*finite province of meaning*“ [James: „*paramount reality*“] relates to all other „*finite provinces of meaning*“ [James: „*sub-universes*“]. It seems possible that all other models of interpreting the world derive from the dominance and/or the interaction model and have to be seen in connection with them.

Both models of world interpretation, the dominance and the interaction model, are *intersubjective* and *universalized* among the Tyvans. Both models are well known and shared by all Tyvans I met. Furthermore, my data suggest that most Tyvans in using terms like „tradition“ and „modernity“ are aware of the existence of both models and distinguish between both. They use them not only unconsciously but also consciously by deciding for one type or for a suitable mix of both types of interpreting, behaving and acting. According to their situation and needs, the Tyvans I observed preferred to interpret a situation and to behave or act in it either in accordance with their „traditional“ worldview or in a „modern“ way. In doing so they select the use of one model of world interpretation in its clear shape or quite often a reasonable mix of both models. When Tyvans decided for a special kind of

explaining an event, they were aware of the model they were following, but preferred terms like „following our tradition“ or „according to Russian and modern influences“.

### **Why „either ...or“? – Why not „both ... and“?**

“The Kombinat Tuvaasbest in Ak-Dovurak, Tuva, is said to be one of the largest open pit asbestos mines in the world. Half the mine is no longer operating and of the 3000 people who used to work there only 600 now have jobs. We asked the ones we met about the risks of asbestos poisoning. They smiled and said they had heard it was dangerous but quickly added that they felt fine and, besides, at least they had a job.”<sup>5</sup>

Asbest and the company with shrinking employment are a reality in the everyday life of Tyvans living in Ak Dovurak (“White Powder”). Most of the inhabitants of Ak Dovurak were previously or are now afflicted by asbestos poisoning. One of them, a 54 years old shaman, explained to me why the traditional Tyvan boots have pitched cones. While walking, the design of these boots prevents mother earth from being hurt; if she would become angry, she could punish people (see Oelschlägel 2004). The Tyvans of Ak Dovurak seem no less familiar with the interaction model than Tyvans living in another regions of the Republic. However, like the shaman just cited, who is living in Ak Dovurak and was working in the asbestos company, they have arranged themselves with the open mine and the mining dump next to their habitat. The Tyvan inhabitants of Ak Dovurak are no less believers but they are living in permanent contradiction to the model of respectful interaction between human and non-human subjects that is typical for many of the Tyvans I interviewed.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.fetchphrase.com/russia/tuva/asbestos/asbestos01.html](http://www.fetchphrase.com/russia/tuva/asbestos/asbestos01.html) (retrieved 6 July 2012)

Many Tyvans – even if they believe in spirits (animism) – do not always observe the rules, prescribed by their specific Tyvan interaction model. I observed men, who crossed rivers with their Jeeps but bowed to sacred springs. I have seen unfortified roads in the steppes, extending for 80 meters or more, and passengers who made libations with milk tea or wodka for their cars, in order to safeguard them and their passengers from danger. Also typical are landladies, who in the morning make libations from the first part of the morning milk tea to the spirit masters of the campground and the landscape around it, while in the evening they dispose of their waste behind the yurt. And to all them the flexible handling of both contradictory models of world interpretation presented here seems to be common behaviour that occurs in Tyvans social contexts.

Hence it will be interesting to reconstruct how local actors apply both models of world interpretation in different situations and contexts, in order to understand everyday occurrences, to communicate them, act in or respond to them. Because Tyvan actors have at least two models at their disposal, they adopt them according to situation, need, time, location or counterpart. William James identified this potentiality as characteristic for human beings: *„first, that we are liable to think differently of the same; and second that, when we have done so, we can choose which way of thinking to adhere to and which to disregard“* (James 1890: 293, 290; Schuetz 1945: 551).

The following example illustrates the opposition between both types of world interpretation and the inner conflicts, which for many Tyvans are associated with the existence of two or more models for interpreting, behaving and acting. It concerns the adventures of a man, who told me about it in private only because his wife pushed him. The speaker regarded himself as an enlightened atheist and was sceptical of many Tyvans' superstitiousness. He insisted that his adventure had happened in the way he told me, but was

unsure how to interpret it. In public, he usually abstained from interpretations modelled by the interaction model in favour of the dominance model.

#### AZ 6

Two or three years ago a friend traveled from Mugur Aksy to Kyzyl. With another friend he drove in a car of the label „ČAZ“ through the place „Adar Töš“. However an aza (an damaging spirit) dwells there. While they were in the car, an old aged man on the side of the road tried to stop them. At this time it was dark and the driver was tired and edged. That is why he did not stop. His companion was sleeping on the seats behind him. After a little while, about one kilometer along the road, suddenly the old man, who had wanted to stop the car, was sitting beside the driver on the co-driver's seat. He looked just like the man on the road. The driver drove on. As he looked a second time, the old man had disappeared. When they arrived in Šagonar, he woke up his companion and after he told him about the old man, they ritually cleansed the car with juniper. But the car broke down. They did not have far to go, but because of the damage to their car, they needed a long time to arrive at their destination.

The wife of the story teller associated the breaking down of the car with the old man, whom she identified as an *aza*-spirit. The story teller himself, in contrast, thought it could have been a simple damage of the engine. He was tired and nervous, for which reason he thought that the hitcher was sitting beside him in the car. Both interpretations of the event contrast both models of world interpretations, the dominance and the interaction model. The explanation of the driver's wife is oriented on the interaction model, whereas her husband explained the event by drawing on the dominance model.

The driver's wife saw in the event interactions between the driver and his companion, an *aza* and the car. The *aza* tried to stop the travellers but the driver drove on. Suddenly the *aza* sat beside the driver on the the co-driver's seat and finally the car broke down, which can be interpreted as damage caused by the *aza*. The traveller cleaned ritual the car with juniper to eliminate the bad influence of the damage spirit. Since the prevention of the damage failed to come about, they were delayed on their journey. To the event have influence human and non-human subjects likewise. It turns out that the *aza*, as an intelligent and acting subject, had more force over the situation than the people involved.

The story teller himself knew interpretations following the interaction model, but he refused to believe in the existence of non-human intelligent interaction partners. Hence he preferred to orient his interpretations on the dominance model and limited his analysis of the event to the empirical lowdowns. He interpreted the emergence of the old man in the car as a hallucination caused by his own tiredness and nervousness. A damage to the car can hit everyone and has nothing to do with the acting of spirits.

The example shows how – in the self-expression of many Tyvans – the dominance and the interaction models appear in an almost clear form, which is almost inviolated by the opposite pole, that is, in a *narrative idealized clear form*. By observing the Tyvans talking with each other, their behaving or acting, we perceive the wide domain of „*transdifference*“ (Breinig and Lösch 2002, 2006), passing the border between different models of world interpretation and the abidance in the continuum between interaction and dominance model, sometimes tending to the first, at other times to the second model. Whereas replacement and alternating are in accordance with an oscillation from one extreme to the other,

complementing and mixing shows the transdifferent space between the extremes and the constant situational positioning of many Tyvans along transdifference continuum.

### **The One and the Other - A reasonable complementing**

In the activities that belong to the work of cattle breeders we can observe a clear case of complementing or mixing both models of world interpretation. It usually occurs during the castration of the young male lambs and goatlings, an act that represents a direct intervention in the reproduction of the flock. Livestock breeding is a pragmatic goal or profit oriented work on the environment and can be seen as an example of human acting oriented to the dominance model at least since the invention of domestication and breeding in the neolithic Orient (10.000 to 9.000 BCE).

On the 1st of June, 2005, at the spring camp of the herder Ajas Kara-oolovič Kyrgys and Ččena Michajlovna Ojun, a place located to the north of Yenisei River, the male lambs and goatlings of their herd were castrated. To this purpose the owner of the animals sent for a veterinarian. The work took the whole day. The cattle breeders caught the male lambs and goatlings in the drove that was pent-up close to the camp. The children assisted in catching the animals. To the general amusement they needed a long time to catch each goat or sheep.

Assisted by the cattle drivers, the veterinarian examined the animals and castrated them. The castration serves both the breed selection of fertile animals and a better utilisation of forage. Castrated animals fatten faster than uncastrated ones. The removed testicles were put in a bucket filled with water, milk and juniper, in order to prepare a feast in the evening.

Spittler's (2003) arguments about „interactive work“ confirm my observations of the playful fight between the boys and the male lambs and goatlings. The catching of the young animals takes place interactively between the catcher and the animal, and both have self-will. The son of a professional herder feels the will and the fear instinct of the young cattle. This interaction becomes an amusing play of power between the boys and the animals. But the superior element in this “game” is the human being and the catching of the young animals follows a rational aim, namely to catch the animals not selected for reproduction that will be castrated in order to beef up.

I assume that we should allocate the intentional selection of the animals for castration and the castration itself predominantly to the model of human dominance over an environment that consists of exploited and therefore rather passive objects of human agency. The castration is an active, pragmatic, goal- and profit-oriented intervention in the fertility and reproduction of the flock. It follows the will of humans, not of animals, and – apart from the interests of the spirits in continuing human society – not that of spirits and other non-human subjects. The human owner of the flock and the colleagues he consults decide by themselves, which animals can still be fertile for the purpose of breeding and which animal will be extracted from the ability to reproduce. In relation to breeding I could not find influences of the specific Tyvan interaction model. Only the resistance of the young animals and their fight with the boys adumbrate an interaction between human and non-human subjects.

Nevertheless the interaction model also influences the castration event. During the castration of lambs and goatlings the Tyvans comprised two resources known from the Tyvan version of the interaction model. It seems the stock owner wants to rely not only on their far-sightedness and competence for cattle breeding but, instead, included religious resources, in

order to secure themselves from evil with the help of the interaction model. The successful prosperity of the stock depends not only on the competence of the cattle breeder but also on the benevolence of the spirit masters and other natural subjects. These resources are milk and juniper. As the cattle-breeder told me, both non-human subjects, used during all rituals and in everyday life, ensure ritual and religious purity. Milk and juniper make the wounds heal quickly, the flock prosper and ensure that its owners stay well and healthy. In relation to the use of milk and juniper we discover several interactions. In the first place, we find an interaction between the cattle breeder, the flock and the milk that is classified as pure and contributing to religious and ritual purity. In the second, there is an interaction between the human owner, the flock and the juniper, its purifying power and the power of the wilderness in which the juniper grows. Finally, we can discover an interaction between people, flock and spirit masters, which take much pleasure in milk and juniper and which safeguard the flock. However, apart from ritual hygiene I could not detect any form of medical hygiene. The veterinarian wiped the knife on his trousers or dipped it into the mixture of water, milk and juniper. He did not disinfect the wounds. What the owners of the flock could not secure themselves – the healthy prosperity of the flock – they secured with the help of the spirit masters by using milk and juniper. Thus, it seems that the most important property of Tyvan nomads, their herd of cattle, depends both on the self-determined acting of the breeder and on a successful interaction between the cattle owner, the flock, several subjects of nature (milk, juniper) and the spirit masters.

In the castration example both models of world interpretation are mixed complementing each other. Furthermore, the example shows that the boundary between both models of world interpretation – which type of behaviour and what explanation belongs to either model of world interpretation – is not absolute and clear-cut. In the first instance, and

clearly visible from the outside, the human cattle owner personally decides about his cattle in observing a dominant and purposeful intervention in the fertility of the flock. In castrating particular male lambs and goatlings, he regulates the breeding and the beefing up of the flock. According to the dominance model, we can allocate the prosperity of the flock to the human ability for cattle breeding. However, according to the interaction model, the success of livestock farming depends on the invisible influences and control of the spirit masters. In the reflections of many Tyvans a mix of both models is the most frequent. Depending on the situation and context they interpret their success or failure in livestock-breeding either according to the dominance or to the interaction model. Both models of world interpretation – in as far as they are different and contradictory – complement one another to form a whole that for many Tyvans is reasonable.

### **The One after the Other – The difficulty, to decide**

Many events I participated in showed me that the first spontaneous reaction to an event (statement or action) in Tyva emanated from the *model of human dominance*, whereas the reflexion of the same occurrence that often occurred substantially later rather followed the *interaction model* of world interpretation. Thus, one of the models of world interpretation could be replaced, supplemented or mixed by the other. This is in accordance with the principle of oscillating between both extremes or on the continuum of the transdifferent space between them. The Tyvans I observed always renewed their position in the transdifferent space, tending once to the first, another time to the second extreme. For a better understanding of this shifting I want to give the following case:

In July 2004, I was fortunate, together with two other foreigners, to accompany a shamaness well-known in Tyva, her younger sister and her two younger brothers, who also work as shamans, to their homeland. The reasons for our trip were religious. Tyvan shamans regularly travel to their homeland, to renew contact with the spirits residing there and to reload the power of the wilderness (in this case, the power of the taiga). The wilderness – far away from human settlement areas – is considered as full of energy. That is why it is important for Tyvan shamans, to participate in nature' energy and renew their own power, at least once a year. In addition, most of the shamans feel indebted to the spirits of their homeland, from whom they were capped to become a shaman. Many shamans find it important to maintain professional interaction with the spirit masters of their homeland. The spirits want to be attended, otherwise they withdraw the power and skills from the shamans that do not care for them.

For the journey, the four shamans borrowed two jeeps from friends. During one of our trips through the taiga one of the jeeps broke down. All involved persons, including the four shaman-siblings, interpreted the breakdown in the following way: The car was old. Many parts of the engine were worn out. The unhitched driveways we used through the muddy taiga, rivers and wood was a strain on our vehicles. The persons involved reacted to the situation by trying to repair our jeep. It was a spontaneous and rational interpretation of the problem and an attempt to solve the problem in accordance with the *model of human dominance*. All persons involved saw as the cause of the problem their manner of driving, the condition of the jeep and the unhitched driveways. In addition, they understood it as their duty to find a way to repair the car.

During the repair the oldest of the four shaman-siblings suggested to conduct a ritual for the spirits in order to influence the condition of the vehicle and safeguard a problem-free further journey. However, because the men were busy repairing the car and because it became late and it was still far a long way to our accommodation, they siblings abandoned this plan and instead hurried to get the repair done. But they did not succeed. In the twilight one of the men went on foot to the next camp of yurts and later returned with the landlord and another jeep. The men solved our problem by towing the broken car to our hosts and needed several days to find spare parts and temporarily repair the car so that we could use it to return home.

Two months later I met the oldest sister of the shaman-siblings again and asked her how they had fared with the broken jeep. She told me following:

1. After our trip through the taiga both jeeps were damaged and their owner demanded high sums of money. I offered her to add money, but she didn't accept, saying: What would the spirits think, if I leave paying my bills to you?
2. The shamaness associated the broken cars and the requirements of its owners with the circumstance that they took us foreigner along their journey and that they had inducted us into their secrets as shamans. The secrets of shamans practice the spirits committed them only for this reason, that the shamans are able to cooperate with them, but not to divulge them to us. In this sense our interviews amounted to an abuse of confidence against the spirits of the shaman-siblings. During our talk, the shamaness showed remorse above this

mistake. She told me that for this reason she got punished by her spirits in the form of the financial aftermath.

3. Further, the shamaness explained, she didn't succeed to contact the spirits so intensively as necessary and accumulate power of wilderness. The spirits withdrew her especially because we foreigners had disturbed them and because she – as a guardian of the knowledge about spirits – had been too frank with us.
4. The shamaness affirmed to never again to undertake a professional journey together with foreigners.
5. When I asked her, how she was going to pay for the damages, she explained that she would never repeat her mistake, had not spoken to any foreigner about her business as shaman since our trip and also had conducted several reconciliation rituals. That is why it had recently appeared that her spirits were helping her again, so that she could earn the money she needed. Her business went very well, she had many clients, and at the time she was one of the most demanded and expensive shamans of her clinic. She ascribed her recent success to the fact that she had recognized her own mistake and that the spirits had regained confidence in her.

Thus, the initial situation and the aim of the journey of the four shaman-siblings had been conditioned by the interaction model and were based on the contract between the shamans and their homeland spirits. The planned contact with the spirits and the refuelling with spiritual power served – in the frame of the interaction model – their function and work as shamans.

However, after one of our cars had broken down, the interaction model had at first been irrelevant. The men tried to solve the problem in a rational way, by repairing the broken

engine. The suggestion of the oldest shaman-sister to conduct a ritual, suitable for the interaction model, had been refused. At this stage, the interpretation of the situation as well as their behaviour and acting had been conditioned by the dominance model.

Only in default, in a stage of reflection, later on, the eldest of the shaman-siblings had modified her interpretations of the events. Her report, two months after the event, attested to the value of the interaction model that now influenced her interpretation as well as her further actions and behaviour.

As the cause of the damages to the jeeps, and the following financial demands of their owner, the shaman-siblings identified their own mistake that derive from the rules of respectful interaction. The shamans narrative generosity towards us was in breach of their duties in the interaction model and induced the partner-spirits of the shaman-siblings to punish them. The new interpretation of the event finally led to changes in the shamans acting and behaving. The shaman-siblings atoned their mistakes with the help of conciliation rituals and the promise to change their behaviour. They decided no longer to share their shamanistic knowledge with uninitiated foreigners.

Even some time after our journey, the eldest of the shaman siblings was experiencing problems, which she had solved only by being sensitized for the interaction model. She interpreted furthermore the events, her professional and financial situation, modeled on the interaction model. In our conversation she explained: After the attempt to propitiate her partner-spirits, her situation had changed and the spirits helped her again, to compensate for her financial losses. In the months after our journey she was successful again in treating her clients, was earning well and became the most demanded and expensive shamaness of her clinic.

The example of the shaman siblings is typical for the direction of changing models of world interpretation. The sequence of actual situation -> dominance model -> reflection -> interaction model is common but not the rule. The change between these models can also happen repeatedly and in both directions. The interpretation of an event based on the interaction model does not necessarily remain stable, but can again be shifted to the dominance model.

The flexible handling of plural world interpretations and the possibility of oscillating between the extremes of various models of world interpretation discussed here is in accordance with the needs of the everyday life of Tyvans who try to deal with them by employing a suitable mix of both models, depending on situation and context. Especially in situations that can not be solved with the help of the dominance model, the interaction model provides an alternative solution that at least is able to accomplish psychological success. In addition, the parallel existence of at least two models of world interpretation in Tyvan culture has a balancing function between a stability that provides safety and identity (the use of the interaction model) and progress and development needed in the globalizing world (the use of the dominance model).

## **Summary**

Analysing the case of the Tyvans in South Siberia, the previous chapters have been aimed at introducing the theory and practice of plural world interpretations. The focus point of the present paper are two models of world interpretation that are common in Tyva and their flexible use by individuals and groups. On the one hand, there is a specifically Tyvan *dominance model* that Tyvans usually perceive as their modern worldview, influenced by

their being part of Russia; on the other, the specifically Tyvan *interaction model* that Tyvans identify as their own traditional animistic-shamanistic worldview. Both models mentioned here are part of Tyvan every-day reality, which they constitute together at the same time. Although mutually contradictory, they are parallel components of the mental culture of all my research-partners in Tyva and can be used by every Tyvan as possibilities for interpreting events and as guidelines for proper acting and behaving. To me they were often communicated in a *narratively idealized pure form*. However, they were executed in tendencies, that means in mixing or complementing them according to the situation and context.

Plural world interpretations and their flexible use follow several rules that I will now summarize:

1. Both types of world interpretation, the *interaction model* and the *dominance model*, can be found side by side among the Tyvans with specific Tyvan contents.
2. In their extreme forms both models contradict each other in such a fundamental way that an interpretation of a situation from one of them seems to be “fictitious”, “dissonant” and “inconsistent” (Schuetz 1955, 1971a, 1971b: 397), if you compare it using the example of the other and contrariwise.
3. Both models of world interpretation appear in the self-confession of many Tyvans often in the form of a *narrative idealized pure form*. Many Tyvans admit gladly only one of them.
4. The acting and behaving of many Tyvans I observed and their conversations among each other allow permit conclusions to interpretations that show both models of world interpretation in supplemented and mixed form. In doing so Tyvans oscillate according

to their needs from one extreme to another or change their position on the continuum of transdifference between them.

5. My conversational partners knew to distinguish between both types of world interpretation and attributed their statements to the emic concepts of “Modernity” or “Tradition”.
6. None of these models can be exclusively attributed to “the” Tyvans: many Tyvans feel at home in both models as well as in the space of transdifference between them.
7. Both models of world interpretation seem to be stable in their structure. However, they can rapidly change their content. Responsible for this change is the impact of the media, schools and professional education, the sciences, tourism and travelling as well as esoterism and the New Age movement.
8. The momentary world interpretation of one person results from his or her position in the transdifferent space, i.e. the position that one Tyva in a particular moment, situation and context adopts and that he or she is willing to follow momentarily.
9. For these reasons, the *world interpretations* of the Tyvans are *not unambiguous or one-dimensional and static*, but rather *ambiguous, flexible, situational and plural*.

In order to describe the multifaceted interactions between human and non-human subjects, I used examples from Tyvan civil religion in the form of reports of events, experiences or adventures (e.g. contemporary legends), interviews, records of ritual texts or oral literature.

From this material the interaction model can be derived:

1. Tyvans do not perceive themselves as the only intelligent beings or as masters of their world. They are connected to non-human subjects in a network and interact constantly with them, both consciously and unconsciously. Human well-being depends on the

success of these interactions. That is why Tyvans attach great importance to compliance with the rules and norms of the interaction model and a consciously respectful interaction with non-human subjects.

2. Considering the frequency of references to and interactions with the *spirit masters*, these are the most important non-human interaction partners for humans. As their real owners, the spirit masters watch over all existing parts of the world, provide norms and rules for dealing with them, ensure their abidance and punish non-compliance.
3. All human activities can be seen as *interactions between humans and spirit masters*. Positive aspects include the acknowledgement of the spirit master's mastery over all existing parts of the world, the observance of standards, norms and rules prescribed by the spirit masters, rituals of gratitude, requests and reconciliations, different aspects of spiritual culture and the utilisation of aptitudes and talents bestowed upon a person by the spirit masters. Every non-compliance with the norms and rules of the interaction model and the result thereof must be understood as a negative element in interaction between humans and spirit masters.
4. With help of their narrative tradition the Tyvans keep alive their interpreting, behaving and acting according to the interaction model. One of the most important narrative genres are so-called "*true occurrences*" (i.e. contemporary legends or reports of events, experiences or adventures). Typical subjects of such contemporary legends are human failings in the respectful interaction between human and non-human subjects as demanded by the spirits and the resulting punishments, such as crises, illness or death. Legends that inform about wondrous rewards by spirits to those who distinguish themselves in their handling of rules and norms as per the interaction model are also popular.

5. Humans often only become aware of breaches of norms after a crisis occurs in their lives. To avert the consequences of such transgressions, Tyvans have to take several steps: (1) interpret the crisis retrospectively according to the interaction model; (2) invite a shaman to review the situation, find out which spirits were involved in what way and give advice on how the problem may be solved; (3) conduct rituals of reconciliation (possibly under the direction of a shaman); and (4) promise to behave in a more respectful way with the non-human subjects.
6. Tyvans consider human talents as connected to the activities of the spirit masters as well. Talents are not inborn attributes and are not considered a form of distinction. Special talents are obligations. In fact, the spirit master of specific talents select and oblige individuals bestowed with such talents to serve these talents by using them in the world of human beings. A person chosen by the spirit masters of a specific talent has to represent it in the human world, is obliged to practice and apply it with the best of his or her ability, not to hold it back or misuse it and not gain unfair advantages because of it. To do otherwise incurs punishment.
7. The interaction model ensures harmony, balance and stability in the field of reciprocal dependencies between human and non-human subjects. If a Tyvan compromises this balance, he or she runs the risk of being punished by the spirits. The spirit masters will call forth a crisis. But spirits can also compromise the stability of respectful interactions. For example, attacks by evil spirits, who the Tyvans regard as playful or vicious, are a constant source of danger for humans.
8. The people see themselves as being permanently dependent on the goodwill of various spirits. But the existence and the well-being of the spirits is seen as depending on human behaviour and action as well. On the one hand, people depend on that, which the spirit masters provide them with. On the other, if people apply incorrectly that which

the spirits have given them or destroy it, this may have negative consequences for the spirit masters, not only for the people. If people destroy the property of a spirit master, they destroy the spirit master as well, the incorrect handling of a spirit master's property may rob them of their power; neglecting to use a bestowed talent or forgetting bestowed knowledge about its proper practice may cause the spirit master of the talent to disappear.

9. Shamans endowed with powers by the spirit masters find their function here in the interaction model. They are intermediaries between human and non-human subjects. With the help of their partner spirits they clarify situations that endanger the interaction. When interactions become unbalanced, they help to return them to a state of stability and harmony. In so doing, they are obliged to reconcile the spirit masters and fight against several evil spirits. They conduct rituals of reconciliation, appeal and gratitude. Furthermore, they act as advisers and remind people of the correct path in the respectful interaction with non-human subjects.
10. Thus all aspects of all human and non-human subjects in the Tyvan world are interconnected and interdependent.

From the concept of „*Plural World Interpretations*“ presented here arises the question, what rules follow from their flexible use. The following summary therefore deals with the flexible application of both models of world interpretation and discusses the subject of connections and regularities, reasons and consequences, as well as several strategies of changing the position on the continuum between their extremes.

1. The *dominance model* is currently the most frequently used model of world interpretation in Tyva. As a guideline for interpreting events, acting in and reacting to them, Tyvans usually first employ this model.
2. *Spontaneous changes* of the models of world interpretations therefore often occur from a first interpretation or problem handling according to the dominance model to the inclusion of the interaction model after a delay of some time.
3. Often a *complementing* take place which means, a shifting of the tendency from the one more to the other.
4. A shift from the first spontaneous application of the interaction model to the dominance model is much rarer.
5. *Spontaneous changes* from the dominance to the interaction model especially occur in *problematic situations*, especially after pragmatic and rational attempts to solve the problem fail.
6. The shift to the interaction model usually accompanies a *retrospective reflection* on the event.
7. After a switch to the interaction model, a breach of rules of respectful interaction between human and non-human subjects is identified as the cause of negative situations.
8. Typical examples of such retrospective reflections from the perspective of the interaction model are so-called *True Occurrences* (contemporary legends), in other words: reports of events, experiences or adventures. Often they refer to a breach of norms by people and their subsequent punishment by non-human subjects, such as spirits.
9. After the spontaneous switch from the dominance to the interaction model *rituals of conciliation* are as typical as follow-up actions.

10. These are followed by *long-term behaviour modifications*, accompanied by the promise, to follow the rules of the interaction model more respectfully.
11. Especially accidents and strokes of fate that often cause the switch from the dominance model to the interaction model, keep the possibility to interpret events according to the interaction model open.
12. Depending on the situation, further reasons for switching from the dominance to the interaction model may include particular spaces (e.g. holy or ritual places), moments in time (e.g. days reserved for rituals) and counterparts (e.g. religious specialists or a researcher working on animism and shamanism).
13. Prompt interpretations of events, based on the interaction model, not preceded by a switch from the dominance to the interaction model, can especially be demonstrated in *stages after rituals*. Rituals keep awake the interaction model in the people involved for a while after conducting them.
14. Switches between the models of world interpretation can be carried out spontaneously or strategically. Strategic switches in both directions often happen, if one person or a group of persons is not satisfied with the results of applying one of the models of world interpretation. Characteristic was the strategic use of the dominance model during Soviet times, in order to hide the own religiousness.
15. The conscious *strategic switch* can be often and well observed in the case of shamans. Currently shamans need to command several strategies of their business that borrow instruments from the dominance model. They include networking, publicity, book-keeping, installation and organization of shaman-clinics, manufacture and the trad of devotional objects.
16. In numerous self-expressions of my Tyvan interview partner a tendency to explanations about right and wrong behaving and acting is cognizable. Such a

distinction is often accompanied by an effort to oppose both models of world interpretation as right or wrong and thus postulate the contradictory character of both models.

17. In so doing, many Tyvans created a *narratively idealized pure form* of one model of world interpretation. In this way, the interpretations of events and situations approximated the extreme form of this model.
18. Apart from the *structural stability* of both models of world interpretation, in Tyva the for our times typically, accelerated *changeability of content* of the dominance and the interaction model is conspicuous.
19. The frequency of applying both models of world interpretation is also changeable. Currently, the dominance model is more often used than the interaction model, which use is concentrated on particular circumstances.

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