

INTERVIEW

MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED FLOWERS

An interview with Anai, a Tsaatan shaman

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During the spring and summer months of 2006 and 2007, I lived in Northern Mongolia in the boreal forest, or taiga, with Tsaatan reindeer-herding families. I also visited them in their homes in the Darhad Valley. They are nomadic herders and hunters who were separated from their Tuvan relatives during the 1990s when the Soviet system collapsed. The subsequent closure of the Mongolian-Siberian border left them as a cultural and linguistic minority in Mongolia.

While Mongolians are shamanists ancestrally, the Tsaatan and their shamans are considered by many to be the "most authentic" because they have been the least influenced by Buddhism, now the official state religion. Living in the remote borderlands between Siberia and Mongolia, they gather wild animals and plants from the higher reaches of the Altai-Sayan Mountains for their shamans' tool kits. They use eagle feathers, which give the gift of sight, on their shamans' hats and ibex fur for boots because this mountain goat is agile and sure-footed. They use reindeer for riding, packing, and as an important food source, but they rarely kill them, relying instead on the rich, yellow milk which they make into yogurt and cheese. One of their staples is "milk tea," made from reindeer milk boiled in water and strained through imported Chinese tea. Reindeer hair is stuffed into pillows and mattresses, and used in the distinctive hair 'embroidery' on hats, dresses, and other items of the shaman's tool kit.

Their seasonal round is organized around finding the best pasture for their reindeer. Over the summer, milk products are prepared for winter use. Later in the year, they separate into smaller family groups and move into their autumn and winter camps. By October the reindeer have been moved into the forest where they are allowed to graze freely—they are not tied or milked. A few of the younger men remain with the reindeer during the winter. The others spend the winter in the warmer grasslands around the village of Harma where they live in Mongolian gers (circular tents), or log cabins, rather than in their traditional tipi-style orts. Today, some Tsaatan raise goats here, as do their Darhad neighbors. While a few family members remain in Harma over the summer to care for the goats, most move back to the

taiga in spring for reindeer lambing.

The seasonal round involves gathering a wide range of plant resources over several ecological zones: steppe, forest steppe, taiga, and alpine. While the taiga and alpine regions are small, the biodiversity there is complex. Some species are endemic to the taiga; others are distributed across the wide band of coniferous forest that encircles the northern hemisphere. Many of the species that originated in this part of Central Asia are now commonplace in North America and are used in similar ways by First Nations Peoples in the United States and Canada.

The permafrost, higher humidity,

cooler temperatures, and fewer biting flies of the taiga-alpine region provide optimum conditions for reindeer which are the only herd animals that can withstand the severe winters. The conditions are also optimum for cold-tolerant plants, including those on which the reindeer rely, such as the reindeer lichen (*Cladonia rangiferina*). The plants that have adapted to these extreme conditions are said to be the strongest and purest and are widely preferred for medicine and ritual. The Tsaatan gather them to treat themselves and their reindeer; they also sell them in town to make a little money.

The taiga also produces wood for



Magsar spends his winters on the taiga taking care of the reindeer, without a tent or other covering, just out in the air with the reindeer, riding them in the snow. It's too cold for horses on the taiga in winter and too warm for the reindeer in town where he goes to visit his family over the winter.

(Photo on left) Anai collecting flowers for her Zay.





Haltsan in shaman's dress at a ger camp outside Ulaanbaatar. The hat shows the distinctive Tsaatan reindeer hair embroidery.

(Photo on right) Tsaatan canvas "tipis" after a light snowfall at the spring camp.



the stoves they use for heating and cooking, and for the rim of a shaman's drum and its beater. Every home has a sprig of fragrant juniper (*Juniperus sp.*) tucked behind an interior pole. The branches may be burned whole, or the needles ground into a powder and scattered onto the stovetop to smolder. "We do this," I was told "for protection from negative influences, and because we like the fragrance." During shamanic ritual, the smoke cleanses and purifies the belongings and ritual space, including all of the participants in the ceremony. The drum is passed through the billowing smoke to prepare it as the shaman's "ride" into the Other World; it also serves as the "ride" for the ancestral and helping spirits from the Other World into this one. The smoke permeates the thin membrane that separates the worlds and the scent pleases the spirits who make this journey.

Shamans also collect flowers and bits of bark and twigs from shrubs and trees to make into a powerful plant mixture known as a Zay. It is composed only of plants from a shaman's own land. As the shaman Haltsan told me, "When other shamans smell your Zay, they smell your native land. I am able to tell the grass growth and the weather conditions, the precipitation, and many other things, when I smell a shaman's Zay."

Plants for the Zay are generally found high up in the mountains. Surnag (*Rhododendron parvifolium*), which has small, purple-red flowers and leaves that roll under at the edges, grows in the alpine and subalpine region. It contains ether which gives the Zay a pleasing scent. The leaves are also stuffed into pillows for peaceful sleep. People from the cities like to rest in a patch of Surnag because it is helpful in healing heartsickness. I was warned, however, that they shouldn't fall asleep there, since it wouldn't be good for them. Another type of rhododendron, used specifically for blood pressure problems, is Havsraa (*Rhododendron aureum*), a rare variety unique to the Altai-Sayan region. The flowers and leaves are dried, pounded, and made into a tea. Like other plant medicines, the dosage is important; it is used only in small amounts, no more than two or three gulps per day. Badaan (*Bergenia*) is an imposing plant with pink flowers. The entire herbaceous plant, in-

cluding the root, is boiled and used to treat both human and reindeer diarrhea. While reindeer are treated with plant medicines for various conditions, they are known to self-medicate and also benefit from foraging over a large and diverse area.

The mountains are also important since ancestral spirits reside there. The bodies of deceased shamans, together with their belongings, are laid out in high places and visits are made to these sites to renew a family's connection with their ancestral shamanic lineage. On such journeys plants are gathered for food as well as medicinal and spiritual use. Most Tsaatan are familiar with the more common medicinal plants, but some are renowned for their extensive knowledge. A revered shaman by the name of Suyan, who died recently at the age of 102, was famous for her knowledge of plants and reindeer medicine. Haltsan, one of her students, explained:

Suyan was my female teacher and helped me a lot. I have collected many, many plants and dried them and given them to people. My grandmother and my mother and father and other people taught me about plants. My grandfather, when he went to the countryside to collect plants, would go for a long time: ten to twenty days. I also go for ten to twenty days. Some plants are for people who are sick. Just the smell can help. Other plants are for luck.

Haltsan's parents passed on their knowledge about plants and shamanism to him, although neither are shamans themselves. His mother, Chuluji, told me that she didn't become a shaman because she was not very strong when she was young. Today, both her daughter, Anai, and her son, Haltsan, are shamans. She spoke about the special shaman's things that she inherited from her family that she is keeping for them, about the protocols concerning when a shaman may take their belongings out of the house, and when photographs are allowed. She warned that many plants are becoming harder to find and that the "spirit bags" that hang in the sacred place across from the entrance in every Tsaatan home, must be treated carefully when moving camp. The fire and the snakes that "live" in it must also be treated with respect. She explained how

a spirit horse or reindeer is tied with a red ribbon or a strip of cloth as a protector of the herd and mentioned the problems that arise when shamans work for tourists in the city.

Because Anai's tipi was next door to ours, her daughter, Shinee, became a regular visitor, lighting our wood stove in the morning, refilling the water buckets, and entertaining us with songs in Tuvan and Mongolian. She told us a story about her mother:

My mother used to be a shaman but she is getting new shaman's things such as a dress and drum now because she had to stop being a shaman. She used to live with her grandfather (Chuluji's father), and learned from him, receiving some of his shaman's things after his death. When she became a shaman, many people came to see her and she was

helping people as much as she could. Then one day, someone came with severe problems and these transferred to her somehow. My mother developed severe psychological problems. Then after about a year, she got better again. After this happened though, she became very quiet.

Soon Anai herself spoke to me about becoming a shaman and invited me to go with her to collect flowers for her Zay. Our outing was scheduled around her daily routine of reindeer milking. By six in the morning the households finish the first milking and let out their animals to graze until eleven when they tie them near camp. They stay tied until the second milking at four in the afternoon, after which they are grazed again. At eight in the evening they tie the reindeer for the night. This



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daily routine allowed Anai time for chatting and plant collecting between eleven in the morning and four in the afternoon each day.

Since the day we chose to go out collecting plants for her Zay was sunny and the meadows were ablaze with flowers. Anai's sister-in-law, Byambasuren, also came along to collect for her husband, Haltsan, collecting her flowers in a cotton sack that she carried over her shoulder. Anai dropped hers into the skirt of her Del, the traditional Mongolian coat-dress. Into it went wild onion (*Allium altaicum*); bright orange trollius (*Trollius asiaticus*) called 'Asian globe-flower' because it only grows in Asia; and sky blue forget-me-nots (*Myosotis sylvatica*). I told them how many of the flowers that originated in this part of the world are now common elsewhere. Forget-me-nots are found all across North America and Europe as a garden plant and also naturalized in the wild. They burst into laughter at the translation of the name between English and Mongolian, and back again into English, as "me-not-forget."

Near a stream, we came upon a stand of wild carrot or parsnip (*Heraclium dissectum*), and wild celery, called Balchirgana in Mongolian. Anai and Byambasuren were careful to point out that only this particular kind is edible. They pulled out pocketknives and peeled the tall stalks which looked and tasted like celery sticks: juicy and crunchy but with a little more 'bite.' I opened my interview with Anai by asking her when she knew she was going to become a shaman.

Anai: I'm not fully a shaman as I haven't got the dress yet. I was supposed to have a dress this year but it wasn't possible because my drum has a tear. I do have an amar huur [a mouth-harp] though.

Walker: When did you start to train as a shaman?

Anai: I started when I was twenty-seven or twenty-eight. Now I'm thirty-eight. Suyan came to see me and told me she would teach me to be a shaman. I had a serious disease, psychological problems and seizures, which started when I was

about twenty-three. I had these problems for almost a year and even went to Muren to see a doctor, but there was no cure. After I agreed to be trained as a shaman, though, all the problems disappeared.

Walker: What kinds of things did Suyan teach you?

Anai: She taught me to play the mouth-harp and the drum. While she didn't teach me much about plants, I am col-



Back detail of Tsaatan shaman's dress (from a replica made for a parks exhibit near Muren).

lecting plants for my Zay. She was very good at reindeer medicine, at using different things to cure the reindeer, but she didn't share that information with me.

Walker: What about your drum? May I ask who made your drum?

Anai: My first drum was made by someone from Ulan Ulde who is no longer living. Because it has a tear, it needs a new antelope skin which will be stretched by my father.

Walker: Who will hunt the antelope?

Anai: It doesn't matter who hunts it as long as we get a good one. We will buy it from one of the hunters. It costs between 5,000 and 10,000 Tugrik (\$5 to \$10 US dollars) for a hide. The size of one of these antelopes is almost as large as a reindeer.

Walker: What about once the drum has the new skin? Do you have to do anything to 'open' the drum?

Anai: Yes, we do a ritual when a drum has a new skin. Lots of people gather in my orts. We dry the skin over the fire or place it near the stove, it doesn't take too long. After it's dry, I hang it from the wall. My father will put the skin on the drum frame. I was supposed to have my shaman's dress in the beginning of June, but I don't have it since we are still looking for the new skin for the drum. By next year, when you return, I should have both my shaman's drum and dress.

Walker: Who will make your dress? I understand that shamans don't make their own dress, drum, and other things.

Anai: My relatives and the taiga people, probably about twenty people altogether, will make it.

Walker: Last year, I talked to people about the spirit bags that hang from the orts poles across from the entrance. I was told these are for protection. Do you have a spirit bag and a spirit reindeer?

Anai: Yes, I have a spirit bag; my mother, made it. And I have a spirit reindeer too; my grandfather on my mother's side made it. He's not still living. He was a strong shaman. I lived with him when he was alive. He died at age seventy-five. Many times I saw him do shaman's rituals and ceremonies.

Walker: What about a shaman's helper? Your brother, Haltsan, told me that his wife, Byambasuren, is his helper. Do you have someone to make the fire, help you put on your shaman's dress and assist you when you are with your spirits?

Anai: I don't have anyone designated yet but I may need a helper to support me during the ceremonies, although there are some shamans who don't fall

off their ride during rituals.¹ My grandfather didn't need support; neither does Haltsan.

Walker: Haltsan is your brother's Tuvan name, right? And Amarjargal is his official name in Mongolian?

Anai: Yes, we are Tuvan and my parents and grandfather taught me to speak the language. I am also teaching Tuvan to my children. My daughter, Shinee, sings Tuvan songs as well as Darhad songs in Mongolian.

Walker: Does your family tell stories about Tuva or do they feel they live in Mongolia now?

Anai: We say we'd like to stay in Mongolia and don't really talk about trying to see Tuva anytime again soon.

Walker: Tell me about the shaman's plant mixture, the Zay, which we are collecting.

Anai: If we can collect more than a hundred different flowers, the shaman's plant mixture is considered to be very good. As well as the flowers that we will gather here, bits of bark and twigs from bushes and trees are added to the Zay. There are none growing around here, though, so I will add them later as we move to our other camps. Juniper will be an important addition. The juniper that grows on the taiga is the most fragrant variety and the strongest medicine.

Walker: What do you do with the plants after you collect them?

Anai: We place them in cloth slings that we hang between the poles of our orts. If you come tomorrow, you can see them drying. I will have one for my Zay and Byambasuren will have one for Haltsan's Zay. Once the plants are dried, which doesn't take too long because the wood stove keeps the orts warm and dry, everything is pounded into a powder and juniper is added. Then drops of water, just a few drops, from nine rivers are added, one at a time. Then it's ready to use.

Walker: Could you describe how you pound the Zay? Do you do it the same

way as you pound tea?

Anai: For the tea, we put the tea blocks that we buy in town in a skin or canvas bag. I use my small hide bag and pound the bag (and the tea inside it) with a pestle made of stone or hard wood. That breaks the tea up into small bits. For my Zay, I use a birch mortar and pestle that my father made about seven years ago. It is used only for pounding Zay.

Walker: And how is the Zay used?

Anai: When people come to see a shaman for healing, the shaman burns it as incense over the fire. People smell the Zay and inhale the smoke in healing. They may also be given some to take home where they burn it for themselves. The Zay gives strength to the shaman and to the people who go to the shaman for help with their problems.

Walker: Would anyone bring you plants to add to the Zay?

Anai: No. Each shaman gathers their own plants from their own land. For example, Tsaatan shamans are supposed to only collect plants growing in the taiga, not in the Darhad Valley, and shamans from different areas are not supposed to mix their Zay.

The next day, it was raining and the woodstove was on when we entered Anai's tent to say goodbye. She offered us a dish of boiled reindeer milk, the color of clotted cream, and some freshly baked bread but we could not stay long. Our jeep driver was booked to pick us up in Harma the day after tomorrow and I wanted to do the trip down in two days. That way we could break up the long horseback ride by camping overnight in the forest.

The rain came down in sheets as we crossed over the treeless mountain pass. There were places so steep and rocky that we dismounted and walked our



Bolormaa milking reindeer at the spring camp.



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horses. Once in the forest, however, the trees dissipated the rain and we got dry quickly by building a fire of dead branches snapped off the trees. We set up our tents for the night and put the horses out to graze on the lush grasses in a nearby clearing.

In the morning we started out early to arrive in Harma by midday. Emerging from the shade of the forest into bright sunshine and lush meadow, we delighted in the yellow-flowered potentillas, purple-blue gentians, and mauve asters spreading out ahead of us. Our guides began singing at the top of their lungs. My partner echoed their song, which made them laugh gaily. They encouraged him to sing more because, as they told us, "When we're traveling and we sing like this, it makes Nature happy."

Endnote

1. When shamans are 'riding' their drums into the other worlds, the helper watches carefully to make sure they do not endanger themselves by stumbling or falling into the fire by 'falling off their ride.'

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Author riding reindeer on the taiga.

