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Summer 2009 • Issue #143

\$7.00 / \$8.00 Canada



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*Ariundelger gathering flowers for her shaman's plant mixture.*



# The Reindeer Herders of Northern Mongolia:

## Community, Ecology, and Spirit Matters

By Marilyn Walker

The yogurt I am drinking has been made from reindeer milk and soon I will go outside to meet the reindeer it has come from. In the meantime, I can hear their rumbling, scuffly, throaty, grumbly, snorting, grunting sounds as they mill around Chulu's tent, occasionally chewing on or rubbing their antlers against the canvas walls, as if they want to be part of the conversation that at times is about them. I am staying in the spring camp of a small group of Dukha reindeer-herders, here to learn about the plants the Dukha and their reindeer use for medicine—and to experience Dukha shamanism, which I have heard is the “strongest” and the “most authentic” because it is “closest to nature.”

Chulu's granddaughter served me the yogurt which I accepted in my right hand in the customary way. As a guest, I am seated on the left side of the tent or *ger* while the family sits on the right or east side—the entrance of their homes always faces south towards the life source, the sun. Ariundelger, Chulu's daughter, is quietly sitting beside her as we talk, but it is not until later that I learn that Chulu's daughter and son, Amarjaraa, are shamans, as are her ancestors. Chulu tells me she is not a shaman herself, however—she was ill when young and so not strong enough to become a shaman.

Known to outsiders as Tsaatan, the Russian word for “reindeer-herder,” they call themselves Dukha, or Tuvan to indicate their ancestral connection with their relatives in Tuva across the Mongolian-Russian border. And they are shamans. Despite years of attempts to weaken their identity, break up their communities, sever their connection to place, and disempower their

shamans (and while most of the Dukha now live a more settled life in the town centre of Tsagaan Nuur), some of the Dukha households continue to live with their reindeer on the taiga. It is this community of Dukha Tsataan, or “reindeer people,” that I am here to learn from. I will teach my classes back in Canada about the Dukha sense of community, their deep ecological knowledge, and the values of respect that underlie all their relationships—human and non-human.

Dukha nomadism, their language, medicine, camps, living arrangements—their entire way of life—has developed over a long period of time and in a particular landscape, the taiga.

“Taiga” is used in Russian and now in English to mean the northern boreal forest that extends in a wide band across the northern hemisphere. The Dukha, however, use it to mean the mountain-tundra plateau found above the alpine treeline. This is because they distinguish amongst the forest, the mountains, and the mountain-tundra or taiga.

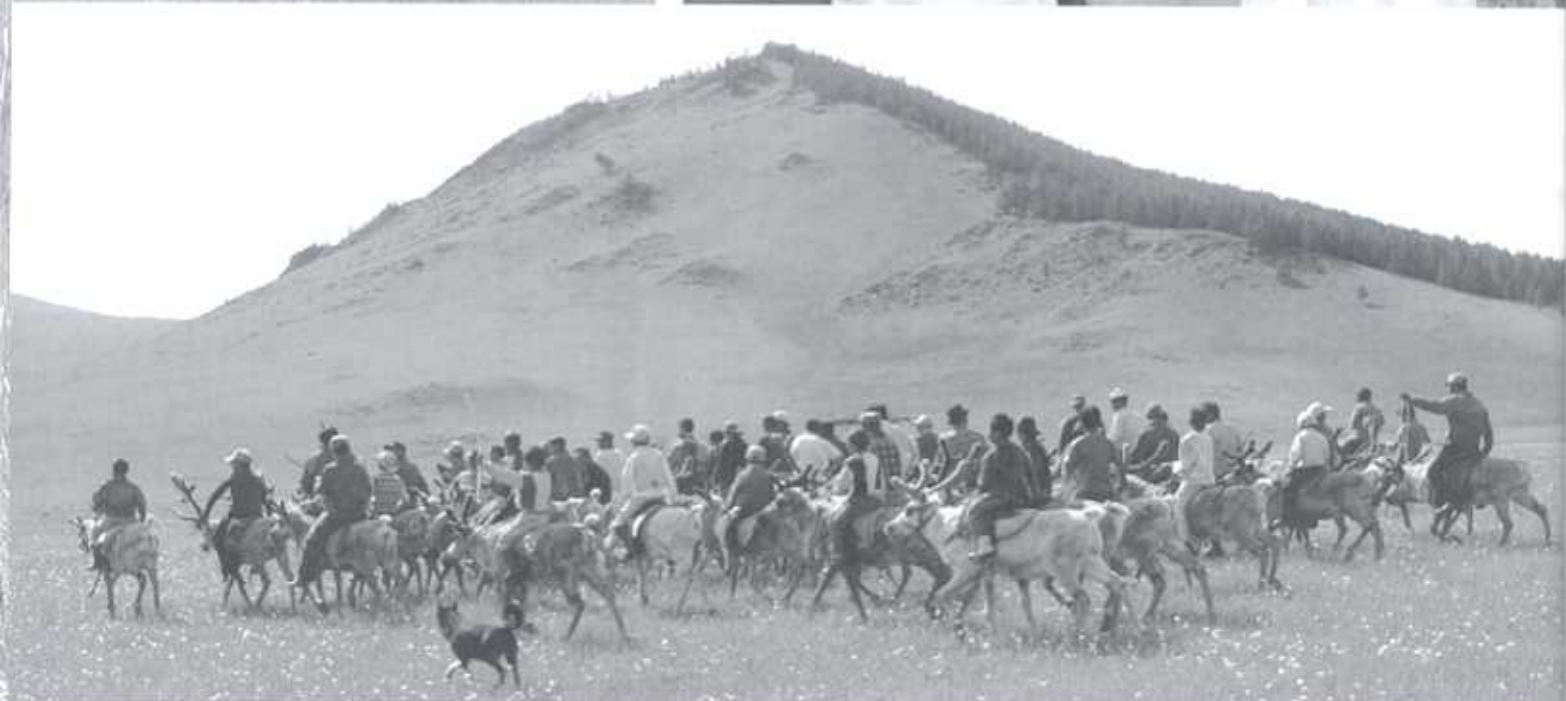
Taiga is actually a term indigenous to several Siberian languages, including Tuvan. The taiga is rich in *shulum*, or “reindeer moss,” which is a lichen and the reindeer's favored food.

Their perception of “ecology” is different from ours in other ways. Not human-centric, it recognizes the close relationship between humans and nature, which are interdependent. And it understands the need for a balance or harmony amongst the plants, animals, the land—all of which have a life force, a sentience. “Ecology” is about the seen or physical world, as is implied in the English term, but for shamans, it also encompasses the unseen world of spirits. This world includes the spir-

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*“Ecology” is about the seen or physical world, as is implied in the English term, but for shamans, it also encompasses the unseen world of spirits. This world includes the spirits of their ancestors with whom connections must be maintained to keep the worlds in balance.*

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*Top left: Magser leaving for the taiga. Top right: Bolormaa's daughters dressed in their best to have their picture taken, and their cousin who wanted to be in the picture too. Middle: Reindeer polo at the Tsaatan Festival in Harmat, Mongolia in 2007. Bottom left: Chui's granddaughter on the spring migration. Bottom right: Tipis on the taiga, spring camp.*

its of their ancestors with whom connections must be maintained to keep the worlds in balance. All Dukha have individual helping spirits which must be treated with respect and in return take care of them and the land on which they depend. Some have very strong helping spirits and the shaman's gift of accessing the assistance and guidance of the spirit world on behalf of their community.

Each shaman has their own strengths depending on their own personalities and also on the characteristics of their spirit helpers. Suyan, who died recently at over 100 years of age, was known for her reindeer medicine. She treated Chulu's reindeer and taught Ariundelger and Amarjaraa about plants. She also designated a spirit reindeer, marked by a red string or ribbon, to protect and care for the herd. And she made spirit bags for each person in the household as protection from sickness and "bad things," and to bring happiness—these hang in the sacred place of the ger opposite the entrance. For the real shamanic people, I was told, you are not even allowed to walk past or sit on the north side of a shaman's home in front of a spirit bag. During the lunar New Year, offerings of food and tea would be made to the spirit bag.

As I carefully lick out my bowl of yogurt so as not to waste a drop, we share a little bit of personal information, discovering we are not too different in age. This surprises Chulu because my hair has not yet turned grey, as hers has. She tells me I am very beautiful but I tell her, no *she* is very beautiful, and we both chuckle. When she stands up to find some plant medicines to show me, I am surprised at how tiny she is. I am tall but Chulu won't even reach my shoulder height. Her size is misleading, though, because she has a presence and strength of character that belie her diminutive size.

Chulu tells me she is getting ready to move to her summer camp on the taiga because it is becoming too warm here for the reindeer, who need colder temperatures to remain healthy. The household belongings are being packed up to be transported by horse and reindeer further up the mountain. As is customary, the spirit bag will be packed carefully on the spirit reindeer at the front of the line to keep them all—humans and reindeer—safe and well. I ask her if she has time to talk to me and she says it will be no problem to delay the move for one more day. "I know you're from far away," she tells me, "but come tomorrow early in the morning."

I've chosen a section of a much longer interview to illustrate how the Dukha sense of community is based on values that come from the heart. It also reveals the deep connection to the land that we often read about amongst traditional peoples, but perhaps don't truly understand. Chulu is speaking about a sustainable way to utilize the medicinal plant, Wansemberuu (*Sau-*

*surea* species) and the holistic use, too, of reindeer medicine.

### "I bring people who are sick to the flower."

Wansemberuu grows in the far reaches of the mountains and is difficult to get to on horseback or even on reindeer. Global warming is devastating its habitat, and it is being over-harvested as well. People come up from the city, from Ulaan Baatar, because they have heard of this plant and its healing properties. One man, I was told, was willing to pay \$40 for a single stem, a lot of money where \$200 a year is a good income for a Dukha family. He wanted to put it in his living room as a collector's item, to show off his wealth and connoisseurship. He didn't realize, as the story is told, that as the plant dried, it would scatter its seeds and bits of itself all over the house, as if resisting its objectification.

Many of us are interested in ethnobotany and in using the plants around us, but we have to relearn the profundities of plant medicine and our subtle energetic connection to the natural world. Therapists have coined the term "nature-deficit disorder" to describe the disconnect with our surroundings that plagues urbanized and industrialized cultures. The time

of year to harvest, the parts of the plant to use in what combination, whether it can be used dry or fresh...but most importantly, having a personal connection with the plant and the land—these are all implicit in Dukha ecological knowledge.

*"There is a flower called Wansemberuu which grows up on the far mountains, especially on the east taiga. On some mountains, it's very rare. We use it in many ways. ... I only visit it from June 20-July 5. So during this period, the flower hasn't fully bloomed—it's still closed. I don't collect the flower but I bring people who are sick to the flower."*

Chulu speaks about when the plant is most beneficial—between June 10 and July 5 before the plant blooms and the flower is still closed. (This is before the plant puts its energy into seed production.) She doesn't cut the flower from its stem or dig up the root; instead she uses it *in situ*, taking the sick person to the flower on a sort of pilgrimage. If the sick person were an adult, the difficulties of the journey would show the intent to get better. Where it is a baby who is sick, the effort that the healer takes shows what the healer is willing to do on the child's behalf, and the power of the land to provide what is needed. Gradually, the plant changes the baby's vibration...as she makes the same journey on three separate days in midsummer—the time of year when the sun is highest in the sky and would be infusing the plant with its energy.

*The time of year to harvest, the parts of the plant to use in what combination, whether it can be used dry or fresh...but most importantly, having a personal connection with the plant and the land—these are all implicit in Dukha ecological knowledge.*



*Top left: Flowers gathered from the taiga for the shaman's plant mixture. Left middle: Bolormaa milking her reindeer. Left bottom: Open storage in the tipi. Top right: The shaman, Amarjanaa. Bottom right: Reindeer polo at the Tsaatan Festival in Hürmat, Mongolia in 2007.*

*"On top of it are drops of dew, drops of moisture. My father used to tell me, don't use all the dew, just one drop..."*

Her father tells her she only needs a single drop. The quantity of the medicine is not important because it is understood that its life force is concentrated in its dew. And she takes only what is needed. Again it is her father who tells her when her son will be alright. How many of us have been able to maintain this connection with our ancestors and the knowledge they have acquired from years of lived experience in a particular landscape? As in other indigenous cultures, elders are key to the community's abilities to sustain itself wisely. But Chulu is also adding to the knowledge passed on to her—instead of using a spoon, she administers the "dew" to her baby from a syringe.

*"The first time, I used a spoon and it was difficult, but the second time, I drew the water up with a syringe and gave it to my son—not even one year old. That winter my son got cold and his lungs were bad and his voice sounded bad. I took him to the flower for three days at the end of June. I had to climb up to the mountain because the plant grows in the higher areas of the mountain. I took my son three times to that flower (once a day). After three visits, my father told me, now your son's going to be good."*

### **"Every part of the reindeer..."**

Next, her father makes soup from a freshly killed reindeer. Mostly, the Dukha rely on hunting in the forest and on milk products from their reindeer, and Dukha wealth has been measured by the number of reindeer in their herds. A reindeer would be killed only on a special occasion such as this one, when the strength of a sick child needed to be restored.

Reindeer forage widely (when they can), eating a wide variety of plants from the forest and the tundra, from the streams and the mountains, from grasses to lichens—all these "medicines" the reindeer would eat depending on what they need to stay healthy. So all the medicines from the Dukha homelands would

be made available to those who consume reindeer milk and, as needed, their meat.

*"Then my father killed a reindeer and made fresh soup for my son. He took a bit of every part of the reindeer, put all the bits into the intestines and boiled them. My father told me, you've got to give him this. I gave him soup, to my son, and little bits of meat. I cut it up really small and gave it to him off a spoon. My son got better and is grown." (from Chulu, June 18, 2006)*

All parts of the animal are used "holistically," to apply a western term to a traditional practice. Chulu's father stuffed a little bit from every part of the freshly killed reindeer into a sausage cased in the intestines, then boiled in a soup so none of the goodness is lost. When Chulu fed tiny bits of meat and spoonfuls of the broth to her baby, she was feeding him bits of the land—its plants, animals, and people. She was feeding him bits of her community—and its spirit—that nurtured her child, herself, her father, and ancestors before them. ❁



*Marilyn Walker, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Mount Allison University, New Brunswick, Canada, teaching courses in ecology, development, ethnobotany, and indigenous knowledge. Her fieldwork has taken her to northern Canada and Alaska, Siberia and Mongolia. For her work with Aboriginal Peoples, she was made an honorary member and elder of the Eastern Woodland Métis Nation. She believes lessons learned from indigenous people may be applied to planning intentional and sustainable communities, and to broadening our understanding of ecology.*

## **The Dukha Community**

The Dukha's sense of community is lived rather than abstract and is structured around the reindeer.

The reindeer and the Dukha are dependent on one another. Some Dukha say that if the reindeer disappear, so too will their culture. The reindeer are domesticated in the literal sense of belonging to the household. In many ways they are treated like family and shown respect. All the community's chores and activities are centred around the care and feeding of their reindeer.

Dukha communities on the taiga are usually a group of tents of two to seven households that move camp to find optimum grazing for the reindeer.

Herding tasks are shared amongst the camp with children at a young age learning to care for the reindeer and keeping them safe. The girls and younger women do the milking and the making of yogurt, cheese, and milk tea. Young men and women and elders help with herding activities in the camp. A few of the men stay with the reindeer in the winter months, living in the open air with their herds to protect them from wolves and other predators. The men also make and repair the reindeer saddles, carts, and their hunting tools. Since they rarely kill a reindeer, they supplement their diet of reindeer milk products with wild animals from the forest.

—Marilyn Walker