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SOME RITUAL TECHNIQUES IN THE BULL-CULT OF THE BURIAT-MONGOLS

The Curl Lecture 1973

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IN THE marriage ritual of the Western Buriat a young birch-tree is planted in the courtyard and a painting on dark-blue cloth is hung from its branches. The young couple prostrate themselves several times before this image, pressing their foreheads to the ground. Meanwhile, an elder from amongst the bridegroom's agnates pronounces a speech in loud and measured tones. This speech seems to do no more than specify the characteristics of some animal—it has a solid backbone, massive hooves, widely spreading horns, a loosely dangling dewlap, and its brow is shiny and hairless; it scratches itself on trees, it rolls in the sand, and urinates as it walks. But these details are heard in reverential silence by those assembled for the wedding, and when they have been listed the bride and bridegroom are legally married, although festivities continue for some time.

This marriage speech, which I shall discuss later in detail, is an example of a kind of material which presents a difficult problem for the anthropologist. This problem is fundamentally one of meaning. Purely intuitive interpretations of meaning in ritual have, since the time of Frazer, been seen to be clearly inadequate. But while anthropology has developed various analytic approaches to the study of ritual, there still remain extraordinary difficulties in the investigation of meaning¹ in alien cultures.

It is possible, as Victor Turner has shown in his excellent studies of Ndembu ritual and belief, to explore the meaning of a symbol in virtually all contexts where it operates, in relation to body imagery, sexual and marital morality, group membership, the inheritance of property, succession to political office, and so on. Such a view sees symbols as essentially 'fixed points of linkage' (Turner 1973: 1103) between animal, vegetable, and cultural domains. Turner recognises that meaning may be at least partially dependent on what he calls 'the positional dimension', i.e. the relation found by the observer between one symbol and other symbols, but the difficulty soon arises of establishing a *method* by which the observer is to find these relations.

This particular difficulty is to some extent overcome by the structuralist anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, since it is with the relations between units of culture that he concerns himself. Edmund Leach (1972: 820) has written '... Lévi-Strauss denies that there is anything to be gained from searching for the particular mean-

ings of particular symbols... He recommends that the anthropologist who seeks to discover the "meaning" of ritual or myth should concern himself with the "structure", that is to say with the relations between the different parts and of the parts to the whole.' Structuralist anthropologists have worked out techniques, many based on earlier work in linguistics, for discovering relations of the kind mentioned by Leach. But in this kind of analysis it is the *anthropologist* who in the last resort is at the origin of the structure. There is the difficulty with this approach of the possible irrelevance of the structures uncovered. Crudely put, the structuralist has to answer the charge: you can discover almost any kind of pattern in almost anything.

An answer to this, it seems to me, is to refer to the instrumental use made of the structures by the people of the culture concerned. It is not necessary for a structure to be consciously employed, but it should be consistently and regularly used within a particular society and culture. To take a simple example: if three knives are used in one part of a ritual and three pieces of meat are eaten later in the ceremony, we have no means of knowing if there is an operative structural relation between the knives and the pieces of meat, unless the number three is consistently employed in this culture to make such connexion and unless knives and meat can be seen as elements in a particular process (or operation) of that culture. According to this schema then, structures are located *in the culture studied*.

One area where it is possible to establish the presence and consistent use of such structures is in ritual language. Scholars agree that there is in Mongolian, and therefore also in the dialect Buriat, and perhaps in other languages, a meta-linguistic category ('ritual language') which includes invocations, song, epics, blessings, proverbs, etc.,² and that this category is defined by its obligatory use of certain 'poetic' techniques akin to our 'rhyme', 'alliteration', etc. These techniques, which differ from language to language, serve to transform ordinary speech into ritual language. I shall refer to them by use of the term 'device' which was employed by the Russian formalists for similar techniques in poetry.³ Examples of 'devices' in Buriat are *badag*, verse in couplets, or *tologoi xolbogo*, literally 'to unite the head', alliteration of the first words of sections of verse. Since such devices are constructs of a particular culture, not of the anthro-

pologist, and since their use is obligatory in creating ritual language, they are ideally suited as means for discovering the significance of rituals. The effect they have is to point to certain relations between the elements of ritual texts.

If we take a Peircean view of 'meaning', that is as the interpretation of concepts through equivalent concepts, or the representation of a thought by subsequent thoughts,⁴ then a study of the concrete use of devices will already convey some meaning.

However, it is possible to go a stage further than this, since the elements of ritual texts pointed out by devices are themselves arranged in linguistic relationships, that is, in grammatical categories. As Boas pointed out as long ago as 1911, different grammatical processes convey different semantic information. He considered that to describe the constituent units of language without regard to their function (e.g. denoting activity, person, interrogation, substance, etc.) is like a description of a machine without reference to the task of its working parts. We may take as an example of the meaning derived from grammatical categories the difference between our understanding of the word 'cover' in the phrase 'that cover' as opposed to our understanding of the same word in the sentence 'Cover that'. Lexically the words are identical, but grammatically they are different. The meaning conveyed by lexical categories may be distinguished from that of grammatical categories by the fact that while the former are open, unrestricted sets, the latter are closed sets of fixed items, 'rules' which may be relatively easily formulated and understood.⁵ Furthermore, the use of grammatical categories is obligatory and consistent.

For these reasons, despite controversies as to the implications of 'grammatical meaning', as Jakobson (1959b: 139–45) called it, with regard to culture,⁶ Boas's idea is still useful to anthropologists. Grammatical categories give us a second set of structures, belonging indubitably to the culture we are studying, which we may take up when making our analysis of ritual language.

In my view, devices and grammatical categories are deliberately manipulated in ritual language in such a way as to establish particular relations between elements of the text. Because these techniques themselves have semantic content, the effect is to lend a separate, additional, ritual meaning to the elements thus related. Such 'meanings' are not usually overtly present in everyday language, but since they are part of culture they are consistent with (or even identical with) other symbolic associations which might occur. Ritual texts which may be the only concrete embodiments of particular semantic relations of this kind seem at first inexplicable and strange, but this does not imply that they are isolated from social behaviour and beliefs.

One such text is the wedding speech (*yörööl*) of the Western Buriat which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. I shall take it as a test case and try to work out what it 'means' in social terms by using the

technique I have outlined above. It is impossible to undertake an even partial interpretation and explanation of ritual without a knowledge of the context, especially the social context and the beliefs which accompany it; therefore I shall now briefly indicate the relevant part of the society and culture of the Western Buriat and their cult of the bull.

The Western Buriat are a Mongolian-speaking people living on the western and northern shores of Lake Baikal in south-east Siberia. They have always had horses, cattle, sheep and goats, but as a result of demand for agricultural produce from Russian towns in Siberia they have also developed arable farming, and as a consequence live in larger settlements and nomadise less than other Mongols. They nevertheless think of herding as the most valuable and honourable part of their economy, and long transhumant, or migratory journeys are important in their cultural history. The Buriats have never had a centralised political organisation. Segmentary patrilineal clans and descent-groups, called *esege* 'father', or *yahan* 'bone',⁷ are organised in a genealogical hierarchy, and most political positions were traditionally inherited in the male line. Even in 1967, when I worked among Buriats, nearly everyone still remembered nine generations of patrilineal ancestors, and many people knew complete collateral descent lines of many generations. A supernatural quality called *udxa* was supposed to descend through males, giving the right to certain positions: only one descent line could produce chiefs, only one provide shamans, only one collect particular herbs, and so on.

The Western Buriat are traditionally shamanists, and the bull which I shall describe is one of their most important deities; despite official discouragement and atheist propaganda, the cult of the bull continues in isolated places. Old men say that the bull-deity, Buxa-Noyon, was especially active during the second world war, fighting for the Red Army on their Western Front; the bull apparently left the lines and came back home in 1944, saying that the war would be won the next year, as true enough it was.⁸ Buxa-Noyon is also worshipped by Buriats who were converted to Lamaism. He was given the Tibetan name Rinchen-Chalpo and respected as a mountain-spirit.⁹ There is a place in the Sayan Mountains, south-west of Lake Baikal, where he is said to have turned into stone. Two white pillars of rock are his horns; these are surmounted by a Lamaist stupa on one horn, and a rather belatedly built Russian Orthodox chapel on the other. This latter is supposed by Buriats to have destroyed the power in this horn. Be this as it may, religious believers to this day say that women are forbidden to go anywhere near either horn of the stone bull.¹⁰

Before I describe the bull cult itself, I shall give an account of the myth of Buxa-Noyon, which is directly linked with and explains the cult. This is perhaps the best-known of all Western Buriat myths and numerous versions are known to me, both published and unpublished. In what follows I shall give the most com-

mon version together with certain additions for which I give references.

After fighting with the Eastern Sky-Deities, the son of the senior Western Sky-Deity descended to earth.¹¹ He changed himself into a beautiful dark-blue bull (*xara xüü buxa*) with yellow horns, as clear in colour as the day sky. Then the son of the Eastern Sky-Deity descended to earth and turned into a striped, piebald bull (*taaral ereen buxa*), as patchy in colour as the night sky. Other versions say that this bull was wild (*taigun buxa*) (Gerasimova 1969: 118) or that it was the bull of the herd belonging to Taiji Khan.¹² The striped bull called out that no earthly bull could defeat him in a fight. The dark-blue bull was at that time only two years old. In order to grow strong he sucked the umbilical cords of bulls (Sandschijew 1927–8: 946) and ate the flowers which grew on their shoulders (Sandschijew 1927–8: 946). He went up to the sky and copulated with the cows in his father's herd. All these cows were white and up to now barren. Suddenly, they all had calves, but these calves were dark-blue (Khangalov 1958: 423). Seeing this, the bull's father, Esege-Malan-Tengri, sent his herdsman to chase away this new bull. The dark-blue bull came down to earth again, and when he was three years old he challenged the striped bull with loud roaring and goring of the earth.

The bulls fought for days, but neither of them could defeat the other. The daughter of Taiji Khan, owner of the striped bull, came out to watch the fight and praised the beauty of the dark-blue bull. The blue bull tried to mount her. The Khan's daughter started to laugh: 'What a fool that new bull is!' (Gerasimova 1969: 119). Another version of this section says that when the Khan's daughter saw that her father's bull was retreating, switching its tail in frustration, she struck the blue bull with a stick. The blow was not hard enough to hurt him, but since she was menstruating the bull was polluted and lost all his strength. He gave up the fight, but glared frightfully at her on leaving, and as a result she became pregnant (Sandschijew 1927–8: 946; Baldaev 1970: 35, Variant 2).

All the local bulls reincarnated themselves in the striped bull to help him defeat the heavenly bull (Gerasimova 1969: 119). The blue bull's father brought his son up to the top of a mountain and gave him huge horns reaching to the sky, and massive hooves (Gerasimova 1969: 119). The blue bull said to himself, 'If I can't beat him by strength, I'll beat him by intelligence. If I fall on my front, let the Mongolian Khan win, if I fall on my back, let the Russian Khan win.' He went down to fight the striped bull and allowed himself to be butted and tossed in the air. He fell onto his back, got up, and went away to the North where he changed into stone. The striped bull realised that he had been cheated of victory and rushed after his enemy. He drove full tilt into the stone bull and broke his horn. Defeated, he said:

'I make three-year-old bull have broken horn,
I make three-year-old cow have tightly wrinkled-up
opening,
They will offer me just as many sacrifices as you!'

and he went back up to the Eastern Heavens.¹³

Meanwhile, the Taiji Khan's daughter found that

she was about to give birth. In another version of this episode, the blue bull fought by day, but at night turned into a handsome young man and slept with the Khan's daughter; as a result she became pregnant (Sandschijew 1927–8: 945). She was accused by her father of immorality and was sent away to a separate hut to bear her child in disgrace. She put the baby into a cradle with iron straps and threw it away in the direction of Lake Baikal. The baby in its cradle flew across the sea onto the northern bank and landed in a hole gored by a bull in the ground. The dark-blue bull found the baby, hung the cradle on his horn, (Gerasimova 1969: 118) and gave the child nourishment, giving it his penis to suck. Other versions say it suckled the umbilical cord of the bull.

At that time on the northern shore of Baikal there lived two old shamanesses, Asuixan and Xusuixan. As they were childless, their husbands had rejected them and were just about to put out the fires in their yurts and drive them away. Asuixan shamanised and found out that they would both have sons, one of which was already on this earth, lying under the dewlap of a dark-blue bull. Asuixan went to get the baby, but the bull refused to give it up. She went home and shamanised again and found out that the bull was Buxa-Noyon-Baabai ('bull-lord-daddy'), and that he would not give up the child until she gave a sacrifice of three animals: (1) a big white mare with a yellowish tinge to its hair, (2) a big ram with horns, and (3) a dark-yellow billy-goat. She made the sacrifice and Bull-Lord-Daddy gave up the baby. It was called 'Found-in-the-hole-gored-by-a-bull-Bulagat.'

But when she got home, Asuixan found that she could not open up the iron straps of the cradle. When she shamanised, Bull-Lord told her that she should perform a ceremony with a bull's bone, and place it in the cradle with the child. She did this, and sure enough, the cradle opened.

Taiji Khan's daughter had followed the bull and found that she was pregnant again. Ashamed, she bore the child in seclusion and then put it into a reed cradle and cast it into the sea. She did the same with another boy and a girl. Bulagat met three playmates when he was playing on the shore of Baikal, two boys and a girl. Xusuixan wanted to catch these children, but as she reached out, the children cried: 'Father Mountain, Mother Sea, save us!' One of the boys turned into a black squirrel and ran way into the forest, the girl changed into a seal and jumped back into the sea (Potanin 1883: 825). One boy was left. Xusuixan squeezed her breasts and got milk. She made very strong milk brandy and left it on the shore for the boy; he drank it and went to sleep, and as he was sleeping she was able to capture him. He was called 'Found-on-the-sea-shore-Ekhirit'. Ekhirit and Bulagat are the ancestors of the Western Buriat. The dark-blue bull went on travelling. He went to Xoimor and spent the night at Buxain-Xevtege ('bull's lying-place') but he did not like it there because women were not respectful to him, sitting with their fronts facing him. He went on to Marmot Sands, where he bellowed 55 times; then he went to Düröö Khantinüür where he cut the cliff with his horns and formed a pass; at Montsog Sands he rolled over and over; then he went to the Sayan Mountains at Toroi, where he turned

into stone (Gerasimova 1969: 120). His wife was called Budang-Lady ('mist-lady'). He and his sons became the nine spirit-owners of the nine Western Mountains.¹⁴

This myth is about fertility, and the whole process of conception, birth, and nurturing of children. But what is surprising is the extent to which the female role in this process is fragmented, one might almost say disintegrated. There are at least three women connected with the bull, each of whom perform different functions. The Khan's daughter, who in most versions of the myth does not even copulate with the bull, bears his children in isolation and disgrace and dares not acknowledge them. Furthermore, she is unclean and polluting because she menstruates, just as Buriat women are traditionally considered to be. Even her function as mother is to some extent taken away from her by the bull: the child is found enclosed in an iron cradle in a hole in the ground gored by the bull (a metaphor, we may assume, for the womb and vagina, since the earth is always 'female' in Mongol shamanist cosmology), and the baby is then nurtured *not* by a woman but by the umbilical cord or penis of the bull. He will not give the child to human beings, nor let it out of its iron cradle (metaphors for birth and entry into social life) until a certain sacrifice and a particular rite have been performed. This sacrifice and this rite are regularly, indeed obligatorily, performed by shamanist Buriats exactly as indicated in the myth; although the aim of these rites is intimately connected with childbirth, no mention is made in them of Taiji Khan's daughter, or indeed of any woman.

A further essential function of women, the feeding of babies at the breast, is given in the myth to the barren old shamanesses, Asuixan and Xusuixan. But even mother's milk has a slightly dubious connotation here, since it is used to make an intoxicating drink (sinful, according to Mongol ideas) in order to entrap the children of the sea.

Lastly, the bull is given a consort, Mist Lady, with whom he has nine spirit-sons. But she never emerges as a separate identity. Nothing is known of her—she is a female reflection of the identity of Bull-Lord. Several important deities of the Buriat pantheon have such consorts, all with names like Mist, Haze, Vapour which in the traditional view express ideas of inactivity and oppressiveness.¹⁵

The myth really seems to be saying that the bull-ancestor commands all aspects of fertility. This becomes an important ideological point in the context of human conception and birth. Buriats believe, within the context of this system, that it is by contact with the bull that men's fertility is guaranteed.¹⁶

The 'cult' of the bull provides the occasions on which this contact may take place. It has three important manifestations in Buriat life. The first is the annual lineage sacrifice (*tailgan*); the second is the consecration of a living bull as an incarnation of Buxa Noyon (*ongon buxa*); and the third is the

'invocation' of the bull at the wedding ceremony. I give below a brief description of these rites before proceeding to the analysis of the ritual language used in the wedding ceremony.

The lineage sacrifice to the bull takes place on a hill-top where there are several ancient stone altars, and usually not only Buxa Noyon is addressed but also his nine sons, the spirit-owners of famous mountains. This sacrifice is complemented by another sacrifice (*tailgan*) later in the year which is offered to the spirit-owners of waters and seas.¹⁷ While women are forbidden to go anywhere near the mountain on which the sacrifice to the bull is conducted,¹⁸ they may be present at the low water-meadows where the offering to the water-spirits takes place; in this connexion it should be remembered that in the myth mountains are called 'Father', while the lake or sea is 'Mother'.

All males of the patrilineage must attend the sacrifice to the bull however far away their pastures may be.¹⁹ Non-attendance means rejection of the lineage, and until recently was almost unheard of.

The sacrifice consists of an offering of the very animals prescribed in the myth: a white mare, a ram, and a billy-goat. The animals are ritually killed: the head, skin, horns, hooves, wind-pipe, lungs, and tail are stuck on a pole pointing towards the abode in the western sky of Buxa Noyon, the bull-ancestor, while the bones are burnt and the flesh is eaten. If the shaman reports that Buxa Noyon has accepted the sacrifice, then it is understood that the bull will deign to come down to earth. The men present arrange themselves in strict order of seniority in the lineage. The bull-spirit comes down and enters the shaman who has reached a trance state; he goes on all fours, bellows, paws the ground, and tosses earth in the air. Then he goes up to each man and butts him hard like a bull, making each man fall over onto his back. After this, he charges up to a ritually-planted tree on which a drawing of Buxa Noyon is hanging, butts this, and then retires.²⁰

Informants say that each man receives some part of the spirit of the bull-ancestor when he is butted; falling onto his back, he receives the blessing of the sky, which is the essential creative force in Buriat cosmology.²¹ But it would be a mistake to see the significance of butting simply in terms of sexual fertility.

In cattle, aggressive butting between bulls is concerned not only with the right to copulate with cows, but also with the status ranking within the herd. The dominant animal is the one which has butted all the other animals, but which has not allowed itself to be butted. Buriat herdsman must be aware of this, and it may be this which provides a model for the butting at the lineage sacrifice. The social hierarchy of cattle is a linear one, and this can be seen to parallel the strict lineal hierarchy of father to sons and older brother to younger brothers in Buriat agnatic groups, which is represented by the line of kinsmen at the

sacrifice. In general, in cattle herds, all bulls are dominant over all cows, which are dominant over all calves, and the top bull is the oldest and heaviest. Although there are sometimes groups of animals of equal status in a herd, these groups usually occur at the bottom of the hierarchy among the youngest animals (Hafez 1962: ch. 10). The association of butting with dominance also occurs in the myth, where the fight of the two bulls represents the opposition between the rulers of Mongolia and Russia, the two great political powers on the Buriat horizon.

Of all the domestic animals herded by the Buriat, it seems that cattle society is the most analogous to human society. Horse herds, for example, are organised on a different principle, with pairs of animals of the same sex and standing being important and with a more fluid pattern in general (Hafez 1962: ch. 9). Buriats even find an analogy among cattle for the social category of chaste men, i.e. Buddhist lamas. They have a saying which goes:

Keep away from a lama who has become a layman
Keep away from a castrated ox which has been a bull²²

The second manifestation of the cult of the bull happens when a man decides that he needs special activity on the part of Buxa Noyon in promoting his own or his herd's fertility. This man takes a dark-blue bull (that is, a black bull with a bluish sheen) and asks a shaman to make the bull into an *ongon*, or incarnation. The shaman purifies the animal and then calls down Buxa Noyon to take residence in it. Thereafter, this incarnation of the deity is treated with great respect; no-one may drive it, frighten it, or wave things at it, and women in particular must keep their distance.

Such a bull is never allowed to die a natural death. It is ritually killed, and the head, with ears and horns, lungs, dewlap, hooves, tail and sexual organs is preserved by the owner. One of the bull's souls is sent back to the western sky, but the other remains in these parts of its body. Often, the owner cuts off the bull's head with its horns and dewlap and puts it on a post in the yard facing outwards.²³ It is supposed to frighten away evil spirits. An alternative is to put up a post with a representation of the male sexual organs which is explicitly designed to frighten female spirits (Khangalov 1960b: 11). (See plates 1 and 2.)

The third manifestation of the cult of the bull, and the one I am primarily concerned with in this paper, occurs during the final and most important phase of the marriage, called the *mürgüümje*. It is preceded by such ceremonies as the betrothal, the payment of the brideprice, the farewell of the bride to her kin, the taking away of the bride, and the arrival of the bride's kinsmen at the bridegroom's camp. The *mürgüümje* is the essential rite of marriage, and it is followed by a communal feast of the two lineages involved.

The *mürgüümje* rite takes place in the courtyard of the bridegroom's father's house or tent. A birch-tree is planted in the ground and on it are hung several paintings on cloth, representations or incarnations of

deities, called *ongons*, the most important one being an *ongon* of Buxa Noyon. Beside these is hung the fur-coat of the bridegroom's mother. Under this tree, in genealogical hierarchy, sit the elders of the bridegroom's patrilineage and certain respected and fertile couples. The bride and her kin form one train, and the bridegroom and his kin another. The two trains go out of the back gate, avoiding looking at each other, make circles in opposite directions, meet at the front gate, and proceed together to where the old men are sitting. The custom of walking in two circles is explained by a myth of the creation of humanity. Esege-Malaan-Tengri made something called *exein altan umai* 'mother's golden womb', and something else called *eseğin müngün serge* 'father's silver tethering-post'. These two things were sent down to this world where they floated on the Milk Sea. The mother's golden womb went in the direction of the sun, and the father's silver tethering-post went in a circle the other way. They met, and people were created.

When the trains of the bride and bridegroom join together and move towards the birch-tree, the couple are allowed to look at one another for the first time. The man prostrates himself on the ground before the *ongon* of Buxa Noyon, and the senior elder makes a speech; the girl bows to the ground before the mother-in-law's fur-coat, and a senior old woman makes a speech. This is the essence of the religious part of the marriage, and it is this brief ritual as it concerns the bridegroom that I am now going to examine. I shall attempt to show that the way this ritual operates is by manipulating structures to convey meaning.

First, I shall refer briefly to *ongon* drawings hung on the branches of the tree, which, it will be remembered, are an integral part not only of the wedding but also of the sacrifice ritual. These drawings are not simply realistic or literal representations of bulls—this function is much better performed by transforming a living bull from the herd into an *ongon* incarnation. The drawing conveys ideas or makes a statement. I would suggest that the ideas conveyed by the drawings are similar to those recounted in the wedding-speech, but that since they are conveyed by graphic rather than linguistic means, the function of the *ongon* is to some extent complementary to that of the speech. In order to make an *ongon* which correctly represents a group of ideas (i.e. a deity), rules must be followed. It is just as impossible to jumble up pictures of people and animals on a bit of cloth and call this an *ongon* as it is to string together words without observing grammatical rules and call this a sentence. The difference is that while the wedding-speech has a diachronic form whose structures are relatively difficult to appreciate, and indeed may not be manifest until the speech has finished, the *ongon* drawing has a synchronic form where structures are more immediately apparent.²⁴ (See plates 3 and 4.)

The *ongon* of Buxa Noyon is one of a series drawn on rectangular pieces of dark-blue cloth. One of the

basic rules of these *ongons* is that one edge becomes established as the sky, while the opposite one becomes the earth; one vertical edge becomes the side of the moon, and the other the side of the sun. The result is that the rectangle of cloth becomes, as it were, a graph. In the vertical dimension any object drawn is closer to, or further away from the sky than others; in the horizontal direction, any object belongs more to the sun or to the moon, or right and left.

Plate 3 is an *ongon* of Buxa Noyon and his sons in which we see that a parallel is drawn between the men and the mountains, since there are nine representations of each. We know from the myth that Buxa Noyon's second son called out, 'Father Mountain', and 'Mother Sea', and that the bull himself turned into a horn-shaped mountain in the Sayan Range; and furthermore the way the mountains are drawn in this *ongon*, a combination of horn-like and phallic shapes, is not inappropriate to the bull cult. But why should there be *nine* mountains and men, and is this number significant? One place the answer to this appears is in Buriat number riddles.²⁵ A typical number series starts: One—I can never forget a man I have seen once; Two—I shall not drop something I hold with both hands; Three—a three-legged (i.e. hobbled) horse will never cross three mountain passes, and so on. The number nine, almost without exception, has to do with male status derived from fertility. A common formula is: Nine—a man with nine sons is the elder of the hamlet. This *ongon* is therefore making a simple relation of equivalence between the men and the mountains, with the mountains closer to the sky than the men; it is the structural category 'nine', with its meanings of status and fertility, which serves to put the men and mountains into a relationship and make them equivalent.²⁶ The tree with the snake beneath it on the side of the moon²⁷ is the world-tree by which passage is made from this world to the sky. It could therefore be seen in the present context as indicating the possibility of transition.²⁸

In another version of the Buxa Noyon *ongon* (see plate 4), men mediate between bulls and sky. Here, men are made equivalent to bulls, again by use of the number nine. The identification is further brought out by making one man larger than the others, and one bull clear-coloured, not striped or piebald like the rest—perhaps a reference to Buxa Noyon himself.

All I am really concerned about here is to show that *ongons* have a characteristic way of conveying information, and a particular function in the ritual. Their way of creating meaning is to use structural rules, e.g. the distinction between 'sky' and 'earth', in order to place individual items in relationship. These individual items, like the lexical units in the speeches, have certain meanings from their use as ideas in everyday life; but both the drawings and the spoken texts use special ritual devices (for example, the parallel use of the number nine) in such a way as to establish special ritual relations, or 'meanings', which are not overtly

present in everyday contexts—thus, 'man is equivalent to mountain'.

It was this perception of the structures present in *ongon* drawings which made me look with more attention at the rather more complicated structures of the texts of the marriage speeches.

With even a small general familiarity with the ideas which are important in the cult of the bull, it is possible to make something of this marriage-speech to the bridegroom:

Udai müngün tengerhee Utxa tataja buuhan	Wide silver sky (from) Patrilineal-essence drawing-out descended
Xüxü müngün tengerhee Xüi tataja buuhan	Dark-blue silver sky (from) Umbilical cord drawing-out descended
Xüje yexe nyurgaaraa Öndör tengeriye zuraja Gegee gargaja buuhan Xüler yexe turuugaaraa	Solid great spine (with your) Lofty sky outlining Light making descended Massive great hooves (with your)
Örgön delexeiye duxaja Xargui gargaja buuhan Haraima yexe evereeree	Spacious earth piercing Road making descended Spreading great horns (with your)
Sümbül uulaida olijo	Sümbül (Sumer) mountain (into) goring
Xütel gargaja buuhan Hanjama yexe boinogooroo	Pass making descended Dangling great dewlap (with your)
Sün dalaida oimojo Olom gargaja buuhan Sagaan elhen xölböölögötöi Sagdul modon şörgöölögötöi	Sün (Milk) sea (into) wading Ford making descended White sand rolling-place (with) Young tree scratching instrument (with)
Xongor dubuun xölböölögötöi	Favourite hillock rolling-place (with)
Xuhan modon şörgöölögötöi	Birch tree scratching instrument (with)
Buryaad xüünde zayabari Bulgad xüünde tüüxe Buxa noyon baabain Boinog doron shurgan yereerei Budang xatun iibiin Umai doron shurgan yereerei	Buriat people (for) fated-one Bulgad people (for) history Bull lord daddy (of) Dewlap under copulating please go Mist lady mummy (of) Vagina under copulating please go ²⁹

This is clearly about Buxa Noyon and describes his horns, spine, hooves, dewlap, and even his way of scratching himself on certain trees and rolling in the sand. The speech seems to put some emphasis on Buxa Noyon's characteristic of walking through difficult places and establishing routes—a trait of which Buriats say, 'You can as soon stop cattle walking as you can stop a dog barking'. It might be possible to say that the Buriats see an analogy between the herds of cattle which walk across the steppe following their leader, and Buriat family caravans on the move. But this, while it might or might not be true, is the kind of intuitive deduction from the text which I am anxious to supersede in the study of ritual. And in fact, from a straight reading of the text it is difficult to see, even by intuitive deduction, what relevance it has to Buriat society in general, let alone to the particular ceremony of marriage.

This is because, in my opinion, such texts are not meant to be read (or listened to) in a straightforward way. They are structured by means of devices which require the listener to make new connexions and to

pay attention to particular grammatical categories. It is my suggestion, that the study of these devices, as in the *ongon* drawings, will convey to us meanings which are not apparent, and are perhaps even unrecognisable, from a straightforward reading of the text and a knowledge of the culture.

Very briefly, the important devices used in this particular kind of speech are:³⁰

First, a rule called *tologoi xolbogo*, ‘to unite the head’, that is, to make alliterations between the first syllables, or words, of two or more lines. This is a metrical device indicating where the beginnings of the lines are (cf. rhyme in English verse which indicates where the ends of the lines are).

Secondly, there is a general rule in Mongolian ritual language concerned with making the number of words and syllables equal from line to line (*ügiyn toog tegšeer öröx* or *ügiyn üyeiyg adil tegš xolbox*) (Xorloo 1959: 64–5).

The third rule I shall investigate here, and perhaps the most important, is known as *avia davtan zoxitsuula* (Xorloo 1959: 62) (literally, ‘sound repeating bringing into relationship’). This device creates relationships of certain definite kinds between lines or whole groups of lines by the repetition of sounds, i.e. syllables, suffixes, words, or phrase and sentence structure. This is roughly the same as ‘parallelism’ in English studies. In the text given above, the first two lines are parallel to, or ‘repeat the sound’ of (*avia davta-*), the second two lines, and this is followed by four groups of three lines which parallel one another, and so on.

All the devices I have mentioned here are important, and virtually no Mongol or Buriat ritual language text is found without them; but of these three, parallelism is the over-riding one. Thus it is only because we know that

Xüxü müngün tengerhee
Xüi tataja buuhan

is parallel to the first two lines, that we do not link *xüi* and *xüje* by the rule of ‘uniting the head’.

These then are some of the important rules by which Buriats transform ordinary language into ritual language. But these rules are not used in isolation, they are not separated from one another, and, more important, they are not divorced from the grammatical rules which apply to normal speech. Grammatical categories appear within or through the ritual language devices. Furthermore, since grammatical categories must be used, and since devices while they do link elements of language do not necessarily have meaning beyond ‘like’ and ‘not-like’ (*ijil, ijilgüy*; Xorloo 1959: 63), a two-way reaction is created: the devices point out which grammatical categories are important in the text as ritual, and the grammatical categories serve to give a more precise meaning to the relationships established by devices.

Clearly, ritual devices of the kind described above will create large numbers of relations between elements of the text. I would suggest that those relations

present in the greatest number of variants of the text are likely to be more significant culturally than those present only in single variants. If my thesis is correct—that ritual language uses devices to create meaningful relations between elements which are not so related in everyday language—then it follows that the anthropologist will discover economic, social and historical material of various kinds which confirms, even if indirectly, the seemingly strange relations created by the ritual text. This is because no structures created by society can be separate from or independent from the techno-economic and social conditions of that society.

I discuss below some examples from the Buriat wedding *yörööl*.

At the phonetic level, Mongolian and Buriat distinguish between what I shall call for brevity front (e, ö, ü, and i³¹) and back (a, o, u) vowels. In any particular word, vowels of only one series will occur, with the exception of the sound *i*. Words with back vowels are called ‘male’, while front vowel words are called ‘female’. Semantically, male words seem to be in some ways opposite to corresponding female words when such exist, for example, *arsalan* (back vowels) means ‘lion’, while *erselen* (front vowels) means ‘fabulous lion or tiger-eating animal’, and it is possible to find connexions in some series of words (e.g. the names of domestic animals) between semantic categories and the distribution of back/front vowels.³² But while the back/front distinction may have little, or even non-existent, semantic value in everyday speech, it is clear that it becomes important in ritual language.

The wedding speech on p. 20 goes as follows with back and front vowel values extracted:

B = back vowel syllable
F = front vowel syllable

BB FF FFF
BB BBB BB
FF FF FFF
FF BBB BB
FF FF BBB
FF FFF BBB
FF BBB BB
FF FF BBB
FF FFF BBB
BB BBB BB
BBB FF FFFF
FF BBB BBB
FF BBB BB
BBB FF BBBB
F BBB BBB
BB BBB BB
BB FF FFFF
BB BB FFFF
BB BB FFFF
BB BB FFFF

The ‘uniting the head’ device serves to link the first

two lines together and the second two lines together, while the parallelism device connects all four lines by making the second two lines ‘repeat the sound’ of the first two. With the exception of the first words in the lines, the words are repeated exactly. This has the effect of drawing the attention to these very *non-repeated* words, that is *udai* (wide) and *udxa* (patrilineal essence) on the one hand, and *xüxü* (dark-blue) and *xüi* (umbilical cord) on the other. Since these words are clearly deliberately contrasted in their use of vowels—the first pair having back vowels and the second pair front vowels—and since this contrast is known as the difference between ‘male’ and ‘female’ it seems reasonable to say that these words are in a relation of complementarity.

This means that the text is stating that ‘wide’ and ‘patrilineal essence’ on the one hand, and ‘dark blue’ and ‘umbilical cord’ on the other, are complementary ideas. I shall focus for the moment on the pair ‘patrilineal essence’ and ‘umbilical cord’, since *udai müngün tenger* and *xüx müngün tenger* are two of a series of deities’ names and hence it is doubtful whether *udai* and *xüxü* should be taken as separate concepts in the present context.

The text indicates by ritual devices that ‘patrilineal essence’ and ‘umbilical cord’—which are incomparable in terms of everyday categories—are complementary in the context of this ritual. How is this? It appears that the girl a Buriat man should marry, his ‘predestined girl’ (Baldaev 1959: 24–5), is called *xüitei-süitei xün* ‘the person with the umbilical cord and the ring’,³³ that is, a girl of the category ‘mother’s brother’s daughter’, someone linked through the womb, connected through the mother and the mother’s mother. Buriat women preserve the umbilical cords of the children, since it is thought that the cord is somehow a ‘line of life’ whose magic power would be broken if the cord were to be thrown away.³⁴ Of course, one might guess that the umbilical cord could have a relation to descent through females, but it was not until I had noticed the use of the back vowel/front vowel categories in this text that I knew it was associated by the Buriat with female descent and thought of as complementary to patrilineal essence.³⁵

This example can tell us more about the handling of words in ritual language. I looked at other versions of the text³⁶ and discovered that in some variants, while the first two lines are more or less identical to Boldonova’s version, the word *xem* is substituted for the word *xüi* in the last line:

Udai müngün tengerhen	Wide silver sky (from)
Udxa baryaji buuhan	Patrilineal-essence holding descended
Xüxü müngün tengerhen	Dark-blue silver sky (from)
Xem baryaji buuhan	‘Measure’ holding descended ³⁷

Xem has the meaning ‘size’, ‘measure’, ‘framework’, ‘limits’, and seemed totally out of place in the present context. Then I noticed another variant of the text where *xem* is replaced by *xeb*, which has the meaning ‘mould’ or ‘form’,³⁸ and another where the word is

xebšerge, which can be translated ‘the thing which gives form’.³⁹ These variants remained puzzling to me until I came across a myth in which the hero emerged from his *exein altan xebel*, literally, his ‘mother’s golden womb’, but translated by a well-known Buriat scholar as the ‘golden measure’, with the explanation that birth by the ‘golden measure’ is normal birth from the womb, as opposed to magical birth via the armpits or navel (Ulanov 1960: 36, 302). It then occurred to me that, as in Latin, the concept of ‘womb’ in Buriat may have the symbolic meaning of ‘matrix’ or ‘thing which gives form’;⁴⁰ consequently, when the use of structural devices brings the reciprocal *xeb* into a relation of complementarity with *udxa* (patrilineal essence), the effect is to draw out and specify a nuance from amongst the potential meanings of this word. It may be that the terms *xeb* and *xem* are used in this sense nowhere else in Buriat language, and in the present case the possibility of using them in this way is given only by the necessary presence of the ritual devices. The structure thus in some ways objectively pre-exists; it is able to indicate to the participants in the ritual which aspects of a certain idea are operative.

Another example. The two lines

haraima yexe evertai	spreading great horns (with)
hanjama yexe boinogtoi	dangling great dewlap (with)

are isolated from the rest of the text by all three devices of ‘uniting the head’, ‘making equal’, and ‘repeating the sound’ (see Appendix 1). Here, the back vowel/front vowel distinction makes *evertai* ‘with horn’ complementary to *boinogtoi* ‘with dewlap’.

The horn, as we saw earlier from the myth, is enlarged to great proportions before the fight during which the Khan’s daughter becomes magically pregnant, and it is also the horn which digs the hole in the ground in which the baby is found. As for the dewlap, it is recorded that among the Western Buriat a bull’s power is thought to be located in his dewlap, and that certain magical rites called *boinog xaxalxa* (‘to slit the dewlap in two’) are carried out by the owners of large herds in order to preserve and increase the fertility of the bull.⁴¹

From the physiology of bulls, and even from the available ethnography, there is no particular reason to link the horns and dewlap in everyday contexts. But the fact that the Buriat deliberately set up a relationship between them in a ritual concerned with fertility in men indicates that they can be seen as analogical with the penis and scrotum.⁴² This is ethnographically useful: we can now see why the herdsman chooses his bull’s dewlap in which to make the fertility-giving incision, and why a bull’s head with dewlap put on a post is as frightening to evil female spirits as a wooden phallus.

In ordinary life and non-ritual thought, as far as we know, the Buriats do not associate bulls’ horns with their dewlaps; these are only brought into relation by

a structure, which thus objectifies the ideas they represent.

When the poetic devices isolate lines where there is no opposition of back to front vowels, as in the first words of the following lines:

budaan бүтэ бударгahan	barley-grain like scattered
bulag бүтэ деберgehen	spring-water like poured out

we may take it that the relationship established is one of equivalence rather than complementarity. This means that *budaan* ('barley-grain') is equivalent to *bulag* ('spring-water'). I shall not now investigate the semantic implications of this, since I have already discussed the use of the back vowel/front vowel categories at length, except to say that it is quite consistent with the ethnography. Another clear example of this is the relation of equivalence established between Buxa Noyon and Budang Xatun (see text below), that is, between Bull Lord and Mist Lady—this is entirely consistent with the idea of the consort as a reflection of the male deity (see p. 18).

Mongolian, like other agglutinative languages, is composed of words built of roots with chains of suffixes. Linguists have therefore said that the root has lexical meaning, while the suffixes, because they are invariant, have grammatical meaning. The following text shows that ritual devices in Mongolian may serve both to differentiate grammatically between words with common roots,⁴³ and to identify grammatically words with different roots.

Udai müngün tengerhen	Wide silver sky (from)
Udxa baryaji buuhan	Patrilineal-essence holding descended
Xüü müngün tengerhen	Dark-blue silver sky (from)
Xem baryaji buuhan	Measure holding descended
Haraima yexe everti	Spreading great horns (with)
Hanjama yexe boinogtoi	Dangling great dewlap (with)
Budaan бүтэ бударгahan	Barley-grain like scattered
Bulag бүтэ деберgehen	Spring-water like poured out
Buxa noyon baabain	Bull lord daddy (of) dewlap
boinogto	(at)
Shurgan yerxe gene	Copulating will come they say
Budang xatun iibiin unaita	Mist lady mummy (of) vagina
	(at)
Shurgan yerxe gene	Copulating will come they say
Hümür yexe uulaiya	Hümür (Sumer) great mountain
Haraima yexe evereeree	Spreading great horns (with your)
Xütel gargan yerxe gene	Pass make will come they say
Hün yexe dalaiya	Hün (Milk) great sea
Alzosha yexe turuugaaraa	? great hooves (with your)
Olom gargan yerxe gene	Ford make will come they say
Udagtai tegshe daidahan	Vast level earth (from)
Uhanhan uuja yerxe gene	Water (from) drinking will come they say
Obogon gurban togolog	Obogon three Togolog seven
doloon zayanda	spirits (to)
Mürgeje shurgan yerxe gene	Prostrating penetrating will come they say
Mürgehen tolgoitnoi	Having prostrated head (your)
münxerxe	will become eternal
Münxen xara uhan бүтэ	Eternal black water like shining
melgerje togtoxo	will become complete. ⁴⁴

An example is the use of *haraima* ('spreading') and *hanjama* ('dangling') which have the common root

ha- meaning 'to part, separate'. Here the use of the suffixes *-r* and *-ai* on the one hand, and *-n* and *-ja* on the other, are used to differentiate grammatically between these two words of common lexical origin (the likeness is underlined by the use in both cases of the deverbal noun suffix *-ma*).⁴⁵ The effect of this is again to bring 'horns' and 'dewlap' into relationship, but in a different way from the previous example; here they are associated as things which are 'separate', but differentiated in the way this action manifests itself: the suffix *-r* seems to indicate a lateral separation, while the suffix *-n* indicates a vertical (particularly downward) separation (see note 45).

The examples of the grammatical identification of words with different roots are numerous: *budargahan* 'scattered'/*debergehen* 'poured out'; *baabain* 'daddy (of)'/*iibiin* 'mummy (of)'; *evereeree* 'horn (by your)'/*туруугаараа* 'hoof (by your)'; *uulaiya* 'mountain (+acc. case suffix)'/*dalaiya* 'sea (+acc. case suffix)', and so on. This is the most common way of using the *avia davta-* (repeating the sound) device, and its effect is to draw attention to a grammatical identity of lexically different items.

One particular case of this is interesting in the marriage speech. This is the deliberate use of generic number for virtually all the nouns. Mongolian has no singular or plural as we know them. There are suffixes which denote a partial number, e.g. *širenuud* 'some tables, some of the tables', from *šire* 'table'. What we are accustomed to think of as the singular is in fact the generic number. The Mongol linguist and ethnographer Rinchen wrote,

... the word *ovtsa* in Russian means 'a sheep'; it is singular in form, but the semantically corresponding word in Mongolian *xoni* 'sheep' does not have the meaning 'a sheep or one sheep', but represents the entire class of sheep, distinguishing it from other animals. Therefore the meaning of 'a sheep' is naturally *included* in the stem *xoni* since it conveys the idea of all sheep; but the idea of 'sheep throughout the world' is also implied by *xoni* because they are not goats, since the native Mongolian is not curious whether there is only one sheep or millions of sheep; on the contrary he is interested in what class or what kind of item, not in *how many* which is very important in Indo-European (Choi Lubsangjab 1971: 62–3).

In everyday speech, of course, it is entirely possible to distinguish between 'one' and 'many' by syntactical means, and there are at least eight partial plural suffixes which presumably may have different semantic content since it is possible for a word to take two of them at once. There are also syntactical means in Mongolian for conveying ideas like 'the' or 'a'. But none of these possibilities is made use of in the marriage speech. The text quite deliberately exploits the possibility in Mongolian of the generic. Thus when the ritual devices relate barley-grain to spring-water, horn to dewlap, dewlap to womb, mountain to sea, and so on, the grammatical category of generic number indicates that what is being compared is not any

particular pair of horns or set of hooves, but the idea of 'horn' or 'hoof' as distinct from the ideas of 'ear', 'eye', 'tail' and so on. This point seems to me to be important in a consideration of what kind of meaning is being created by the use of ritual language—that is, what is being established is abstract relations between qualities or classes, rather than individual items, a point which Lévi-Strauss has discussed in detail in his analysis of totemism and naming.

I shall return to the question of generic number later. Now I would like to examine one of the most important ritual uses of the *avia davta*- 'repeating the sound' device. It is evident that in this text there is a repetition of a relatively small number of verbal suffixes, indeed of whole verbal phrases, giving the effect almost of a refrain, for example *baryaji buuhan* and *yerxe gene*. The text contains twenty-nine verbs, but only five verbal forms are used. What is strange about these repeated forms is that none of them clearly has a subject; moreover, the devices of repetition or parallelism seem to be deliberately employed to make the subject ambiguous.

This requires some explanation. First, in Mongolian and Buriat there is no third person pronoun in singular or plural, that is, no words for 'he', 'she', 'it', and 'they'. Secondly, many verbal forms are not inflected, so without a pronoun it is impossible to tell from these verbs which person is being indicated (in Buriat certain verbal forms are inflected in all persons except the third person singular). Thirdly, since this is a transcription of an oral text, there is no punctuation. The conclusion from this is that while there are, and must be, ways of indicating person in Mongolian and Buriat, these languages have clear possibilities for exploiting ambiguities of person. In Buriat this can be done only by using verbal forms which are not inflected—and this is what the marriage speech does.

But even in this case a subject is implied, of course, by syntactical and semantic means—otherwise the speech would not make sense. But what happens in this speech is that while the emphasised verbal forms continue in repetitive series, as it were forming one sentence throughout the speech,⁴⁶ the implicit subject of these verbs changes.

The first eight lines are phrases or sentences ending with the perfective verbal-noun suffix *-han* and they seem on semantic grounds to have Buxa Noyon ('with great spreading horns' etc.) as subject. Then, however, the parallelism devices links six sets of lines by the repetitive use of the verbs *erxe gene* ('will come, they say'); here we move straight from two couplets in which Buxa Noyon cannot be the subject—and since the elder who gives the blessing is specifically addressing the bridegroom it is reasonable to suppose that it is the groom who is to 'copulate under the dewlap of Buxa Noyon'—to four couplets in which the subject once again seems to have horns and hooves. In other words, this text switches from the idea of Buxa Noyon as subject, to the idea of the bridegroom as subject. The ambiguity of subject is created both by the use of

poetic devices and by the exploitation of possibilities in the Mongolian grammatical categories themselves.

I suggest that this ambiguity is deliberately created in order to make a *ritual identification* between the bull-ancestor and the bridegroom—that is, between the unspoken 'you' meaning the bull, and the 'you' meaning the bridegroom. In my view the Buriat use of devices and grammatical categories is so deliberate in ritual language that a study of the text alone would be sufficient to make this a sure deduction, but in the present case there is also supporting evidence of various kinds:

1. It is not common, even in ritual language, for the subject of a series of verbs not to be clearly marked. If spirits are speaking through the mouth of a shaman, they nevertheless add suffixes to indicate the first-person plural; if a spirit is invoked, a voluntative verbal form is used, and so on. In fact, the correct verbal forms *must* be used in order to convey the meaning intended. In the present case, the ambiguity is created only by the deliberate use of ritual language devices.

2. The wedding ritual contains a previous clear identification of the bridegroom with the idea of the bull. When the bride's relatives arrive at the bridegroom's camp, one of his elder agnates goes out to meet them.

'Who are you?' he asks. The bride's father's spokesman replies,

'We are people from far away. We have lost a young bull and we are looking for him. Did a young bull join up with your herd?'

'Yes, yes. A bull like that came in with our herd yesterday. But what colour is he?'

'Dark-blue, dark-blue!'

'Has he got horns, your bull?'

'Not yet; he's a fat, mischievous little one'.⁴⁷

'That's the one! He's always trying to butt people'.

'He's ours, he's ours. And look where he got to!'

'There's nothing more to say. May we invite you to come for a drink at our camp?'—and they all go together to the bridegroom's camp. The bride herself should on no account be present at this conversation. But, earlier in the wedding, when the bridegroom's kinsmen seek out the bride, they say that they are looking for a young heifer (Baldaev 1959: 117–18).

3. Many versions of the marriage speech place particular emphasis on a word which itself contains an identification between man and bull. This word is *mürge*- which has the meanings: (1) to hit, knock one's forehead against something; (2) to butt, of bulls and rams; (3) to bow, prostrate oneself knocking the ground with one's forehead; (4) to worship, pray, or beg. It is this word which gives the root of the term for the marriage rite in general, *mürgüümje*.

If we look at Zonxoeva's text again (p. 23), we see that there are two lines (nos. 19–20) apparently referring to the bull, since it 'drinks water of the wide earth', while Mongols and Buriats never drink water if they can help it.⁴⁸ This is followed by two lines



PLATE 1. The bull's head: a sketch by M. N. Khangalov in the archives of the State Museum of Ethnography of the Peoples of the USSR, Leningrad, fond. 1, delo 694, p. 874.



PLATE 2. Male organs on wooden post: from U. Holmberg, *The mythology of all races*, vol. 4, Finno-Ugric, Siberian, New York: Cooper Square Publishers Inc., 1964.

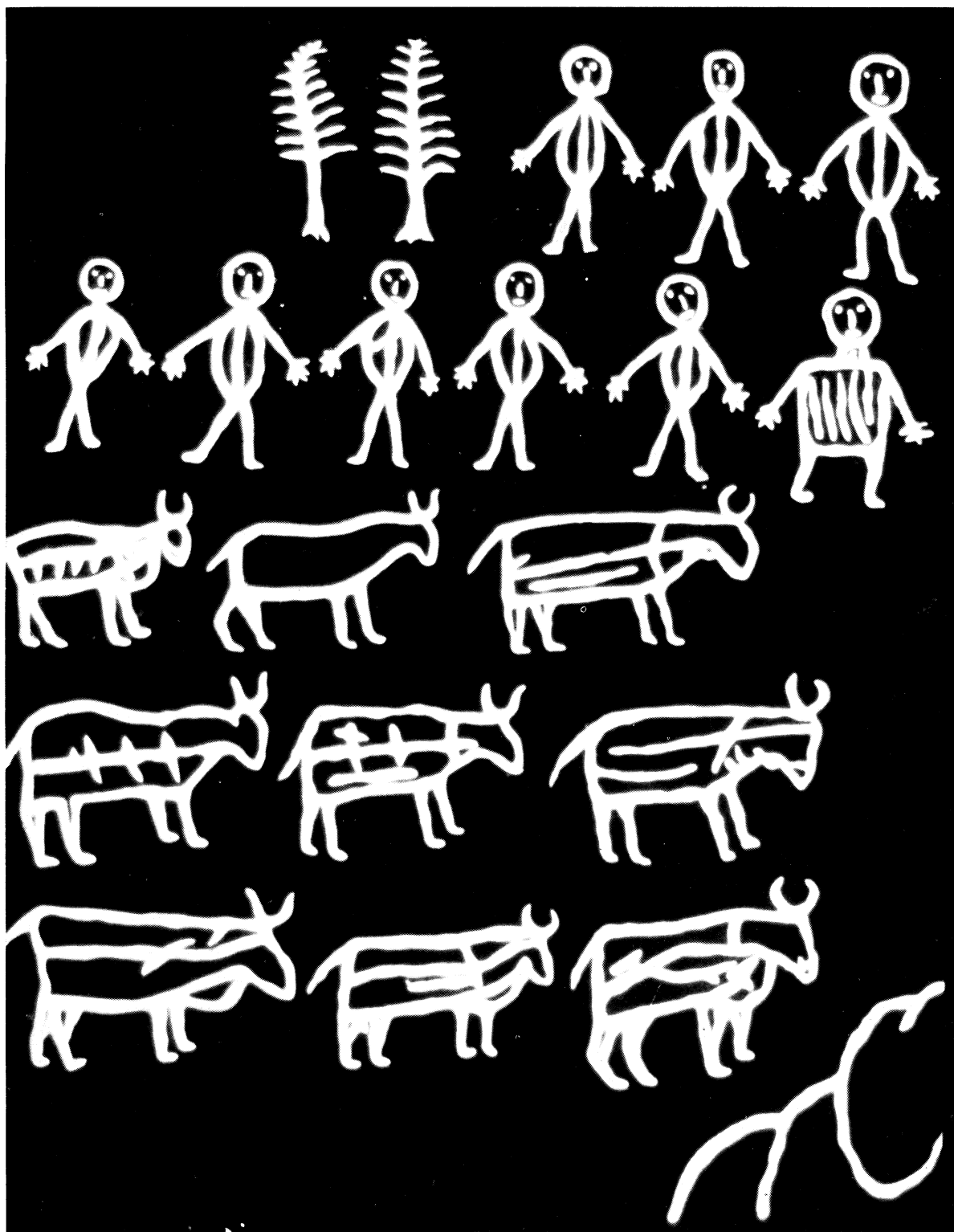


PLATE 3. *Ongon with bulls*: from S. V. Ivanov, *Materialy po izobrazitel'nomu iskusstvu narodov Sibiri XIX-nachala XX vv.*, Moscow, Leningrad: Academy of Sciences, 1954, p. 715.



PLATE 4. *Ongon* with mountains and sun and moon: in State Museum of Ethnography of the Peoples of the USSR, Leningrad, coll. no. 1286-30.

which must refer to the bridegroom, since the subject of the verbs must 'prostrate himself penetrating' before certain spirits who are well-known as descendants of the ancestral bull. Finally, there are two lines about '*mürgehen tolgoitnoi*'—'your head which has butted' or 'your head which has touched the ground in prostration'. It is by no means clear whose head this is. It would seem to be the bridegroom's head, since he has just been asked to prostrate himself before the ancestor spirits; but in the myth the word *mürge*- occurs constantly referring only to the bull, and in real life it is bulls whose foreheads are worn smooth and hairless by butting. The phrase *mürgeje shurgan* (line 22) 'prostrating penetrating (or copulating)' reminds us again of the equivalence between the male sexual organs and the bull's head which was noted earlier in this paper. And the mystical last line '*münxen xara uhan büte melgerje togtoxo*'—'like eternal black water shining will become complete' is an echo—since 'black water' in Mongol means 'pure water' (B. Damdin, personal communication)—of a previous allusion to the bull's fertility: *bulag büte debergehen* 'like spring-water poured out'.

I would conclude therefore that in the general operation of marriage the bridegroom is identified with the bull-ancestor. In some versions of the marriage-speech (e.g. Zonxoeva's text) ritual and linguistic devices are used to create this identification, but in other versions (e.g. Boldonova's text) this is not so and the identification is simply understood for reasons arising for the context of the rite.

The identification of the bridegroom with the bull may be seen as a 'second level' structure which is instrumental in giving this whole section of the marriage an orientation. Thus while the ritual devices mentioned at the beginning (back/front vowels, etc.) set up links of equivalence or complementarity between lexical items within the text, the establishment of a relation of equivalence between the bridegroom and the mythical bull gives these 'previous' links a further meaning by the fact that they may now be 'mapped onto' the human male, and it is the male and his fertility which is the concern of the rite.

I have tried to show by these examples that in ritual language special poetic devices and certain grammatical categories are manipulated so as to constitute meanings which normally are not operative in everyday language. In the present case, items of the bull's anatomy and behaviour, drawn out of their normal context in the actual world by their links with the myth of the bull-ancestor, are related to one another by the specific structures of ritual language in such a way that they become analogous to human activities, in this case the male role in procreation. It is the existence of the myth, a construct of culture and society, which makes it possible for the items of the bull's anatomy, etc., to transcend their natural referents. The structural arrangement of these items in the ritual language becomes an objective, meaningful model for the contemplation of the actors, and

here it is irrelevant that it may say things which are manifestly unreal: for example, that the subject draws his umbilical cord from heaven. The point of the wedding-speech lies in the fact that, by ritual-linguistic means, the bridegroom is identified with the bull-ancestor: by becoming equivalent to the mythical bull, he acquires the powers of the bull enumerated in the speech.

If it is remembered that in Buriat culture it is possible to *become* the mythical bull by shamanist incarnation, with the result that the actor has no mental or physical reality other than that of the bull, then it is evident that in the present ritual what I have called 'equivalence' or 'identification' does not equal oneness: here a theoretical separation of actor (the bridegroom) and model (the idea of the bull) is retained, such that one may influence the other.

The question of meaning in ritual is intimately connected with the general problem of equivalence (/non-equivalence) or synonymy (/antinomy), that is with the different kinds of relations between lexical items or between grammatical categories of one language. The difficulty of the problem lies in the fact that synonymy in ritual language seems to be radically different from that in ordinary language.

In ordinary language, synonymous items are those which can replace each other in any context, and which have identity in both cognitive and emotional import; and while such total synonymy is rare, less complete synonymous relations of a restricted kind still attempt to satisfy these criteria. But the equivalence of items in ritual language is realised in a completely different way. Items are declared to be equivalent which may be alike in only one particular; indeed, it might be true that, as in Western poetry,⁴⁹ the strength of the effect of equivalence in ritual may result not from the total substitutability of the items, but from a chasm of non-substitutability in most respects. The items are established as equivalent by particular ritual devices, but in ordinary language they may belong clearly to different classes: for example, men are equivalent to mountains, bull's horn is equivalent to man's penis, bull's dewlap is equivalent to man's scrotum, etc. I am not suggesting that ritual equivalence is completely divorced from its base in ordinary language, only that it employs its own structures which create a theoretical discontinuity between the two levels. In the present case, for example, the use of the grammatical category of generic number throughout the text is a means of separating lexical items from their normal context and objectifying them.

This approach thus differs to some extent from that which sees ritual meanings *simply* as symbolic extensions of fixed signs, developing from the everyday significance of words (although this of course is their basis). Ritual devices *select* potential 'meanings' from current language and make them operative at another level—without the devices such meanings would remain latent and would not in the end contribute to the ongoing culture of the people.

Ritual language is often employed in situations concerned with unknowable factors such as fertility. We may suppose therefore that in so far as the ritual structures, i.e. the combination of devices and grammatical categories, establish relations of equivalence between items which are in many respects totally different from one another, the listener (or viewer) begins to assume the existence of another, further semantic system in which these items might replace one another (Lotman 1965: 35–7), and in which unknowable factors might be accountable. At the same time, it is possibly because the items are *not*

identical in the ordinary world that in magical acts or *rites de passage* one may acquire from the other qualities which are lacking, but nevertheless desired.

It is not very surprising perhaps that the Buriat marriage identifies the bridegroom with a mythical bull and hence transfers to him bull-like characteristics. But what I suggest is important is that these relations are brought about by the operation of a combination of ritual devices and grammatical categories, and that these structures are not merely inferred by ourselves, but are an explicit part of the linguistic and cultural attributes of the Buriat and Mongol peoples.

NOTES

¹ I use the word ‘meaning’ here without further definition, but see note 4.

² G. O. Tudenov (1958: 29–30) gives the following provisional list of what he calls ‘poetic folklore’ for the Buriat: *duun*, songs; *yörööl*, good wishes; *on’hon ügenüüd*, sayings and proverbs; *taabari*, riddles; *sog üge*, funny sayings; *joroo üge*, tongue twisters, fast speech; *xaraal*, curses; *solo*, glorification of winning wrestlers, race horses, etc.; *ül’ger*, epic poems; *böögei durdalga*, shamanist hymns, invocations, etc.; he also gives four more types which can be either in prose or ritual ‘poetic’ style: *ontoxon*, stories; *yabagan zugaa*, fables; *tüüxe*, historical narrative; *tuuji*, legends. The marriage speech analysed in this paper is a *yörööl*, good wishes, or blessing.

³ The Russian word is *priëm*. This idea is useful to us as anthropologists because, by using an impersonal, ‘structuralist’ word such as ‘device’ rather than a phrase such as ‘the means of expression’ which smacks of psychologism, the Russian Formalists side-stepped the issue of the creative personality, thus exposing the techniques common to both Western poetry and ethnographic ritual language. See V. Erlich (1969: 190–1).

⁴ Charles Peirce (1934: 5.283–5.309).

⁵ John Lyons (1968: 435–8) gives a more sophisticated discussion of this point than I have been able to include here.

⁶ For example, the various arguments around the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. There are considerable differences in the grammatical information conveyed by different languages. If I say in Russian ‘*ya kupila knigu*’ ‘I bought (a) book’, I would have to indicate that ‘I’ am female, and that the action of buying was completed, but I would not show as I would have to in English, whether I bought ‘the’ or ‘a’ book. No-one would claim from this that English people cannot make a mental distinction between male and female, or between completing and not completing an action; similarly, no-one would say that Russians cannot conceive of a difference between the definite and the indefinite. Nevertheless it seems clear that Russians habitually pay more attention to completion or non-completion of actions, and that English speakers notice whether an object is to be seen as definite or indefinite.

⁷ S. P. Baldaev (1961: 78) gives a discussion of these terms; he says that *yahan* ‘bone’ is a more inclusive concept than *esege* ‘father’.

⁸ N. O. Sharakhshinova (1962: 136–7). She writes, ‘To the present day, some old men continue to relate to Buxa-Noyon with the deepest respect. To give honour to their ancestor, they set off for the Sayan Mountains, climb up to their peaks where, according to them, there is a stone representation of Buxa-Noyon as a bull with horns lying down. Having shown their respect by sprinkling *tarasun* or vodka, they spend the night in the stupa built on one of Buxa-Noyon’s horns, and then return home with a feeling of having done their duty’.

⁹ A. D. Urzhanov (1969: 129–33) gives the full text in Tibetan and Russian translation of the *serjem* prayer read by lamas at the *obo-taxilga* (offering to mountain-spirits) ceremony in honour of Rinchen-khan (Buxa-Noyon) of the Zakamen’ Buriats.

¹⁰ N. L. Zhukovskaya (1965: 120–21). She remarks that the Orthodox chapel was dedicated to Saint Pafnutiya, but was in

fact used by worshippers of Buxa-Noyon who had been christened. No-one now visits this chapel and it has been almost destroyed by the wind, but the Buddhist stupa standing on the other horn is frequently renovated and is visited by worshippers from all parts of Buryatia.

¹¹ The Buriat shamanist pantheon has two opposed groups of Sky-Deities (*tengri*): the benevolent, ‘white’, western deities, and the evil, ‘black’, eastern deities.

¹² G. N. Potanin (1883: 265, 267–8, 822–3). In some versions, Buxa Noyon himself joins the herd of Taiji Khan.

¹³ G. N. Potanin (1883), quoting Khangalov, gives the following text in his own transliteration:

*gunan buxadash xorik xexeb,
gunzhan ünündüş xunyala xebeb.*

(for the first 2 lines).

¹⁴ Many sections of this myth have been greatly abbreviated. M. N. Khangalov gives a detailed description of the ‘nine kings’ and the places they are supposed to inhabit. Sometimes the nine includes Buxa-Noyon himself; sometimes the group is known as the ‘Western Kings’ and while it has 90 members (the nine sons of Buxa Noyon and the nine sons of each of them) only about twelve of these are known (M. N. Khangalov (1958: 304–11)).

¹⁵ For attitudes to mist and haze, see the beginning section of Abai-Geser-Bogdo-Khan, in Khangalov (1960a: 240–3).

¹⁶ This is a simplification for the sake of brevity. There are in fact other rituals concerned with male fertility, although none are as important as the cult of the bull.

¹⁷ These deities are called *uhan xad* ‘the water kings’; the opposition of mountains/seas appears frequently in Buriat mythology, e.g. in the Sumer Mountain/Milk Sea motif, and the call of the children in the present myth: ‘Father Mountain/Mother Sea’.

¹⁸ In some places immature daughters of the lineage are allowed to be present at the sacrifice; but in no case are post-pubescent daughters or wives allowed to attend.

¹⁹ S. P. Baldaev (1970), describes for many different lineages how members who have emigrated return to their native places for the *tailgan*. However, he also shows that when a lineage finally segments, a stone may be taken from the original altar and placed on a mountain top in the vicinity of the new pastures for the performance of a separate *tailgan*, pp. 63–4.

²⁰ This is a very abbreviated description of the ritual. Full accounts are given in several places, e.g. Khangalov (1958: 515–22). A similar ritual occurs among the Altaian people Telet.

²¹ Mongols traditionally hold that all potential vessels should be placed with their opening towards the sky; thus bowls, hats, etc. should always be set down in this way.

²² I. I. Madason, ed. (1960: 57).

*Xara bolohon gelenhee zaila
Buxa yabahan sarhaa zaila*

The word ‘*xara*’ (layman) can also have the meaning of ‘profane’; in everyday language *xara xiin* (literally, black man) means ‘husband’.

²³ M. N. Khangalov, archives in the State Museum of Ethnography of the Peoples of the USSR. Fond 1, op. 2, delo 669, pp. 873–4 (1908).

²⁴ In some cases it might be possible to say that an *ongon* drawing *demonstrates* certain structural relations to be found in the text of the speech used in the same ritual. However, I cannot say this is so in the present case, since I do not have examples of drawings and speeches which I can be sure were used at the same times by the same people.

²⁵ Riddles are an important part of Buriat and Mongol oral culture. Riddles are often brought into conversation, and riddle games are frequent. An ordinary person would be expected to know several hundred riddles, while a specialist might know up to five thousand. E.g. M. Gaadamba (1966).

²⁶ The number nine is used extensively in Buriat rituals of many kinds; it is often contrasted to eight, a number symbolising female things.

²⁷ The moon in Buriat shamanist cosmology is seen as a young man who impregnates women, Zhamtsarano (1907), *ürör* no 15; he is the elder brother of the sun, Potanin (1881: 126; and in riddles the moon may appear as an 'uncastrated ram', Bazarov (1902), no. 46.

²⁸ For the role of the tree in affecting transition, see e.g. A. Alsaxanov (1917).

²⁹ T. M. Boldonova (1961: 195–6). Text recorded in 1948 in Irkutsk Oblast.

³⁰ I give here a short summary based on Tudenov (1958: 29–51) which refers to Buriat traditional ritual language. But the Mongol P. Xorloo (1959) gives a more detailed description in his chapter entitled *yöröölün dürslex arga* ('the means of constructing *yörööl's*') which has the advantages that he uses Mongol rather than Russian technical language and that he is discussing the very type of ritual language which our marriage speech belongs to (*yörööl*). Xorloo gives several sub-types to the devices I have mentioned, as well as some other rules.

³¹ Poppe writes, 'The vowel *i*, though pronounced as a front vowel, does occur in both types of words and is, therefore, considered a neutral vowel. The explanation is that in Proto-Mongolian there were two vowels: *i* which occurred in back vocalic words and *i* which occurred in words with front vowels only. Thus in Proto-Mongolian there were no neutral vowels at all. In written Mongolian and in the existing Mongolian languages, the *i* and *i* have converged into one sound which is *i*.' N. N. Poppe (1964: 11).

³² Mongols have said to me that male words express 'strong' or 'pure' ideas while female words corresponding to them express 'weakness' and 'impurity'. However, there are relatively few such pairs of words in Mongolian. Such ideas certainly do not extend over the whole range of Mongolian vocabulary in any clear way. I am indebted to Professor Charles Bawden for the example *arsalan/erselen*. He also points out that paired words may have colour referents; thus an *arsalan* is lion-coloured, but an *erselen* is a five-coloured creature (Lessing (1960: 331)).

³³ In some versions of the Buriat wedding ritual the couple may exchange rings when they meet after having made half-circles round the homestead.

³⁴ B. B. Baradin (1926); he adds that the umbilical cord is kept by the wife under the pillow of the marital bed as an aid to fertility.

³⁵ Professor Charles Bawden has kindly informed that this link is also made clear in Mostaert's Dictionnaire Ordos under *kü*, p. 441.

³⁶ About 20 versions of the marriage speech are known to me.

³⁷ P. F. Trebukhovskiy (1929), text 1, collected by Zonxoeva.

³⁸ P. F. Trebukhovskiy (1929), text 2, collected by Zonxoeva.

³⁹ N. O. Sharakhshinova (1962: 131) text recorded in 1959.

⁴⁰ In the opinion of Professor Bawden, the word *xebel* ('womb') is not however linguistically related to the word *xeb* ('mould'), since it comes from an earlier form *xebeli* and cannot be contracted (e.g. *xemjee* to *xem*). There are no known suffixes which would generate *xebeli* from *xeb*.

⁴¹ I. M. Manzhigeyev (1960: 90); and P. P. Khoroshikh (1929), who states that the cuts made on the dewlap are not ownership marks but magical acts concerned with fertility.

⁴² Presumably Buriat culture sees the relationship between these two as complementary.

⁴³ An example of 'common root' is *ün-*, meaning 'smell', in words *ünür* 'fragrance, aroma', *üneg* 'fox, literally "he who habitually smells"', and *ünse-* 'to kiss, literally "to sniff someone"'. Of course several different roots may take the form of a single morpheme, and most roots are bound to certain suffixes, so the average speaker is probably not very aware of the separate meaning of the root in everyday language. But in ritual language because of the use of devices such as 'uniting the head' the common root of certain pairs may be thrown into relief.

⁴⁴ P. F. Trebukhovskiy (1929), text 1, collected by Zonxoeva.

⁴⁵ While the *-ma* deverbal noun suffix is well established (see e.g. Poppe (1964: 48)) the other suffixes mentioned here are putative and derived only from a consideration of the words with the root *ha-*: *handaxa*=thrown out, thrown away; *hanjaga*=waving (of something hanging in fronds downwards); *hambaitaxa*=waving (of hair sticking up); *hansag*=hair hanging down on temples, sideboards; *haragar*=extended (e.g. of wings); *haraildaaša*=waving (of things sticking outwards, e.g. horns, wings); *harbaixa*=to stretch out hands; stick out (of hair); *harixa*=to lift leg in urination (of dogs); *harnad*=extend nostrils, etc.

⁴⁶ Most of the verbal forms used can be employed both as verbal nouns and predicates.

⁴⁷ This may be a reference to the fact that the Western Buriat often married their sons very young, before puberty, in order to get a working woman sooner.

⁴⁸ They drink in preference anything made from milk, or tea. B. Damdin personal communication.

⁴⁹ See for example Lotman's discussion of the lines from Lermontov's poem 'Sashka':

The moon rolls along in the winter clouds
Like a Varangian shield or a Holland cheese,

(my translation) where the effect of the equivalence of 'shield' and 'cheese' depends on their unlikeness in the everyday semantic system. Yu. Lotman (1965: 22–37).

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