JERZY S. WASILEWSKI

People of the Taiga, the Reindeer People, the People...

... Darkness pervades the shamanic yurt. A huddled figure - perhaps the shaman's wife or his young helper – holds a massive drum above the dying flames of the fire. The shaman sits slightly further, with the figurines of the deities of the home altar behind him. His eyes are shut (...) the quiet murmur of a prayer is heard. Suddenly, he stands up, takes hold of the drum, and testing it strikes it; the sound is still insufficiently loud – it has been raining the whole day and the leather on the rim is moist and must be dried for a long time. Those sitting on both sides observe him tensely....". [1]

When more than a quarter of century ago I began my book on shamanism with the above quotation I never even hoped that I should ever see such a scene myself. Much has changed since the time of Feliks Kon and other authors from the turn of the nineteenth century on whose accounts I based my descriptions. In the Siberian and Mongolian stretch of taiga and tundra there appeared a system that obliterated or modified the archaic ways of existence, changed tents, teepees and yurts into wooden barracks and cottages, transformed the shepherds into kolkhoz tractor drivers, and eliminated all shamans. And yet, I am witnessing today a recurrence of an ancient image: a shamanic séance in a cramped teepee, held for a few shepherds. The shaman looks just the same as his counterpart did years ago: he wears an identical costume, rocks back and forth, and murmurs in an unchanged manner, his daughter dries the drum above the fire just like it was done years ago because today it rained as it did then, not surprisingly since the Eastern Sayan Mts. are a range where it always rains.

The Tuva/Tukha/Tsaatan people of northern Mongolia had completed a full circle – they returned to reindeer grazing, living in yurts and teepees, and to shamanism.

We are on the edges of the Darkhad Valley, known as the land of the shamans. Here flows the Shishged River, further down known as the Yenisei. This is almost the end of the world and we shall travel on horseback even further, north of the last permanent settlement: Tsagaannuur, towards the frontier with Russia, or, more precisely, with South Siberian Tuva. This territory, once known as Uriankhai, has been the domain of rivalry between Russia and China, embroiled in a competition for hegemony in Asia intent on transferring Mongolia from the Asian axis to the European one. Here, boundaries were never clear-cut – hence the multiplicity of misleading names given to the inhabitants of the forest-steppe borderline by the Mongols, the Russians, and the Chinese: the Uriankhai, the Soyot, the Uyghur, the Tuva (pronounced by the locals as Tukha and for some reasons transcribed in current Western literature as Dukha), and the Tsaatan. Today, the latter, Mongolian name signifying "people of the reindeer" is best known, although unwillingly accepted by those concerned. The Tsaatan are not a Mongolian people but of Turkic origin: native Tuvinians, who fled from their homeland to Mongolia only half a century ago.

Not many remember that until 1944 there existed a state known as the Republic of Tuva – a pseudo-independent buffer between the USSR and Mongolia, a region of interests pursued by two other Far Eastern rivals: China and Japan. Its symbolic independence came down to post stamps (triangles and rhombi featuring shepherds and milkmaids with sheep, cows, and camels). When at the end of the war Stalin ultimately incorporated Tuva into the Soviet Union, famine and enforced army recruitment followed. The post-stamp shepherds started to flee across the frontier - a feat accomplished the easiest by breeders of small reindeer herds, who had earlier penetrated the mountainous borderland.

After several years of compulsory returns and repeated attempts at escape, several hundred Tuvinians were permitted to stay in Mongolia, where in 1956 they were granted citizenship, while an ensuing adaptation policy assumed the form of acculturation or outright assimilation. The nomadic shepherds were settled down and some became fishermen and employees of a fish processing plant; it is worth recalling that neither they nor the Mongols fished or ate fish ever before.

Forest culture was an embarrassment to the progressive authorities, which regarded local shamanism as a particular disgrace. This is why foreign researchers were so rarely permitted to tour these regions, as we experienced personally a quarter of century ago while arriving with an expedition organised by the Polish Academy of Sciences. We were driven out after being accused of acting as Intelligence agents working for the Japanese; a suspicious janitor saw us using candles at night – evidently, we had been developing espionage film negatives.

The events of the 1990s changed the mentality of the local decision makers and transformed it beyond recognition. This borderland region opened up not only for researchers and tourists but also for all the more and less fortunate consequences of a systemic transformation. The fish processing plant finally went bankrupt (since no one ate the fish) and the reindeer kolkhoz was disbanded, its members somehow managed to slaughter more than half of the herd just in time before privatisation.and all funds for additionally financing animal hus-

bandry vanished as did those for constructing houses and farm buildings, veterinary assistance, and schools.

Such were the conditions of an onset of inevitable regress towards tradition as the sole possible form of survival. Once again teepees covered with torn tarpaulin had to suffice together with small – 20-40 animals per family – herds of reindeer and scarce products of the taiga as an additional source of sustenance. Preserved remnants of indigenous culture included tradition, spirituality, and shamanism.

2.

We await the beginning of the séance in a dark teepee, just before midnight. The not quite fifty years-old Gandzorig is the youngest but the most active of four Tsaatan shamans. He slowly arranges his costume, roomy calf boots, and a black-feather headband. All resemble items shown in old engravings, although they had been made only three years ago and are kept inside a large and capacious drum (a researcher cannot help noticing with satisfaction that this is a proper "south Sayan" drum according to the Prokofieva classification). The front part of the costume imitates armour (a breastplate with horizontal bands) and the back is embellished with long ribbons, including one in the distinct shape of a snake. The shaman's daughter, assisting in the séance, still has to sew on the last iron tags, which for reasons unknown have to be placed anew before each séance. Opposite the entrance there hangs in the place of honour a half-metre long sash displaying pieces of fabric and figurines made of fabric and leather. These are the shaman's holy objects – *ongons* prepared by his older brother, Gost, who until recently was also a regular shaman. Later I shall describe the encounter with this celebrated figure of local shamanism.

It is nearly midnight. The daughter lights a candle and places it behind a bed sheet screen, producing an excellent stage design effect. Silence falls and everyone succumbs to solemn concentration. We are accompanied by a young married couple quietly explaining in the Tuvinian language the reason for their presence – apparently, they are childless. Now it is my turn to present our wishes – I ask for successful work, and a happy return home. I feel like yet another member of a long sequence of European researchers studying Siberia - travellers and exiles who resorted to the same motivation to mask their curiosity that led them to the site of a shamanic rite.

3.

We set off across the land of the Tsaatan on eight horses: the four of us (two Polish and two Mongol researchers), two guides, and two pack horses, carrying provisions for us and our hosts so as to prevent them from killing reindeer for meat. Apart from flour, rice, canned goods, and pressed tea our supplies include flashlights, candles, and ropes for tying reindeer; we could do with more medicines, shoes for children, tarpaulin for covering the teepees.... .

It is October, the 3 000 meters-high peaks of the Sayan Mts. on the horizon are already capped with snow, and temperatures - especially at night - are well below zero. The horses take fright while carefully stepping over the ice-covered streams, but at least they do not sink in "black water", which in the summer hampers all movement in the taiga. The laboriously traversed passes offer views of a frozen, still landscape. Not a single trace of man – kilometers of yellowed larch taiga covering the dome shaped summits and the sprawling grassy valleys. Even the Tungus meteorite would not make an impression here.

The taiga displays yet another colour, i.e. black. This is not solely the effect of the natural process of the larches turning dark - larch is aptly called "the black tree". In many places one can see traces of local forest fires caused by lightning. Our guides secure the remnants of a bonfire, carefully covering it with sheets of ice from a frozen stream. This does not come as a surprise - there is only a single method of combatting fire: the intervention of an owner of a magic stone known as *dzada*, whose exposure to wind immediately brings rain. This special item comes from the bowels of a stag and is an ossified fur ball just like *bezoar*, the magic stone in mediaeval European tradition. The magic anti-fire campaign is, by the way, financed by the local authorities.

Only rarely do we encounter traces of human presence: an *ovoo* - a pile of branches with strands of hair obtained from a horse or reindeer mane, and traces of small sacrifices for the spirits of those sites, a *khadag* - a blue sash hanging on a branch as a sign that nearby a human corpse had been placed on the ground, or a horse skull nailed onto a tree to guarantee the birth of good stallions.

Here and there we can see that shamanic practices and beliefs live on. We pass shaman's trees full of ribbons, the destination of those wishing to make a sacrifice on this spot and whose relatives included a shaman. We see reindeer with colourful ribbons around their necks –these are blessed animals excused from hard labour; women are forbidden to mount them. The ribbons – the same as those hanging in the place of honor in a teepee as holy objects – are the seat of the guardian spirits of the family, and the reindeer are their carriers.

During our journey we encounter a lone rider transporting a small load. He looks strange, as if he was carrying only part of his belongings. The mystery was explained once we arrived at the camp from which he had departed.

Everyone is preparing for tomorrow's joint transference to a new site near the winter grazing land. Such a day has to be astronomically providential for all - and it is by no means easy to establish it for more than ten families in the camp. The feat is almost accomplished, but for one family this is still an unlucky day. The only solution is

magic: the departure has to be staged on another day by dispatching a single family member; then the others will follow with the rest.

This is where we shall spend the night. As always when staying in someone's teepee we are not allowed to throw even the smallest piece of paper into the fire - this would be an offence against the household fire, causing a rash on the faces of all the residents. We can only helplessly watch our hostess putting outside our clean paper wrappings, which could have been burnt without leaving a single trace. Even more the pity considering that in this environment they will litter the taiga for years to come. This is a case of an insoluble conflict of the attitudes, reasons, and values of the East and the West, perhaps equally justified but also mutually exclusive.

When we finally go to sleep our host removes from the wall all *ongons* – ribbons, small pieces of fur, iron embellishments, and figurines so that, he explains, the spirits would not torment us at night and bring bad dreams.

4.

Gandzorig puts on his costume, treating each part with the smoke of a burning juniper branch and deeply inhaling the smoke. He tries out the drum, first quietly and calmly, facing the fire in the centre, and then with his back turned to us and looking at the *ongons*. Standing predominantly in this position he dances for several hours during the séance.

After the first six-eight minutes the drum is beaten regularly. Now, two rhythms will resound uninterruptedly, interchangeably, and in long sequences: rapid series of 166-180 beats a minute – a typical trance-inducing shamanic rhythm, and double beats imitating the noise of a galloping horse. This goes on tirelessly for over two hours - when his hand gets tired of producing one of the rhythms Gandzorig chooses the second tempo. He hums something quietly, in a changed and unnaturally whining voice. The words are illegible and on the next day he is unable to, or does not want to explain anything to us. Sometimes he cries out, huddle, and using his hands gathers something into the drum open on one side. He wheezes and snorts, as if he were a bird soaring in the air or a steed. This otherworldly flight is also rendered by running on the spot, dynamic motions of the body, and jumping on both feet. A quarter of an hour after falling into the trance he sits down for less then a minute and his daughter hands him a pipe. During successive brief intervals he sips tea or puffs on a cigarette.

More than half an hour of the unflagging dance has passed and the shaman is clearly losing control over his motions; he is prevented from falling on his back by the men sitting nearby who catch him and protect him from hurting himself against an iron stove. Now, we have to pay attention so while whirling rapidly he does not get one of the ribbons entangled on the stove pipe. He no longer controls his movements because he is being entered by the supreme *ongon*; the only thing we know about it is that it is a female.

One of the spectators ties to the shaman's back a white sash – the *khadag*, a gift that is supposed to win over the *ongon*. Perhaps now the conversation with the spirit will take place and produce divination for those gathered? No, Gandzorig rarely resorts to this method and usually the fortune telling involves interpreting the location of a drum rattle thrown to each of the participants twice: the first time one has to catch it with one's hand and give it back while saying: "divination!" (*torog*!), with the handle turned towards the ; the second time it should be caught without touching the object, into one's lap, and the shaman, having looked at the position of the rattle, makes a longer statement assuring about its conducive effect.

The *ongon* leaves the shaman's body; at the same time, the flight of his soul comes to an end. Those present comment that now the shaman "is descending to earth". He slowly grows calm and takes off the attire without help, although he staggers. One of the men gives him a brief massage, and the son leads the shaman – undressed and hot – outside; in a few minutes he returns refreshed. He adds that he did not wish to exhaust us, the foreigners, with an overly long séance, which could last for five hours. When we leave for our tent it is almost three in the morning.

5.

A day in the teepee always begins with making tea. Today too we are awakened by a familiar sound – our hostess uses a steel chisel to scrape the tea leafs pressed into a hard brick and kept in a leather pouch, and then pounds them into powder in a wooden mortar. We warm up, chilled despite the warm sleeping bags, and listen to what our hosts are saying: that the children found it so hot at night that they went to sleep outside, on the ground, and that the adults too would be unable to sleep in a bed in a room in some town. In addition, it is high time to begin the slaughter.

Slaughtering a reindeer starts with tying down the dogs. The barely five year-old Budzen' with a constantly surprised expression on her face and her older brother secure the two shaggy creatures, still covered with hoar frost, to trees so that that they would not disturb us. Our host has already separated the chosen animal from the rest of the herd. He carries an axe and a long home made bayonet – an irregularly shaped piece of iron in a wooden sheath. Now, he sends his little daughter to fetch his knife, the one with a clasp made of a boar fang, which he always wears tied to his belt and today has supposedly forgotten and left behind in the teepee. By the time the girl returns the whole operation has been completed: the reindeer, stunned by the axe on the head, has fallen to the ground and his heart has been stabbed with the bayonet deeply piercing the neck. Lying on its side, the animal

kicks and is pressed by the boy from the rear so that dark thick blood flows into a bowl.

The little girl watches while the two men skin the reindeer starting with the pasterns, slashing through the belly, extracting the full stomach, cutting off the liver and serving everyone a slice of warm, sweetish, meat. The dogs calmly wait for their portion of inferior entrails. In not quite half an hour the pantry beams are full of pieces of the meat of a whole reindeer, while the ribs and the heart are being cooked for immediate consumption.

It was not easy to make the decision to kill the animal. The whole herd is not even thirty strong, but our host's wife is very weak, she recently miscarried, and the meat should give her strength. Asked when he had last slaughtered a reindeer our host becomes angry. He is well aware that reducing the size of the paltry herd leads to nowhere but the family has to eat something.

This is the prime problem faced by these people – the dilemma: to slay the reindeer or not. The animals constitute the foundation of their sustenance and not by accident are recorded in the Mongolian name of the ethnic group. The several hundred strong Tsaatan community and its specific culture will survive under the condition that it does not kill off the reindeer. The number of the animals is falling and today totals about 700, and the lack of fresh blood means inbreeding together with all its negative consequences.

In addition, the herds are weakened by the procedure of cutting off the antlers. In the spring, the antlers, which grow back each year, are still soft because they are richly supplied with blood and in this state – similarly to the famous Siberian stag horns - they have been used for centuries by traditional Chinese medicine and, more recently, European medicine. At the beginning of the summer Chinese merchants appear in the region, willing to trade in bearskins and other products of the taiga, such as mushrooms; in turn, they offer money, quickly exchanged for vodka. In those conditions it becomes tempting to once again cut off the antlers when they are growing back before autumn, a procedure that exceptionally weakens the animals and leads to infections and a degeneration of the antlers. Consequently, the herds include a growing number of deteriorated animals - our Father Christmas would be ashamed to use them for his sleigh.

Everyone is supposedly aware of this, but it just so happened that in each cluster of the teepees we came across fresh meat and the heads of the reindeer displayed bloody wounds in place of the antlers.

6.

Does the reader recall the titular character of the Siberian hunter from a film by Akira Kurosawa, a man called Dersu Uzala? This part was played by Maxim Bulduk, an actor from Tuva – the land of shepherds located some 3 000 kms to the west from the site of the plot. Now, I am no longer astonished at the extraordinary ease with which he performed the role of a man of the taiga.

The Tsaatan are masters of the hunt. A young man with a gun, who quietly whistling rides a reindeer next to us, manages to shoot in the blink of an eye an edible dormouse in a tree, and still on horseback skins its glistening black fur. He laughs with glee because it is worth 5 000 tugriks (almost five dollars) and is the source of additional meat. When the newly fallen snow is so deep that even reindeer sink to their bellies he will put on primitive home-made skis - long, wide, heavy larch beams fastened with leather straps and with the hide of freshly skinned reindeer attached to the bottom.

These are the natural born people of the taiga, a name - *taigynkhyn* – that the Tsaatan use most often to describe themselves.

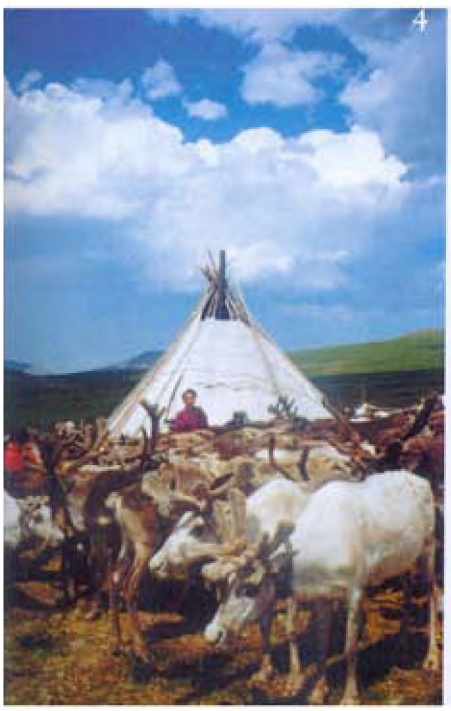
Before leaving, the residents of the campsite say farewell to the holy mountain, thanking it for a well-spent autumn. We are not permitted to take part in this rite but upon return they show us the strange pebbles they brought back. Smooth, regularly shaped, and with light brown swirls, they supposedly lie scattered as if in stone bowls. It pleases the mountain that they are taken in return for something that has to be left behind, even if it is only apiece of white fabric. The mountain grudgingly gives bad people only the smallest pebbles.

We set off on our way. Mounting the steep approaches we reach the passes only to laboriously guide the easily frightened horses down. We cross couloirs covered with rock scree, places that are so wild and devoid of people that if *almas* - the local version of the yeti - were to live somewhere in Mongolia this would be the location. Our hosts, although recounting legends about the *almas*, do not believe in its existence. They are most of all afraid of bears, which can be fatally dangerous especially if the summer season did not provide abundant berries and ants and the hungry animal cannot fall asleep for the winter.

We listen to the story of a man whose whole family was killed by such a famished bear. Having returned together with his wife to the teepee where they left a small child in the care of its granny, they found the mauled remnants of the corpses cast together with household utensils into the fireplace in the centre of the building, as if the bear wished to set all afire and obliterate the traces of the attack. The wife suffered a heart attack, which she survived, but never managed to eliminate the depression that after two years of suffering resulted in suicide. At the end of the meeting the man, who since that time lives alone, asked us to sign our names in a notebook in which he collects the names of all his visitors.

Only after a longer stay we were told in secret that universal belief has it that the calamity must have been brought about by a black shaman from Tuva, who for reasons unknown sent the bear. After all, there could be no other explanation for the fact that the animal passed

1. Departing for wood. Photo Lech Mróz
2. Atarma, Delgermagnay's wife. Photo Lech Mróz
3. Batzayaa leaving for the hunt. Photo Lech Mróz
4. The herd is back in the camp. Photo Lech Mróz
5. Old lady in front of her tepee. Photo Lech Mróz



6. Suyaan and her old shamanic drum. Photo Lech Mróz
7. Half-blind Tsend fortune-telling with 41 pebbles. Photo Lech Mróz
8. Ganzorig with his newly made paraphernalia. Photo Lech Mróz

by all the other teepees and carried out such a carefully planned attack.

7.

I sincerely admire the researchers of yore capable of gathering so much material about esoteric shamanism. They managed to overcome barriers and distances created by distrust and alienness, decipher enigmatic symbols, reconstruct the whole pantheon, and outline a model of the world.

I was unable to attain this objective among the Tsaatans and local shamanism still remains a mystery. I was even incapable of resolving the question concerning the extent to which the shamans, declining to answer, conceal that, which must remain taboo or are concerned with preserving the aura of mystery required from the commercial point of view while additionally masking their incomplete knowledge of tradition.

Gandzorig forbids taking photographs in the course of the séance (and limits the number of photographs that we are permitted to take the next day to four). He also refuses to speak about any details of his art – initiation, training or the chanted texts, claiming that songs appear during the séance and that otherwise he is completely unfamiliar with them. He seems to be somewhat afraid of the anger of the spirits and even more so of his older brother, Gost.

Gost ceased being a shaman quite recently – I suspect that he simply lost faith while observing the manner in which this art is becoming crude. He is stern and reticent - several years ago he had the reputation of a "black shaman", the sort that could harm his foes and be commissioned to cast a fatal spell. *The* ongon *no longer comes to him* – reveals his sister. He refuses to speak about this and condemns the commercialisation of shamanism in its popular version, a process spreading among the Mongols. After years of illegally practicing shamanism, for which he was imprisoned, he still has too much respect for the spirits to reach for a drum since he no longer believes in the effectiveness of such activity.

The doyenne of the Tsaatan shamans is the 98 year-old Su-yaan. Although she still threads a needle without using spectacles, she is not longer able - as she did only a few years ago- to conduct hours long séances that demand a constant beating of a drum and dancing, ecstatic leaps, and the singing and recitation of texts. *My head no longer remembers a single thing, I have forgotten all the prayers*.

Two years ago, however, the sight of aged Suyaan wearing a costume almost as old as she, and getting ready for a shaman séance signified a meeting with an entirely different world. The cap-plume, the long tunic with jangling accessories, the high boots with sewn-on likenesses of bird's claws, and the large drum with a blurred image of either a human figure or a tree must have survived concealed somewhere. With the help of her daughter-in-law the old woman reverently treated all the parts of the costume and the drum with incense smoke and sprinkled the *ongons* using a juniper branch dipped in sacrificial milk. From a wooden box she took out a drymba (Jew's harp) - an iron instrument, which played with the lips produces a quiet vibrating sound, allowing the spirits to travel great distances. The arrival of the main spirit, the "lord of *ongons*", made it possible to decipher the prediction. Twice in a row the instrument hurled on the ground fell with the tongue upward. This was a good sign.

The shaman got up, reached for a large drum made for her when she was still a young woman (it cost one reindeer), and started to lightly strike it with a wand and quietly hum. She skipped, turned around once and twice, and rhythmically shook her head so that the braids covering her face trembled. Old age, however, takes its toll: Suyaan did not complete the whole ritual, rapidly finished it by sprinkling tea in front of the teepee and through its upper opening - an offering for the local spirits.

Her daughter, the kind-hearted, blind Tsend, arranges a genuine shamanic séance only once every three months, but readily tells our fortune to see whether our return trip will succeed. In the manner of all fortune-tellers in Central Asia she uses 41 pebbles arranged in piles. Subsequently, she picks them up and in a gesture of prayer holds them next to her face, rearranges them over and over again in three rows (each composed of three piles), brings them together and once again arranges them. *Your legs are light, nothing bad will occur along your way, the personal fate of each of you is auspicious*, but at the end she adds that while returning we should avoid a solitary yurt, otherwise we shall encounter a "'slight obstacle". Her son, watching the course of the fortune telling and the configuration of the pebbles, confirms the warning.

Heedless of the divination, on our way back we ate dinner in a lone yurt. Several hours later, just before entering the town, our jeep was stopped by the militia: it turned out that the driver did not have a license; if we had arrived just a few hour earlier we could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble.

Predictions can be more or less down to earth, but despite appearances a shaman séance is not merely rendered service. To my astonishment, this rule is observed by the praxis of old Tsaatan shamans. None had ever been commissioned to tell fortune, and the ritual is performed only on certain days several times a year. Even the sick, arriving for a cure, were expected to wait for that particular day - a séance in their intention could take place solely during their absence. Gandzorig's daughter explains, in secret from her father, that when spirits come to him they ask why they had been summoned and could punish him for having beckoned them for petty reasons.

This information is at odds with my heretofore image of shamanism as an intervention praxis focused on *ad hoc* assistance rendered to a person suffering from spiritual, psychic or physical disability. I am incapable of sufficiently verifying it and coming to terms with the conclusion

that in the case of intense research conducted in a small community where the number of interlocutors is slight and each person presents his own, complicated history it is difficult to achieve tested, infallible generalisations. There are no effective theses and diagnoses concerning trends and no facile sweeping statements. Tsend, Gost, Sandzhin, Bayaraa, Ganbat and others are concrete persons representing individual experiences, knowledge, and opinions as well as ignorance, forgetfulness, and doubts that only multiply my questions and uncertainties.

8.

The people of the taiga are scarce: only forty families breed reindeer in the mountains and over ten are gradually adopting Mongolian-style husbandry: they descend to the dells where instead of the sickly reindeer they keep more resilient cattle and sheep and move from the teepees to warm felt yurts. Young men marry Mongolian girls. This influx of new blood pleases the parents, but the young brides anxiously await the moment when they will be able to return, together with the husbands, to their people.

We look at photographs of a recent wedding of such a mixed couple, and at the same time conduct an ethnographic interview. The event took place in a teepee newly erected for the young couple, but the ceremonies originate in a Mongolian yurt and are borrowed from Mongolian culture. The girl arrives on horseback, riding on white felt placed in front of the entrance, where the husband's mother welcomes her by sprinkling milk. The basic dish of the feast is mutton, and carefully measured out portions are served according to a ceremonial code describing how each guest is to be treated. The symbolic test of the young wife involves making "the bride's tea": to light a fire, grind the tea, add the milk, butter, and salt, and serve it to all the guests. At the culmination of the ceremony she receives a piece of rope guaranteeing the good fortune of the household and symbolising the "reins of the yurt", here artificially attached to the teepee. In this manner, step-by-step, the Tsaatans gradually not only start speaking Mongolian but also assume the Mongolian language of symbols.

This is the second great problem facing the Tsaatan people – the preservation of linguistic distinctness and ethnic identity. Deprived of contact with Tuva they slowly begin using Mongolian, the language of schools and official communication, even within the family. They have no elite, authorities or leaders concerned with the retention of the remnants of tradition and self-identification. The awareness of ethnic distinction is declining. The Tsaatans know that they are Tuva but the genuine Tuva people live abroad; this is why they call themselves "the people of the taiga" and without using ethnic names distinguish themselves from the "people of the river", the *golynkhyn* dweling in the Valley.

Ties with relatives in Tuva have been severed. For decades there have been no local contacts and the frontier remains firmly closed. The exchange of reindeer has ceased and the influx of new blood has come to a halt, affecting both people and animals. The unpopulated mountainous borderland is a dangerous terrain. Expeditions of robbers from beyond the border take place - desperate shepherds, former kolkhoz workers, now left to their own devices, are forced to obtain horses and cattle in some way. A few years ago it was even rumored (those in the know referred to reports of the US State Department) that Tuva was involved in smuggling Russian weapons for the Moslem Uyghurs in Chinese Sinkiang.

Despite the fact that reindeer require mountain pastures and become ill in the valleys, where they also fall prey to wolves, local strategies of survival force the people of the taiga to descend. The impact of the presence of Western tourists arriving thanks to travel agencies from Ulan Bator is growing, and not everyone has the time to go all the way into the mountains. Sometimes a foreign charity organization delivers food supplies. The world is starting to appreciate the need for help, however humble, in order to enable this small ethnic group to continue adding the bright colours of their distinctness to the global palette. Not much is needed - some flour, so that they would not slaughter the reindeer, tarpaulin for the teepees, so that they would not seek shelter in yurts and wooden cottages in settlements, and veterinary assistance in recreating the herds.

Paradoxically, it could be the incomers – researchers, travellers, and tourists – who might provide the last chance for the people of the taiga to preserve their culture. Who else will convince the Tsaatan that it is worthwhile to maintain certain elements of their lifestyle – the teepees, the reindeer, and the shamans and their art? And who will inform the West that if it is our caprice to observe a people traversing a path of culture so arduous and different from ours then we should all support them.

Endnotes

1 J. S. Wasilewski, *Podróże do piekieł. Rzecz o szamańskich misteriach*, Warszawa 1979, p. 5.

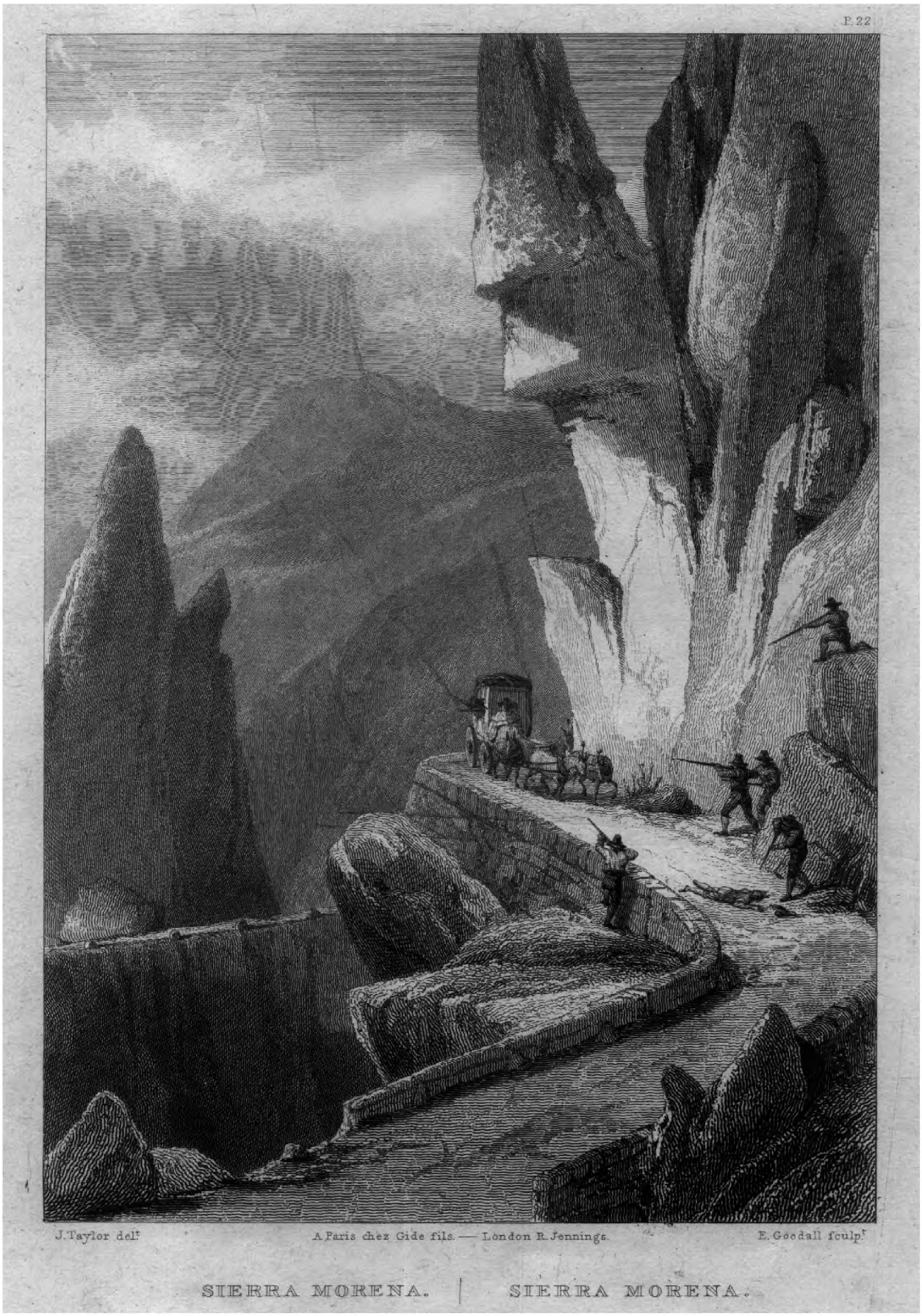


Fig. 1. Although this illustration does not come from *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie* by Jan Potocki I would like to add the opening words of the novel: *The first day Count d'Olavidez had not yet established foreign settlements in the Sierra Morena— that lofty chain of mountains that separates Andalusia from La Mancha – which was at that time inhabited solely by smugglers, bandits and a few gypsies. (...) The traveler who ventured into that wild region was assailed by a thousand terrors that would freeze the blood of the boldest man. (...) and invisible hands pushed him towards the edge of bottomless precipices.*