

SUMMARY OF “PLURAL WORLD INTERPRETATIONS: THE CASE OF THE TYVANS IN SOUTH SIBERIA”

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

The Tyvans themselves use the term “tradition” in the conventional way to date best described by Handler and Linnekin (1984: 286): “The prevailing conception of tradition, both in common sense and in social theory, has envisioned an isolable body or core of unchanging traits handed down from the past.” Regarding to this “naturalistic paradigm, which presumes boundedness and essentiality,” Handler and Linnekin argue that while “tradition is a symbolic process ... ‘traditional’ is not an objective property of phenomena but an assigned meaning.” In this understanding of the term, “the past is always constructed in the present.” The concept agrees furthermore with Hobsbawm und Ranger (1992) who understand tradition as being “invented.” With this in mind it becomes clear how all phenomena commonly called “traditional” are permanently changing and how difficult it is to distinguish historical elements of culture from contemporary ones. Both traditional and modern elements of culture are in a process of development and the object of external influences. The continuing debates on “tradition” and “modernity” are reasons for avoiding these terms in the present work and for replacing them with more appropriate terms, which are not contaminated by scientific and daily usage and which I solely derive from the structures of the models of world interpretation presented here.

Using the practice of individual actors as a frame of reference, the term “plural world interpretations” enables us to describe contemporary culture as comprising many parallel models of world interpretation that are both co-existent and equally valued and at the same time both complementary and contradictory. Based on field data collected in the Republic of Tyva (Russian Federation) in 2004–2005, I demonstrate how individual local actors deal with the choice of many different models of world interpretation and how they use them flexibly in order to respond to events and act in daily life situations. In doing so, I propose to study both the actual plural-

ity of world interpretation models and the human ability to handle them flexibly in everyday life.

In this case study, two of many different possible models of world interpretation will be highlighted. Both exist as equally valued realities but can be differentiated structurally as a *model of human dominance* and a *model of interaction between human and non-human subjects*. The first stresses *the human dominance over an environment, that is regarded as a series of more or less passive objects of human agency*, the second emphasises *the interactions in a world including and encompassing humans and consisting of both human and non-human subjects*. Both models are coherent systems and are part of the repertoire of knowledge, behaviour and action of West Tyvan actors. To them, these models are both equal and mutually contradictory. The models compete and oppose each other, but form a continuum within a single person to the effect that the human actor is constantly positioning him- or herself depending on the specific situation and context. The empirical material reveals that West Tyvans use these models in various ways – replacing, complementing and mixing them according to their individual needs in specific contexts.

The case study demonstrates how local actors deal with the plurality of world interpretation models, how they switch from one to another and how they mix them in different situations and contexts. The rules of their flexible handling of plural world interpretations, the reasons behind their choices between one or for a mixture of several models, as well as the consequences of their choices are analysed.

Theoretical background

The term *plural world interpretations*, which gave this book its title, is based on phenomenological and constructivist insights that view human beings as the creators of multiple realities. Socially constructed realities shape human interpretations of the world as well as human actions and behaviour that are based on these interpretations. The following definition clarifies how I use this term in the present book: *Plural world interpretations refer to human interpretation as well as human action and behaviour based on these interpretations, which rest upon the flexible use of simultaneous and equivalent models for interpreting the world. These models of world interpretation (Deutungsmodelle) are coherent systems, having both structure and substance. Supplementing and contradicting each other they are part of the knowledge, behavioural and action repertoire of human beings.*

In studying the flexible handling of just two of many possible models of world interpretation by individual Tyvan actors, I use the term *model* in the sense of a “social construction” as defined by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (2012 [1966]). Since the world interpretation of an individual Tyvan actor at any given moment comprises a selection of many different patterns, I propose to regard these

patterns as models and *intersubjective constructions of society*. As models, they are neither natural realities nor human biological characteristics but products of human creativity.

In the following descriptions of plural world interpretations I will also use the term *interpretation*. This term is not equivalent to *perception*. Interpretation means the human behaviour that follows human perception. People perceive something with their senses before they interpret it. For interpreting the perceived, humans use patterns predefined by our culture, which I call models of world interpretation. Our subsequent behaviour is then based on these interpretations.

The term *world* – as a component of the terms plural world interpretations and models of world interpretation – is based on the constructivist concept of “lifeworld” (*Lebenswelt*) that goes back to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1936, 1954). It was introduced into sociology by Alfred Schütz (Schütz 1945: 533, Schütz und Luckmann 2003 [1975]) as “paramount reality” (*ausgezeichnete Wirklichkeit*). Berger and Luckmann developed it further as “world of daily life” (*Alltagswelt*) or “everyday reality” (*Alltagswirklichkeit*) (Berger und Luckmann 2012 [1966]: 23–25).

Both models of world interpretation presented here, i.e. the dominance and the interaction model, must be allocated to the “everyday reality.” They are part of and constitute the socially constructed “world of daily life” (“everyday reality,” *ibid.*, S. 18–26).

The dominance and the interaction model can be understood as “social stocks of knowledge” (*ibid.*, S. 41ff.), consisting of *recipes for mastering routine problems* (*ibid.*, S. 43). In this sense, both models of world interpretation are shared by all Tyvans. They are intersubjective parts of Tyvan everyday reality.

In the present book I have examined two of several Tyvan models of world interpretation. People living in industrial societies most often apply a *model of human dominance (dominance model)* in the sense defined above. This term denotes a model of world interpretation that postulates *the human dominance over the environment that is regarded as a series of more or less passive objects of human agency*. The model shows the following characteristics: (1) It separates human beings from their non-human environment and opposes them. (2) It differentiates between active subjects (humans) and the passive objects of human agency as the constituent parts of the non-human environment and presupposes that the act takes place from the subject to the object. (3) The non-human components of the environment follow the laws of nature. Therefore humans are able to understand them and use them to their own advantage. (4) Interaction is possible only between conscious subjects (human beings). Animal instincts are a border case: they appear to modern humans as interactions between humans and animals, but they are not regarded as equal to the rationality and intelligence of humans. (5) Non-human components of the environment have no rationality, intelligence or will. Only humans have the ability to consciously and deliberately create human lives, even if the possibilities for

doing so are limited by natural principles. (6) In shaping their own lives, human beings shape their environment too. Only mistakes and an incorrect understanding of natural connections limit human ambitions to create their own world, the world they live in.

The Tyvan form of the model of human dominance is not opposed to but attended by a model of world interpretation that many Tyvans call *their* “traditional world view.” All norms of proper behaviour in the Tyvan world point to the absolute necessity of a respectful interaction between human and non-human components of that world. This model of world interpretation, and the actions and behaviour patterned on it, obligates Tyvan actors to interact with the various components of the Tyvan world, such as stones, trees, fire, cars and even spirit masters. The knowledge that they are part of a world consisting of human and non-human subjects or “actors” (actor-network theory, see Law and Hassard 1999, Belliger and Krieger 2006), and comprising humans as well as spirits and other non-human subjects, gives Tyvans the certainty of being in permanent interaction with all non-human components of the Tyvan world. According to this model for interpreting the world, humans participate in the power of non-human elements of the Tyvan world (for example, religions considered as energies), undergo the influences and the will power of non-human subjects and perceive the reasons why they are chosen, controlled and dominated by non-human subjects (for example spirits), which they have to fear or are afflicted by. The model described is a Tyvan version of the *interaction model* I defined above as a *model of interactions in a world encompassing both human and non-human subjects*. It has the following five attributes: (1) Humans are an integral part of the world. (2) Apart from humans, the world includes many non-human subjects. (3) Interactions take place between human and non-human subjects (partners or actors). The term “interactions between subjects” is not limited to human beings. (4) Not only humans but all parts of the world are seen as acting subjects. (4.1) In the case of the Tyvans these are spirits and gods, animals and plants, articles of daily use such as tools and machinery, as well as natural energies and powers, the earth, the heavens, the stars, the sun and the moon, the landscape, e.g. water, springs, rivers and lakes, mountains and valleys, woods, trees, glades and much more. (5) A self-consciousness similar to human self-consciousness is not ascribed to all subjects. But all parts of the world continuously influence the lives of humans. (5.1) Among the Tyvans spirits and gods without will, intelligence, rationality and intention are unthinkable. (5.2) The subjects of the Tyvan interaction model are hierarchically ordered. The highest rank is held by the spirits and the gods, the second by humans. Placed parallel are energies and powers that influence all parts of the world, but without a specific self-consciousness. Wild and domestic animals, plants, parts of the landscape, tools and articles of daily use are subordinated to humans and spirits, energies and powers. (5.3) This hierarchy is not universally valid, however. Depending on the situation in which an interaction takes place, various subjects can be superior, equal or inferior

to one another. For example, a tree may not consent to being cut and a wild animal may avoid being killed and may do so by laying obstacles in a human's path.

The definitions of both models of world interpretation include a separation between structure and substance. For Schütz and Luckmann (2003 [1975]: 657; 1973) substance stands for “intersubjective symbolic meanings” (intersubjektive symbolische Bedeutungen) that are specific for various cultures and time periods. They lead to an enormous “diversity of socio-historical forms” (ibid.). Whereas the substance of both models of world interpretations is in a permanent process of modification and development, their structure, by contrast, appears as being global and permanent through time.

The concept of Plural World Interpretations

The present work focuses on two models of world interpretation that are widespread in Tyva and on how they are applied flexibly by individuals and groups. On the one hand, there is a Tyvan version of the *dominance model* that Tyvans usually perceive as their “modern” worldview, influenced by their being part of Russia (since 1944). On the other hand there is the Tyvan form of the *interaction model* that Tyvans identify as their “traditional” animistic-shamanistic worldview. Apart from other models of world interpretation, such as the Tyvan lamaistic worldview of Tibetan import, all models mentioned are part of Tyvan every-day reality, which they together constitute simultaneously. Although mutually contradictory in many of their aspects, they are parallel components of the mental culture of all my research partners in Tyva and can be applied by every Tyvan as possibilities for interpreting events and as guidelines for proper action and behaviour. To me they were often communicated in a *narratively idealised pure form* (*narrative idealisierte Reinform*). However, they were applied in mixed, complementary form according to the situation and context.

These plural world interpretations and their flexible use follow several rules that can be summarised as follows:

1. Both types of world interpretation, the *interaction model* and the *dominance model*, can be found side by side among the Tyvans, each with specifically Tyvan substance.
2. In their extreme forms the models contradict each other in such a fundamental way that the interpretation of a situation from one of them must necessarily appear “fictitious”, “dissonant” and “inconsistent” (Schütz 1971b: 397), when seen from the perspective of the other and conversely.
3. The Tyvans describe both models of world interpretation often in a *narratively idealised pure form*. Many Tyvans claim to profess to only one of them.

4. The actions and behaviour of many Tyvans I observed and their conversations among themselves allow the conclusion that both models of world interpretation appear in supplemented and mixed forms. According to their specific contextual needs, Tyvans shift from one extreme to another or change their positions on the continuum of transdifference, the space between them.
5. My conversation partners knew how to distinguish between both types of world interpretation and attributed their statements to the emic concepts of “modernity” or “tradition”.
6. Neither of these models can be attributed to exclusively “the” Tyvans: many Tyvans feel at home in both models as well as in the space of transdifference between them.
7. Both models of world interpretation appear stable in their structure. However, their substance can change rapidly. The reason for these changes can be found in the impact of the media, schools and professional education, science, tourism and travel as well as esoterism and the New Age movement.
8. The immediate world interpretation of one person results from his or her position in the transdifferent space, i.e. the position that one Tyva adopts at a particular moment of time, in a particular situation and context and that he or she is momentarily willing to follow.
9. Accordingly, Tyvan world interpretations are not only subject to a permanent process of change in their substance but also in structure. Rather than being unambiguous or one-dimensional and static, they are ambiguous, flexible, situational and plural.

The Ethnography of the Tyvan interaction model

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

1. Tyvans do not perceive themselves as the only intelligent beings or as masters of their world. They are connected to non-human subjects in a network and interact constantly with them, both consciously and unconsciously. Human well-being depends on the success of these interactions. That is why Tyvans attach great importance to compliance with the rules and norms of the interaction model and a consciously respectful interaction with non-human subjects.

2. Considering the frequency of references to and interactions with the *spirit masters* (Tyvan: *éè*), these are the most important non-human interaction partners for humans. As their real owners, the spirit masters watch over all existing parts of the world, provide norms and rules for dealing with them, ensure their abidance and punish non-compliance.
3. All human activities can be seen as *interactions between humans and spirit masters*. Positive aspects include the acknowledgement of the spirit master's mastery over all existing parts of the world, the observance of standards, norms and rules prescribed by the spirit masters, rituals of gratitude, requests and reconciliations, different aspects of spiritual culture and the utilisation of aptitudes and talents bestowed upon a person by the spirit masters. Every non-compliance with the norms and rules of the interaction model and the result thereof must be understood as a negative element in interaction between humans and spirit masters.
4. With help of their narrative tradition the Tyvans keep alive their interpreting, behaving and acting according to the interaction model. One of the most important narrative genres are so-called "*true occurrences*" (Tyvan: *bolgan tavarylgalar*, i. e. contemporary legends or reports of events, experiences or adventures). Typical subjects of such contemporary legends are human failings in the respectful interaction between human and non-human subjects as demanded by the spirits and the resulting punishments, such as crises, illness or death. Legends that inform about wondrous rewards by spirits to those who distinguish themselves in their handling of rules and norms as per the interaction model are also popular.
5. Humans often only become aware of breaches of norms after a crisis occurs in their lives. To avert the consequences of such transgressions, Tyvans have to take several steps: (1) interpret the crisis retrospectively according to the interaction model; (2) invite a shaman to review the situation, find out which spirits were involved in what way and give advice on how the problem may be solved; (3) conduct rituals of reconciliation (possibly under the direction of a shaman); and (4) promise to behave in a more respectful way with the non-human subjects.
6. Tyvans consider human talents as connected to the activities of the spirit masters as well. Talents are not inborn attributes and are not considered a form of distinction. Special talents – for the Tyvans – are obligations. In fact, the spirit master of specific talents select and oblige individuals bestowed with such talents to serve these talents by using them in the world of human beings. A person chosen by the spirit masters of a specific talent has to represent it in the human world, is obliged to practice and apply it with the best of his or her ability, not to hold it back or misuse it and not gain unfair advantages because of it. To do otherwise incurs punishment.

7. The interaction model ensures harmony, balance and stability in the field of reciprocal dependencies between human and non-human subjects. If a Tyvan compromises this balance, he or she runs the risk of being punished by the spirits. The spirit masters will call forth a crisis. But spirits can also compromise the stability of respectful interactions. For example, attacks by evil spirits, who the Tyvans regard as playful or vicious, are a constant source of danger for humans.
8. The people see themselves as being permanently dependent on the goodwill of various spirits. But the existence and the well-being of the spirits is seen as depending on human behaviour and action as well. On the one hand, people depend on that, which the spirit masters provide them with. On the other, if people apply incorrectly that which the spirits have given them or destroy it, this may have negative consequences for the spirit masters, not only for the people. If people destroy the property of a spirit master, they destroy the spirit master as well, the incorrect handling of a spirit master's property may rob them of their power; neglecting to use a bestowed talent or forgetting bestowed knowledge about its proper practice may cause the spirit master of the talent to disappear.
9. Shamans endowed with powers by the spirit masters find their function here in the interaction model. They are intermediaries between human and non-human subjects. With the help of their partner spirits they clarify situations that endanger the interaction. When interactions become unbalanced, they help to return them to a state of stability and harmony. In so doing, they are obliged to reconcile the spirit masters and fight against several evil spirits. They conduct rituals of reconciliation, appeal and gratitude. Furthermore, they act as advisers and remind people of the correct path in the respectful interaction with non-human subjects.
10. Thus all aspects of all human and non-human subjects in the Tyvan world are interconnected and interdependent.

Plural World Interpretations among the Tyvans of southern Siberia

From the summary of the concept of *plural world interpretations* presented above there emerges the question what rules for their flexible use can be extracted? The following synopsis therefore deals with the flexible application of both models of world interpretation and discusses the connections and regularities, reasons and consequences, as well as strategies for changing positions on the continuum between their extremes.

1. The *dominance model* is currently the most frequently used model of world interpretation in Tyva. As an initial guideline for interpreting events, acting in and reacting to them, Tyvans usually employ this model first.

2. *Spontaneous shifts* from an initial model of world interpretation to another often occur after the first attempt at interpretation or a solution to a problem fails.
3. Often the interpretation of a situation is *complemented*, which means, a shift in the tendency from the one model of interpretation towards the other takes place.
4. A shift from the initial spontaneous application of the interaction model towards the dominance model is rare.
5. *Spontaneous shifts* from the dominance to the interaction model occur particularly in *problematic situations*, after pragmatic and rational attempts to solve the problem fail.
6. The shift towards the interaction model usually accompanies a *retrospective reflection* on the events.
7. After a shift to the interaction model, a breach of the rules of respectful interaction between human and non-human subjects is identified as the cause of the negative situations.
8. Typical examples of such retrospective reflections from the perspective of the interaction model are so-called “*true occurrences*” (Tyvan: *bolgan tavarylgalar*, i. e. contemporary legends or reports of events, experiences or adventures). They often refer to a breach of norms by people and their subsequent punishment by non-human subjects, such as spirits.
9. After the spontaneous shift from the dominance towards the interaction model, *rituals of conciliation* (Versöhnungsrituale) are a typical next step.
10. These are followed by *long-term modifications of behaviour*, accompanied by the promise to follow the rules of the interaction model for respectful interactions between human and non-human subjects more carefully.
11. Accidents and strokes of fate that often cause the shift from the dominance model to the interaction model are especially relevant in maintaining the possibility for interpreting events according to the interaction model.
12. Depending on the situation, further reasons for shifting from the dominance to the interaction model may include particular spaces (e.g. holy or ritual places), moments in time (e.g. days reserved for rituals) and encounters with specific people (e.g. religious specialists or a researcher working on animism and shamanism).
13. Interpretations of events directly on the interaction model, i. e. not preceded by a shift from the dominance to the interaction model, take place most frequently in the days *after rituals*. Rituals keep awake the interaction model in the people involved for a while after conducting them.

14. Shifting between the models of world interpretation can occur spontaneously or strategically. *Strategic shifts* in both directions often take place when a person or a group of persons is not satisfied with the results of applying one of the models of world interpretation. The strategic use of the dominance model during the Soviet period was a characteristic tactic for hiding personal religiousness.
15. The conscious *strategic shift* can often and best be observed with shamans. Today, shamans need to command several strategies in their work that borrow instruments from the dominance model. These include networking, publicity, book-keeping, the installation and organisation of shaman-clinics as well as the manufacture and trade of devotional items.
16. Tyvan self-descriptions reveal a tendency to explanations of proper and improper behaviour and action. Such a distinction was often accompanied by an effort to oppose the two models of world interpretation as right or wrong and thus postulate their incompatibility.
17. In such cases, many Tyvans created a *narratively idealised pure form* of one model of world interpretation. Therein the interpretation of events and situations approximated the extreme form of that model.
18. Apart from the *structural stability* of both models of world interpretation, in Tyva an accelerated *changeability of the content* of both the dominance and the interaction model is typical today.
19. The frequency of applying both models of world interpretation is also changing. Today the dominance model is more often employed than the interaction model, the use of which is concentrated on specific circumstances.