

LECTIO PRAECURSORIA

The Horse in My Blood: Land-Based Kinship in the Sayan and Altay Mountains, Inner Asia

4 December 2021, University of Helsinki

ABSTRACT

A lectio praecursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent, members of the audience!

In March 2012, I attended the annual Helsinki Horse Fair for the first time. At that time, I was a recent divorcee, overwhelmed by the enormous responsibility of raising children in Finland. I remember walking with my daughters through the exhibition centre that accommodated a show arena and stalls for the horses. My older daughter, Ottugmaa Aino, stopped by a stall with a playful Scottish Clydesdale which actively interacted with visitors. The five-year-old blazed bay Clydesdale stood at 180 centimetres at its withers and weighed almost one tonne. That Clydesdale was quite different from a horse breed I grew up riding in my homeland, the Tyva Republic in Inner Asia.¹ Tyvan horses are smaller: up to 140 cm at the withers and with an average weight of 350 to 450 kg. Still, when I inhaled the Clydesdale's smell—a rich mixture of horse sweat and hay—I broke into tears. I felt

as if I had found a lost part of myself amidst horses, their familiar smells, and voices. I poured my longing for horses and home into an article, 'The Land of Horses' (2012), which was published in the Finnish magazine *Tunne Hevonen* (*Know the Horse*). In May of that same year, my two daughters and I visited the horse centre named 'The Happy Horse' in Spain, located about an hour's drive from Barcelona. The centre's founder, Una McLister, practices natural horsemanship. She also takes in rescue horses. While Una's students were helping my daughters, four and two years old at the time, to ride Shetland ponies, Una told me that it is good to educate children about horses because they will shape our shared future with horses. A few years later at the same Helsinki Horse Fair, my younger daughter Paju Ayalga, eight years old then, stopped at the entrance to the arena hall and held her breath. I was sure that, as tidy and picky as she is, Paju would complain about 'the rich mixture of horse sweat and hay.' I was wrong. Paju Ayalga told me in Finnish,

'Me, Tyvalaisia, kaikki olemme maalaisia. Emme pelkää hevosten hajusta!, which means, 'We are the Tyva people, and we all come from the countryside. We are not afraid of the horses' smell.' Paju Ayalga was born in Helsinki. What Tyvan she has in her comes from the Tyvan language that we speak at home, and from brief visits to Tyva in summers. During one of those visits a couple of years ago, my cousin Aisula presented Paju with a buckskin filly. Paju loves to talk about her own equine and waits for the birth of foals. I explained to Paju that now we have an obligation to bring gifts to my cousin for looking after the mare. To Paju Ayalga, the buckskin mare is an entry point to my kinship networks in Tyva, serving as a way to learn about obligations which come with relationships. On the other hand, Paju Ayalga connects with her mare's homeland in Tyva, between the Sayan and Altay Mountains of Inner Asia. I hope this makes Tyva a special place to Paju, who believes that travelling and exploring new countries and cultures are the best things in life.

When I started my studies at the University of Helsinki in 2015, I planned to write about all of the knowledge of horses accumulated by countless generations of Tyva horsemen. Through years of field research in Tyva and Mongolia, I came to understand that horses help us tell our human stories; and these human-horse stories are undetachable from our homelands where they live together. The focus of my study, I realised, is the mutual coming together of horsemen with their horses and the sentiment towards their homelands. Thus, my dissertation, entitled 'The Horse in My Blood: Land-Based Kinship in the Sayan and Altay Mountains, Inner Asia', is a study of relationships between the horsemen from my clan—the Soyan people—their horses, and our homelands in southern Tyva.

What is land-based kinship? It is a translation of the Tyvan concept *čer törel*. I will briefly explain the meanings encompassed by the expression *čer törel* in the Tyvan language. The word *čer* conveys a multiplicity of meanings, and can be translated into English as 'the Earth', 'the land', 'landscape', 'the ground', and 'wilderness'. *Törel* means 'a relative' or 'kin'. It comes from the stem *tör-*, meaning 'to give birth' or 'to be born'. It is part of the expression *töreen čer*, which is 'the birthplace'. Thus, the concept *čer törel* encompasses the meanings 'those who are born in the same land' and 'those who are related through shared belonging to a homeland'. In my dissertation, I expand on its meaning by including nonhuman animals and horses. I apply land-based kinship as a theoretical framework to understand the complexity of relationships between horsemen, their horses, and interspecies' shared homelands. Herding communities in the Sayan and Altay Mountains have a deep sense of belonging to their homelands because their clans have inhabited the same land for multiple generations. This reinforces a relational perception of landscapes as one's birthplace, active or abandoned campsites, places where one's kin lived, seasonal pasturelands, hay-cutting places, watering holes, nearby and far afield pastures for various livestock animals, and paths that connect seasonal grounds. All of these understandings reveal the inherent sociality of landscapes for pastoralists—homelands keep and share knowledge about the people who live there. The anthropologist Caroline Humphrey (1989), who conducted field research in Tyva at the end of the Soviet period, observed the resilient sense of belonging of the Tyva people to their clan grounds. At the time, she defined rural communities in Tyva as 'patrilineal localised clans'. This means that geographical belonging often reveals one's clan kinship. For

instance, when I say the name of the village where I was born—Ak-Erik by the River Tes—my interlocutors in Tyva know that I belong to the Soyans, my father’s clan. Until the border demarcation in 1932, my clan lived in the Xaan Kögey Mountains and was known as the Soyans of Kögey. This new borderline was the first in history to demarcate the border separation between Mongolia and Tyva. The Soyans’ clan territories became part of Mongolia. The government of Tyva officially displaced the clan, renamed the administrative unit after a new location, and prohibited herders from crossing the border. However, the Soyans continued to move to the former clan grounds in summers. Because of their resistance to the government’s orders and their reluctance to abandon the clan’s homeland in the Kögey Mountains, the Soyans were harshly persecuted during the political repressions of the 1930s, then imprisoned, exiled, and executed. I will return to this later.

I grew up seeing Xaan Kögey as a blue line on the southern horizon when viewed from our seasonal spring-to-autumn pastures around Lake Shara-Nuur. Whilst unreachable at the time, Xaan Kögey was always visually present and featured in stories I heard from my grandparents. I visited the Xaan Kögey Mountains for the first time in summer 2016 and made offerings to the great mountain. Later, I felt an even stronger sense of belonging with Xaan Kögey, when I was a guest with a family of local herders Dorlig Namsüren and Gambodrax Namsilmaa who are from the Bayad group. We visited them at their summer place, named Xar Xučir by the River Turuun in the northern valleys of Xaan Kögey. After listening to a story about my clan’s previous habitat in the Xaan Kögey Mountains, our host, Namsilmaa, responded with the welcoming words, ‘So, we are kin because we share a homeland. We are happy to meet our kin.’ I conducted fieldwork

in the vast transboundary region of Tyva and Mongolia for several years—from 2015 to 2019. I was welcomed and often addressed as kin by herders who belong to different ethnic groups and speak different languages. ‘*Tyva gadaat emes*’ (‘A Tyva is not a foreigner’), I was told by an old Kazakh man from the village of Saksay in Bayan-Ölgii aymag, Mongolia. The Tyva people who live in the Altay Mountains of Mongolia addressed me as ‘our kin from Tajdi-Tyva’, referring to the mountain range Tajdi-Uula in Tyva. These encounters taught me a lesson—our homelands unite us despite differences in nationalities, ethnicities, and languages. Kinship by land is a way to overcome and heal past traumas, such as displacement from clan grounds or problems in cross-border relationships.

In all of these encounters with herders in Inner Asia, we shared stories about horsemen and horses. There, I was never asked, ‘Why horses? Why do you study relationships with horses?’ Here, in the West, I am regularly asked that question, ‘Why horses?’ The question puzzles me every time, because it is difficult to give a brief answer about something as important as a horse. So, let me answer using the words of my horseman-uncle Roman Aldin-Xerel. He once told me, ‘A horse is everything in life. Without horses, our people would not exist in history.’ This echoes the words of the anthropologist and equestrian Niobe Thompson (2018), who said, ‘The human story is the horse story.’ I want to draw your attention to the fact that the horse has always been political—across all 6000 years of our existing together and it continues to be political today. Perhaps, this statement is best illustrated by the story of the racehorse Ezir Kara. His name means the Black Eagle, and he lived in Tyva. Ezir Kara was born in 1930 in the herd of a man named Soyán Sandaṅmaa. He was an educated man,

a politician, and the head of the Soyán clan's administrative unit. His seasonal pastures were between Mount Agar, which is the heart of our clan territories today, and the Xaan Kögey Mountains, which I mentioned earlier. My uncle Roman Aldin-Xerel heard from his father, Aldin-Xerel Soyán, who knew Ezir Kara, who was black-coated—like his mother—had a gentle character and was a purebred Tyvan horse with a small stature. Ezir Kara won the all-Tyvan races for five consecutive years—from 1934 to 1938. The races took place in central Tyva. Simply arriving at the location, Ezir Kara travelled hundreds of kilometres from his summer pastures in the Xaan Kögey Mountains.

In Tyva, horses are believed to embody the life energy, or spirit, of their owners. Ezir Kara's exceptionally successful racing career expanded his representative power to the Soyán clan and all of southern Tyva. Later, as the winner of the all-Tyvan championships for multiple years, Ezir Kara was understood as embodying the Tyva people's collective life energy. In part four of my dissertation, I discuss regulations affecting the relationship between a horseman and a racehorse, which belongs to the category of special, beloved equines. I emphasised how these regulations inform the proper treatment of a racehorse during his lifetime, define the circumstances of his death as part of a special ritual, and determine the treatment of his flesh, especially the skull, after death. The skull is placed at the highest spot in the horse's homeland, usually a mountain peak. Horsemen regularly visit these spots; they make offerings to the mountain and their horses which are gone, asking them to look after people and livestock. Ezir Kara's status as the embodiment of all Tyva's life energy required a strictly regulated engagement with him: respect and care for Ezir Kara and his tack, and a long life. Within the cultural norms of Tyvan

horsemanship, it is expected that a champion racehorse lives until he cannot graze anymore, approximately up to the age of 25 to 30 years. His death had to strictly follow customs, and his skull had to be placed on his birthplace—the Agar Mountain—with regular offerings provided afterwards. All of these normative regulations were violated. In March 1939, Ezir Kara's owner Soyán Sandaŋmaa was imprisoned. He was falsely accused of antirevolutionary activities and executed in June 1939. Two weeks later, on 7 July, the all-Tyvan races took place. On the last day, people saw Ezir Kara alive. He was brought with other army horses to participate in the races. Witnesses later shared memories of how Ezir Kara was agitated, and how the army official declared that the horse belonging to an executed 'enemy of the people' cannot participate in the races. The Tyvan writer and journalist Kara-Küske Čoodu, the nephew of Ezir Kara's female owner Öškü-Saar Čoodu, studied the archival sources and met with people who knew the famous horse. Kara-Küske Čoodu collected rumours regarding how Ezir Kara met his end: he was sold to the Xakas people and taken 'beyond the Sayan Mountains'. He was gifted to the Soviet Army, and someone saw Ezir Kara abused, starved, and unable to stand on his own after dragging logs in the taiga by the Yenisey River.

In summer 2018, I asked my uncle, Kara-Küske Čoodu, for his opinion on what had happened to Ezir Kara. He answered, 'When Ezir Kara was released [from the tethering post before the races on 7 July 1939], people saw him running up to other racehorses on the steppe. Nobody saw him after that. Artem Borbak-ool, who was in the army and later worked for the KGB, told me that Ezir Kara was banned from racing, and the following night people came and took him, they conspired without telling Borbak-ool, and they killed

the horse. That must be true.’ Killing Ezir Kara was an inconceivable violation of cultural norms and pastoralist lifeways. I asked myself, ‘How could we, the Tyva people, whose life story is impossible without a horse, kill Ezir Kara, a horse that embodied the life energy of our people and homeland?’ I still cannot fully comprehend it. In my dissertation, I show how the answer lies in the geopolitics of Tyva at the time, which was then controlled by the Soviet Union. The government of Tyva perceived Ezir Kara as undermining its politics, the objective of depopulating the border region, the socialist modernisation of pastoralist communities—a system that denied any ties between humans, nonhuman animals, and homelands. Through his research and numerous publications, Kara-Küske Čoodu contributed to the postsocialist revival of Ezir Kara’s story, and to Ezir Kara becoming a symbol of political repression in the 1930s. The first monument dedicated to the famous racehorse was built in 1993. It is the memorial to victims of the repression, where Ezir Kara’s name is written next to the names of repressed people. Since then, several more monuments to Ezir Kara have appeared in Tyva.

During my field research, I noticed that my Soyán informants emphasised their affinity with Ezir Kara’s story. Descendants of Ezir Kara’s owners boast a direct connection to the famed horse. Others trace their lineages to Ezir Kara through kinship ties to either Sandaŋmaa Soyán or his wife Öškü-Saar Čoodu. Ezir Kara’s owner Soyán Sandaŋmaa’s great grandson Soyán Sayán is the well-known horseman who breeds champion racehorses. Sayán told me about the new tradition in their family. Every year before the main races, the family invites a Buddhist lama and performs a special ritual at the last camping site at which Sandaŋmaa and Ezir Kara lived and from whence they were taken, a place named Kara-Xaya, The

Black Rock, in the Agar Mountains. There are many meanings to this ritual. First, it allows descendants of Ezir Kara’s owners to reconnect with a landscape that has not been inhabited by their family for several decades. Second, the annual ritual at this place acknowledges and reinforces belonging between the descendants of Sandaŋmaa Soyán and the Kara-Xaya site and, through the shared Kara-Xaya homeland, with its famed inhabitant—the racehorse Ezir Kara. As a result, this ritual reinstates the racehorse in the human–nonhuman kinship network. Furthermore, it allows south Tyvan horsemen, especially descendants of the horse’s owners, to approach Ezir Kara as a mediator between interspecies communities and sentient landscapes, and to rely on his ability to increase their life energy and to lift their spirits.

The ability of horse and landscape stories to restore human–nonhuman relationships in my homeland of Tyva reminds me of Julie Cruikshank’s (1998: 3–4) observations related to Indigenous storytelling, which ‘can construct meaningful bridges in disruptive situations’. Sweeney Windchief and Timothy San Pedro, the editors of *Applying Indigenous Research Methodologies: Storying with Peoples and Communities*, suggest ‘[t]hat’s the beauty of stories ... they can be what we need at the time of the telling’ (2019: xxii). They further observe that, over an extended period of interacting with a story, we change in relation to the story, and each time the story can teach us different lessons. These observations on the power of Indigenous storytelling have inspired me to acknowledge the potential of storying with my kin, our horses, and our homelands in Tyva. The Soyáns’ storying with the racehorse Ezir Kara is a way to heal, revive, and celebrate intraclan kinship and the clan’s belonging with its homelands. The complexity of interwoven stories reminds me of my grandfather’s explicit leatherwork. He used

different braiding techniques when crafting horse tack. My grandfather made saddle belts by braiding several leather strands in a complicated pattern. I helped him by holding one end of the leather piece, whilst my grandfather first cut it into strands, and then braided those strands together to create a beautiful and secure piece of tack. My grandfather was generous in sharing his craftsmanship with others. Similarly, I share stories that I have braided—listened to, connected, and written down—with communities in the Sayan and Altay Mountains and beyond.

Storying with my kin, homelands, and horses in the Sayan and Altay Mountains as a part of this research project has also been a personal healing journey for me. I have reinvigorated my kinship ties, renewed obligations, and engaged in empowering and inspiring storying with my human–nonhuman kin.

Honoured Opponent, Professor K. David Harrison, I now call upon you to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

VICTORIA PEEMOT
POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHER
INDIGENOUS STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
victoria.peemot@helsinki.fi

NOTES

- 1 Specific letters of the Tyvan Cyrillic alphabet are transliterated as follows: ө – ö, ү – ü, һ – ђ, ы – ï, й – y, ч – č, ш – š, ж – ž, and х – x. However, the vowel ы is transcribed as y in words derived from the ethnonym Тыва [Тыва], following the established transcription system. I write the ethnonym as Tyva: for example, the Tyva, the Tyva people, or the Tyva Republic. The form Tyvan is used as an adjective: for instance, Tyvan clothing or Tyvan food. When writing about equines in English, I use the gendered pronouns he/him and she/her. In the Tyvan language, the same pronoun *ol* (plural—*olar*) is used for he, she, or it. However, when talking about their equines, the Tyva horsemen employ an elaborate vocabulary that distinguishes animals by their age and gender.

REFERENCES

- Cruikshank, Julie** 1998. *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in Northern Canada*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Čoodu, Kara-Küske = Чооду, Кара-Күске** 2011. Репрессированный конь [The Convicted Horse]. Кызыл: ОАО “Тываполиграф.”
- Humphrey, Caroline** 1989. Perestroika and the Pastoralists: The Example of Mongun-Taiga in Tuva ASSR. *Anthropology Today* 5 (3): 6–10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3032697>.
- Peemot, Victoria** 2012. Tuva—Hevosten Maa. *Tunne Hevonen* 2: 32–39.
- Thompson, Niobe** (dir.) 2018. Equus: Story of the Horse. Handful of Films. <https://handfuloffilms.com/our-films/equus-story-horse/>.
- Windchief, Sweeney and Timothy San Pedro** 2019. *Applying Indigenous Research Methods: Storying with Peoples and Communities*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315169811>.