



# A MONGOLIAN COAXING RITUAL FOR CAMELS.

A zoosemiotic perspective on human–non-human animal communication.

Yekaterina Lukina

Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu

**Abstract.** Over thousands of years of co-evolutionary domestication with herds, Mongolian pastoralists have developed profound awareness of the ungulate herds' sensitivity and subjectivity. This present study, drawing on the particular example of the traditional coaxing ritual for camels, aims to examine how this living practice can provide a broader overview and fit into the larger framework of the non-human-human relationship experienced in Mongolian herding communities from the zoosemiotic perspective. Reconstructing the herd-herder relationship via the notions of umwelt, semiotic competence and ontological niche, this research provides insights into the Mongolian co-domestic environment, established on the principles of mutual trust and respect, as well as an effective interspecies communication system developed through the complex and subtle process of the enculturation of co-domestic herders and herds.

**Keywords:** umwelt, semiotic competence, ontological niche, enculturation, zoosemiotics, Mongolian coaxing ritual

Kaamelite peibutusrituaal Mongoolias. Zoosemiootiline vaade inimeste ja mitte-inimeste suhetele.

**Abstrakt.** Kaamelite kodustamisega kaasnenud koevolutsioon on teinud Mongoolia kaamelipidajad väga teadlikuks ja tähelepanelikuks oma kariloomade tundlikkuse ja subjektiivsuse suhtes. Antuds töö uurib traditsioonilise peibutusrituaali näitel ja zoosemiootilisest perspektiivist, kuidas selline elukorraldus võib pakkuda laiemat vaadet inimeste ja mitte-inimeste suhetele Mongoolia karjakasvatajate kogukondades. Rekonstrueerides karja ja karjapidaja suhet läbi selliste mõistete nagu omailm, semiootiline kompetents ja ontoloogiline nišš heidab käesolev töö pilgu Mongoolia elukorraldusele, mis põhineb karjapidaja ja kariloomade vahelisel vastastikusel usaldusel ja austusel ning keeruka enkultuuratsiooniprotsessi käigus välja kujunenud efektiivsel liikidevahelisel kommunikatsioonisüsteemil.

**Märksõnad:** omailm, semiootiline kompetents, ontoloogiline nišš, zoosemiootika, Mongoolia peibutamise rituaal



## Introduction

*The Story of the Weeping Camel*, the narrative documentary released in 2003, chronicles quite an extraordinary living practice of Mongolian pastoralists – a traditional coaxing (*khuuslukh*) ritual for new-born Bactrian camel colts and their mothers. The season of spring, when the female camels give birth to their young, in the Gobi Desert appears to be a time of harsh weather conditions, characterised by bitter cold, strong winds, dust storms, and increased dryness. Such unfavourable circumstances may result in high mortality rates among both mother and baby animals or cause the female camels to reject their progeny. The rejected or orphaned colt has poor chances for survival, and, in order to encourage the female camel to accept her own baby or to adopt an orphan, the Mongolian herders utilise an elaborated chanting technique – a specific rhythmic song, accompanied by the gentle stroking of the mother camel and playing the *morin khuur* – a traditional horse-head fiddle – or, sometimes, a flute (ICH 2015; Tumurjav 2015).

During the coaxing performance the colt is placed close to the mother camel, the singer starts intoning a melodic passage, chanting repeatedly *k-h-u-u-s*, *k-h-u-u-s* and modulating her voice in accord with the camel's behaviour. Simultaneously, she tries to appease the often anxious animal by tenderly stroking her hair. The musician follows the singer, playing a slow soothing motif on the *morin khuur*. The ritual is held at dawn or dusk and can take up to several hours. It requires exceptional skills in handling camels, singing as well as playing the fiddle. As a rule, members of the herding family enact the coaxing ritual themselves, but experienced singers and musicians might be invited when such professionals cannot be found among members of the local community. Upon completion of the ritual, as a sign of relenting and accepting the colt, the mother camel is said to shed tears in response to the gentle sounds of the human voice and musical instrument. In 2015 the coaxing ritual was inscribed by the UNESCO committee on the *List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding*, since the number of herders practicing this tradition is rapidly declining due to various changes within Mongolian pastoralist communities, including increased migration from the Gobi area to urban centres, and the integration of new technologies into husbandry (ICH 2015).

At first glance, the coaxing ritual may come across as an act of performing magic and casting spells on animals. However, considered from the zoosemiotic perspective, this practice may provide a vivid illustration of the profound awareness of camel sensitivity and subjectivity developed by the Mongolian pastoralists over thousands of years of co-evolutionary domestication with herds (Fijn 2011: 241; Tumurjav 2015: 100). Reconstructing the herd-herder relationship via the notions of *umwelt*, semiotic competence, and ontological niche, I will demonstrate how the coaxing ritual is embedded in a broader pattern of what Fijn considers as the enculturation of co-domestic herders and herds (2011: 114, 124). First, I will examine how Mongolian pastoralist communities relate to their herds and what attitudes they project upon their animals in general. Second, I will consider the ways herders and herd animals communicate with



each other. Particular attention will be paid to the role music and songs play in the interspecific communication. In the final section, drawing on the observations and findings of the previous parts, I will analyse the processes and effects of the coaxing ritual.

## Animal as subject

The way we perceive other non-human animals largely defines the essence of our relationship with them. In Western capitalist societies, predominantly informed by the Cartesian dualism of mind vs. body and culture vs. nature (Roepstorff 2001: 207), domesticated farm animals have been considered as senseless objects or mindless bodies, existing beyond the boundaries of human ethics and culture (Plumwood 2012: 79) and treated as mere economic resources exploited for human benefits (Fijn 2011). In line with this objectifying attitude, it has become morally acceptable to deny animals' capacity for expressing feeling and emotions and suffering from pain; to confine them to unliveable cages and sheds for controlled exploitation, and to organise an inhumane systematic animal slaughter on a mass scale (Masson 2003; Morgan, Cole 2011; Plumwood 2012). The same perception is identifiable in the traditional anthropocentric definitions of domestication. Thus, for Ducos domestication takes place when "living animals are integrated as objects into the socio-economic organisation of the human group" (1978: 54). However, the concept of domestication in the Western scholarship tradition has recently undergone considerable transformations with more attention being paid to the mutual impact of animals and humans (see, e.g., Leach 2003; O'Connor 1997).

The way Mongolian nomadic communities perceive and relate to their herds is remarkably different. Natasha Fijn, having conducted etho-ethnographic<sup>1</sup> research on herding life in Mongolia (2011), provides an insightful account of the complex interspecies relations between humans and ungulate herds (horse, cattle, sheep, goat, and camel). Deliberately contrasting these relations with the intensive Western farm husbandry approach, she defines them as 'co-domestic' implying "the social adaptation of animals in association with human beings by means of mutual cross-species interaction and social engagement" (Fijn 2011: 19). Fijn's term of *co-domestication* chimes with and enriches the notions of co-evolution, introduced by Haraway (2003) and mutual domestication, introduced by Lestel (1998).

Fijn (2011: 36, 47) observes that Mongolian pastoralists view herd animals as subjects, capable of expressing emotions and actively involved in a process of co-domestic interaction based on mutual trust and respect. This attitude towards animals, also characteristic of arctic hunter-gatherer societies (Fienup-Riordan 1990; Roepstorff 2001), originates in an animist perspective of the world, in which other living entities are regarded as sensing persons (or agents) treated with respect (Fijn 2011: 35, 47).



Observing their herds in everyday interactions, herders have accumulated an extensive body of knowledge about animal social behaviour. They implement this knowledge in order to effectively carry out necessary activities, such as pasturing, riding, or milking. However, instead of forcefully modifying or constraining animal expressivity, the herders assume the lead positions as members of the herd and adjust their own behaviour in accord with that of the animals. The animals are free to express their autonomy in relationships with the environment, humans, and other species of the herd alike (ibid, 55–80).

Considering ungulates as agents with distinct personality, Mongolian pastoralists are able to distinguish individual animals by their appearances (*zūs*) and behavioural traits. Based on these peculiar characteristics (e.g. coat colour, age, agility) animals are given proper names and regarded as unique members of the herd rather than a faceless mass of objects (ibid, 95–97, 103). An animistic belief in reincarnation and continuity also has a crucial impact on attitudes regarding killing animals. Animal meat is an important part of the herders' subsistence, especially during cold winter periods; yet, only those animals that are deemed unlikely to survive through the winter, due to some infirmity or ailments, are slaughtered for food. The act of killing an animal is realised according to a set of specific traditional rules ensuring minimal suffering of the animal, and is performed with a high degree of respect (ibid, 197–198, 224–226). The herders perceive the animal's death as a necessary link in the chain of life. As Fijn notes, supporting Ingold's (2000: 114) observations on animist practices: "Instead of dichotomous division between human and non-human animal, herders include themselves and herd animals in a constant struggle for balance in the cycle of life and death" (Fijn 2011: 47).

When analysing the herders' relationship and attitude towards their herds within the framework of zoosemiotics, it is appropriate to emphasise that, unlike Western industrial farmers practicing intensive forms of animal husbandry, Mongolian pastoralists acknowledge and actively engage with other species' *umwelten*. The concept of *umwelt* was introduced by Baltic-German scholar Jakob von Uexküll in order to describe a living organism's subjective universe or phenomenal world, in which the neutral objects of the environment acquire unique meaning pertinent only to the organism involved (Uexküll 1982[1940]: 26–33). The area occupied by an organism in its *umwelt* (or phenomenal world) at a particular moment is defined as an ontological niche – a set of the organism's relations at a given point of natural history. Though it is impossible to fully grasp the other's *umwelt*, through the ontological niche the organism's *umwelt* interweaves with the *umwelten* of other organisms (Tønnessen 2003: 288), thus allowing for the interactions between species to take place.

The herders engage with non-human animals' *umwelten* on multiple layers. For instance, by giving meaningful names to the animals, the herders recognise their individuality and ability to relate to the world in a unique subjective way. By fostering natural social behaviour patterns, the herders allow the ungulates to utilise their semiotic competence (or freedom)<sup>2</sup> (Hoffmeyer 2014: 98) and live through their subjective reality in relation to the environment and other species (including humans). At the same time,



within the borders of the herd-herder ontological niche, the herders adjust their own behaviour to acquire the meaning of a conspecific (Sebeok 1990: 107) in the animals' umwelten. This allows the humans to secure a leading position within the herd and, while maintaining respect-based relations, use the animals' semiotic competence for their own needs. By understanding the meaning of suffering within the ungulate's subjective universe, the herders try to minimise that suffering during the act of killing.

## Animal as interlocutor and emotional being

The herders' active engagement with ungulates' umwelten has also shaped the communication patterns developed in the co-domestic environment of Mongolian herding communities. Thomas A. Sebeok notes that in order to communicate with each other, a human and non-human animal have to learn the key elements of each other's communicational codes (Sebeok 1990: 45). Dominique Lestel adds that during the process of communication, alongside mastering each other's codes, human-non-human animal communities rely on a shared rationality defined by their scope of semiotic abilities to produce and interpret signs (Lestel 2002: 56, 59). The effectiveness of communication between ungulates and herders in particular, to a considerable extent, also depends upon their reciprocal ability to anthropomorphise and zoomorphise each other respectively (Walther 1991: 11<sup>3</sup>, cited in Fijn 2011).

Ungulates communicate via a variety of channels, including vocalisations, scents, physical interactions, and visual displays. Over thousands of years of co-existence with their herds, Mongolian pastoralists have grown to recognise which stimuli acquire meaning in the species' Umwelt and have learned to adjust their behaviour within the animal's ontological niche in line with those meanings. They are also well aware of the ungulates' sensory abilities unavailable within the range of human perception. Thus, understanding the importance of olfactory signals, herders don't wash their working clothes in order to preserve the herd's smell or, relying on their horse's sense of direction; they allow her to find the way to the camp by herself (Fijn 2011: 106, 108).

Having been exposed to the ungulates' vocal signals for multiple generations, Mongolian herders developed a special verbal code to communicate with their co-domestic animals. Fijn compares this language with "transspecies pidgin" described by Kohn (2007) as a means of communication between the Runa of Amazonia and their dogs (Fijn 2011: 115). In the Mongolian version of pidgin the herders utilise a variety of animal sounds to construct words according to the principles of the Mongolian language, which, at the same time, creates meaning for the animals addressed. The herders use species-specific vocabulary that also varies in relation to the age, sex, context, and number of animals. Verbal communication, as a rule, is often accompanied by diverse bodily movements (ibid, 115-118, 123). Thus, by constantly anthropomorphising-



zoomorphising each other's signals, the herders and herd animals get create in a mutually effective communication process. The efficiency and effectiveness of herd-herder communication is also reinforced by a common rationality developed by the members of the co-domestic community over time – in each generation both a herder and an animal starting from birth learn to convey and respond to each other's signs (ibid, 118).

Music and songs hold a special place in the communication system of herding communities. For centuries Mongolian herders have used a wide array of whistles, calls, chants, and melodies to placate or coax herd animals; to encourage them in releasing milk; to direct their movements; or simply to praise the animal's beauty, strength, and power. (Fijin 2011; Pegg 2001). The name of one of the musical instruments, used by Mongolians in communication with animals, *iki*, is believed to originate from *ih hel* – “large language” – the language that transcends the boundaries of human language and can be used in reaching out to the animals, the environment, and the gods (Pegg 2001: 235). By considering animals as persons, the herders identify with them as emotionally responsive beings. They often refer to the ungulates in their everyday communication as “sensitive” (Fijn 2011: 106) and utilise music to elicit emotive reactions from them. They say that singing is “a sound that touches the heart of the animal” (ibid, 111). Obviously, active engagement with animal umwelten, acknowledging their abilities to express feelings and emotions, and carefully observing their behaviour throughout centuries of co-evolving have allowed herders to recognise the profound effects music may have on the psychological well-being of herds and the benefits of apply this knowledge in communication with them. Moreover, the herders have also learned to select sounds, melodies, and rhythms that matter in the subjective worlds of each particular species. Thus, for instance, while encouraging female animals to release milk to their young, a herding woman will vocalise a chant based on the ‘*zu*’ sound to address a goat, on the ‘*toig*’ sound to reach out to a ewe, and on the ‘*guurii*’ sound to communicate to a horse. The songs are also accompanied by physical touches and stroking (ibid, 109).

It is curious to note that, in contrast to Mongolian pastoralists, the Western academic world (especially ethology and comparative psychology scholarly circles) has long been hesitant to consider animals as capable of feeling and expressing emotions in general. The animal's emotive responses to music in particular have been subject to doubts and overt suspicions as well (Bekoff 2013; Fijn 2011: 111; Kaplan 2009). Yet, in recent years, a growing number of research studies has provided empirical evidence that animals do develop complex emotions in response to various stimuli (Bekoff 2013; Dawkins 2006; Morell 2013). Obviously, the paradigm is gradually shifting, and what has been known to Mongolian herders for centuries as an inextricable part of animal existence, now also becomes common thinking among Western academics.

As has been demonstrated in this section, interspecific communication of Mongolian co-domestic ungulates and herders reveals a vast array of complex mechanisms, approaches, and social practices, and appears to be based on numerous vocal, bodily, and emotive stimuli. Fijn (2011: 114, 241) suggests considering this communication system as part of the enculturation process, whereby both herders and





herd animals learn and adjust to each other's culture via reciprocal observation and social use of species-specific vocalisations and body language.

## Coaxing ritual as part of enculturation

Drawing on the analysis conducted in the previous sections, it becomes clear that a seemingly magical camel coaxing ritual appears to be in fact a manifestation of the larger phenomenon of multispecies enculturation occurring within the Mongolian herding communities.

Throughout generations of co-existence with camels, acknowledging their subjectivity, and actively engaging with their *umwelten*, herders have learned to understand animal behaviour, emotive responses, and communicative preferences. Tumerjav (2015: 102) reports camels to be very sensitive and willing animals, which are believed to be able "to love, cry and sense joy". Through careful observations and trials, they may have singled out vocalisations, tunes, and rhythms as well as elements of body language that became the most meaningful in the female camel's subjective world and produced the desired psychological effect. Thus, in the coaxing chant addressing a female camel among a wide range of sounds only the word '*khuus*' is utilised, which is vocalised following a particular rhythmic pattern and accompanied by sounds of the *morin khuur* and specific stroking gestures. All these manipulations together appear to have a soothing therapeutic effect on the animal, allowing her to accept the abandoned or orphaned colt.

A female camel, in her turn, while having been reared in the atmosphere of trust and respect over centuries, expanded her semiotic competence and learned to read and interpret human signals in the process of social interaction with herders. During the evolutionary process some vocalisations, melodies, and gestures, encountered by the female camel within her herd-herder ontological niche, might have happened to become more valued than others and were incorporated as meaning-carriers into the camel's own *umwelt*.

Another important point to consider is the meaning of tears reportedly shed by the female camels at the end of the ritual. From the perspective of the Mongolian pastoralist, the tears undoubtedly come across as an emotional response to music and song. From the perspective of the Western scholar, the emotional aspect of animal tears remains questionable (Bekoff 2013). On the one hand, it is a confirmed fact that camels produce tears as a result of the adaptation to a dry environment (Gauthier-Pilters, Dagg 1981; cited in Fijn 2011). The coaxing ritual usually takes place in spring, a season characterised in Mongolia by increased dryness and dusty winds. It is most likely that this type of functional tear should be observed in camels during springtime quite regularly. On the other hand, traditional knowledge about animal behaviour accumulated by



Mongolian pastoralists should not be discarded as irrelevant, and the tears shed by the female camel at the end of the ritual might well be directly associated with the emotional experience of the animal. Hopefully, further research on the relations between tears and emotions in animals will help to clarify this issue.

## Concluding remarks

This present study aimed to examine how the traditional coaxing ritual for camels fits into the broader framework of non-human-human relationships experienced in Mongolian herding communities. During the analysis it was revealed that Mongolian herders and ungulates exist in a co-domestic environment, established on the principles of mutual trust and respect. In this environment humans perceive animals as agents, capable of expressing feelings and emotions, and actively engage with their umwelten in their everyday interactions. It was also demonstrated how through the complex and subtle process of enculturation herders and herds have developed an effective communicational system, and learned to read and interpret each other's signals and movements.

At the same time, the study identified some possible directions for further research. Thus, e.g., it might be interesting to investigate the usage of herding pidgin from the zoosemiotic perspective, compare communicational strategies used with different herd species, or investigate the application of music and songs in other herding activities.

## References

- Bekoff, Marc 2013. Do elephants weep as an emotional response? *Psychology Today*.  
Online: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/animal-emotions/201309/do-elephants-weep-emotional-response>. Accessed: 10.04.2018.
- Dawkins, Marian Stamp 2006. Through animal eyes: what behaviour tells us. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 100(1): 4-10.
- Ducos, Pierre 1978. "Domestication" defined and methodological approaches to its recognition in faunal assemblages. In: Meadow, Richard H.; Zeder, Melinda A. (eds.), *Approaches to Faunal Analysis in the Middle East*. Harvard University: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 53-56.
- Fienup-Riordan, Ann 1990. *Eskimo Essays: Yu'Pik Lives and How We See Them*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Fijn, Natasha 2011. *Living with Herds: Human-animal Coexistence in Mongolia*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.





- Gauthier-Pilters, Hilde; Dagg, Anne Innis 1981. *The Camel. Its Evolution, Ecology, Behavior, and Relationship to Man*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Haraway, Donna 2003. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Others*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hoffmeyer, Jesper 2014. Semiotic scaffolding: A biosemiotic link between sema and soma. In: Cabell, Kenneth R., & Valsiner, Jaan (eds.), *The Catalyzing Mind: Beyond Models of Causality*, vol. 11. New York, NY: Springer, 95–110.
- ICH 2015. *Nomination file no. 01061 for inscription in 2015 on the list of intangible cultural heritage in need of urgent safeguarding*. Retrieved from: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/coaxing-ritual-for-camels-01061>. Accessed: 05.04.2018.
- Ingold, Tim 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. New York: Routledge.
- Kaplan, Gisela 2009. Animals and music: between cultural definitions and sensory evidence. *Sign Systems Studies* 37(3/4): 423–453.
- Kohn, Eduardo 2007. How dogs dream: Amazonian natures and the politics of transspecies engagement. *American Ethnologist* 34(1): 3–24.
- Leach, Helen M. 2003. Human domestication reconsidered. *Current Anthropology* 44(3): 349–368.
- Lestel, Dominique; Brunois, Florence; Gaunet, Florence 2006. Etho-ethnology and ethno-ethnology. *Social Science Information* 45(2): 155–177.
- Lestel, Dominique 2002. The biosemiotics and phylogenesis of culture. *Social Science Information* 41(1): 35–68.
- Lestel, Dominique 1998. How chimpanzees have domesticated humans: Towards an anthropology of human/animal communication. *Anthropology Today* 14(3): 12–15.
- Masson, Jeffrey Moussaieff 2003. *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Morell, Virginia 2013. *Animal Wise: The Thoughts and Emotions of Our Fellow Creatures*. New York: Crown Pub.
- Morgan, Karen.; Cole, Matthew 2011. The discursive representation of nonhuman animals in a culture of denial. In: Carter, Bob; Nickie Charles (eds.), *Human and Other Animals: Critical Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 112–132.
- O'Connor, Terry 1997. Working at relationships: Another look at animal domestication. *Antiquity* 71(271): 149–56.
- Pegg, Carole 2001. *Mongolian Music, Dance, & Oral Narrative: Performing Diverse Identities*. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press.
- Plumwood, Val 2012. Animals and ecology: Towards a better integration. In: Shaonnon, Lorraine (ed.), *The Eye of the Crocodile*. Canberra: ANU Press, 77–90.
- Roepstorff, Andreas 2001. Thinking with animals. *Sign Systems Studies* 29(1): 203–218.



- Sebeok, Thomas 1990. 'Talking' with animals: Zoosemiotics explained. *Essays in Zoosemiotics* (Monograph Series of the TSC 5). Toronto: Toronto Semiotic Circle; Victoria College in the University of Toronto, 37-47.
- Tumurjav, Myatavyn 2015. Husbandry techniques practiced by Mongolian nomadic people. In: Badarch, Dendevin; Raymond A. Zilinskas (eds.), *Mongolia Today: Science, Culture, Environment and Development*. London: Routledge, 86-113.
- Tønnessen, Morten 2003. Umwelt ethics. *Sign Systems Studies* 31(1): 281-299.
- Uexküll, Jakob von 1982[1940]. The theory of meaning. *Semiotica* 42(1): 25-82.

## Documentary films referenced

- Byambasuren, Davaa; Luigi, Falorni (directors) 2003. *The Story of the Weeping Camel (Ingen nulims)*. Mongolia, Germany: Mongolkina.

## Notes

- 1 Etho-ethnology "seeks to describe and understand how humans and animals live together in hybrid communities sharing meaning, interests and affects, articulated around jointly negotiated significations" (Lestel et al. 2006: 173).
- 2 The level of semiotic competence or freedom can be understood in the sense of "increased capacity for responding to a variety of signs through the formation of (locally) 'meaningful' interpretants" (Hoffmeyer 2014: 98).
- 3 Walther, Fritz R. 1991. On herding behavior. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 29: 5-13.