



The Unusual Seagull

Buryat People – Russia, Mongolia and China

A long, long time ago, there was an old man called Shono, who lived in a felt-covered *ger* on the shores of Lake Baikal. One autumn day, after a dreadful storm had kept him confined to his *ger* for several days, he heard a piercing squawk coming from the sky above. Going outside, he turned his head this way and that until he finally located the source of the unusual cries. It was a strange seagull, such as he had never seen on Lake Baikal, and it seemed to wail with a sad, anguished squawk.

That year, autumn had been unusually cold and grey, so the Baikal's common birds had left earlier than usual on their annual southward migration. But the seagull was uncommonly large for the lake, so he guessed that the storm, with its fierce winds, must have blown it from the distant Arctic Ocean.

But why was it squawking so pitifully? Shono's heart was breaking, even though he was used to seeing animals in agony every time he went hunting for his livelihood.

The rare seagull must have been unable to make its way back to the Arctic Ocean, with more than 1,400 miles of forest and barren land in between and in the face of those fierce headwinds. So it became just another inhabitant of the coastal landscape of the Sacred Lake. However, the bird must have been homesick for its ocean and the perpetual ice of the Arctic, for it was constantly squawking, day and night, with anguished cries of despair. Perhaps it missed its flock or its loved ones in it. This was what everybody in the area thought, whether they were fishing families from the Sacred Lake or taiga hunters like Shono. The

point is that everyone felt a deep sorrow when they heard the Unusual Seagull, as they came to call her.

Even the shamans eventually came to see this exotic bird, which was bigger than any bird they knew and dealt with in the spirit worlds. Some of them said that it must be an evil spirit or else a tormented soul; in any case, a bad omen heralding misfortune or future calamities. These shamans were certainly afraid of it.

Then came a day when Shono saw the seagull trying to fly northwards. However, this particular autumn was cursed with the winds, raging and roaring, which kept forcing the bird back before it could disappear over the horizon. And so it stayed for weeks, trying to overcome the stubborn winds that swept over the Baikal Mountains that year. It was swept back and forth, again and again, by the forces of nature. By then, its pitiful cries had become a source of anguish for all the villagers in the area.

They could understand its pain. They could also imagine what would be going through the bird's heart. And yet there were plenty of fish in the Sacred Lake, and it did not have to compete with any other creature for food. But the villagers put themselves in the bird's skin and thought of the lamentations in their hearts which would reach heaven if, by any chance of fate, they were forced to live in an environment that was foreign to them.

Finally, one day, the unusual seagull decided to make its last desperate attempt to return home to its loved ones. Soaring up into the sky, it tried with all its heart and soul to overcome the furious winds that kept it from returning home. It forced its wings to fly until its strength was exhausted, and it cried out with a mixture of fury and sadness, of rage and despair, as it had never done before ...

And at that moment Shono, heartbroken, stepped out of his *ger* with his hunting bow and, aiming at the beautiful bird, shot an arrow. The arrow, fleeting and accurate, shot into the heart of the seagull.

Suddenly silence fell on the Sacred Lake, and many saw the strange bird fall from the sky, lifeless as a stone.

Shono walked over to the place where the seagull had fallen, his eyes misty with tears. When he saw it, he could not help but let out a

moan of pain. Its white feathers were stained with the deep red of its blood, the seagull lay dead with its eyes open, eyes in which he could see the tears of despair that had overwhelmed the bird in its last effort to fly against the wind.

Crying like a child, covering his face with his calloused hands that had taken so many lives to feed himself, Shono regretted in the depths of his soul that he had killed the strange seagull.

‘I should have let you finish your last attempt to fly home,’ he said to the bird in a whisper. ‘You’d a right to fly until all your strength had left you... but it hurt me so much to listen to you!’

He sat down on the ground next to the seagull for a long time, staring at it, his eyes filled with tears, feeling the pain that the unusual bird had been feeling ever since the storm had swept it down to Baikal.

But after a long time, immersed in the sadness and the mournful beauty of the dead bird, an idea flashed into Shono’s mind: what if he took it to the miraculous hot spring which was not far from there on the shores of the Sacred Lake? Shamans said that the spring waters actually came from the Arctic Ocean, but were heated by plunging deep underground before emerging in Lake Baikal.

What if the scent of Arctic saltpetre could bring the rare seagull back from the other world where he himself had sent it with his arrow?

Shono jumped up, pulled the arrow out of the lifeless bird and, taking it in his arms, carried it to his boat. He cast off the mooring and rowed with all his might to the healing spring. Once there, he took a large wooden spoon, filled its bowl with water and poured it over the head of the ill-fated gull with exquisite care, just like a mother washing her new born baby’s face....

‘Oh, Esege Malan!’ Shono muttered between his lips, invoking the creator god of the Buryats. ‘I call to you. Come from the sister stars and the moon, and bring the Unusual Seagull back to life, so that it may return to its home in the ice.’

Tears were once again streaming down Shono’s weather-beaten cheeks when, suddenly, he thought he saw the bird's head move slightly. And, without giving him time to realise what was happening, the seagull

stirred in his arms and then flew out of them before his astonished eyes, only to soar into the air as if nothing had happened.

Shono burst out laughing as if seized by a fit of madness. His tears became the joyful weeping of a child as he watched the Unusual Seagull soar into the sky, stronger than ever before, and at last able to overcome the fury of the winds and fly away to the north and be lost forever over the horizon.

The Strange Seagull never returned and, although no one could be sure, everyone living near the Sacred Lake wanted to believe that it had finally returned home, that it was happy again on its frozen sea with its flock and its loved ones. They all wanted to believe that it had never again squawked with that deep sadness that had hurt the souls of all the people of the region. □

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Comments

Lake Baikal is the world's largest fresh surface water reservoir and the deepest and oldest lake on Earth, estimated to have been formed 25 million years ago. It is also a treasure trove of biodiversity, harbouring around 1,700 indigenous plant and animal species in its waters and on its shores (Mitiaen, 2008). This is perhaps due to the worldview of the Buryat people, for whom Lake Baikal is their *dalai*, their 'sea', a sea they consider sacred.

The traditional beliefs of the Buryats led them from ancient times to the sacralisation of nature, with an animistic approach that was widely nourished by Siberian shamanism, Tengerism. We have already discussed this spiritual approach in two stories in Volume 1 of this Collection. This cult of nature, arising from the ancestral nomadic life of the Buryats, made them very aware of the fragility of the balance in the

ecosystems and led them to a special relationship with the rest of the species (Dugarova, 2013).

We have an example of this in the cult of the bear, which they consider to be the strongest of the shamans. It is said that, when Buryat shamans choose tree bark for their rituals, they favour those with bear scratches on them. Trees scratched by a bear are called *baabgain ongolhon modon*, which means ‘tree consecrated by the bear’. As with other Siberian peoples, and even with the Sami People in Scandinavia (see the story ‘The Legend of Bonki’ in Volume 1 of this Collection), the sacredness of the bear was not, in the past, at odds with its hunting, although it was always a ritual hunt.

Before starting out on a hunting party of the ‘Taiga Master’, as it was called, the Buryat would ask the spirit (*burkhan*): ‘Nandikan, allow us to take the bear, not the Master himself, but an ordinary bear’. In the same way, after killing the animal, they asked for forgiveness and performed a series of rites for the burial of its remains. They believed that the bear did not die for ever, but that its spirit would remain in the forest for a while until it entered the body of another bear. They believed that the natural balance would be maintained in this way (Key to Baikal, 2018).

This worldview of the Buryat, which is by no means speciesist, is exemplified by the name given to the bear in the Buryat language, *babagai*, which is a combination of the terms *baabai*, ‘ancestor’, and *abgai*, ‘brother’. In fact, *babagai* is also used when describing elderly relatives, living or deceased (Key to Baikal, 2018).

Unfortunately, this worldview is not shared by the political and economic establishment of the Russian Federation, as in so many other places in this industrialised world. In recent decades, the onslaught of ‘progress’ is subjecting the ecosystems of the sacred lake of the Buryats, Lake Baikal, to serious degradation. It is estimated that the total pollutant emissions from existing energy facilities on the natural territory of Baikal amount to 280-300 thousand tonnes per year. This is comparable to, and even higher than, the annual emissions of some European countries (Maysyuk, 2019). Not only that, but among these facilities is a dangerous uranium enrichment plant (Dolgov, 2015).



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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

