When Good Luck Is Bad Fortune
Between Too Little and Too Much Hunting Success in Siberia

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Abstract: Two indigenous Siberian groups—the Yukaghirs and the Telengits—share rather similar ideas about success in hunting as an elusive and highly precarious tension between too little and too much luck. In the catalogue of semiotics, it corresponds to the homonym whereby one sound/spelling is the manifestation of two words with different meanings. The result, as we shall show, is that any lucky hunter always inhabits the alternative possibility of his own failure. In this sense, good luck in hunting might at any point be exposed as bad fortune.

Keywords: Altai, death, homonymy, reciprocity, sharing, spirits, Telengits, Yukaghirs

Victor Turner opened his famous article on Ndembu hunting rituals by stating: “For the Ndembu tribe of Northern Rhodesia the hunt is more than a food quest; it is a religious activity” (1962: 37). More recent Western-style anthropological studies of indigenous Siberian hunting communities seem to take a similar stance. Here ‘hunting luck’ or ‘hunting fortune’ is treated as synonymous with local ideas about hunting success, while at the same time implying that, for the locals, there is no such thing as ‘luck’ or ‘fortune’ in the Western sense. Rather, for them, killing animals is effectively believed to be the result of supernatural intervention (see, e.g., Hamayon 2003: 63; Humphrey and Onon 1996: 243; Vitebsky 2005). Thus, local ideas about ‘animal masters’ and other spiritual entities are compatible with our notions of luck or fortune, yet with the key difference that the local conceptions are infused with an essentially religious quality. For some scholars, this idea is taken a step further by comparing indigenous hunters’ spiritually fostered ideas about hunting luck to secular, Western game management politics, which makes no reference to environing spirits (see, e.g., Feit 1973: 117; Jochelson 1926: 150; Martin 1978: 18; Vecsey 1980: 9).

John Ziker is an interesting case in point. In a recent article, which addresses land use among Dolgan and Nganasan hunters of the Taimyr Autonomous
Region, Ziker (2003: 362) argues that their subsistence practices are “embedded in local social morality.” Modes of sharing and “prudent predation” are, according to Ziker, encouraged by everyday reminders of elders, whose definition of ‘sin’ (ani) involves hunting too much and a refusal to share one’s bounty: “The effect of the sin concept is that the elders’ power is reinforced, sharing is encouraged, and self-interested behavior is discouraged” (ibid.: 353). This social effect of the ‘sin concept’ is achieved for Ziker by means of what he describes as ‘abduction’ and ‘adduction’. As an example of adduction, he quotes situations when “actions or events are offered as examples, reasons, or proof in local discussions. So the early death of a hunter is, for example, offered, or adduced, as evidence of previous overhunting” (ibid.: 351). Following Thomas Widlok, Ziker then defines abduction as the “fallacy of affirming the antecedent from consequent” (Widlok 2002: 19; quoted by Ziker 2003: 351). Ziker exemplifies this in the Dolgan and Nganasan case by suggesting that “good fortune in hunting is seen as a result of previous good deeds and proper intensities of hunting, but logically luck is independent of human deeds” (ibid.: 351).

At this point, one could ask why Ziker needs to introduce the analytical concept of abduction. The answer, it seems, is given in the last sentence quoted above. For Ziker, the word ‘luck’ refers to outcomes, which are by definition not only beyond the agency of the person concerned, but also outside the influence of other humans—that is, he equates luck with the Western notion of coincidental chance. However, his informants do not endorse this idea but instead consider hunting luck as being dependent on their own previous actions and their moral stance toward humans and spirits alike. It is exactly this discrepancy between his own so-called scientific view on the nature of luck and that of the locals that forces Ziker to account for their assertions by employing the notion of abduction to explain it. It is telling that Ziker does not account in this way for other feasible statements by the local hunters, such as, for example, that their success in taking animals also depends on the hunter’s experience and the quality of his gun and traps. Roberte Hamayon (2012) also seems to rule out the skill and equipment of hunters in her discussion of luck. Although we agree with Hamayon that “game cannot be produced by human initiative” (ibid.: 101), we disagree with her assertion that “no human action can oblige game animals to come to the hunter” (ibid.). In fact, quite the opposite is true. Several empirical accounts describe how hunters, in many contexts, can attract animals and make them come to them quite freely, for example, by using lures or other tools/techniques of imitation (see Nelson 1986: 171; Willerslev 2007: 97–100). This confirms Mary Douglas’s (1975: 276) observation that other people’s causal theories are divided by anthropologists into those “which accord with their own and therefore need no special explanation and those which are magical” and therefore must be accounted for and explained.

We do not deny that the concepts of ‘index’ and ‘abduction’ as pioneered by Alfred Gell (1974, 1998) might be usefully employed for coming to terms with the cluster of issues discussed by Ziker. However, we do think that the latter’s analysis gets essentially misguided by insisting on equating the indigenous conceptions of hunting success with our term ‘luck’. A more careful translation
would have been more useful, so that, instead of luck, Ziker might have used an equivalent of Dolgan and Nganasan terms, such as, for example, ‘success as a favor of the animal masters’. There is no doubt that Ziker does not share the locals’ belief in spirits as the source of success in hunting. Yet this difference is only obscured by introducing a different logical process on behalf of his informants.

In this article, we wish to reverse this primacy of Western ideas about the nature of luck by following the lead of the local hunters in what they are in fact saying about success in hunting, for only in this way can we hope to develop a framework for taking their viewpoints on this matter seriously. Our starting point is the concreteness of everyday life as we experienced it in the actual practices of hunting among two Siberian indigenous peoples—the Yukaghirs and the Telengits. Although the two groups live far apart, speak completely different languages, and occupy different ecological zones, they share rather similar ideas about success in hunting as an elusive and highly precarious tension between too little and too much luck. For both groups, therefore, hunting luck is neither fixed nor fully defined; rather, it is understood in terms of an ambiguous manifestation of two ontologically antithetical phenomena of respectively positive and negative consequence, in much the same way that one sound/spelling can be the manifestation of two words with different meanings, that is, homonyms. The result, as we shall see, is that any lucky hunter always inhabits the alternative possibility of his own failure. Thus, in this sense, good luck in hunting might at any point be exposed as bad fortune.

**The Yukaghirs: Luck and Its Shadow**

The Upper Kolyma Yukaghirs is a small group of indigenous hunters who live in the village of Nelemnoye on the Yassachnaya River within the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). Since the collapse of the state farm in 1992, the people have largely returned to a subsistence-based economy in which the elk (the Asian equivalent of the moose) is easily the most important game resource (Willerslev 2007: 30).

Central to the way that the Yukaghirs think about hunting is the notion that all physical entities have a second side (the ‘other side’) on the very edge of visibility, which they call the ayibii, meaning ‘shadow’ in their native language. As the word ‘shadow’ suggests, the ayibii refers to the idea of a ‘doppelgänger’ or ‘twin’ that appears simultaneously with the physical object but as its ghost-like wraith. In the catalogue of semiotics, it corresponds to the ‘index’ or “that which by physical connection is assigned to reality and makes itself noticeable as a trace” (Sadowsky 2005: 28; see also Gell 1998). As an index, the ayibii does not exist in and of itself; rather, it requires of the presence of the object to which it refers and, as such, is a dependent thing—an ‘ontological parasite’, so to speak (see Casati 2005: 43). Yet the dependency goes both ways. As with shadows, which are themselves not present as objects within our field of vision but rather hide themselves, making objects more visible by deepening, intensifying, and enriching our field of visibility, the ayibii is believed to underlie
the world of things and bodies as a vital or animating force (Willerslev 2006: 34). With the loss of one’s ayibii, there is no destiny except death. Finally, the ayibii captures the tension in all shadow images, that is, things that are never just themselves but always something else as well. Humans may transform into animals, animals into humans, and one class of spirits into another. There are no fixed identities here, only continuous transformations of one class of being into another (Willerslev 2007). Hence, caution is necessary, as one can never know if a being that appears to be friendly and helpful might turn into a demonic antagonist.

The duplicity or ‘shadow force’ that the ayibii evokes is, as we shall see, essential to the Yukaghirs’ notion of luck. Their native word for ‘luck’ or ‘good fortune’ is pe’jul’: “Peju’lneye coro’mox’ means a lucky man, or a man who has a pe’jul’” (Jochelson 1926: 146). Yet the word pe’jul’ is also the name of the spirit of the prey animal—its individual guardian or master (ibid.). Some hunters describe a pe’jul’ in strictly physical terms as a small, bald-headed child or gnome who may be detected riding on the back of the elk, while others claim that it resides in the lumps of gristle that can be found on the neck or shoulders of the animal (Willerslev 2012: 150–153). The word pe’jul’ also has the more intangible meaning of an ‘aura of luck’, which is with a hunter in certain circumstances or for particular purposes. It can be held permanently, or it may be fleeting and illusive, yet it is considered absolutely necessary for success in hunting. Without a pe’jul’, as Waldemar Jochelson (1926: 146) states in his classic monograph on the Yukaghirs, “the animal cannot be killed ... This is why the term pe’jul’ is equivalent with ‘luck’. When a man has a pe’jul’ ... he is a privileged individual with reference to the guardian protector of some animal.”

While it holds true that a lucky hunter is regarded as the beneficiary of an animal master’s compassion, having a pe’jul’ is also loaded with much danger. This can perhaps be best illustrated with a story that was told to Willerslev (2007) by an elderly Yukaghir woman, Akulina, who lost a friend and the latter’s son to the predation of an animal spirit. The spirit Khoziain developed “uncontrolled feelings of love” (ibid.: 44) for her friend Igor and kept sending him animals to hunt. The animals kept coming to him, and he could hardly believe his luck. Yet Igor’s overhoarding of animals eventually enabled the spirit to stake out its own claims, which it enforced by dragging the ayibii of Igor’s son “back to its household” (ibid.), thus killing him. Later, it also killed the father, who fell ill in the forest and died. Igor’s luck in hunting had translated into an overaccumulation of the ayibii of the spirit’s ‘children’ (the animals). This gave the spirit the right to claim the ayibii of both Igor and his son. Akulina ends her story by warning Willerslev: “[I]f you are too lucky and animals keep coming to you, stop hunting at once. It might be Khoziain [the animal master], who wants your ayibii” (ibid.: 45). If there is a moral to be learned from this account, it is that things are not always what they appear to be. Luck in hunting, which at first seems to result from the benevolence of an animal master, can turn out to be an act of deception. So although having a pe’jul’ is essential for success in hunting and for that reason is desirable, it is desirable only in a highly unstable and relative sense.
Now, what can this ambiguous notion of luck—in which desire and fear coalesce and swim in and out of focus—tell us about the Yukaghirs’ conception of their environment or, more specifically, about their use of resources and ethics of conservation? The image of indigenous hunters as ‘ecologists’, whose spiritually informed hunting practices are comparable to our own notions of rational resource management and conservation ethics, lies deep in Western thinking. This is, for example, the view of Jochelson (1926: 150), who, with regard to the Yukaghir, writes: “On the one hand … the peju’lpe [plural of pe’jul’] look after the well-being of the animals in their care, on the other hand, they are also friendly towards the hunter as long as he observes certain regulations and kills only what he actually needs for his livelihood. In principle, these religious conceptions of the Yukaghir correspond to and compare perhaps favorably with our hunting laws and game preserves.”

More recently, this idea has also been suggested with regard to various groups of Native Americans, whose spiritual beliefs about animal masters that become angered by the overkillings of hunters are compared to our secular game management politics (see, e.g., Feit 1973: 117; Martin 1978: 18; Vecsey 1980: 9). Within the Siberian context, Ziker (2003: 350, 358) has proposed spiritually fostered practices of ‘prudent predation’ among the Dolgan and Nganasan: “Hunters must not overuse the tundra’s resources. Ancestors have told members of the present elder generation that ‘essences’ of the tundra or spirits of the dead ancestors will punish those who hunt too much or do not follow their advice … [This] implies the ability to sense the effects of harvesting … and the subsequent modification of behavior to assuage overharvesting in affected patches.”

Hamayon (2012: 107) seems to suggest similar ideas with regard to avoiding “excessive hunting” on the conviction that “the hunter will eventually have to make up for the game he took with his own vital force,” a view which, according to her, “still holds (except in areas where Russian or other influences have resulted in overhunting)” (ibid.). However, within the last few decades this line of thinking has been challenged by a number of scholars (Anderson 2000: 127; Brightman 1993; Krupnik 1993). Igor Krupnik (1993: 84), for example, points out how Arctic hunters in Siberia, far from being intuitive ecologists, overkilled reindeer and other mammals whenever possible in order to maximize their “surplus food reserves.” Likewise, Robert Brightman (1993: 283) recounts numerous instances when Cree hunters killed caribou and other animals in such numbers that the game population plummeted, resulting in large-scale famines. Moreover, Brightman locates the reason for this merciless killing in the Indians’ traditional subsistence ideology rather than their encounter with commercial hunting. Due to the Indians’ idea that no life can ever be lost or entirely destroyed but will return to be reincarnated in fresh bodies, “[t]here existed no conception of ‘waste’ attached to the material bodies of animals, and neither was there a conception of regional populations manageable by selective hunting” (ibid.).

What are we to believe? Are the indigenous hunters aggressive resource users engaged in unlimited killings, or are they ‘ecological saints’, limiting their killings to what is needed for survival? Perhaps the Yukaghirs and their ambiguous
notion of luck can provide us with a plausible answer. This, however, requires a slight detour. First, we need to address what is commonly reported in ethnographic studies of hunters under the rubric of ‘sharing’. The Yukaghir distribution of resources—especially the allocation of meat—follows in many respects a model described by Nicolas Peterson (1993) as ‘demand sharing’. This implies that people are expected to make claims on other people’s possessions and that those who possess more than they can immediately consume or use are expected to give it up without expectation of repayment. The important point for our argument, however, is that Yukaghir hunters engage with the non-human world of animal masters in much the same way, namely, through the principle of demand sharing. Thus, in the forest, hunters will ask—even demand—that the spiritual masters share their stock of prey with them. For example, spirits are induced to share their bounty through words such as “Grandfather, your children are hungry and poor. Feed us as you have fed us before!” Hunters believe that the animal masters, in their nurturing capacity, are obliged to share their resources of game with the hunters, in much the same way that fellow humans who possess resources beyond their immediate needs are obliged to give them up. A key aspect of this idea is the widespread saying that the animal is not killed by the hunter’s force, but freely offers itself to his weapon out of ‘love’ for him (see, e.g., Brightman 1993; Tanner 1979). Although it occasionally happens that an animal master withholds the animals, hunters regard these occasions as exceptional, temporary, and accidental. Bad hunting luck is usually explained as being caused by the improper behavior of humans, such as when they fail to observe the ritual procedures that secure the circulation of the animals’ ayibiis. However, when lack of luck cannot be blamed on people, hunters will walk restlessly around the encampment, swearing at the animal master. So, in much the same way that fellow humans who are not willing to share become the subjects of much grumbling and gossiping, the master-spirit is openly accused of being stingy whenever it rejects hunters’ request for meat (Willerslev 2007: 43).

In addition, the killings are not seen as something altogether destructive but rather as a rite of regeneration. Hunters must slaughter and consume animals so that their ayibiis can be released and subsequently refreshed through spontaneous rebirth. Hunters’ predatory activity becomes, in this sense, a life-giving activity, for without their killings the animals would fail to reproduce (Ingold 1986: 205; Jordan 2003: 126). Not only, then, do hunters depend on the animal masters for their supply of prey, but the spirits also depend on the intervention of hunters to perform the acts of killing, which ensure the reproduction of their herds. The more one kills, the more the herds of the animal masters will grow—and the more one will be likely to kill in the future. Clearly, this aligns with the Yukaghir saying that one must “take what one is given by khozyain … and if a hunter is offered much, he must take much” (Willerslev 2007: 35). Willerslev himself was witness to such overkilling, when, together with an elderly hunting leader and his two sons, he paddled down the Yassachnaya River in June. At this time of year, bloodthirsty mosquitoes rise in massive clouds along the grassy riverbanks, and the elk seek to avoid them by going out into the river, where the wind blows more freely. However, without the forest to hide in, the
animals are largely defenseless against hunters, and within just a few hours the hunters had killed four elk, each weighing a thousand pounds or more. The hunting leader instructed his team to take only the best bits—the hearts, tongues, noses, kidneys, and some selected pieces of meat from the thighs—and the carcasses were left to drift in the water. As they continued down the river, more elk were killed, and again the hunters were told to take only the delicacies. When the expedition eventually reached Nelemnoye, a total of seven elk had been slain, but huge portions of meat had been left behind to rot.

While this fits neatly with the image of northern hunters as merciless predators, blindly destroying their own ecosystems, we find yet another propensity in Yukaghir thinking that points in the opposite direction: Yukaghir myths and other narratives are full of stories about hunters who kill too many animals and as a result lose their hunting prowess or are killed by some animal master (see Jochelson 1926: 148–150). However, to understand the principle on which this compelling sanction against overkilling is based and in what way it relates to its opposite—the propensity to kill as much as possible—we need to return to the elderly woman Akulina’s story about Igor and his son, who were killed by the animal master that dragged their ayibii back to its household. How are we to understand the logic of this story? We have already seen that in a sharing economy people have the right to demand that those who possess goods beyond their immediate needs give them up. With regard to the hunter-spirit relationship, as long as an animal master possesses prey in abundance, the hunter is entitled to demand that the spirit shares its animal resources with him, and, for its part, the spirit is obliged to comply with the hunter’s demands. However, if the wealth divide between the two agencies becomes displaced, their respective roles as donor and recipient will be inverted, and the animal master will now be entitled to demand that the hunter shares his resources with it. Such a changeover of roles is exactly what we find in this story: the animal master provides Igor with game in overabundance, and the latter takes all of the animals offered. As a result, he is accumulating a surplus of the ayibii of animals. This in turn gives the animal master the right to demand that Igor shares with it, and it asserts its claim by striking him and his son dead. Thus, the spirit deliberately manipulates the principle of sharing to put the hunter in the position of a wealthy donor, which justifies it in ‘demanding’ Igor’s and his son’s ayibii. An urge for reciprocity, therefore, underlies the ethos of sharing, which hitherto remained invisible but now becomes dangerously manifest (Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2007: 536).

This potential for the roles in the sharing relationship to reverse and turn into one of reciprocity gives rise to much anxiety among hunters. This stems from the fact that whenever they succeed in killing animals in large numbers, they can never be certain about the intention of the animal masters in providing them with luck. Are the spirits simply fulfilling their moral obligation to share their resources, or is their intention to trick the hunters into becoming wealthy donors, which allows for a divine predatory attack? No hunter knows for sure.

Yukaghir hunters respond to this uncertainty by moving between two complementary yet opposing strategies: one in the direction of overpredation,
which is believed to increase the future animal population, the other in the
direction of limiting one’s killings to an absolute minimum, to avoid putting
oneself in the precarious position of being a donor and risking counter-
predatation by the animal masters. Hunters usually seek to maneuver between
these two extremes, killing all of the animals offered but only up to the point
that their luck exceeds what is considered ‘normal’ hunting success. Thus,
the elderly hunting leader described above, who habitually killed each and
every elk he encountered, stopped hunting altogether after falling ill in the
forest. He ascribed his illness to the local master-spirit, which he claimed was
in love with him and had attempted to kill him by providing him with prey
in overabundance.

The point is that overkilling and not killing constitute the shadow image of
each other as two mutually implicative yet opposed resource and risk manage-
ment strategies in Yukaghir subsistence practice. In the concrete situation of a
kill, any hunter will see the act in terms of either sharing or reciprocity with the
animal’s spirit and will let it guide his actions for the time being. Still, the point
to keep in mind is that the two, far from being mutually exclusive, co-exist in
parallel as shadows of each other. In terms of hunting, therefore, the idioms
of sharing and reciprocity, along with their associated ethics of overkilling and
not killing, are effectively homonyms in that hunting luck signifies both. Thus,
it is not useful to conceptualize them as alternative ethical systems (see Corsín
Jiménez and Willerslev 2007: 534). Rather, the ethical value that either one is
imbued with exists only at the moment that it is visibly foregrounded. Yet at
any given time it can flip into what has shadowed it all along. So although it is
true that the Yukaghirs—perhaps along with most other northern hunters—do
not invariably exist in a condition of equilibrium with their game resources
and that they have no conception of ‘waste’ attached to the material bodies of
animals, there is an alternative mode to their aggressive resource use that lurks
as a shadow in the background, waiting to be put into effect, and that effec-
tively counterbalances the inclination to engage in indiscriminate slaughter.
Indeed, just as the Yukaghirs say that an entity is alive only as long as it casts
a shadow, this applies as well to a particular hunting practice, which is known
only insofar as its shadow is known as well.

The Telengits: When Gift Becomes Theft

Let us move from the forest-tundra of northeastern Siberia to the forest-steppe
of southwestern Siberia, which is the home of the Telengits. In the year 2000,
they were given the status of a small numbered people, yet more commonly
they are treated as a sub-group of Altaians (see Broz 2009b; Halemba 2006).
The Telengits inhabit two southern regions of the Altai Republic and speak a
regional version of the Altaian language (a Turkic language that, apart from
Russian, is the official language of the Altai Republic). The Ulagan region,
where Broz conducted fieldwork in 2004–2005, is mountainous, covered with a
tapestry of larch forest, grassland valleys, and rocky slopes and peaks.
Following the economic crisis of the 1990s, during which most of the important institutions providing jobs (i.e., collective and state farms) collapsed, the majority of households have to a considerable degree become dependent on subsistence cattle rearing, potato gardening (up until the economic crises regarded as impossible in the harsh climate of the Ulagan region), and, to varying degrees, on subsistence hunting and fur hunting for cash. In comparison with the Yukaghir case, however, the importance of hunting is much smaller.

The most important animals hunted for subsistence are the Siberian roe deer and the Siberian red deer (Maral). Of the animals hunted for pelts, which are sold for cash, the most important is the squirrel. The approximately 73 rubles that was paid for a pelt in 2005 was considered a lot of money, given the fact that a good hunter could obtain around 20 squirrels a day and that the average monthly salary in the region was around 3,000 rubles. Sables are rare in the Ulagan region and are mostly killed when encountered by coincidence, rather than hunted on purpose.

The word that seems closest to the English ‘luck’ is the Altaian yrys/rys. It is usually translated as schast’e/uspekh/udacha—felicity, rejoicing/success/luck. A nineteenth-century missionary dictionary mentions the word in the collocation rystanchak kizhi, that is, ‘the one who is careful not to lose luck’. The author of the dictionary adds that “such people observe many superstitions, for example, in the last days of the month [they] do not give fire from their ail [round or hexagonal house] to others” (Verbitskii [1884] 2005: 461). Broz encountered similar beliefs aimed at preventing the loss of yrys in the household. The notion of possessing yrys is present in another derivative of the word that is also used as a personal name—yrystu/rystu—‘the one who has got yrys’. Such a person, as the Altaian proverb says, keeps smiling (Petesheva 2007: 132), and his/her actions are successful. It can probably be argued that the meaning of yrys is close to the Buryat word hesheg, as interpreted by Hamayon (2012), and there seems to be a parallel in aiming to preserve it. The relative absence of these words in hunting narratives might suggest that yrys, like hesheg, is more of a pastoral concept of luck, to follow Hamayon’s distinction.

The word yrystu is not used to describe a hunter; rather, joldu is used to designate someone who ‘always encounters something’, that is, animals. Even though the term seems to refer to some essential quality of the hunter or his gun (joldu multyk), any further discussion of hunting success in Broz’s experience boils down to the discourse on local master-spirits or eeler (the plural form of eezi). From the dominant perspective, hunting success depends entirely on the benevolence of the eeler, and hunters do not seem to be a priori entitled to game. Broz never witnessed any verbal demands of game or impolite address of the local master-spirits, as Willerslev did among the Yukaghir. This situation is clearly reflected in the social relations among people, where demand sharing does not seem to be widespread. During the peak of the crisis of 1998, Broz’s friend purchased some margarine in the local shop. This seemed nonsensical in the context of a critical shortage of cash, given that many of the man’s relatives had cows. When Broz inquired into it, his friend answered rather angrily, “Who would like to ask [for things] all the time?” It gradually became apparent
that even though people share, such sharing is close to Maussian gift-giving. Either it implies a counter-gift, which his friend was not economically able to offer, or it creates a power imbalance between the one who is giving and the one who is receiving. This feeling of inferiority on the part of the receiver was unacceptable for the man, who was physically strong and confident, and thus he preferred to buy margarine.

Asking a local master-spirit for game also seems to generate a power imbalance, yet in this case it is taken for granted that it cannot be otherwise. What is more, if one succeeds, one also receives a certain authority. As one hunter explained it, jerdiŋ eezi (the local master-spirit) “does not accept all kinds of people. He might punish people and give nothing to the hunters if they are sinful” (Broz 2007: 297). This implies that the successful hunter sees himself as having behaved in a proper ethical manner and therefore has been given game by the local master-spirit. In this logic, hunting success is an index of proper conduct, while failure is a result of bad human deeds. In their omnipresence, the masters of places, eeleri, are the judges of human deeds, and a hunter’s success or failure is the result of their rulings.

Yet a logical inconsistency is apparent in what is regarded as proper moral conduct with regard to hunting. On the one hand, imperatives of sharing the game meat in wider social networks and sharing pelts among the hunting team, as well as showing due respect to eeler by means of offerings, only support the logic whereby eeler allow game to come to hunters according to human deeds. On the other hand, there is also a strong discourse on the punishment of hunters who either hunt too much or who hunt in places where one is forbidden to hunt, for example, healing springs arzhan suu, or when they are not supposed to hunt, such as after a death in one’s close family or when female deer are pregnant. It is here that we touch upon a paradox: how can one hunt too much or in an improper place or at an improper time in the eyes of the local eezi if indeed all success in hunting is in fact facilitated by that eezi?

This inconsistency can be seen as the result of yet another logic that is simultaneously in operation. The Altaian language lacks a general term for ‘animal’ (Broz 2007: 292–293); instead, two terms, aj and mal, are used. The first term (aj) refers exclusively to wild animals and birds, while the second (mal) refers to domestic animals. However, an animal that is aj (a wild animal) for human hunters is mal (a domestic animal) for the local master-spirit or eezi. Thus, the Siberian deer is in fact a cow from the viewpoint of the local eezi, and so on. From such a perspective, eeler are closer in nature to humans than they are to divine figures with unlimited power. Even though they take care of their mal, eeler are not in full control of the situation. The human hunter can succeed in taking prey without the consent of its non-human owners or even against their will (see also Potanin 1883: 204–205; Potapov 2001).

Taking an eezi’s mal without its approval is seen locally as theft. This closely corresponds with the fact that the word mal, defined above as a domestic animal, carries the more general—even though nowadays rarely called upon—meaning of ‘possession’ or ‘belonging’. Equally, the word ee, which in the context of hunting means the ‘master-spirits of places’, has a more
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general meaning of ‘master’ or ‘owner’ and is applied to people as well (see Broz 2009a: 28). For this argument, it is important to note that, in a certain sense, property is seen as an aspect of the extended personhood of the owner, and, as such, livestock represent a special kind of property. The act of stealing livestock is sharply denounced among Telengits. Tuvinians from the Tuva Republic, which borders the Ulagan region, are often condemned as notorious thieves, especially of horses—even though there is also a strong discourse on “our own Tuvinians” that can be seen as a social critique pointed inward. As Marilyn Strathern (2008) has recently argued, stealing has the aspect of personal gain, but also of aggression against the owner, and this seems to be true in the Telengit context as well. Broz came across narratives about stealing or destroying someone’s property as a means of exacting revenge among people. However, this can also happen in human-animal interaction, as when wolves attack the livestock owned by a wolf hunter, which is considered a revenge theft on the part of the wolves.

Regarding hunting in terms of the example of wolves, it is telling that the word baryntychy, meaning ‘predator’, also carries the meaning of ‘thief’ or ‘robber’. The main task of the hunter, therefore, is to behave in a proper way toward the local eezi, as the hunter might at any time be exposed as a baryntychy—that is, as somebody stealing someone else’s cattle or belongings. Thus, every hunting success is a potential problem: good luck in hunting, which at first sight can be interpreted as a sign of proper conduct on the hunter’s part and of the eeler’s benevolence, can turn out to be ‘unauthorized’ and hence a cause of future misfortune as punishment from the spirits.

The situation is further complicated as the idea of hunting too much is predicated on the concept of kire. Every hunter has kire, which is the amount of animal prey that it is appropriate to hunt within a given period of time (e.g., a hunting expedition) as well as within one’s lifetime. Thus, kire can be translated as ‘norm’, ‘share’, ‘portion’, or ‘limit’. Exceeding one’s kire leads to kinchek, which is often translated into Russian as grekh or ‘sin’ and is referred to by adherents of Buddhism as ‘karma’. Kinchek, as Halemba (2006: 159) argues, takes away one’s yrys or luck. Committing kinchek might lead to the punishment of a particular person being passed on to his offspring. According to many, it continues to affect offspring up to the seventh generation. In the context of hunting, it is often said that sons of hunters who exceeded the norm of their kire are unsuccessful in hunting or have no interest in it at all. The concept of kire makes causality rather complicated: not only can it be someone else’s deeds that influence one’s success (as some sort of collective, genealogical karma), but, even more importantly, a hunter’s excessive hunting success, followed by his death, does not have to fit into the ‘exceeding the norm and punishment’ logic. Instead, in what turns out to be his last hunting season, the hunter is accorded what is left in his lifetime kire. In such a case, his hunting success is looked on as an omen of his upcoming death rather than its cause.

In his classic account of shamanism in Altai, Andrei V. Anokhin ([1924] 1994: 20) claims that humans die for two reasons: either they are taken as a result of the voraciousness (alchnost’) of the ruler of the underworld, Erlik,
or as a result of the decision of a tribunal consisting of Erlik and the ruler of upper world, Ulgen’. The former is regarded as generating premature death, which might be avoided by making sacrifices to Erlik; the latter is regarded as unavoidable. Even though such assertions recall the construction of cosmology out of diverse experience and hence should be treated with extreme caution, it seems to capture something important. Broz was once told by one of his informants, whose daughter had died, that she had known her daughter would not live long. It was her destiny, the mother said. But at the same time, people obviously struggle to avert death. People avoid dangerous places, go to doctors as well as healers when ill, and so on. Such notions about premature death and destiny, which are at the heart of Anokhin’s argument about Ulgen’ and Erlik, seem to allow for both determination and open-endedness. In other words, there seems to be a space to claim agency and to shape one’s own future, as well as a space to give up that agency contextually (and often ex post) and be placed on an inevitable and preordained path.

Given the background of these notions of two kinds of death, hunting success can be an omen, a potential cause of punishment, or an index of a hunter’s proper conduct and the benevolence of the local master-spirit. For the inhabitants of the Ulagan region—and we say ‘inhabitants’ purposefully because the entire community is involved in ongoing interpretations of its hunters’ successes and failures, as well as accidents, illnesses, and suicides—the tension between those logics of interpreting success is considerable. There is no other way that the local master-spirit can give other than by making the hunter succeed, yet unapproved success looks exactly the same. It seems that rather than one hunting luck/success, we are facing two homonyms: approved and unapproved success.

Even though our use of homonymy that follows is not inspired by Bronislaw Malinowski’s ‘doctrine of homonyms’, we could hardly ignore it here altogether. His use of the concept, developed in greatest detail in Coral Gardens and Their Magic (1935), stems from the effort to repudiate the ascription of “pre-logical mentality” to “primitive peoples” by disentangling “native terminologies” from “native mental categories” (Leach 1957: 129–130). While we take seriously conceptual as well as ethnographic criticisms of Malinowski’s doctrine (e.g., Leach 1957; Weiner 1979), we of course have much sympathy for his claim of the equal logical capacities of all humankind as well as his close attention to language and his passion for ethnographic detail and accuracy, which are equally embodied in his homonym theory. Our use of the homonym device is nevertheless different from Malinowski’s. Whereas he speaks in a very straightforward sense about actual words (such as tabu) being in fact sets of homonyms and thus stays within the field of linguistics generally defined, we use the principle of homonymy in an analogical sense. Thus, we join the list of anthropologists who have taken the liberty of employing concepts from linguistics for making non-linguistic theoretical points. It follows that while Malinowski (1935: 20) claims that all his informants are aware of the homonymy and undoubtedly distinguish among different categories represented by the same word, in our case that is not so. We harness the homonym
device more figuratively to overtly interpret rather than to seemingly mechani-
cally represent. Our informants, we admit, would agree and disagree with the
understandings that we offer, just as we would agree and disagree with socio-
logical interpretations of our lives in our own social context.

Despite our partial distancing from Malinowski, we shall return to Telengit
hunters by invoking the notion of ‘context’ that Malinowski made indispens-
able in anthropology (see Dilley 2002: 438). Just as in the case of words that
are homonyms, it is the actual context that distinguishes approved and unap-
proved hunting success, a situation that we are familiar with thanks to the
distinction between poaching and hunting. Such a distinction separates acts
of killing into two homonymous actions that are distinguishable in reference
to the legal context. Telengits also discuss the context of success, yet the most
important context seems to be misfortunes, of which the ultimate one is death.
Given human mortality, one would expect that the Telengits would have a
readily available and decisive way to differentiate between success in hunting
that has been approved by the local master-spirits and stealing from the spirits,
since it is possible to differentiate with regard to the hunting-poaching distinc-
tion in a legal framework. Yet it is important to note that when, in retrospect,
the difference is invoked after someone dies as a result of stealing from a
local master-spirit (improper hunting), the same retrospective framing that can
separate the distinctions provides a tool to blur them again. It could be that the
hunter’s destiny to die is indicated by his success rather than by theft, which
is followed by punishment. Death cannot play the decisive role in distinguish-
ing between two kinds of luck because, as mentioned above, the two kinds of
death are themselves homonyms.7

Thus, under such conditions, the concept of receiving/being given is never
really separated from its shadow, which is stealing, because there is no decisive
sign that would distinguish approved hunting success from unapproved hunting
success. The approved and unapproved hunting luck/success, are, therefore,
both homonyms and synonyms without being reducible to one or the other.

In effect, this view contradicts Hamayon’s (2012: 103) assertion that “[g]ood
and bad [luck] are not symmetrical.” As she argues: “Excessive luck ... will
not fail to bring misfortune. By contrast, excessive misfortune is not supposed
to be followed by a happy event” (ibid.). Given human mortality, Hamayon’s
suggestion appears at first glance to be very reasonable. However, as we have
shown above, the uncertainty of hunters about how to decode any actual hunt-
ing event applies symmetrically to both failure/misfortune and success. Thus,
at least with respect to our material, Hamayon’s conclusion cannot be applied,
because the inherent uncertainty of hunters contradicts any rule linking ‘excess
of hunting luck’ with future misfortune. Even so, it is true that we can observe
a certain asymmetry in hunters’ orientation. While success in hunting gener-
ates uncertainty about what is really going on and, therefore, what it may bring
about (e.g., future misfortune), hunting failure/misfortune generates uncer-
tainty about what caused it. Therefore, good and bad hunting luck are sort of
antipodes: one orients uncertainty toward the future, while the other orients
uncertainty toward the past.
Conclusion

In the semantic field of the English language, the words ‘luck’ and ‘fortune’ are often equated with pure chance or coincidence. The topic of harnessing, utilizing, shaping, and accumulating luck may in this sense be seen as an oxymoron in that it combines terms that are normally viewed as contradictory. While it may be appealing to relate luck to words whose meanings are in conflict with it, this is by no means new. As pointed out earlier, conceiving indigenous notions of luck as infused with religious significance is a commonplace in much anthropological literature. While we agree that indigenous ideas about hunting luck in Siberia are inseparably bound up with local spirituality, we have also drawn attention to the ambiguity of these ideas. Taking, once again, Ziker’s article as an example, we wish to stress that in the case of the Dolgan and Nganasan as well, hunting luck appears to be an essentially ambiguous concept. Thus, on the one hand, Ziker’s informants explain that their hunting luck is earned by proper moral behavior, while, on the other, they maintain a strong discourse on the punishment of those who overhunt (Ziker 2003: 350–351). However, this apparent contradiction—which directly parallels that of the Telengit case—goes totally unnoticed by Ziker, who focuses instead on the contradiction between his own scientifically informed view on luck and the view of his informants, which he seeks to account for by calling upon the notion of distinct logical processes. Yet Ziker’s ethnography—along with perhaps many more Siberian cases—appears to describe the same ambiguities with regard to hunting luck that are described here for the Yukaghirs and the Telengit.

This ambiguity, in which hunting luck is desirable only in a highly unstable and relative sense, can be explained if we treat acts of successful killing as manifestations of two ontologically separate yet interconnected phenomena of respectively positive and negative consequence, in much the same way as homonyms. Thus, in unfolding our two ethnographic cases, we saw how, among the Yukaghirs, a successful kill might be seen as either an act of generous sharing or as an act of reciprocity with all that this entails—including the risk of being preyed upon by the animal’s spirit. In the Telengit case, the hunter-spirit transaction can be seen either as a gift of the local master-spirit (authorized taking) or as a theft on the part of the hunter (unauthorized taking), which, as a rule, leads to the punishment of the hunter. In both cases, a definite labeling of hunting luck as either positive or negative, desirable or unwanted, remains uncertain in any actual situation. When it comes to concrete cases of hunting luck in Siberia and possibly beyond, notions of sharing and reciprocity or gift and theft seem to collapse into their antipodes in much the same way that synonymous words collapse into each other in terms of meaning. Authorized and unauthorized hunting luck, or hunting luck achieved in the idiom of either sharing or reciprocity, are therefore both homonyms and synonyms without the one being reducible to the other. Indeed, this is why good hunting luck in Siberia can, at any point, turn out to be bad fortune.
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Notes

1. For the use of Gell’s concepts of ‘occult’ and ‘index’ in the Siberian context, see Halemba (2006).
2. For discussion on this topic of gift-giving, see, for example, Ingold (2000: 70).
3. Similarly, although with a different underlying scheme in mind, Hamayon (2012: 106) has argued that for the Buryat “a hunter should take game in the same way as a husband takes a wife, at the risk of becoming a thief or an abductor.” For comparison with non-Siberian material, see Turner (1962: 44) on Ndembu hunters, who “in song and invocation to hunter spirits refer to themselves by terms normally considered opprobrious, such as ‘adulterers who sleep with ten women a day’ and ‘great thieves’” (emphasis added).
4. For a fuller discussion of *kire*, see Broz (2009a). Broz is indebted to Altaian ethnographer Svetlana Tiukhteneva for first drawing his attention to this concept. She suggested that the notion of *kire* is as important to Altaians as are the concepts of time and space.
5. As Muitueva and Chochkina (1996: 130) put it: “Ee kizhiniŋ kirezin bilip berer [Ee gives to a person knowing his/her kire].” However, we wish to stress that, in contrast to the Yukaghir case, for the Telengit there is no demand by the hunter to receive his *kire*. In fact, the hunter does not know his individual *kire* and, unless he interprets the omen of success correctly, does not know that his death is coming. For a similar case, see Vitebsky (2005: 295–298).
6. Muitueva (2004) uses more or less the same differentiation as Anokhin. In Mongolia, the lama, while “opening the golden vessel,” determines whether the deceased lived the “destined lifespan or died early” (Humphrey 1999: 67). This seems to refer to a similar notion of two kinds of death.
7. Therefore, even though we agree with Halemba’s (2006: 159) assertion that the “action becomes rendered as kinчек [sin] usually post factum,” we want to add that such rendering can never be absolute—at least, not in the case of hunting success.

References


