

божественных актов, которые придают смысл человеческой жизни – «мир, который можно истолковать как космос, имеет смысл, насколько он может быть понят как мир сакральный», мир повторенный.

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## *The Social Function of Bata Performance Rituals*

### ***Introduction***

The Kyrgyz terms *ak bata berüü* (lit.: to give a white wish) and *ters bata berüü* (lit.: to give a contrary wish) are usually taken to mean blessing or cursing a person for a specific good or bad action. They are special language actions which have social, situational and individual contexts. *Bata* is addressed to God. This is speech action and usually accompanied with the gesture of arms.

*Bata* blessings are performed for social reasons. There are culturally structured situations which lead people to make certain speech acts. People expecting to receive *ak bata* are pursuing a concrete goal. For example, if someone is going on a trip or expecting baby, his or her relatives would like to receive *bata* from relatives, neighbors and friends for the protection. On the other hand everybody among his or her relatives consider it to be their duty. In this way *ak bata* is responsibility of community to support the person who is in the critical moment.

*Bata* implies specific cultural values and social relationships, in addition to its obvious linguistic meanings. The means by which speech acts are carried out, their wording and import, do have a cultural foundation, but, following D'Andrade's (1992) work on cultural models, acts like *bata* are not simply "culturally constituted." Their usage arises from the individual emotional demeanor of a person. It is not necessary that expressions that take on culturally appropriate forms should arise from causes explicitly connected with culture. The intellect, individual interests, and psychological state of a person at the moment when the blessing or cursing takes place play an important role.

I will analyze this issue using higher-level schemas theory, the theory of cultural models (R.D'Andrade, 1992) and the theory of pollution (M. Douglas, 1996). I will dwell on the next

questions: What reasons do people have for receiving *bata* and who do they prefer to receive *bata* from? What social and religious functions does *bata* have? Who has privileges to give *bata*? Since many people take specific actions (or openly ask) to receive *bata*, my research also investigates their past experiences and motivations.

To answer these questions, I used a combination of participant observations, interviews, and a close reading of Kyrgyz epics and legends.

I investigated the dynamics between individual participant(s), *bata* texts, and societal expectations. Specifically, I am interested in how people categorize and use contextual situations of *bata* performances.

***Kuru aiakka bata jurboit*** ‘Bata given on an empty bowl will not work’

People actively attempt to “invest” in receiving future blessings by performing favors for people in a position to give them *ak bata*.

Strategically performing favors in order to receive *ak bata* can be considered as an exchange of a social capital. Person A, who wishes to receive *ak bata* from Person B, “invests” in the exchange by inviting Person B for dinner, or giving him or her gifts. Person A then expects that her investment will be repaid by Person B giving him or her a blessing. Thus the *ak bata* blessing is an investment towards a future favor, because the act of *ak bata* blessing puts the recipient in a debt to the performer. However, the proverb *Kuru aiakka bata jurboit* (lit., ‘Bata given on an empty bowl will not work’ does not mean that *bata* given without this “investment” will not be effective. A proverb suggests that *bata* givers should (want) feel like to do it as gratitude for the good action of someone. So *bata* as community action is spiritual and moral, and not just material. This paper is restricted to the practices of exchange, but at the next stage of my research I plan to consider the material aspects of *bata* within exchange practices and gift-giving theory (Ssorin-Chaikov, 1993).

### ***The power of words and the function of Bata***

As it was mentioned, *bata* can actually be a blessing or a curse. I focus here on *ak bata* (lit.: ‘white blessing’), otherwise known as *oŋ bata* (lit.: ‘right blessing’), used to give someone a favor and *ters bata* (lit.: ‘contrary wish’), or curses. I would like to note that my interviewees avoided talking about curses. It was much easier for my consultants to talk about a good person who blessed somebody, and then the blessing came true. No one admitted ever cursing or being cursed by another person. Under normal circumstances, a person does not allow himself to pronounce negative words. If somebody deserves to be punished, then God should decide to punish him. Therefore, if a person is offended, he usually says ‘Let the God punish him’, or “I leave him with the God”.

The reluctance to speak about curses in Kyrgyz society is a taboo. Curses are regarded by Kyrgyz as a kind of pollution (cf. Douglas 1968: 199-200). People who pronounce curses publicly are regarded as ill-bred and brutish. We can say: *Oozu jaman* ‘his\her mouth is bad,’ *Kir ooz* ‘dirty mouth’, *Tili zaar* ‘his\her tongue is malicious’. People try to avoid this type of persons but nobody wants to be put off from his\her society. What I find interesting about *bata* is that they are speech acts that powerfully regulate these social relationships. The act of performing positive or negative *bata* is known as *bata berüü* ‘giving bata.’ Both blessings and curses are speech acts employed to effect *specific actions*: *ak bata* for good deeds, *ters bata* for bad actions.

One of the episodes of the Kyrgyz epic 'Kojojash' will be a good example to demonstrate the belief of people in the power of curse. Interesting and instructive by its content the epic has well known episode in Kyrgyz culture. Very skilful hunter Kojojash provides all his clan with his hunting findings, but when he accidentally met the patron of the mountain goats Kaiberen, he shot him in spite of Kaiberen's wife Surechki begged not to kill him in order not to destroy their offspring. Then Surechki decoyed Kojojash to the cliff, where he could not go down and she pronounced the curse.

*Аскадан кулап бой тааштан,  
Соогун ташика илинсин,  
Озундун жарын Зулайка,  
Оксон ыйлап жугурсун.  
Карыган атан Карымбай,  
Калкын кошо булунсун*

(I would like you to fall down from the cliff, may your body remains among stone, may your wife Zulaika sob losing herself, may your father Karypbai becomes poor as well as all your clan).

The curse, as blessing, always refers to a valuable affect in person's life. Belief in a curse is precise in terms of feasibility. People's believe in the effect of the curse is very high, however, in my opinion, the curse is not that dreadful as it is believed to be. Those phenomena are inexplicable and not predictable. Weird forces are not under the human will. The curse plays important role in people's life and they are afraid of to be cursed. According to the other version of the episode about hunter, Kaiberen cursed him to loose only his son. Moreover, while Kojojash coming back from unsuccessful hunting he accidentally shot to death his own son. His son was sleeping in a fur coat made of dare's skin, which Kojojash thought it was a dare. In both cases Kaiberen or his wife Surechki functions as symbol of mother-nature, against whom/which the human-its child, raised his hand. It reflects what D'Andrade (1992) has termed "higher-level schemas," here is a cult of mother.

In the same way, there are certain people whom other people scare to get curses from. There are two groups of this type of people. The first, Kyrgyz people consider to be afraid of curses of three category of people: parents, unfairly offended person and a *karyp*. People explain this by fact that parents are those who gave you life, and one cannot do towards them anything that can cause their anger. You will be punished for this. Unfairly offended person is clean in front of the God, and his curse is fair and the God will hear it. *Karyp* is person from different land, traveler, lonely. He is accompanied by God or angels. In the strange land he needs help and support. One cannot offend him. That is why his curses also are accepted by God. This belief demonstrates the cult of parents and fairness/justice. As an element of religious faith it has an educational character and it is very important to establish respectful relationship of people in the society.

The other group of people whose curses have a power, as people believe around them, are people who have birthmark in eyes, or wart on tongue, etc. It has certainly has symbolic meaning. As it was mentioned before, people pay a special attention to a rare phenomenon of the nature. In addition something mystic and incomprehensible causes fear and careful attitude of people. Black color, color of night and as a birthmark in eyes, is always associated with negative elements of life: death, disease and so on. A wart visually has not aesthetic view that is why people have negative emotions when they see it. Consequently people are more careful towards persons with birthmark in eyes, or wart on tongue than to others. That is why

to get *bata* from one type of people and try not to get curses from the other type of people as language interrelations of people is a part of structure of social interrelationships.

Besides, it defines the individual behavior of people because they try not to do anything that may cause curse or try to do something as result of which they can get blessings. It also demonstrates the belief to the power of words. In the rituals of negative and positive *bata* the speech which contains *bata* is more important than the actions themselves (speak looking at the west and opening palms, cooking special food, sacrifice).

### ***The bata as a religious and social performance***

*Bata* has both an Islamic and pre-Islamic basis. Kyrgyz syncretic faith, worshipping not only Allah, but natural phenomena, emerges during the *bata* performance. People do *bata* facing Mecca, yet. At the same time we take the mythical figures Manas or Kyzyl as protectors. For example, the traditional *bata* to men, who are going to accomplish something very important, is '*Manas atan koldosum*' 'Let Father Manas support you'. Some blessings to God worship not only Him, but other objects of environment: '*Oh Kudai jer suudan, too tashyndan, eldi jalga, el ichimde bala-chakamdy jalga*' ("Oh God, I worship of Your land and water, mountains and stones, bless my people and my children among them").

On a societal level, *bata* requires the social participation of people in their community: giving *bata* is a duty. Therefore any adults invited to any celebration or funeral should give a *bata* blessing both at the beginning and at the end of a meal. Participating in the ritual of *bata* people follow socially dictated requirements of behavior. I.e. the performance of *bata* has both social and religious base.

Regulating social relationships is one of the most important functions of religion (here the tabooed curse expresses elements of religious belief). Through religion, society prescribes the behavior of its members. Social regulations such as a prohibition to keep the Ramadan fast for children under 12, a prohibition to have marriage with the relatives to the seventh generation, respect elderly persons (in Kyrgyz society) prevent otherwise dangerous effects, or have a moral significance, as has been documented extensively in other cultures (Douglas, 1966, p.197).

### ***The Range of Rituals of Bata***

As a religious action *bata* can be a component of a number of rituals. *Bata* are performed during animal sacrifices: any livestock, which are going to be killed for celebrations or funerals, are taken as a sacrifice to the god. Therefore before the sacrifice, people express their *bata*. Relatives are invited especially for *bata* before sacrificing the livestock. A man who slaughters the sheep or cow holds it facing west (towards Mecca), people usually stand behind him also facing west and *Bata tilesbet*, that is to ask God for the blessing. The phrase '*Bata tilesbet*' from the linguistics' point of view has very interesting reading of words 'blessing' and 'wishes'. Both of them are wishes of something significant, something very important. However all my interviewees stated as one: that *bata* is a blessing addressed to somebody else while *tilek* is a wish addressed to yourself. Of course, it is very difficult to distinguish in everyday life *bata* and *tilek*. To my point of view, these two words have some limitations in terms of their combinations with other words. For example you cannot say

'*Tilek berem*' (lit., 'I will give you wish', but you can say '*Bata berem*' (lit., 'I will give you *bata*'). And also the word *tilek* and simple wish are synonyms. However, *tilek* is mainly addressed to God and consequently has a higher meaning. For example, one may want and wish to eat and to sleep, but *tilek* can be only about health, about success in the work. The second example of expressing *bata* is blessing (back??) to a woman, who greets elder relatives of her husband making a bow. The relatives of her husband as a tradition must give *bata* to a woman. As a rule they say '*Kudai jalgasyn*' or '*Kudai tilegindi bersin*', '*Taalailuu bol*'. It is interesting to mention, that a widow woman has rights not making a bow. This means, she is free of some obligations as a daughter-in-law. Though it does not mean she stops getting *bata* for her good things..

Another example occurs before serving and after eating the noodle and mutton dish *besb barmak*. The hosts provide guests with water to wash their hands, since water is present in this action, usually people give the blessing '*Suudai omur bersin*' (lit., 'let you be given life as water'). In the imagination of traditional Kyrgyz nomads flowing water (a river) is a symbol of infinity.

***Kyzyr ata koldosun!*** 'Let father Kyzyr to support you'

(Some phrases of *Bata*)

For a given situation, the *bata* text is fairly predictable: for any celebration (such as graduation, marriage, getting a new house), the *bata* performer is expected to say something positive to the graduate, newlyweds, or new homeowners. *Bata* has a special content for each situation. For example, people whom we had interviewed, when they learned that it was for my research, gave their blessings to my work by asking the God to give me luck. When they learned that my mentor was from Kansas University and that she would soon leave for home, they wished her happy trip back home. They blessed her with the words '*Kydyr ata koldosun*' (lit., 'let father Kydyr support you), or '*Jolum shydyr bolsun, joldoshun Kydyr bolsun*' (Do not have obstacles on your way, let Kydyr be your companion).

The name *Kydyr ata* (father Kydyr) is derived from the mythical old man, who accompanied travelers and protected them from enemies and difficulties on their way. But he is replaced by the attested historical person Kydyr. In 1916, he saved his kin at Issyk-Kul lake from Russian troops and from a certain death. To be blessed with reference to Kydyr/Kyzyr is to be associated with a person who united people, advised and possessed gifts of clairvoyance. Today, the use of his name functions to ensure a happy journey.

There are also fixed phrases of *ak bata* for other significant situations. E.g., people bless parents of a new born child with the words '*Beshik boonor bek bolsun*' (literally: 'let be the band of your child's cradle be strong'). Newly married couple people receive *bata* with words '*Kush boonor bek bolsun!*', new settlers receive *ak bata* with words '*Konushunar kut bolsun!*', etc. My mother when I helped her to wash her hair, gave *bata* '*Chachtai doolot bersyn.*' Hair as uncountable phenomenon is considered to be a symbol of health and wealth and so on. Besides, there are traditional *bata* blessings given specifically to children, to woman, to men, etc. Young women are given *bata* '*Aldynda mal bassyn, artynda bala bassyn!*', meaning "Let there be many cattle in front of you, and many children behind you." All these examples of *bata* demonstrate vital values of Kyrgyz people, what is important and significant to them, and what they pay attention first of all. In all these the traditional nomad way of life dictated the content of *bata*. In spite of the big changes in contemporary life, the content of values to Kyrgyz people remains the same as it was before, since they related to the values of high level.

### ***Why do people need to receive bata?***

There is a parable regarding *bata*. There were two neighbors. One of them works hard does not waste time, do not have guests and does not have any celebrations. But he has no enough money. He is unhappy. He has health problems. So his life is so hard. Another one receives guest every day, he also goes out a lot, he has everything, is happy and has no problem. Then the first one gets upset and asks the God, why it is so unfair to him. The God answers: 'Sorry, your neighbor has many guests at least three times a week, and each person asks me to give him health, happiness and wealth. How I could reject all this. Is there anyone who asked something for you?' The same word addressed to God with request to give something good or punish somebody for bad/wrong actions is important as expression of relationship between speaker and whom the *bata* is addressed.

In order to understand a person's actions (in this case, the act of giving and receiving *bata*), it is necessary to understand what led to the action, what is the goal of his action. That requires us to understand how he perceived, understood, interpreted, and related to the action. In short, to understand why a person engages in a specific action, it is necessary to understand the cognitive structures that motivated it (D'Andrade 1992: p.28-37). I observed how two young women argued whose son was supposed to pour water to guest's hands. Each wanted her son to do that, because he would get blessings from many people. In another situation a young woman wanted to pour water herself. She explained her behavior by saying that she got married recently, and wanted to receive blessing from respected members of her husband's clan. This example shows that individuals have mental patterns, or models, that allow them to recognize specific situations and recognize an action as the appropriate response to those situations (D'Andrade 1992: p.28-37).

### ***From whom you should get bata?***

Kyrgyz people of all ages and from all walks of life try to get *bata* from elderly and respected people. *Bata* performers need to have good speech. I.e. they should be eloquent, have an expressive language and be skilful speaker. Stylistic fluency is very important, because people want not only effective *bata*, but also beautiful poetic words. A *bata* performer always aims to produce something pleasant, visually and verbally beautiful. In each Kyrgyz village, there are certain people to whom other people turn to get *bata*. For example, a woman with her daughter came to a woman at the age of eighty four, during my interview. Her daughter was expecting a baby and a mother wanted the old woman to give *bata* to her daughter, as she was expecting very important experience – to give a birth to her first child. This old woman is respected in the village for her modest character, for her intelligence, for her neatness and mainly because she experienced a lot in her life and she knows a lot.

The relative age rank of family and village members is highly relevant for *bata*. Here is an example of my family: The wife of my younger brother must customarily bow to me in greeting. Custom requires me to bless her, but I was only about 30 years old when she appeared in our house that I was so embarrassed to pronounce the words of blessing as old women do. So I asked this sister-in-law not to bow to me. But she continued bowing to me, being afraid of her mother-in-law's disapproval should she not bow. So, in desperation to get her to stop, I told her that I would curse her. Of course, it was a joke; but I wanted to be free of my own obligation to give her *bata*. My breach of custom created a mini-crisis in

my family: my unhappy sister-in-law asked my mother's permission not to bow to me. My mother was not happy with this arrangement, but at the end I was able to convince her that it was acceptable in my case.

Another example of the importance of age rank – and a thus, status – in being a suitable *bata*-giver, is a woman who has many living children. Particularly women with twins are considered to be good sources of effective *bata*. (One woman I know has 10 children, including two sets of twins. As this is rare in nature, people see her as a good *bata* performer). Her blessings, especially to children and mothers, have a big power and for sure come to true, as people's believes. Thus, hierarchical social relationships define status, and those of high status are seen as being the most skilled and effective givers of *bata*. Her blessings, especially to children and mothers, have big power and for sure come to true, as people's believes. Those facts demonstrate fixed social relationship of people, who defines status (in this case – high status) of this or that member of the society depending on human features.

### **Conclusions**

*Bata* are speech acts which have both an individual and situational character. They both embody modernity and traditions of a long ago in the everyday life of Kyrgyz people, reflecting people's life values. The situations under which *bata* are performed combine language and performativity, enabling people to understand the speech act's purposes and expectations, as well as the interactions between participants. *Bata* differs from ordinary positive or negative expressions in that it refers to specific expressions that (1) have a traceable tradition of usage, (2) have a religious sense and (3) reflect "higher-level schemas," meaning there is often a unifying element in specific large-scale occurrences in a person's life, such as events surrounding birth, family, love, material well-being, and health (D'Andrade (1992).

*Bata* defines both proactive and avoidance behavior of individuals. People try not to do anything that may cause them to be cursed; they also attempt to receive blessing from honorable persons. This fact gives *bata* a grand character, also unlike of wishes *bata* is performed during the major events of the Kyrgyz people's life. As religious action *bata* is different from other deeds. They are sacred and should be protected from the ordinariness. And Kyrgyz by giving and receiving *bata* separate sacred from pollution.

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