

## MUSIC AND STORYTELLING IN THE TUVAN SHAMANIC WORLD

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the interaction of music and storytelling with shamanism in Tuva, when practiced by shamans, and also by other people. The arts form an important layer of the shamanic context, which is today out of balance in part because outsiders focus so strongly on shamans and throat-singing, ignoring other cultural areas. Important aspects of storytelling are imagery, spiritual geography, the soul journey, and the persona of the teller. Music also contributes imagery and sound healing. It creates a bridge to the spiritual world and calls spirits through timbres produced with instruments and the voice.

**Keywords:** musical sound, storytelling, imagery, soul journey, timbre, healing

When Vilmos Diószegi visited Tuva in the 1950s he was fascinated with the shaman's drums – hearing stories of how they were made and played, as well as their symbolism as a shaman's riding animal (DIÓSZEGI 1968: 248–51). Until it went underground in the 1930s, Tuvan shamanism existed as part of a cultural network, interacting constantly and at times almost indistinguishably with storytelling, improvised music and poetry, visual art, ritual and ceremonial life, everyday customs, and non-shamanic forms of divination and healing. There were non-shamans who specialized in various parts of what we think of as a shamanic practice, while true shamans were set apart by the strength of their particular helping spirits. Until the mid-twentieth century most Tuvans lived a rural nomadic lifestyle, and they shared and supported a common world-view. This philosophy shows the world as alive, unified, always in motion, and interconnected in all its parts.

In the post-Soviet period there has been a renewal of many forms of traditional culture, as Tuvans reclaim their physical and spiritual territory after the repressions of totalitarianism. At the same time, increased interest and sometimes financial support from the outside world has focused primarily on shamans and throat-singing, to the detriment of other forms of cultural expression. Although it is obvious that culture always adapts to changed social conditions (many Tuvans are now urban dwellers: Russian speakers, with a western education), I believe that deliberately developing shamanism outside of its creative context causes an imbalance. Not only does it detract from appreciating Tuvan cultural diversity, it also makes the shamanic acts themselves less effective, and more subject to controversy, since people inside and outside the culture may lack the criteria for interpreting them. Shamans are less powerful than were their ancestors, perhaps because of this lack of support for the

related arts and philosophy, which can create healthy environments for positive spiritual phenomena. It also makes it more difficult for storytelling and music to regain their rightful place as more than just entertainment.

The renowned Tuvan scholar Mongush Kenin-Lopsan welcomes many visitors to the Tuvan museum where Diószegi worked in the 1950s, and also to the new urban shaman's clinics – a thing which would have been unthinkable in Diószegi's time. In conversation in 2000, Kenin-Lopsan spoke of the tragedy of today's social situation. "The law does not affect Tuvans", he said. "No action taken by the government will make them turn away from drugs and alcohol, suicide and crime. But our ancient stories and traditional philosophy have that power." Aware of my interest in storytelling, he said, "Why do so few people pay attention to our storytellers? They are our treasure."<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, change begins on the spiritual level, be it individual or social. Shamans are needed to heal the ills of today's society, but within creative context. New approaches need to include the many talents of the Tuvan people, making use of all facets of the wisdom of the past in order to move forward.

Here I will discuss the arts of storytelling and music (instrumental as well as vocal), in their interaction with shamanism – important not only when these arts are performed by a shaman, but also when practiced by others. Shamans deal with dangerous spiritual realities, taking on the burden of protecting and healing their people. Because of the energies they attract and work with, most people are frightened of shamans and avoid dealing with them whenever possible. On the other hand, musicians and storytellers have a less fearful persona, translating spiritual realities onto a human level. Shamanism, music, and storytelling are all collaborative – the "audience" is never kept separate from the "performance" as they are in western theatres and concert halls. In fact it may be this separation of sacred and the everyday in the west that makes it so hard for westerners to understand the depth and spiritual function of the arts in Tuva.

## STORIES AND TRADITIONAL PHILOSOPHY

What Kenin-Lopsan is pointing to in his plea for a return to storytelling and traditional philosophy is the way words, sounds, and intent can actually change vibrational levels in a whole community. They record and maintain the maps of a nation's spiritual geography and history. Part of this comes through the power of imagery – by which I mean not only visual picture-making, but all sensory impressions that bypass rational thought, activating memory through our inner senses of smell, hearing, sight, touch and movement. As Kenin-Lopsan says, "Storytellers and shamans create worlds with words." While there is much confusion in this middle world,

<sup>1</sup> Questions of language affect storytelling. Although less endangered than other Siberian languages, Tuvan is under serious pressure. And the language of storytelling is more demanding to learn than everyday language.

the upper and lower worlds have greater clarity. A voyage taken together with a storyteller allows us to see with that greater clarity, finding solutions to everyday problems.

Kenin-Lopsan speaks of the time when his own work began to emerge from obscurity.<sup>2</sup> His vision appeared at a mountain pass, a sacred place.

“In 1991 I was working with a film crew from Estonia. We were on our way back from Khandykaty village, where we had recorded an old man who talked about demons and spirits. We came to the mountain pass. I saw a great golden stag coming towards us. His horns had twenty-eight branches – it was beautiful! I wanted to stop the car but no one else saw the creature and the driver refused to stop. The golden stag flew toward the sunset behind the mountain, going higher and higher. On each of the twenty-eight branches bright balls, or bubbles formed. They flew away and turned into stars. And then the stag disappeared. I thought this was a message that I was about to die. I went to see a former Buddhist monk named Kuular Aras. He was a very knowledgeable person who knew the Tibetan and Mongolian languages. He was a wise man who had known many shamans in his day. He told me that I would live a long time. And after that my first books were published. And so you see what appeared to me was a creature from my own mythology, Tuvan mythology.”

Kenin-Lopsan’s vision and his response to it show that imagery is most powerful when it is one’s own, related to stories heard in childhood and to the surrounding landscape. Clearly shamans live in this mutually understood spiritual geography and their work is much more difficult when it is not supported in this area.

Another powerful aspect of oral story is the sound value. “Language begins with the music of words”, said folklorist Georgii Kurbatski. “Shamans and story-singers converse with spirits in the spirits’ own musical language. They have a much larger vocabulary than do ordinary people, a vocabulary that describes the vast worlds they encounter on their voyages, and reflects structures and concepts long forgotten among non-shamans.” Besides this, epics are sung in verse, with melody and rhythm.

Yet another important way that storytelling connects with shamanism is in the heroic or soul journey, which appears in oral literature throughout the world. Like a shaman, a hero or heroine receives a call to action – a serious problem to be solved. In Tuvan epics the goal is usually the defeat of a clan enemy, finding a spouse, and/or bringing back abducted parents. A journey begins. The hero finds helpers in animals, people, and classic beings like the old man Aksal with the white beard or the old woman who gives support and good advice. These may be compared with a shaman’s spirit helpers. A battle ensues with humans, monsters, or celestial beings. This may involve negotiation or trickery, like the techniques employed by a shaman to retrieve a soul, and the story ends with return home. Hearing such a story told can act as a form of soul retrieval.

<sup>2</sup> Besides his work at the Tuvan Republican Museum and the Research Centre for Shamanic Studies in Tuva, Dr. Kenin-Lopsan has published ethnographic work, fiction and poetry.

### STORY-SINGERS, *TOOLCHU*<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 1)

More evidence for the mutual support of oral storytelling and shamanism is the very similar life path of the practitioners. Like shamans, Tuvan epic singers underwent an initiatory illness, had the ability to call spirits and to dismiss them at the end of the tale. They took listeners on an interactive journey, grounding spiritual realities in the emotions and humour of the believable. Well-known contemporary *toolchu* Andrei Chuldum-ool told me about his own initiation, in which he met 40 mice on the road and helped them in their felt-making, all of which led to his learning the arts of music and storytelling.

After telling me some short stories in 1993, Borbak-ool Saryglar explained how he became a shaman. “I started as a storyteller. But after a while a truly great storyteller begins to see visions of the characters and the plots. Sometimes it happens that a storyteller must become a shaman. The spirits become internalised in you. You call the spirits of the stories often enough and at last they force you.” The most powerful storytellers have personal helping spirits, as do shamans.

Epic singers held a very high position in the community, and accompanied their tales with the music of the bowed string instrument called *igil*. Although today people have a lot of respect for a storyteller, the circumstances for telling have yet to revive, and unfortunately most of today’s *toolchu* tell their tales to folklorists rather than to their neighbours.

Although most real *toolchu* are men, it goes without saying that women also tell wonderful stories based in tradition. Their tales are usually shorter, unaccompanied by music, and often have funny and sexual plots. It would be interesting to find out how these stories relate to female ceremonies that were carried out parallel to the many rituals which were reserved to men.

Dramatic stories *about* shamans form a whole genre, which presents a shaman’s credentials to both humans and spirits, and confirms their prestige. Another of Andrei Chuldum-ool’s stories tells of the kind of competition traditional shamans engaged in, which involved a lot of shape-changing, giving us an idea of the inner realities a shaman deals with.<sup>4</sup>

## MUSIC

Sound plays an enormous role in the shaman’s inner reality. It helps to open the inner, spiritual ear and eye. Musical sound calls helping spirits, who especially enjoy hearing their names called, and transports the shaman on the journey.

<sup>3</sup> *Toolchu* comes from the Tuvan word *tool*, or story.

<sup>4</sup> Both of Andrei Chuldum-ool’s stories appear in my book, *Singing Story Healing Drum: Shamans and Storytellers of Turkic Siberia*.



Fig. 1. Tuvan storyteller *toolchu* Andrei Chuldum-ool in 1993

“There is a bridge on these sound waves so you can go from one world to another”, says Tuvan musicologist Valentina Süzükei. “In the sound world a tunnel opens through which we can pass – or the shaman’s spirits come to us. When you stop playing the drum or *temir-khomus* (jaw harp) the bridge disappears.”

Most Siberian shamans describe the drum as a horse, reindeer, camel or other riding animal, and Diószegi recorded the way even the parts of a drum refer to horses and their gear (DIÓSZEGI 1968: 260). Both the rhythm and the timbre of musical sound help heal the patient through the effects of specific frequencies and musical styles on the human body.

Like storytelling, Tuvan music helps heal and maintain well-being in individuals and communities. It contributes motion, colour and depth to the spiritual and cultural context of shamanism. But nowadays music is rarely played in the traditional setting. For ideological reasons, culture has been secularized and placed on the performing stage in large ensembles, divorced from its spiritual roots. Many young Tuvans now experiment with American style pop and rock music. But there are exceptions and today more and more musicians, especially those who tour in the west, are consciously reconnecting with the sacred in their music. American musicologist Ted Levin has made videos of singers at the places their songs come from, and shows them as part of the group’s performances to bring home the importance of this connection with nature.<sup>5</sup> At the same time shamans are commissioning new drums, and using them in their ceremonies.

<sup>5</sup> See [www.tuvatrader.com](http://www.tuvatrader.com)

With the spiritual function at its heart, it is easy to see that music was not traditionally a concert activity, designed to entertain or enlighten other humans, but was instead a complex part of our relationship with nature. Some music was never designed to be heard by other people, but was performed alone in the steppe or the taiga, resonating with rocks, trees and water, holding conversation with spirits. “You must think of what stands behind that music, what a person is expressing in it, the functional context”, says Süzükei. Songs were sung while riding, while tending the herds, at home or beside the river. We should not analyse music in terms of harmony and form, but absorb it in terms of the times, places, and means of playing it.

Traditionally Turkic people did not learn music by analysis, but by imitation. It is often difficult for traditional musicians to explain exactly how sounds are produced. “I came to understand that traditional musicians can’t use such terms as pitch, scales, interval, timbre”, says Süzükei. “This is a different culture with different values and criteria.”<sup>6</sup> One man began to play the *khomus* (jaw harp) and I asked, ‘How do you think that melody is built? How can you describe it?’ He said, ‘How can I explain it to you? Look at those mountains over there. They have layers of brown and blue with snow on top, different colours as it gets further away. Then the nearer mountains – shadow and a patch of sun – then shade again. And then in the heat everything is moving, like a mirage. You see that movement of the air with your eyes. So there you see how the *khomus* sounds. And that’s when it’s hot and sunny. But when we start to play in the evening or at night, you can *imagine* such waves moving’.”

Specific sounds the shaman chooses to have on the costume and other ceremonial objects, recall places in physical geography that correspond to those in the spiritual world. Especially important is a person’s place of birth – the place where we crossed from the world of the ancestors to the world of this physical reality. The words of a song, especially the descriptions and names of spirits and places contribute to this recall of the native land. The women’s style of singing long songs recalls the mountains. Other styles evoke riding through the steppe.<sup>7</sup> Melody, rhythm, tempo, timbre – all recall places.

When Süzükei asked one musician how he determined whether music was being played well or badly, he replied that the best music could transport him back to summer in the steppe in his childhood – together with all the sights, sounds and smells.

“When you listen to one of these singers, you will see the place he sings about”, says Süzükei. “They are masters at evoking nature. It would be impossible to mistake a song from the steppe for one from the forest or the desert. In the nomad’s life there was not the separation from sound and smell that there is in the city. The walls of the yurt kept you from seeing out, but the sounds came through – the sounds of animals, approaching people, the wind. Maybe the sense of hearing is heightened in the yurt for this reason.”

<sup>6</sup> Although Süzükei is Tuvan, she was brought up in the city with a western education.

<sup>7</sup> I recommend listening to recordings. Several good ones are available from The Tuva Trader. [www.tuvatradet.com](http://www.tuvatradet.com)

Part of a shaman's talent lies in the ability to receive and interpret a larger range of frequency than a normal person. Some of these frequencies are sounds above or below the normal range of hearing. Valentina Süzükei says, "The shaman senses them as surely as do birds who sense the approach of an earthquake or storm."

Timbre, or tone colour, plays an enormous role in Turkic music, and allows the listener to go deeper into the spiritual realm. Timbral variations are vital to shamanic music, calling attention to minute sound details. Süzükei points out that Western music focuses largely on melody and harmony, and African music on rhythm. But Asian music plays with tone colours, through manipulation of overtones, frequencies and vibrations.

In Tuvan music we hear the play of timbres most clearly in overtone singing, where a performer gets two or three distinct sounds at the same time. But timbral variations are also rich in bowed string instruments like the *igil* (used by storytellers). The strings are made not of a single strand of gut, metal or nylon, like the strings of western instruments, but of horsehair. Each string is made up of numerous parts which resonate individually, producing a rich collection of overtones. These can be manipulated through the use of the bow, the fingers of the left hand, and pressure on the skin head. The player tunes the strings not to an outside source but to his own inner ear, according to his mood and other factors including the weather. The actual pitch of the strings is unimportant – their interval relationship is what matters. "I tried to get one player to play the two notes separately so I could record them, but he wouldn't do it", says Süzükei. "When I tried to insist, he got so angry that he got up and left!"

When I heard Andrei Chuldum-ool in 1993, I felt that tuning the instrument was part of the preparation for telling the story in more than just the physical sense – that perhaps the sounds themselves helped him to decide which tale to tell on that particular day. The sound of the *igil* was calling the spirits of story, as Chuldum-ool hummed and gently sang to tune his voice and instrument to his own energies.

The metal jaw harp also creates audible overtones, and in the past was often used by shamans for calling spirits. And of course there is Diószegi's favourite – the shaman's drum (Fig. 2). Called *düngür* in Tuvan, it produces rich overtones owing to variations in the thickness and tautness of the head. The large drums have a tremendous dynamic range. Metal pieces hanging on the inside add to the sound. Jangling metal pieces on the back of the drumstick add to the overtone possibilities. The drum sound recalls the animal whose skin was used for its head, or qualities of his habitat.<sup>8</sup> Goat skin makes the best drum heads, with the greatest variety of sounds, says Kenin-Lopsan. In its animal form the drum is similar to a helping spirit.

Many beliefs surround the shaman's drum, among them that the shaman rides the drum like a horse while journeying. It is in some ways identical with the shaman's

<sup>8</sup> Kenin-Lopsan recorded an *algys*h about the goat and the drum (KENIN-LOPSAN 1995: 399–404 in Tuvan; 150–57 in Russian). English translation in my *Singing Story Healing Drum*.



Fig. 2. Tuvan shaman Khuurak Kyrgys in 1996

life, since if the drum is destroyed the shaman will die. And when the shaman dies, the drum head must be cut. In some cases Kenin-Lopsan says a shaman's drum has been heard after his death, beating a farewell.

When a ceremony takes place inside an enclosed yurt, the sounds of the drum are reflected in a very particular way, affected by the shape of the space and the felt cover.



“Shamans of the past masterfully brought forth many kinds of sounds on the *düngür*”, Valentina Süzükei recalls. “Strokes in the centre, around the edges, on the rim, delicate tremolo on various parts of the membrane, sliding movements of the stick or the hand along the head, beating with the fingers of the right hand, these and other sounds were made within the network of complex rhythmic sound drawings.”

“Sometimes a shaman used the *düngür* as a resonator and with its help sent waves of sound to the right and left, up and down. It seemed that the voice of the shaman, the *düngür*, and the spirits seated in it moved from side to side, up and back. In the half-darkness, in combination with his jumping shadow, they created the impression that the shaman was really flying.” (SÜZÜKEI 1989: 92)

Music and storytelling were often inextricably combined in the traditional Turkic world. They have many of the same functions and make use of the power of sound vibrations, melody, and rhythm. They support an understanding of the history and realities of the spiritual world.

Both storytellers and musicians were crucial to the success of a hunting expedition, and there are many tales about both music and storytellers in this genre. A musician/storyteller would go along as part of the expedition. He used his arts to call the spirits of the place, for which he would receive a portion of the take. If the spirits were pleased they would bring the hunters success. Shaman Borbak-ool Saryglar told me of a time in his youth when he came back to the fire and found his uncle singing a story with no human listeners present – he was singing to the spirits of the place. But there were dangers as well. If the spirit liked the singer or player too much, she might take him away forever.

There is a popular Tuvan tale which combines many of the themes we have discussed – the power of music to call spirits, and in this case to resurrect the dead, the uses of music in communication, the connection of people and spirits to specific places, the similarity of story form and the shamanic journey, and hope for the continued life of this rich and varied culture.

## THE IGIL<sup>9</sup>

An orphan boy raised an orphan colt that the khan had ordered to be killed. They grew up and began to win the khan’s horse races. When the khan learned that this was the very horse he had ordered to be left for the wolves to eat, he was furious, and now ordered his servants to push the horse over a steep cliff. This time they had no choice but to obey.

The boy searched for his horse, but couldn’t find him. He sat down under a larch tree, exhausted, and dreamed that his horse appeared to him, telling him not to

<sup>9</sup> A musical rendition of the boy’s lament is on Huun Huur Tu’s recording, “Sixty Horses in my Herd”. The complete story is in my *Singing Story Healing Drum*.

grieve but to use the horse's skin and tail hair, together with wood from the tree, to make a musical instrument.

The boy obeyed, and when he began to play the new instrument, which is now called the *igil*, he looked to the mountain top and saw a fine horse, the double of his own, coming down to him, bringing a fine herd of horses.

And from that day on, he was poor no longer! And from that day to this, the people of Tuva have had the sounds of the *igil* to express their joys and sorrows when they are too great for words.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Portions of this article have been published in VAN DEUSEN, Kira 2003: *Singing Story Healing Drum: Shamans and Storytellers of Turkic Siberia*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.