

SONGS TO A Faraway Sky

The use of blessings in Tuvan Shamanism
Christiana Harle

Blessings are a
an important part
of the roll of most
shamans, brining
the gifts and grace
of the spirits to the
people to help them
in their daily lives



We are all stuck in our own stupidity and narrow-mindedness, in our own limiting and border-filled worlds, walking with a closed heart; especially me. But that is who we are at that moment, and if we are blessed enough, then maybe we will open up, maybe we will learn something. I like to think that I have, as time has gone by.

But what is blessing than more than simply a wishing well for others? And who has the rights to perform a blessing? The priest? The official? Me?

Raised in a Christian household, actively participating in choirs, attending and, or leading Bible-studies, and later doing healing work through the Holy Spirit, I grew up thinking that it was only the priests and ministers who could bless others; thinking that they were endowed with exclusive special rights and authority. I experienced their blessing at the end of a church service as a powerful tool which was somehow intimidating. I never even noticed my father blessing me all those years when he said grace over dinner!

When the spirit of a magnificent fir tree came to assist me in my healing work, my road with the church split, and I became seen as someone who was not working through the Holy Spirit. I began to spurn the prayers of my family, friends and church ministers and of anyone associated with Christianity. I didn't want their blessings because they seemed only to want me to convert back to the 'true path', their path. They didn't want 'good' for me; they just wanted their way because it was the 'right way'.

And so I thought and believed then, and for the next nine years or so lived that truth.

What closed eyes and heart I must have had! Why was I running around thinking of protection from other people's energy? Thinking that others were trying to manipulate me and my path? Was it that their Christian blessings were expressed from a place of love for humankind and humanness after all? Were my eyes and heart so closed as to not see the blessings that were being given all around me?



AN EYE-OPENER

I didn't get much information on blessing during my initial shamanic coursework with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in early 1990's. Reviewing notes taken on journeys and teachings it wasn't emphasized much back then.

Spirit helpers did give me blessing or healing songs however, and I experienced blessing in my journeys to the Spirit World from my helpers, but not so much from us humans on this side of the fence. It wasn't discussed in ethnographic literature very much either, and when it was, it was degraded, misinterpreted by the reporter.

My path led me to Tuva (see Sacred Hoop, Issue 25, 1999) where I found shamans spending most of their time blessing people, and their animals, places and things; where the everyday human would bless the sky, their home, their path. And they weren't Christians!

Something snapped inside of me. Something was healed, for wounded I was.

BLESSING: SALT OF LIFE

In Tuvan culture-and elsewhere, blessings are an integral part of daily life. They are everyday common place occurrences. For example, when a blessing is offered in the morning with the first milky tea made by the mistress of the yurt, she will burn *artysh* (juniper) by the door of the yurt and offer her tea with her *tos-karak* to the skies, mountains, forest and to the rivers.

After completing the ritual she will say something like:

Be merciful, my *Khairyrakan*!
Be merciful, my mountains!
Be merciful, my sky!
Be merciful, my earth!

When she has offered the morning tea to the Universe first, she then offers it to the host of the yurt to drink.

Blessings are part of celebrating and marking the seasons and the rhythm of nature in Tuva, and they are carried out by both the common human (in Tuva,

someone who does not 'see' and work as a shaman) and the shaman.

Offerings and blessings are part of daily life. For instance, under a spring sky, during a thunderstorm, a Tuvan mother might offer milk to the sky, to the khan (Lord) of the *azars*³ living in the White Sky who would then become glad and peaceful.

The yurt's mistress's blessing prayer would be:

The head of the year is coming,
Khairyrakan!
The snake's head is shedding,
Khairyrakan!
Let white food be abundant,
Khairyrakan!
Let milk and dairy products be tasty,
Khairyrakan!
Let coughing be still, Khairyrakan!
Let snot stop running, Khairyrakan!
Let the grass and plants be lush,
Khairyrakan!
Let our native-place be prosperous,
Khairyrakan!

BLESSINGS AND THE FAMILY

Shamans are called in to bless the immediate family and relatives.

The shaman Kuular Makar-ool told me how he experienced healing, power and Spirit. He said there is an egg-like orb of protective energy surrounding an individual; another orb around their family, and still another larger orb around near relatives and their *aal* (a group of yurts situated near one another, all members having kinship; sharing in daily work) which contained also their belongings, animals and even drinking water.

The shaman is called in specifically to bless them when there is some new event. If the orb is broken then malicious energies enter: people fall ill, or there is 'bad luck' or fights occur or animals disappear, etc.

If this happens, the shaman's job is then to close this energy-orb by blessing and purifying.

I assisted Makar-ool during one call: a family's son was moving to the

Tuvan capital Kyzyl to attend technical school and the parent's wanted Makar-ool to check the path: to make sure that his road would be clear, to bless the road and family while he was away, as well as bless the relatives also.

The ritual lasted over six hours during which he drummed, sang, ate, made divination, and washed the immediate family's bare feet and hands; he even included instructions in right living!

I was too busy working and was unable to record his shamanic song, but this one below by Kuular Chanzan-ool Bulunmayevich, an old shaman born in 1901, was recorded in 1990 by Mongush Kenin-Lopsan⁴, and it contains similar elements.

With golden hair
you are my children!
Let your mountain pass
to cross over be low,
Let your horses be fast,
Let your food be satisfying.

You are beautiful my children!
Let your river-crossing be shallow,
Let your path be fulfilled,
Let your happiness be complete.

My abundant children!
Let them sing

Opposite page:
dark skies and a
rainbow over
Tuva's wild
landscape

*Opposite page -
bottom:* Tuvan
shaman drums
during a
ceremony

Below: Tuvan
mother
and child

*blessings are an integral
part of daily life.
They are everyday
common place
occurrences*



shaman's
ritual milk
spoon



their charming songs,
Let them carry out their tasks,
Let them have friends to be
together with.

A flying bird needs wings,
A big person needs a legacy.
Drinking water needs to be clean.
The girl whom you need to marry is
not a relative.

My walking path has been fulfilled,
Let me continue shamanising.
My task to complete
has been fulfilled,
Let me go further and shamanise.

BLESSING AS HEALING

Anthropologist and filmmaker Heimo Lappalainen made numerous visits to Tuva in an attempt to retrace the shamans in Tuva. Heimo was the organiser of the first conference between Tuvan shamans and researchers and western practitioners and researchers (mostly associated with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies) in July, 1993.

During one of Heimo's 1992 visits' he revisited shamaness Töszhu Teshit where she performed a healing (Heimo had a cold) and a blessing ritual which contained this song:

Let my children,
having come from afar

Get to their home.
Let my children, who have come
from such a far away country
Let them always be lucky.

The beauty-girl,
pull up your stirrups,
And ride quickly the horse
by the name Emdik-Dai
Let you be lucky at work.

I have got a pasture,
spacious and wide
It seems to be quite near,
at the distance of an inch.

If I am asked where
my homeland is,
Then it is my Tere-Khool
with its hills and tussocks
If I am asked where your homeland is,
Where you were growing,
Then it is my taiga country.

I will sing, I will present my song
And we will go my daughter
I will play, I will tell you
And then we will go
to Ortuluktug across the island
Aai-ooi, aai, opei, opei,
Let you have many children.

Let those ones,
who will stay after us, be happy.
Let my present life be prosperous
Let my future life in the next world,
Be as happy as my present life.

Let my horses be fat
which graze in Oyalyk.
Let you have many children
Who will stay to live
in your native land?

My native, vast and spacious taiga,
Where I grew since my childhood,
My beautiful homeland
Where I have been living
for a long time
This is my rich abundant homeland.

When I am thinking
for a long, long time
It seems to me that
my Homeland is nearby
It is only one inch away.

My cradle is my Homeland,
I have grown up carefree
In my spacious and wide taiga.
(translated by Aldynai and Chrissi, 1994)

SONGS TO A FAR AWAY SKY

The Tuvan cosmology cannot be summarized in one general statement. Shamans, researchers, and the common man's opinions vary about what we, in the west, call the Upper World.

Many state that there are 'Nine Heavens' or 'Nine Skies.' Tuvan shamans often pray to these Skies, especially the White and Black Skies, both of which lie far beyond the sky we can see with our eyes.

*Below: trying
cloth prayer
offerings on a
sacred tree*



In Tuva blessings are an everyday common place occurrence... a blessing is offered in the morning, with the first milky tea, to the skies, mountains, forest and to the rivers

Some shamans are said to have their origins in the Skies. In one area of Tuva recently people said of the oldest shamaness Mongush Targyn-Kara that she was from the Skies because she knew what would happen in the future beforehand: what disaster would come, what disease would come and when death would be.

Before the Soviet repression of shamanism in the 1920's, the great shamans would perform ceremonies to the sky on the top of a mountain and when they did only close relatives could come to that place during the ritual.

During the Soviet repression the shamans lost their rights and were driven away from their native places. The greatest shamans were taken to prison, some of them were shot and the people didn't perform ceremonies to the sky publicly anymore.

There are many songs to the Skies, here is one told by an old shaman called Kuular Orus Donguroolovich in 1990 to Mongush Kenin-Lopsan.

The worshipper of the war sky
I am Targyn-Kara
I am burning my *artysh*
I am worshipping
with my white milk.

I am honouring my White Sky
Let my people be rich
I am honouring my Black Sky
Let my people be safe and proud.

GRACE AND BLESSING TODAY

Everyday I have lived, I have encountered blessing and grace! Everyday now I encounter it! It is all around me! Blessing keeps you full. It keeps you full of Life. I need no amulets or power-objects, no protection rituals or similar, for I am full of blessings. I can ask for

blessing for myself and I have the right to bless others, places, events.

Makar-ool's teaching me about his view of power opened my eyes: When one gets blessed only life can happen. I am full of power; I can walk with no fear. It doesn't take away from me, it only adds.

In all the time I was in Tuva I never observed or heard of a shaman making ceremonies for protecting. Their *algyshe*s (ceremonies) are full of blessing words, wishing and praying for good things for place and people. Fear is not an element, only life, living and walking the path before us.

Christiana Harle (-Silvennoinen, Buckbee-Lappalainen) lives in Sotkuma, North Karelia, Finland. Chrise has been working shamanically for nineteen years. She has studied extensively with Jonathan Horwitz and Heimo Lappalainen. Chrise has worked also worked intensively for several periods with traditional shamans in the Republic of Tuva, Siberia. She carries a Dūngūr Shaman red membership card. She is the assistant editor of the book 'Shamanic Songs and Myths of Tuva' by Mongush Kenin-Lopsan and also made a film on Tuvan life: 'In the Arms of Buddha and the Drum' (director Jouko Aaltonen: www.illum.fi). Chrise is a shamanic counselor and has been teaching for the past 15 years, offering shamanic healing and drum birthing. She is also a bee-keeper and maintains a Finnish handmade natural and organic soap company. She still keeps in touch with Tuva.

NOTES:

1: A *tos-karak* is a large wooden spoon with nine small indents for scooping and scattering milky tea made with salt during rituals. Nine 'holes' represent the Nine Skies or Heavens (one explanation).

2: *Khayrakan* is often interpreted as 'My Bear God' 'Master Bear Spirit,' 'Master of Sky,' or 'Bear Khan' This phrase is often used in rituals to express honour and high praises.

Tuvans have stories how their ancestor is the Bear. This tradition is also found in Fenno-Ugric culture, as well as with some Siberian, and North-American peoples. Some shamans also claim their power comes directly from the Bear ancestor.

3: The *Azar* are beneficent beings or



spirits, living in the Ninth Sky, which is far, far away. Some shamans claim their power comes from the *Azar*.

4: Mongush Kenin-Lopsan is over 80 years old, and is a revered Tuvan poet, story-teller, folklorist, researcher, shaman, collector of Tuvan peoples' stories and shaman's *algyshe*s. He has recently received his doctorate. He is affectionately known as 'The Professor'. For tens of years he has maintained a small one-room office at the Museum of Kyzyl where he received visitors and made his research. Kenin-Lopsan founded Dūngūr (Shaman's Drum) Shaman Society in Tuva in 1993-4. Proven shamans are issued with a red-leather-bound membership card. Dūngūr still operates today.

Above: A shaman prepares to drum during a ceremony