

IN THE LAND OF SONG AND THE DRUM

Receiving Inspiration from Tuvan Shamans
by Christiana Harle-Silvennoinen



Five years ago, I left for the Republic of Tuva - Land of Eagles and blue mountains. Tuva is the little Switzerland of Siberia. The Altai, Sayan and Tannu-ola mountain ranges encircle the country. It is a land of pristine forests, lakes of all colours, and the birthplace of the Yenesei river as well as ancient sites of the Scythian culture. Uranium and asbestos mines are also part of the scenery.

Tuva was the last of Russia's autonomous regions to open its borders. Prior to 1947 it was under protectorship of the USSR: suffering the same effects as the rest of the Soviet Union. Stories abound of the repression of shamans: who payed ten times the taxes, were imprisoned, denied education for their children, had their movements restricted and even suffered execution.

Yet they survived, practicing in secret and Tuva is one place amongst very few others in Siberia where the shamanic heritage has remained unbroken. In 1992 a Society of Tuvan shamans was formed. This was called *Dungur* (shaman's drum). There are some 34 red card-carrying licensed shaman members of this society, of which I am one.

In Tuva, I found my own path and my own way. I feel a certainty that all that I had lived and experienced up to that point was to prepare me. Arriving in Tuva was like returning to a loved one after many years of separation.

My reason for going there was to deliver the ashes of my late husband Heimo Lappalainen and finish the work he had begun, complete the research and make a documentary film on Tuvan beliefs and life¹. I met many people and many shamans. Working with these people and the places they lived brought me a deeper understanding of what it is to walk a shamanic path and especially what trust means. It raised many questions and gave much inspiration.

SONG AND DANCE

When a Tuvan shaman is shamanizing it is a sight to behold: the changing of

metallic objects on gown and drum, bells, beating of the drum and the shaman's rattle-beater the *orba* with its metal rings all sounding with the shaman's voice above it all. The feathered and beaded cap and the gown with perhaps hundreds of *snakes*, the ubular pieces of cloth in a variety of colours, which hang from it swirling and dancing as the shaman moves.



Tuvan shamans do not lay down during the seance. They stand and move around. Some are what we in the west might generally call melodic and graceful while others rough and noisy! They sing shamanic hymns (*algyshtar*) which can be healing songs, songs of praise for their spirit helpers, song descriptions of their journeys or also songs of blessing.

Zoya is a shamaness. She is a single mother of nine children and can sing up a storm. She can take you to another place and time: describing the beauty of the land and those who live there. Some of her songs follow a pattern: several verses and a chorus. She makes her *algyshtar* up on the spot, with much depending on the reason she is singing. When she sings, she can do so for a couple of hours.

Old shaman Sargly is different. His words are mostly in spirit language. He can shamanize for quite a while with only the spirits understanding what he is speaking. He has a chorus which is present in almost all his songs. His beauty lies in his way of working with power, and, although his helpers are present, he is far away in the spirit world.

I cannot imitate or borrow Tuvan shamans' songs because each

shaman has their own. They are not for sing-alongs, nor are they passed on to others. I did, however, take inspiration from them and learned from my spirits my own songs.

Moving around the fire or the patient the shaman dances and becomes his helpers. He battles with spirits, dances in praise or thanksgiving. The Tuvan shaman is almost always in motion. It isn't a matter of a *power dance*, it is rather that, parts or even the entire journey is active movement.

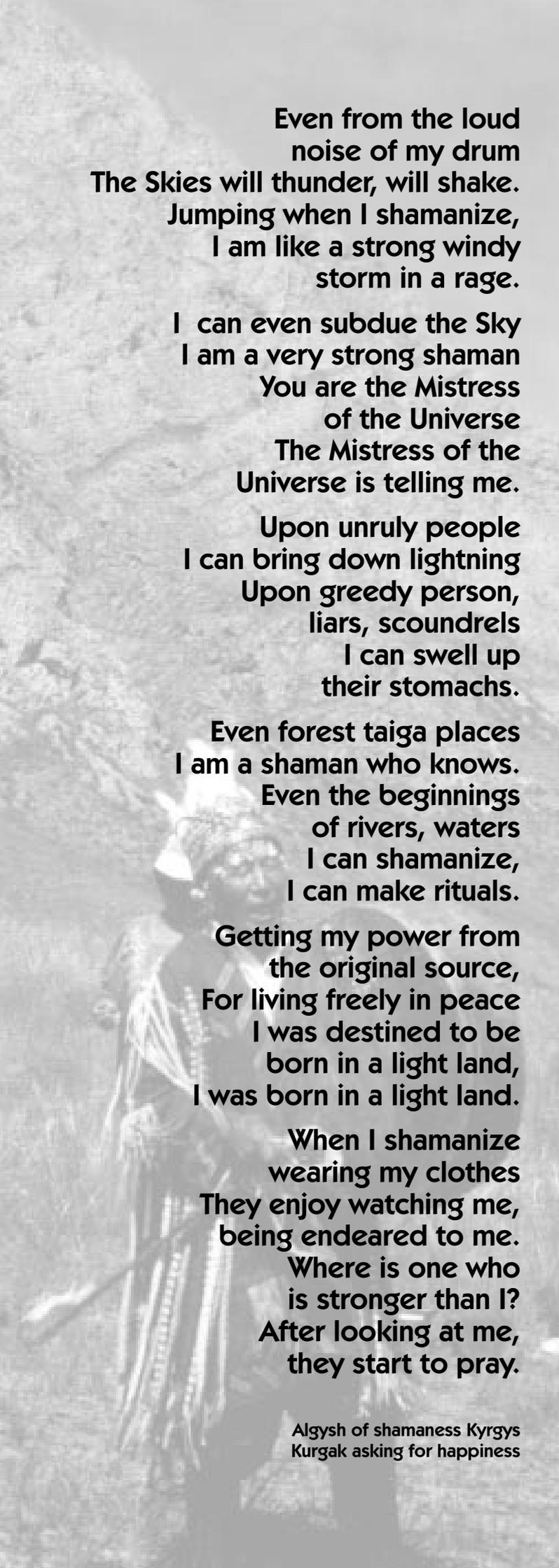
For myself, it is as if, just by being amongst these people, I have been given the ability to 'rise up and walk' or *boogie*. I find now that I cannot lay or sit down for long. The journey unfolds before me, my helpers come and dance with me; the spirits prompt me into joy, into ecstasy and into a deeper trance.

During my visits to Tuva I found shamans actively using *algyshtar* to introduce themselves to Spirit, describe their spirit helpers, praise their shamanic paraphenelia, describe their journey to nonordinary reality and to describe the illness or problem of the patient.

What I observed was, when the shaman was engaged in something more than divination with stones (*khuvanak*), they used songs (with obvious melody), chants, and sounds from nature. The richness and variety of these songs varied greatly.

Both elderly and younger shamans used prolonged singing, lasting over fifteen minutes. Phrases, both melodic and rhythmic, were often repeated with only the words changing. One thirty-eight year old female shaman in Bai-Taiga (western Tuva) sang for almost forty minutes using a structured melody, with repeated melodic phrases, and a repetitive chorus. Somewhat akin to verse A, chorus, verse B, chorus, verse C, chorus, etc. The content was changing with what she heard and saw in nonordinary reality.

The people gathered at the dedication and purification ceremony



**Even from the loud
noise of my drum
The Skies will thunder, will shake.
Jumping when I shamanize,
I am like a strong windy
storm in a rage.**

**I can even subdue the Sky
I am a very strong shaman
You are the Mistress
of the Universe
The Mistress of the
Universe is telling me.**

**Upon unruly people
I can bring down lightning
Upon greedy person,
liars, scoundrels
I can swell up
their stomachs.**

**Even forest taiga places
I am a shaman who knows.
Even the beginnings
of rivers, waters
I can shamanize,
I can make rituals.**

**Getting my power from
the original source,
For living freely in peace
I was destined to be
born in a light land,
I was born in a light land.**

**When I shamanize
wearing my clothes
They enjoy watching me,
being endeared to me.
Where is one who
is stronger than I?
After looking at me,
they start to pray.**

**Algysh of shamaness Kyrgys
Kurgak asking for happiness**

of a spring received instructions on what to offer to the different directions, to the fire, and to the spring itself. They were told what to say (*Kurai! Kurai!* or *Blessing! Blessing!*) and who should carry out the tasks.

When the shamaness sang of four eldest female heads, these women arose from their places. When she told them in her song to offer milk, barley heads, and meat to the fire and four directions for the spirits which lived there, the four women carried this out. Through her song the people became aware of the shamaness' experience, what her purpose was, and if she was making a power-filled ceremony for them.

The shamans working in Dungur sometimes went into nonordinary reality, but often didn't have time because of the amount of patients waiting. They remained in perhaps a slight trance state. In the past, seances could last all night, but nowadays they appear to last only a few hours. No matter the length of time in the journey state, the shaman was involved in making sound, whether song, sounds of nature, or chant. Their drumming and the clanging of the metal objects on their costume and on the beater (*orba*) were constant.

On several occasions, the shaman would slump into a chair or on a bed or fall to the ground at the end of the ritual. But whether this was from a deepened journey trance or exhaustion I cannot say with certainty. They were often revived with *araga* (milk brandy) or spring water immediately after collapse.

The people attending the ceremony and the patient were part of the ritual because of the shaman's song. They heard what the shaman experienced and saw some of what the shaman encountered along the way.

Another way of seeing what the shaman encountered, was through their physical movements in this reality. In their journeys they were often flying, stomping, crouching, stalking, attacking unseen spirits, and running. All these movements were acted out for all to see. Rarely did I observe shamans just standing or sitting and beating their drum. Song and movement were actively and equally involved in the Tuvan shamanic ritual.

I was first able to experience this during my first trip to Tuva. Prior to this, I thought I could only sit, stand or lie during the journey even though I felt to do otherwise. It has taken me several years to figure out why I thought this in the first place, and I have decided it was an issue of trust. I had to trust that those feelings, of moving, of singing, what I heard and saw, moving as I did during the journey were correct.

It has always been easy to journey while drumming or rattling myself, and now, moving and singing the journey has become almost necessary in order to do shamanic work. To reach the trance state, to enter non-ordinary reality, to commune with my spirit helpers, to experience the joy, the ecstasy of that connection with Life and bring healing to another now requires (in almost all cases) that I sing, chant the journey, praise my spirit helpers, fight in nonordinary reality those spirits which are causing illness, sing the soul home or onwards and move. There seems to be several repetitive songs for communicating my journey. The contents change, but the structure remains the same.

For some people, singing and moving during a journey does not feel right, but the main thing is to trust your spirit helpers to guide the way in which you shamanize. I

find that when I trust them to sing words, which I do not know in advance, I don't go wrong. I know only that what I sing is what I experience and it gives honour to my own spirit helpers, and reminds me of my own connection with everything around me.

Mongush Kenin-Lopsan told me once that the way the Tuvans have preserved most of their language is from the shamanic *algyshtar*. Here, with the shaman, the people are reminded of their past, both personal and societal, through the *algyshtar*. They are brought back into contact with their language and customs. The shaman works as a healer and reminder - perhaps a keeper of traditional ways.

SHAMANS OF THE SKY, EARTH, WATER AND MIDDLE WORLDS

The sky looms large above me. A deep autumn blue moves to a light blue above dark blue mountains. On the very top of the mountain ridge is a thin line barely visible to the eye. It is whiter and is said to be the boundary between the middle and upper worlds. The Lower World is through any hole.

In Tuva, not every shaman journeys to Upper, Middle or Lower Worlds. Some are *Sky-origin* shamans, some are Earth and Water shamans, some are Middle World shamans. Each has their own special abilities and their own special power source.

The late shamaness in Kungurtuk was a Middle world shaman. She journeyed in the local area; able to see all that was present on the earth. She could visit far-away lands, yet she never ventured into the Sky of Skies or into the Earth.

Shaman Makar-ool in western Tuva journeys to the Skies and the Lower World. His helpers are from a specific class of Sky-beings. He also has helpers from the Lower World, however his main power is from the Sky. Zoya is an Earth Shamaness. Some say Sky shamans are the most powerful, others say Earth.

Most shamans specialize in some area: death work, soul retrieval, difficult illnesses, blessings, etc. The main thing is that they have their areas or *origins* in which they journey. Learning this, I began to look at my own and others' journeys. For some it is easier to be in the Upper World and for others the Lower World or Middle World. Some go between all three. There is no one place better than any other, only different places in the

circle.

DRUM AND ORBA THE SACRED OBJECTS OF TUVAN SHAMANS

All is Alive. The drum has its own spirit. Getting to know the spirit of a drum is a wondrous event. The drumstick-rattle, or orba with its animal fur front-side and metal ringed backside is in part for making divination and drawing the attention of the spirits.

When drums were being collected and destroyed during the times of repression, some shamans used only their orba for rituals. The orba has its own powerful spirit. Each shaman finds out what their drum and orba are used for, such as divination, journeying, extracting, etc and honouring its spirit's decision is part of the knowing.

In some way, I knew this prior to my going to Tuva, but while there, I learned this anew. The spirits must be fed, honoured, used and respected. In Tuva I witnessed the respect that ordinary people and shamans held for the Spirit of some things. The shamaness in Kungurtuk told me that she had not held a drum in 48 years. I offered to bring along my drum the next time I visited. Several weeks later I sat in her small log house watching her prepare the drum before handling it. Having asked her grand-daughter to fetch some white cloth, she laid it over the drum like a cover.

Tözhu Tezhit proceeded to drum, sing and dance on legs which were twisted, partially numb or in pain. The joy which she gave and received that day! She told me that the reason she covered the drum was to not get her helpers and mine mixed-up or confused.

SACRED SMOKE, FEEDING THE SPIRITS

In Tuva, smoke is sacred and an intricate part of everyday life. *Artysh* is a juniper variety which smells and looks more like cedar. A small branch is lit and let to smoke. *Artysh* encircles the patient, his family, yurt or the sacred place. It is the



**I want to travel
all the Universe.
My winged bird,
come here.
Kyk-kyk! Kyk-kyk!**

**I will visit all the lands
My grey horse,
gallop to me
li-khoo, li-khoo.**

**I want to go around
all the Universe
Black crow, come here
Kark-kark! Kark-kark!**

**I want to go up
to the Kurbustug-Sky
My bird that can
transform, come here
Syg-syg! Syg-syg!**

**Song with which shamaness
Suzuk begins her rituals**

purifier, smoke of blessing and prayer sender and also the extractor of disease. The spirits eat just as we eat. Artysh is one of the foods for the spirits. They say that if the spirits are not fed, the ritual may not go well.

Artysh isn't so much for protection because this word is not used. It is for purifying and blessing: to clean away unwanted illness and misfortune. To bless is to give praise and thanksgiving while at the same time send the people happiness, health, many children and many strong and healthy cattle. In Tuva if the family is blessed and purified there is often no need for protection.

THE ROLE OF BLESSINGS

When I returned home, I came with a renewed awareness of the power of blessings. The beauty in wishing or wanting for others good things is ever abiding. Most of the Tuvan shamans spend part of the seance blessing the patient, the family, and their place. Blessings are also made in sacred places for those who are present.

I continue to work with this when seeing people. I receive words from my spirit helpers and have even been given some blessing songs. This word blessing in Finnish is so full of Christian overtones that it is hard for many people to even say the word. I decided to take to heart the advice of one of my friends about reclaiming certain words. Blessing is one of these.

DIVINATION

A large part of a shaman's work is making divinations. By changing their state of consciousness, shamans go to the spirit world and get answers to questions. While in Tuva, I learned that divination is an integral part of every seance. Traditionally, shamans mostly make divinations with forty-one small stones called *khuvaanaku*. These special stones are collected from forty-one



different rivers or other bodies of water which the shaman has crossed, or he has found in the belly of a *capercaillie grouse*. Prior to beginning a shamanic healing seance the shaman pulls out their *khuvaanaku* bag of stones and makes *khuvaanaku*.

I never made a divinatory journey before Tuva. I was inexperienced in this area. In Tuva I learned to make divination through the journey using my drum and rattle. All I could do was pay attention, trust my helpers and learn from them.

TAKING ON THE SPIRIT

As I mentioned above, Tuvan shamans often become their spirit helpers. All this one can see and hear. The shamans only do it if they are spirit-inspired. They know what is happening and can stop at any time only to re-enter where they left off. In the middle of his seance, Makar-

ool stopped, ate some food, and drank some tea and then resumed his shamanizing.

This approach seems to be common with all the shamans in Tuva. It is more than just feeling the power of eagle or bear. It is becoming one with them; of letting their spirit work through one for the purpose of healing. Embodiment is not something which is willed, it comes on its own when one is in a shamanic state and it happens for the sole purpose of healing.

A HEALING CEREMONY

We are in the yard of Dungur which operates a shamanic health center in Kyzyl. I lean over the woman sitting in the chair.

She has come to me because she wants to have a baby. Years of gynecological problems have perhaps left her unable to have a child. She wants to be healed and know if there will be a child in her future.

I begin to drum, sing and dance, calling in my helpers, journeying to meet them. I call on my helpers and we begin our journey into the woman's body. There are places in her which

are clogged. These plugged-up areas stop the flow of life force. I sweep them away, we sing them away. I sense my old woman shaman helper present. She feels a part of me and we suck² and collect, suck and collect. I feel her age, her power, this old shaman woman. She is dressed in a white gown with ribbons hanging from the sleeves.

"More", she says, "more!" We suck and throw, spit all into the drum. We hoist the drum skyward and bang it violently, throwing the disease into the heavens; returning it to the spirit world. Singing all the time; drawing upon Raven, Bear, Eagle and the Snakes. At the same time I am *Seeing* what lies ahead; what needs to be done by her; what is the reason for the problem.

At last the spirits tell me we are done. I take *artysh* and light it. I lay the smoke all over her: looking

through the smoke at her body and checking to see if anything is needed before ending. The smoke doesn't show anything. I begin to drum and sing praises to my helpers, blessings and prayers to them for the help they have given and will give.

I feel the Old Woman and I are the same and yet different. She stands before me and I know we are finished. I feel tired and exhilarated. The patient is smiling and happy. We talk about the journey, the treatment, what guardian spirits came to be with her and what she needs to do next. She thanks me and places several thousand roubles in a bowl nearby for *Dungur*.

This was in 1994. In 1995 I returned to Tuva. This woman sought me out and thanked me - proudly displaying a one month old baby girl. Healing and miracles happen.

COMMON GROUND

In general, awareness, trust and discernment are the keys of disciplined shamanic healing in Tuva. This is, in part, what I brought back to Finland with me. Being aware of the spirits and letting their power flow through me is part of the path.

The spirits are the best teachers, but they are not the only ones; for Life puts many people on the same path, people from whom we can learn. Trusting the spirits to teach me how to work shamanically in Tuva planted so many seeds in me; what I have written here is only a small part.

To know whom I am dealing with in the spirit world and when to speak or be silent about what I encounter is to discern. Also, the essential ethics of shamanic work requires one to be discerning. I often ask myself, is it necessary to speak with the patient of what I know? Is it harmful or helpful according to my spirit helpers?

I am in constant dialogue with my helpers during shamanic healing, asking them about everything in order to make sure it is of the Spirits and not just my head. I trust and act accordingly.

Returning to Finland to teach and work shamanically I find that many people are more impressed if a *real* Tuvan ceremony is performed. Playing Tuvan by imitating their ceremonies is not the way of a shaman nor of a healer. I identify myself partially with them, but I do not have the roots culturally, mentally or physically.

Perhaps my spiritual roots lie there, but this, I feel, does not give me license to imitate.

I have a Tuvan name and I even have an official red membership card of The Society of Tuvan Shamans. In the end it doesn't amount to anything back here at home.



And if I won't play Tuvan then what am I? If I dig into my blood line as far as I can go I find a mix of Swede, German and Welsh. Is that what I am? The only answer I can find at this moment is that, I am what my spirit helpers make me. I work according to how my spirits guide me, while all the time trying to be aware of those around me, under me and above me.

The shamans I met in Tuva are human just like myself. We learned we had similar problems and joys. I found common ground with some of the ways the Tuvan shamans work with soul retrieval, death, power restoration and extraction. I learned that my core-shamanic practice gave me the basic groundwork: the seeds were planted, some compost added and just enough rain and sun at the right times. I also realised that what I learned does not necessarily require a trip to Tuva. The path continues, the learning continues. Remembering that I and the spirits exist and continuously learn to trust one another is part of the ecstasy.

Christiana Harle-Silvennoinen (Buckbee-Lappalainen) has been working shamanically for nine years. She has studied extensively with Jonathan Horwitz (Scandinavian Center for Shamanic Studies) and Heimo Lappalainen. Chris has also worked intensively for several periods with traditional shamans in the Republic of Tuva, Siberia. She is the assistant editor of the book 'Shamanic Songs and Myths of Tuva'

by Mongush Kenin-Lopsan.

Chris is a shamanic counsellor and has been teaching for the past five years. She is currently the chairperson for Shamaaniseura (Shamanic Centre of Finland), a volunteer network and grassroots group for persons interested in shamanism. Chris continues to maintain her contacts in Tuva.

On November 5 - 7 1999 she will teach a course in London called The Shaman's Path in Tuva. This workshop focuses on shamanic healing work inspired by what she has learned from Tuvan Shamans.

For more information on this course contact Kathy Fried, 29 Chambers Lane, London. NW10 2RJ. Tel: 0181 459 3028

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Part of the section on Song and dance was first published in Tiedote, the newsletter of the Shamanic Center in Finland, but this has been greatly extended and enlarged.

Notes:

- 1 : *In the Arms of Buddha and the Drum, a film on Tuva life directed by Jouko Aaltonen.*
- 2 : *For more information on 'sucking medicine' and shamanic extraction see Sacred Hoop issue 22.*

PHOTOS:

Page 8: Main photo - Shamans sing and drum on Bear Mountain. Inset Christiana Harle-Silvennoinen.

Page 9: Sacred Tree shrine with offerings.

Page 10 and 11: shaman in fringed hat singing with drum.

Page 12: Top - Fire offering in the mountains. Bottom - Tözhu Tezhit plays the author's drum while her granddaughter, perhaps to become a shaman herself one day, watches.

Page 13: Birch Bark Shaman by artist Valeri Elizarov with the spirit animals of bear, eagle and snake. The word TbiBA means Tuva.

The shamanic songs are taken from the book 'Shamanic Songs and Myths of Tuva' by Mongush B. Kenin-Lopsan. Published by Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest and the International Society for Trans-Oceanic Research, Los Angeles, 1997.