

Pregnant with the Drum

Christiana Harle



Above:
Christiana and
Tanja with some
of the drums
'born' with a
group

A drum is alive and has a spirit. When I make a drum I am responsible for this being and this being is responsible for me. My own drum is a physical piece of evidence of my own sacred marriage with spirit.

She - my drum - helps me to make divination, heal, unmake, release, bind, separate. Together the spirits and I create and destroy. In Tuva they say a shaman is nothing without a drum.

Not all drums are meant for shamanic healing. Drums have

many roles in many different hands. In my understanding of shaman-hood, if you hold and use a drum it is for shamanic healing. One has a sacred contract with the spirits, which you are showing to the world by your use of the drum.

For the past twenty-two years, I have undertaken a journey with people which I call 'drum birthing.' This journey is about bringing that which is Spirit, as instructed or guided by our spirit helpers, into this reality.

A person will be pregnant with their drum. They may have been carrying this desire to make a drum for a long time, for years even, or the need to birth a drum could be a recent realisation. We call the process 'birthing' because it is about being in the borderlands between 'spirit' and 'matter,' it is about being on the edge - having one foot in each realm

For this work, I use the natural materials of timber and animal skin; the land; midwives; community; shamanic journeying; an animist worldview that all is alive and has a spirit, and that all is connected.

Drum-birthing is about doing the best we can do to bring into being a healing drum which is as individual and beautiful as the person birthing. The drum is awakened and blessed when brought into the world.

My relationship with the drum began soon after I participated in a shaman's journey - basic workshop, taught by Jonathan Horwitz and Heimo Lappalainen in 1991. These two were, at that time, teaching for the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in Scandinavia and Finland.

They were my introduction to shamanic journeying, and my first drumming experience with them is still strong in my heart. It set my feet straight on the shamanistic-animistic path I still walk upon; but, that is a whole other story for another time.

Back then, Remo synthetic drums were very much in use in Finland: as no matter if the temperature was -30C or +30C, they still sounded.

My Remo drum was sweet to play; sweet to listen to, sweet to sing with, and sweet to work with. This was the drum which travelled with me to Tuva (Tyva) in 1994 when I made my first visit there to return the late Heimo's ashes, as well as continue a joint project there with some of the Xam/Xamnar (shamans) and stone carvers.

This journey also became the turning point for my walk with Spirit and an initiation into the Tuvan worldview and ways of healing through song and the drum.

There I learned about drums and about shamanic healing - for lack of a better word - from my Tuvan teachers. I deepened into how a drum is alive, has a spirit, and about how the relationship between shaman and drum is an active and intimate relationship, much like a marriage between two persons.

When one of my Tuvan Xamnar teachers Tözhü Teschit Lopsanovna (1912-2003) took my Remo drum and covered it with a white gauze cloth, so that our spirit helpers would not get mixed up, or transfer to each other, I understood on a completely new level the respect

and honouring of spirit of the drum.

I felt I had come home, for singing has always been present in my life, even since childhood. But the drum took me - and my song - to a new, much deeper place. So, I learned to work with my drum, and my voice, and they spread like a swollen river into my healing work and daily life.

In Tuva I heard stories about, and witnessed the power of, drums through their use. The power to create and destroy; power to cause harm and heal; to chase away illness; to bring in blessings and purify all through the power of voice and drum combined. My Judaeo-Christian, holy-roller, esoteric, classical voice and music therapy, church-singing upbringing moved aside willingly!

I have heard lots of stories about shamans and their drums and read old stories, recorded by anthropologists and ethnographers. Many of these spoke of shaman's drums falling from the sky, or of them being made by the shaman's community. Sometimes a drum was found in the forest; sometimes it took years to be made - each part



being collected, or made, over a shaman's whole apprenticeship - which may take years.

Above: the late Tuvan shaman Tözhü Teschit Lopsanovna with the author's Remo drum covered with a white cloth so that the spirit helpers won't get mixed up, or transfer to each other

Carrying a healing drum is a responsibility. It is as if you have a child to raise, yet you are also the child yourself, and the drum is your parent. It is a responsibility, a commitment, one which is 'until death do you part.'

Traditionally, in Tuva, a shaman would have only one drum and they would use it for their whole lifetime. I do not have many shaman drums: one is my partner, another is for others to use. It is much work to keep them fed and alive.

In the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm there are some old Sápmi [Sámi] shaman's drums taken from Finland, and if you look closely at them, you will see some of them have been repaired: a few stitches to close a tear here, a small patch of reindeer skin to cover a hole there. From this evidence, I assume they were cared for and loved, and in Tuva it was the same: one drum to one shaman.

Left: Christiana works uses her drum with a birthing group in Finland

There is a rich tradition of making shamanic healing drums, and our consumer-led and immediate gratification ways simply lack such tradition. The journey to reclaim part of the Finnish tradition began when we began shamanic healing drum-birthing in Finland.

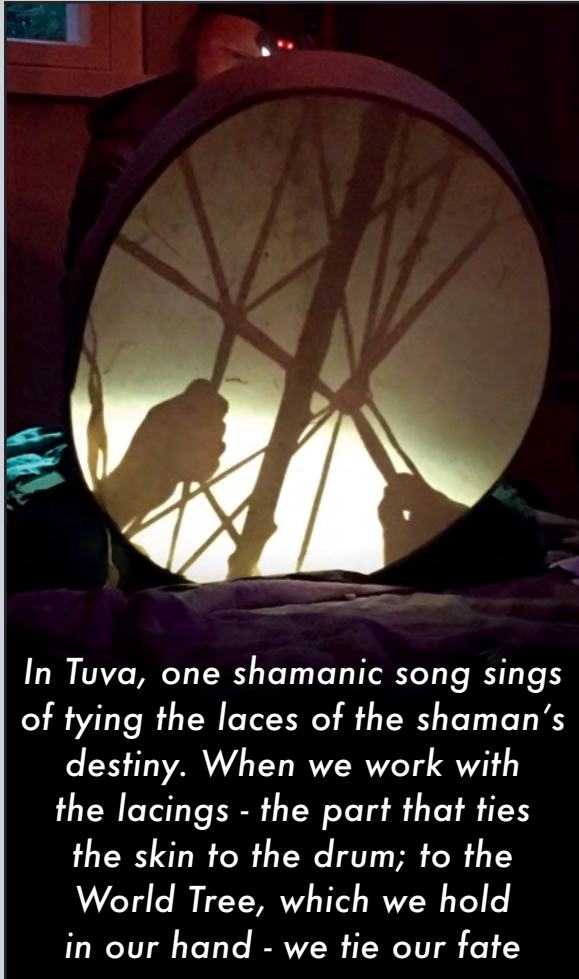
THE CALL TO BIRTH DRUMS

It was back in the 1990s that my dear friend Jaana Kouri and I were given a similar dream: helping people make and birth their own drums with sacred Spirit.

Our inspiration came during a workshop which I had organised on

Left: preparing the altar during a new drum





In Tuva, one shamanic song sings of tying the laces of the shaman's destiny. When we work with the lacings - the part that ties the skin to the drum; to the World Tree, which we hold in our hand - we tie our fate

behalf of Annette Høst. Her teachings were of the seiðr¹, working with Nature's and womens' cycles and renewing old earth wisdom.

Jaana and I both received a teaching from the spirits of the land about reclaiming past knowledge and re-inspiring our own culture. We both realised that language, stories and the ways of drum handcrafting were the paths we should tread in order to bring this vision forwards.

How could we, in this day and age of cultural appropriation, consumerism and competition be *välittäjä*? As *välittäjä* allow *voima*, or power, energy flow through us. How could we assist others to learn this skill of the physical act of creating and birthing shamanic healing drums as guided by direct intervention with the spirit teachers.

A few years ago Jaana returned to the world of academia (Spirit guided!) to focus on her university path, whilst I continued with the drum-birthing process. A former

apprentice of Jaana's and mine, Tanja Kangas, co-leads now. She was apprenticed to this work for twelve years.

One day I will stop doing this work, stop being a midwife in the 'birthing' of drums but for now Tanja and I work with people together.

RECLAIMING AND RE-INSPIRING

There is much to tell of our reclaiming and being re-inspired, however I share only a small part.

To reclaim and re-inspire, Jaana and I made journeys to our spirit teachers. We sat with Mother Earth, sea, lakes and ponds, asking for vision and guidance. Our mutual interest in language, stories, songs, hand-craft, and a living connection with the spirit helpers brought in the vision.

Giving birth speaks of being pregnant - you can't give birth without a pregnancy first. It speaks of fecundity, of being fertile, and of bringing 'that which is hidden' into being. Think of the process of making a baby: an egg, semen, and a fertile receptacle - the womb - are required. Parthenogenesis is also very allowed! Many of the Fenno-Ugric (Finland/Karelia being part of that group) stories and songs have the beginning of the world as coming from song, breath, word or an egg.

With the making of physical babies, we all have a fairly clear vision of what each of those things are, but even then, we do not know really what we are birthing; what kind of being - what child - will arrive? We may have our dreams and expectations, but we also have uncertainty.

All birth is like this, whether it is a physical baby, a painting, a piece of music, a new business or a healing drum. It all begins with that egg, a dream, a desire, a passion, for a voice to communicate with.

For some this is a dream of a drum for healing others, for others it is a different dream. Some people go away at the end of the process with a drum that has a totally different intention than doing healing work for other people or places - perhaps the drum is about healing themselves.

A person will be pregnant with their drum, and this forms a link to

a central pathway to honour our past traditions in Finland: the tradition of sauna.

Sauna is found all over the world by different names and with varying customs and physical forms. Sweatlodge of the First Nations of Turtle Island seem to be the most popularly known form, and nowadays have been borrowed by other peoples in other places. In Finland sauna has been a central part of the sacred and archaic culture for a very, very long time.

It is said that sauna was the first building constructed when someone arrived to a new place. This is where they lived while building a house. Sauna was made of logs and, or turf, peat, even covered pits in the earth, or poles covered with skins. Most common are the log variety.

Sauna was also the place for giving birth, and even up until the 1970s there were still people being born in them. It is the place for doing healing, for doing magical charm work, for bathing and also washing the dead. It is a holy place, with its own sacred rules, and has many different guardian-like spirits.

This is the place where transformation and alchemy are visible as wood is burned for fire, fire heats stones and water is poured on them to create steam. Sauna is the place where we climb the 'hill of pain,' it is the place for our prayers to be given and also answered; the place for our physical healing to be resolved; for our hurt hearts to be soothed; for purification; celebration; initiation and weeping the pain of change. It is, for us, a womb.

In Finnish, we also speak of *seppä* - the smith - who is found in the old rune songs and stories of Karelia². *Seppä* is the transformer, working with stone and metal, fire, heat, steam, water and air. As the *seppä* gets hot, so does the *tietäjä* or 'the one who knows,' for we have references to the healers getting hot in the old stories and rune songs.

Both the *seppä* and the *tietäjä* are being a *välittäjä* - the broker, the bargainer, the negotiator - between Spirit and the people, or Spirit and form, in the stories and songs.

We are able to honour our ancestors by having our sauna womb

available during the drum birthing. We reclaimed the *seppä*, and we get 'hot' in our work, reclaiming its use in our drum birthing.

BIRTH IS OF WATER AND FIRE

We speak of 'birthing' because it is about being in the borderlands between 'spirit and matter,' it is about being on the edge - being in both realms at the same time.

People need to generate a connection between their own spirit helpers, and the spirits of nature, in order to bring forth a healing drum. How can we connect and receive guidance from our helpers and also bring this information into this reality?

We are the *välittäjä*; the go-betweens, the hollow-bones, the conduits for the spirits to work through when doing healing work.

We immerse ourselves in the energy of Creator - *Luoja*: creation and destruction, cooperating with spirits of nature - *luonto*, our own nature - *luonto* also, spirit helpers - and with one another - in order to receive creative eggs or seeds and plant them continuously in our womb - *kohtu*; weaving knots of our new fate - *kohtalo*, and meet ourselves - *kohdata* into this new path. This is the sacrum or core of birthing a sacred healing drum.

For a full week we guide a small group given over to each birthing a shamanic healing drum. This was our compromise between tradition and modern life.

At the beginning, Tanja and I set up an altar in the centre of our work space, created from our first journey to the spirits. We make that journey to learn about the coming week together, to learn about our time, and journey with the other people gathered.

We ask for strength and for power for the coming week ahead. We give thanks for those arriving. We seek vision of what is coming forward and for blessing upon all. We lay all this out on the altar as a reminder to us. This gives birth to our red thread for the week.

THE GREATEST OF MOTHERS

Having people gather in circle for an extended period of time allows us to guide each person into a deep connection with the spirits of nature, the spirits of the elements, and with their own spirit helpers. Their spirits guide every aspect of

We have a nice, cool lake, and the 'bones' - the wooden frame boards - are in the water. People undress and go, one by one, into the birthwaters and find one of the boards. They swim, paddle or float with their bones, until they feel ready to arise, dress and return to the land, bringing their boards with them



The lake in which the 'bones' float



Christiana teaches about the bending of the 'bones'

Bending the wooden board to form the drum frame is a communal event; it requires a team effort, it is not a job that can easily be done by oneself. Bending is when the baby first starts to be born, and everyone in the circle are supporters of this. Bending is when the 'bones' of the shaman are re-joined, and everyone is involved. We work as midwives for one another

putting the drum together.

There are many teaching stories about places of power and the 'World Tree,' or 'Centre of the World.' People would go to find their 'power place' in nature for the birthing process, this is a place where they feel a connection to the World Tree, the sacred 'centre of everything'.

The idea of the World Tree is found throughout the world, and is often seen in paintings on the front of a shaman's drum; as well as sometimes being found

Below: bending and clamping the freshly bent drum hoop



represented on the inside of a drum - the part that faces the shaman, the spirit, or 'god' side.

Sometimes people get instructions that the World Tree needs to be brought into their drum physically. Perhaps it is the part they hold, or it may be woven and tied-in in some other way, or drawn.

This connecting power place is where each person will return to constantly during the whole drum birthing process. Sometimes it is a place they will spend a night sitting out with nature, in order to seek an answer³ to a question they have.

We have sacred practices for each part of the drum's construction: the frame, the skin, the lacings and the finished drum's decoration.

There are sacred ways to choose the skin and the wooden board, which will become the frame, just as there are for bending that board, for joining its head and tail to make the shape of the drum's frame. There are sacred ways for attaching and lacing the skin to the frame also.

All of these are done with the constant contact of a person's spirit helpers, with song, and with their partner midwife - *kättilö*, with the group community, and if needed Tanja or myself too - and all with contact with their power place, out in nature,

When people come and ask how, or what to do, we ask them if they have asked their helpers. The mantra of the week is "Go ask your spirit helpers before you come to us."

We have different practices to help people be in contact with their spirit helpers. In that way, people learn to walk both in this physical world and the spirit world, actively at the same time, weaving the two worlds together to aid the birthing process.

Nothing is ever pre-ordained. Birthers learn to follow the clues their helpers give, and this is key to birthing a healing shaman's drum. Often one of the most difficult teachings for some is just allowing this red thread to form and for them to follow it. We do our best to support and assist, so that the visions are brought into this reality.

We give examples of this sacred weaving in language and story - mostly from Finland and Tuva - as

a way to help explain the different parts of the drum and the basic way all the parts are put together.

A central part is connecting to our Mother Earth and the energy of the cauldron, the iron pot full of possibility, full of flame, full of creation energy. This is where the raw energy arises and it is not from the arms.

Physically, we refer to it as *vitun voima*, and we reclaim the old meaning in Finnish: the energy from the hips, womb, cervix, the hundreds of ligaments and muscles in, and around, the female genitalia. And yes, men can connect with this energy also in themselves.

Some people try and use their arm strength - without a connection to their womb space - and the results are torn skins, frames that crack when they wouldn't have, and getting more tired and frustrated. That is all part of their teaching.

Drum birthing takes place in the region of birthing power.

We speak of 'bones' - the drum's frame - and of 'skin;' and of 'laces'. These are all parts of our fate, and we are tied to our fate by our laces, and all of these come forth from water.

As I said before, 'the birth is of water and fire,' but first of all, people have to 'find the bones.'

When we were born, we all swam in the birth waters of our mothers, and so we swim in the birth waters once again, as part of the birthing process of our drums.

We arrange a sacred walk with that specific intention - a walk to find 'the bones.' People set off into the forest, down wild paths, and at the end of the walk they come to the birth waters, just like in the pregnant belly.

We almost always have a body of water for the bones - the wooden frame boards - where they float.

So, people undress, and they go into the birth waters of the bones and find, or choose, one of the boards within them. They swim, paddle or float with their bones, until they feel ready to arise, dress and return to the land, bringing their boards with them.

Bending the wooden board to form the drum frame is a communal event. It is not a job that

is meant to be completed by oneself. Bending is when the baby first starts to be born and is crowning and everyone in the circle are supporters of this. Bending is when the frame - the bones - of the shaman are joined. Shapes vary, and speak to the red thread of their birth story. We have never lost a baby!

The skin is the face we show to the world. The inside of the skin with its fat and fascia, perhaps still present, is part of the god-side: the side the shaman speaks and sings with, where the secrets are kept. We arrange the choosing of skins, so it is directly connected to Spirit and each person's spirit helpers.

Stretching the skin and attaching it to the bones is pair work between birther and midwife. Sometimes even more.

In Tuva, one shamanic song sings of 'tying the laces of a shaman destiny.'

When we work with the drum's laces - the part that ties the drum skin to the drum frame - they tie us to the World Tree, which we hold in our hand as we play the drum. When we work with the laces, we tie our fate.

And we sing... our birth songs, our spirit songs, folk songs, children's songs, all songs which arise, that strengthen and empower, for working all day and sometimes in to the late dark-less night.

I find that communal drum birthing requires learning about boundaries. Imagine ten people scattered around in a large area outdoors - some sitting close to each other, others set apart.

Some are singing to their frames as they whittle, saw and smooth them, while others are quieter than quiet. Some people talk to their frames; some sit and rattle their rattles whilst holding their frame.

Some people have never held a sharp knife before, or used a hand drill which does not run on electricity.

Some people disappear, going to their power place to find out what is next in the process to work the frame.

Some people tell others to leave them alone, and some learn to ask others for help - which might be one



Hot water is poured over the lake soaked boards to help them bend



Bending the boards around a former to help give them shape



The freshly bent drum hoop is clamped so the two ends can be joined



Above: using a skin lace to tie the drum skin the completed frame

of the hardest things for them to do. And when asked, some learn to say "No," and remain focused on their own process - not being available to solve everyone's problems.

And then, sometimes, when they are at almost the end of putting their drum together, they come to understand - or get told by the spirits - that their drum is not for healing other people, it is for healing themselves. The spirit of the drum decides, and it lets the person know.

**Oh! My many-coloured drum
You who stand in the forward corner!
Oh! My merry and painted drum,
You who stand here!
Let your shoulder and neck be strong.
Hark, oh hark my horse - You!
Female maral deer!
Hark, oh hark my horse - you bear!
Hark, oh hark! You! Bear!**

Tuvan algysh [shaman's song]

All the shamanic journeys people make are important and all of them reveal an aspect of the spirit of their drum which is important for them to understand (or begin to).

The final journey which everyone makes is to meet the spirit of their drum.

This is probably the part of the whole process I cannot emphasise the importance of enough. It is vitally important to know the spirit of your drum, who they are, how to honour them; how are they to be worked with; for what reason and when; what offerings need to be given to them; can other people

hold or play them - or are they for the birther's hands only?

They say in Tuva that if the drum holder (in Tyva's instance this means shaman) doesn't take care of - doesn't honour - their drum, the spirit of that drum can turn around and bite you. What that means, is that one needs to care, co-operate and use a drum respectfully, because the drum is alive, and so, if you are not careful, drum's spirit can turn around and do you harm - prevent good things happening to you.

AWAKENING AND ENLIVENING

And then, finally, we come to the important task of waking up and blessing the newly made drum. We join in community - all of us in circle - and we put on our finery and we make ceremony.

Each year the ceremony differs because each year we contact our spirit helpers and ask about the blessing ceremony. As each group of people has been different, so the ceremony has been different.

We ask, 'What was the 'red thread' during the week?' 'What events, nature spirits or phrases around the dinner table are important for the ceremony with this circle?' 'What should it look like?' 'Who wants to be present, remembered, honoured?'

Then Tanja and I sit and weave our answers together, and in this way, we honour our spirit helpers; the spirits of the place where we are; the ancestors; the group; and all the drum spirits as well as each other.

We feel that we honour the making of the drums in the best way possible, and I also think we work in quite a traditional way, considering the times we live in. A week is good, but ten days would be even better.

We need more drum carriers - we need more healing drums. All the drums people make with us are healing drums, and some - but not all - of these are shaman's drums too.

To do shamanic healing work is having a grounding connection to your spirit helpers, rooted in the earth, with your hands in the heavens, and with a constant flow going between here and there which is brought back to your people and land.

This flow directs your hands to create. It is one of the ways for the

spirits to manifest; it is a way to bring new ways into the world, new inventions even.

The sacred is present when we call it in, be aware of its presence in every action, as every act is a prayer, and every drum is a voice of prayer, when we play it.

Making a drum is a journey into the raw energy of the creative. It is the energy of passion, of joyful lust, of heat and of fire. It is a joining in with that creative spark, and a way to keep it smouldering, so that it is ever present in our lives.

When we work and eat in community there is always much laughter, and many tears, about how everything in drum-birthing is a reflection of life - basic, life-making and life-giving - fecundity, sensual, sexual, nutrition-giving, and taking Life....

Touching the sacred, is focusing the energy of our ordinary reality time, with the time continuum of our spirit helpers - mixed with a heaping of intention - so as to produce a flow, which is so focused, that the time of ordinary reality disappears, and we are then enveloped in their time.

Having a baby is a pretty proud moment; it is amazing, it is awe inspiring, it is an essence of profundity. Birthing a sacred drum is the same.

Many different 'folk' join in, and many have it on their minds to make a 'shaman's drum' - and some of them do, but some of them don't, for something else wanted to be born to them. It sounds like a natural pregnancy doesn't it?

People often tell me afterwards that it was the hardest and most wonderful thing they had ever done. They tell me that they are in love with their drums.

We had a group of theatre people come and make drums once - playwrights and actors - people who wanted to make drums to help them better understand the energy of creativity involved. Maybe they wanted to have a drum that could be used in their performance.

They were surprised at how each drum was so alive, and with a spirit, and some drums said straight: "I am not to be used for performances, make another." The



Left and below:
newly born drums

week-long process gave them a better sense of the project they were working on.

One woman made a drum which was for a child. Her birth story was all about healing and working with children in schools. Then she came along a second time, and a drum was born for mourning and lamenting of her dead grandchild.

Another found out why her drum was born with five sides. She had pre-determined that her drum was to be swift, smooth, and round when she was bending her bones, but it wasn't to be. The summation of her spirit helpers' teachings she had received by the last day and on the last day was literally a layered upon layer teaching of a five-sided shield of service to spirits of land and community. It was a big, beautiful drum to see and hear, with teachings in every second of her working with her baby.

Birthing a drum is finding out that the inside is the outside, that the outside is the inside. It is about finding out who is leading whom, and who is following; and when. It is walking together between the worlds and bringing forth.

Christiana Harle - a shamanic healer - holds degrees as a music therapist, Inspiraktiva Breathwork therapist, beekeeper and cidemaker, with a diploma in women's consciousness, as well as being a shamanic drum-birther. She has been working in the field of shamanic healing for almost thirty years. Her path is woven with land and song, through Tuvan shamanic initiation, with deepening paths into the spirit of song: the keener, the healer, the birther, the

journey-er, the stinger. Christiana is passionate about supporting and guiding people to find their path, heal, remember and re-connect with Mother Earth and all beings. She lives in Ruotsinpyhtää, southeast Finland. Chrissy is currently working on a book about shamanic healing drum-birthing with Tanja and Jaana.

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Workshops and ceremony offerings are posted on Facebook most regularly.

NOTES:

- 1: Read articles by Annette Høst at www.shamanism.dk/library.htm
- 2: K(C)arelia is the geographical region lying on either side Finnish and Russian borders, and may include Fenno-Ingrians. The Karelians are an indigenous group with their own language and culture. Religiously, Orthodox Christianity, as well as the Lutheran religion are mixed with earth-based worldview in the region. During the Second World War, Finland absorbed around 500,000 evacuees when new borders were forced upon Finland. Some say about half of the Finnish population can

claim Karelian roots currently. The Finnish Folk Archives contain rune songs (a poetic form), charm songs, laments, and healing songs - the longest of which is over 300 lines in length.

3: Sitting out in nature for vision: *ulko-istuiminen*. In Finnish we often say *menee metsään* [go to the forest], because that is where the wisdom, comfort, guidance and healing happens. There is also an expression: *metsään peitto* [under the blanket of forest], which might mean that anything can happen, so beware... one might just 'transform'.

Many of the images in this article are taken from the film 'Christiana Harle: 'Birthing a Drum' by Ben Cole Cinematography. Sacred Hoop Magazine is grateful to Ben for allowing his images to be used here. The film can be seen: www.vimeo.com/234108752

www.bencolecinematography.com

Bottom: a drum birthing circle sits with their freshly made drums

