

Tuva, Land of Eagles—The Foundation's 1993 Expedition to Tuva

By Bill Brunton

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During a search for possible Living Treasures of Shamanism in the Central Asian republic of Tuva two years ago, Foundation Field Associate Heimo Lappalainen discovered that the prior Communist rule there had outlawed and almost destroyed shamanism, once the proud and flourishing heritage of the Tuvan peoples. Heimo also found that although the number of Tuvan shamans had radically diminished under Soviet rule, now many Tuvans wished to see shamanism restored to their daily lives.

Heimo reviewed the situation with me, and we agreed that he should approach the President of Tuva to learn if there was official interest in having the Foundation help provide encouragement for the revival of shamanism there. He subsequently met with the President, and they agreed that in late June and early July 1993 the Republic of Tuva and the Foundation for Shamanic Studies would co-sponsor a conference as the cooperative vehicle for the rehabilitation of shamanism. The conference was to be officially labeled "scientific," but with the recognition that participants from both sides would primarily be persons who practiced shamanism as well as studied it.

I had hoped to lead the Foundation group and participate in healing work and other collaboration with Tuvan shamans, but prior obligations prevented me from going. The formal leadership of the expedition devolved upon Field Associates Director Bill Brunton, with the important assistance of Heimo Lappalainen. The other participants in the expedition were: FSS Board members Norman Benzie and Mo Maxfield; Field Associates Larry Peters and Tom and Tamia Anderson; and from the Austrian branch of the Foundation, Faculty Member Paul Uccusic, Roswitha Uccusic, and Gabriele Weiss. Accounts of their experiences are included in the following article by Bill Brunton.

Although the Foundation's team was in Tuva for only ten days, its impact was even more than had been hoped. Perhaps it is sufficient simply to note that on the day preceding the departure of the Foundation team, the President of Tuva delayed his own flight to Moscow in order to consult with team members concerning the relative roles of shamanism and Buddhism. He thereupon publicly declared that both would be equally respected in the modern Tuvan Republic.

The work of the Foundation in helping to revive shamanism in Tuva is planned to continue this summer with an expedition headed by Paul Uccusic. Meanwhile, we may have identified a Tuvan who should be honored as a Living Treasure of Shamanism.

I thank the Foundation's members and donors whose support is essential to such achievements as we work together to help restore shamanism to the Planet.

—Michael Harner

Tuva, Land of Eagles

During the summer of 1993 the Foundation responded to an invitation by the President of Tuva and scholars and shamans from that tiny mountainous country by sending a delegation of ten to attend Tuva's first international conference on shamanism. We were assured that we also would be able to meet and work with local shamans and be taken into the countryside. There, we would meet ordinary Tuvans living in yurts and tending livestock in a picturesque landscape. We were told that there is great interest in reviving shamanism, now that the Communists are no longer in power.

What happened as a result of that invitation is reported in the following pages in the words of those who were there. We hope these words bring you close to the experience of being in this exotic place at the center of Asia as we do this important work.

There is a land called Tuva in the center of Asia where the sight of many soaring eagles wheeling just overhead is not exceptional and where crystal-clear streams rush from surrounding mountains to form one of Siberia's most mighty rivers, the Yenisei. It is a land of taiga forest, high mountains and rolling steppe. The air is so clear that fair-skinned people protect themselves from direct sunlight. Grassy, undulating terrain gives way to sweeping valleys and hills. Their soft emerald glow is dotted here and there by the camps of herdsman and their families, wisps of white smoke rising from the wood stove in each yurt. Rounding a bend or cresting a hill may suddenly reveal a majestic, craggy mountain jutting from a nearly flat valley floor, such as the sacred Bear Mountain, Khaiyakan. Or, the incredible panorama of a river valley may burst into view with such suddenness that one catches their breath for a moment. There is also the blight of industrial pollution here like an open-pit asbestos mine that looms over a small city in western Tuva; the result of Soviet interests in the area.

Roads and Towns

A narrow two-lane road connects the capital, Kyzyl, with communities to the west, north, and south. But, away from this main artery there are few roads that are more than a track. Virtually the entire eastern half of the country is without roads, access being along rivers or by air in vintage radial-engine biplanes. Except for Kyzyl, with a population in 1989 of 153,000, communities are small. They are typical Russian-style settlements with numerous concrete apartment buildings. Small, unpainted wooden houses with board-fenced yards, a few shops, and some public buildings such as a theater or cultural center are also typical. Kyzyl, with the National Theater and central government, has the most impressive buildings. It also has a monument to the center of Asia, located on the bank of the Yenisei River. Buddhist temples are being rebuilt now that the Soviet period has ended. The current population of this 67,000 square mile country is around 350,000, two-thirds of which is ethnically Tuvan (the rest being mostly Russian). Most Tuvans live in cities, towns and villages.

An Ancient Land

Tuva's cultural history is both rich and deep. It is one that stretches from the Old Stone Age through modern times, involving European and Asian populations. Many peoples comprise the contemporary Tuvan population, and their culture is a composite one blended from their various tribal roots. The predominating language and culture of pre-Soviet Tuva derive from Turkic peoples, mostly pastoral nomads who herded flocks of sheep, cattle, goats, camels (in the south) and yaks (at higher elevations). Horses are the very capable small Asian breed common to this part of the world. Tuvans lived in felt-covered yurts (round structures with conical roofs) which they moved four times each year as they shifted to fresh pastures. In the eastern part of the country, particularly in the northern taiga forests, reindeer breeding and hunting were the mainstays of the economy. A sensitivity for, and deep understanding of, nature was characteristic of Tuvans, who wore up-turned shoes so that they might walk lightly on the earth. Their respect for nature even extended to a reluctance to pick wild flowers. Tillage, though known for much of their history, was always incidental to their economy.

Shamans and Spirits

A significant part of Tuvan respect for nature is expressed through shamanic traditions. All of nature is considered sacred, the fabric of their world view being woven in the sacred thread of their myths. Here, features of the landscape and the creatures inhabiting it are settings and characters in great stories that

describe and explain the world. Principal places and characters of this mythic and natural world are Tuva's nine sacred springs, nine sacred mountains, and nine sacred celestial objects; the Sun, Moon and seven stars of the "Great Bear" (the Big Dipper). There are dragons in the sky, sirens who inhabit the steppe, and a sacred flower that has the power to hold strangers together in marriage. Each place in nature has its special spiritual inhabitants. This spiritual aspect of nature is equally as important to Tuvans as are physical attributes. It requires attention from people who are sensitive to, and trained in, relating to this side of nature. These people are the shamans.

The shamans of pre-Soviet Tuva were healers, diviners, and conductors of ritual necessary for Tuvan life. Both men and women became shamans after they were visited with the "shaman's sickness." Often, a shaman interpreted this as invasion by the spirit of a dead shaman. This invading Being, wanted the living person to become a shaman. The onset of this illness was commonly early in life, but also occurred in people more than 40 years of age. If the person ignored the calling, continued sickness or even death occurred. The illness frequently manifested itself as fainting spells, memory loss, or convulsions. Heeding the call resulted in a complete remission of symptoms.

The shamanic vocation often had an hereditary aspect in Tuva, as in much of the rest of Siberia. Relatives watched children carefully for the appearance of characteristics that signaled a new shaman. Training under an existing shaman was necessary, as was a drum, garment, and feather headdress. Relatives were responsible for making the new shaman's equipment. There was a ceremony of investment for the new shaman during which relatives enlivened the new drum (the shaman's horse) by beating it.

Shamans were central to Tuvan society. Not only did they represent their kin and work for them spiritually, but they were respected repositories of important knowledge. They conducted necessary rituals such as the yearly "fire ceremony" and rituals to bless the land and promote fertility. Tuvan shamanic ceremony was quite colorful, with shamans reciting long verses, dancing, and singing to the accompaniment of their drums. They also employed a jew's harp in their performances. Healing work included extraction, removing harmful spirits from places, purification, and soul work involving the transition at death. Their garments were knee-length shirts, upon which were sewn long streamers that represented their spirit helpers (called "snakes"), bells and rods of metal, and metal effigies. Besides their symbolic value, costume decorations moved with the dancing shaman, producing auditory and visual stimulation.

Secrecy, independence, and competition also characterized Tuvan shamans. They were each unique in the way they worked and typically worked alone. Like tribal shamans in other places, they sometimes engaged in competitive struggles with each other.

Shamans were considered very special people, being revered and feared at the same time. When they died, they were not interred like ordinary people, but were placed in open wooden sarcophaguses elevated above the ground by four posts. Here, their bodies lay exposed to the elements while their spirits continued to serve their people. That servitude was, however, frustrated by the forces of history. The living and dead shamans would have to deal with an ambitious state to the north, called Russia.

The Russian Bear

Russian interests in Tuva began early in the 17th Century, but amounted to little until late in the 19th. Increasing numbers of Russian settlers and commercial interests eventually led to annexations in 1914 (Czarist) and 1944 (Soviet). Before this, little Tuva had experienced political domination from both Mongolia and China. While these latter masters created feudal systems that exploited their Tuvan

vassals, the Russians initially had only commercial interests. As difficult as these early exploitations were on the Tuvans, they were permitted to remain Tuva, culturally, including the presence of, and reliance on, shamans. The Soviet approach was to transform Tuva. A major goal of this transformation was to eliminate shamanism and Lamaism (a Tibetan form of Buddhism). To this end the Soviet communists were ruthless and thorough. Estimates of the number of shamans imprisoned and/or put to death runs from a few hundred to thousands. Whatever the actual number, the impact on Tuvans was brutal. No family was left untouched by this painful excision. The few remaining shamans either quit working altogether, or practiced secretly, always fearful that they would be discovered. It was during this time that cloth flags replaced drums for spirit extraction work — they did not make any noise that would reveal a shaman at work.

The Soviet period lasted long enough to create a missing generation of shamans. People remember the shamans. There are many stories told about them and their feats of power and healing. These victims of Soviet ethnocentrism are still mourned. People still remember the details of a song sung by one, or a ritual performed by another. The few who survived are now old — in their seventies or eighties. Some of these old shamans have put on a newly-made shaman's garment and picked up a drum (often from a museum). They are performing rituals again and are doing healing work. Shamans who never quit continue their healing work today. There are some new ones: young women who are learning from the old ones and from psychic institutes in places like Moscow — an irony. They try to bridge the enormous gap hacked in their culture by outsiders who tried to eliminate what they thought to be backward customs that frustrated their own idea of "progress," with a socialist twist.

Modern Tuva

Modern Tuvan culture is a blend of elements from the older pattern and that introduced by the Soviets. In Kyzyl and the larger towns Tuvans dress like Westerners, watch television, drive cars or ride in packed Russian buses, etc. But, in the countryside, extended families consisting of grandparents, parents, and children live in yurts without electricity and draw their water from a nearby stream. Here, nature is close at hand; it can be heard, smelled and seen in every moment. One has the sense that if the world economy collapsed, this rural Tuvan pastoral life would continue with only the inconvenience borne of having grown used to foreign amenities.

Here in this rural world of yurts, grass and livestock, as well as in the cities and smaller communities of Tuva, there is a strong longing for a new identity that is an old identity. Tuvans, like other tribal peoples of Siberia, want to be who they are. As in other places in Siberia, this means that they want their spiritual lives restored. In Tuva this vital link to themselves and their world is shamanism blended with Lamaist Buddhism. It was this pressing interest on the part of Tuvans that led to the Foundation expedition to Tuva in the summer of 1993.

An Expedition to Tuva

On his 1992 field trip to Tuva, Heimo Lappalainen, Finnish anthropologist, film maker, and Foundation Field Associate, had the opportunity to discuss the religious future of Tuva with its President, Oorzhak Sherig-Ool. This conversation and others with interested Tuvans eventually led to an invitation to the Foundation for Shamanic Studies to visit Tuva for the purpose of holding a joint scientific conference on shamanism. In a sense, the expedition began with those conversations and other work Heimo did for several years in faraway Tuva. Heimo's experience in conceptualizing and helping to organize the conference and expedition shows how important Field Associates are to the Foundation's commitment to respond creatively to the needs of peoples whose shamanic traditions are in jeopardy. Here, in his own words, is what that beginning was like:

In October 1992 I made my fourth field trip to Tuva, partly sponsored, by the Foundation. I traveled extensively and met shamans all over the country. During some of the trips I was assisted by Zoya Khirghiz [Tuvan ethnomusicologist] and on others by Mongush Kenin-Lopsan [senior ethnologist and expert on Tuvan shamanism]. During one of the trips in the southwestern area of the country, it suddenly struck me that a seminar on shamanism should be organized; a seminar having both scientists, Tuvan shamans, and active practitioners of shamanism as participants. I think the idea started to grow because I so often heard mention of the Dalai Lama's visit to Tuva. He had made his first to Tuva the preceding month, September 1992. It was an official visit organized on the highest level with the President and other dignitaries involved. This, of course, meant promoting and officially sanctioning Buddhism in the country again. In my discussions with the President I brought this point out, arguing that as Tuva, through the Dalai Lama's visit, had focused public interest on one of the spiritual traditions of the country, wouldn't it also be time to cast some light on the other, the older spiritual tradition, by organizing a seminar on shamanism? He agreed.

Off to Tuva

Faxes, letters, and phone calls: a flurry of activity preceding the departure for Tuva by ten expectant people making up the Foundation team. Coming from Austria, Canada, Finland and the United States, most had never met, and would only do so in Moscow the day before departing for Krasnoyarsk en route to Kyzyl, where they would arrive June 29, 1993. The Foundation team consisted of the following persons:

Bill Brunton, Ph.D.—Ethnologist; Faculty member; Director of Field Associates
Heimo Lappalainen—Ethnologist; Film Maker; Field Associate
Larry Peters, Ph.D.—Ethnologist, Field Associate
Norman Benzie—Board member
Melinda Maxfield, Ph.D.—Psychologist; Board member
Gabriele Weiss, Ph.D.—Ethnologist
Paul Uccusic—Journalist, Author, Faculty member
Roswitha Uccusic
Tom Anderson and Tamia Marg-Anderson—Video and Film Production

We felt relieved when our seriously overloaded Aeroflot Yak-40 aircraft touched down in Kyzyl and taxied to a stop on the tarmac. We were welcomed to the "Land of Eagles" by our host, Dr. Mongush Kenin Lopsan, head of the Tuvan society of shamans (Dungur), and "national treasure" of Tuva. A television crew from the local station filmed our arrival and conducted the mandatory interview, which produced such notable quotes as, "We are pleased to be here in your beautiful country."

Ushered into waiting vehicles, we were whisked away to a banquet, introductions, and our first negotiation. The hotel rooms that we had booked were now unavailable. Our hosts wished to scatter the ten of us among as many families' private flats (apartments), or we could stay in a dreary asylum-like place outside Kyzyl. Neither of these choices was acceptable to a team that needed to function as one and did not wish to be isolated. As Gabriele Weiss observed:

After a short discussion we called in our spirits and formed a circle; under the rolling waves of attack by thousands of mosquitoes we decided to insist to stay overnight in Kyzyl instead of remaining in the countryside. During the whole conference, we were accommodated in two private flats (three Austrians in one flat and the rest in another) with a warm reception by the Tuvans who lived there.

The Tuvans could not understand why we preferred this arrangement, but finally agreed. Melinda (Mo) Maxfield notes:

It must have been confusing to the Tuvans to see seven of us, by choice, pile into one small flat, and later we learned that our hostess was mortified that someone had to sleep on the floor. It was, however, one of our most important decisions as it set in motion the superb quality of teamwork that was going to be required and was exhibited as we went forward.

And, it was teamwork in the best sense of that term. Each of the participants contributed to the effort of the group, both by cooperative focus and by the incredible way each person's skills, personality, and provisions dovetailed into a mosaic of effective action. One important aspect of our community was that we were a sacred circle from the very beginning of our stay in Tuva, as Gabriele mentioned above. Time and again we drew on the familiar power of the circle, the blessings of which extended to the Tuvans as well.

The Meetings

Scientific meetings are a place for scholars to report their findings to each other. This meeting was especially important since Tuvan scholarship had been isolated from that of the West. We were anxious to learn from each other. But, there was another burning issue for the Tuvans: shamanism had been a part of their culture and they wanted it back! Early in the presentation of papers one of their scholars stated: "We want to deepen and widen the practice of shamanism in our life — we want to revive shamanism in Tuva, because shamanism is the principal [spiritual tradition] of Tuva." She then asked: "What recommendation can you give us to make our life more prosperous?" At that point we had little to offer, but that would change over the course of our stay.

Our team members presented papers on the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, Nepalese shamanism, the effects of drumming on consciousness, Nganasan shamanism, and the Foundation's expedition to the Baker Lake Inuit (Eskimo). The Tuvans reported on the nature of the soul, Tuvan shamanism, differences between new and old shamanism in Tuva, and throat singing. Interpreters worked between Russian, Tuvinian, and English. Tuvan throat singers (also called "overtone" and "harmonic" singers) performed several numbers in traditional costume. Two old shamans, one of whom is a former movie actor and is now blind, performed in full regalia. This blind shaman was very interesting, for when he was assisted into the room, it appeared as if he could barely move. Once in his garb, drumming and singing, he became animated as a young man, dancing and singing for at least ten minutes. Once finished, he became an old man again. From time to time shamans were introduced from around the packed room, one being a Tuvan now living in Mongolia. The son of a shaman, he refused the shamanic call earlier in life. He now practices a variety of healing techniques, including acupuncture. His specialty is female fertility.

Introductions

We were not satisfied with the level of participation between ourselves and the Tuvan shamans. The brief introductions provided no dialog. We were hungry to share perspectives with them. After continued insistence and negotiation, we were finally given the opportunity to meet exclusively with them. At last we had our opportunity. But, how were we to proceed? We began by giving our own introductions of how we had come to shamanic practice. But, the dynamic was wrong. Then we hit upon the idea: form a circle with them! We did this, and explained the symbolism of the circle. The effects were dramatic. There was an immediate easing of tension. The Tuvans each told of his or her initiatory illness and the healing work they had been given the power to do. Their stories were touching, especially

that of Moon Heart: an abandoned orphan whose young life was full of personal tragedy. This was a milestone in our relationship with the Tuvan shamans.

Controversy

We were not spared controversy during the conference, or later on our excursions outside Kyzyl. A Tuvan philologist (linguist) argued that shamanism cannot be taught in workshops; it comes directly from the spirits. Dr. Kenin Lopsan sided with our position, saying: "Young Tuvan shamans must be trained by an experienced one." He argued that our workshops "help people find themselves and define themselves as shamans." We made the points that workshops, like shamanic illness, allow for the identification of potential shamans, that we teach methods that give people a chance to experience a spiritual connection, and that spirits, not people, make shamans. We argued that from the many who take workshops, some will have great potential and will go on to become shamans when their communities recognize them as such. Paul Uccusick added. "We need to consider cultural differences. In the West, where shamanism is extinct (in the traditional sense), workshops are the only place to expose people to it.""

Another problem expressed by this young scholar was that she had learned that there was a plan for the "American" and Tuvan shamans to perform together at a "concert." She said that such spiritual activity was not appropriate in such a setting. We had heard about the plans for this event and were also troubled. To address this point and cap this contentious debate, I stated:

Shamanism is not meant to entertain people. It's done to achieve a specific purpose. The methods are employed specifically if healing is necessary. We clearly have no intention of performing at a concert in that way (as an entertaining performance). However, last night when we had dinner with our Tuvan friends, we formed a circle and we sang a song together. This was shamanic also and it gave our hearts great gladness and joined us together in a powerful spiritual community. This sort of thing can be done. We in the West have lost all traces of shamanic culture. Here in Tuva, the Soviet period interrupted that, but you still have the memory of it, and you still have shamans. You still have a living tradition, which you are now going to reinstate, and develop, and allow to blossom like a beautiful thing. We have to wait for this to happen. In the meantime we will teach workshops, and we will bring more people into the spiritual world. We will discover more shamans and they will lead us to our new traditions.

Conference Extras

As part of the conference, we were given a tour of the National Museum. There, we took part in the inauguration of a new exhibition on Tuvan culture and traditions. Professor Kenin-Lopsan introduced us to the treasures and meanings of shamanic activity: drums, costumes, feather caps, medical paraphernalia, books, paintings, stone carvings, petroglyphs and spiritual knowledge. Outside the museum one of the older shamans performed a purification ceremony. Burning juniper, he called in powerful spirits, intending to guarantee happiness and good luck for those present. The fenced-in area outside the museum also housed some large stone uprights incised with writing and "stone men" of the Turkic period. They probably represent warrior leaders of specific regions. We were to see one of these on the steppe of western Tuva.

We also took a walking tour of parts of Kyzyl, ending at the monument to the center of Asia. It was here on the banks of the Yenisei River that we saw our first Tuvan eagles soaring fearlessly over our heads. We visited with stone carvers and looked at beautiful pieces for sale. Prices were exceptionally high. Here, and at other times, we had to refute the "rich Westerner" stereotype. There was also a shamanic

play by a local theater group, written and performed for us. Television and newspaper interviews punctuated our stay.

The Professor

Throughout our time in Tuva, whether at the meetings, riding a bumpy bus, or at a site in the countryside, Mongush Kenin Lopsan seized the opportunity to teach us. He seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of knowledge to share: a lifetime of work waiting for just this moment. "The professor," as he is known locally, is beloved. His shock of white hair tells of a long life, but does not reveal the depth of his personal and professional suffering. His passion for research has always been Tuvan shamanism, but this interest was aggressively forbidden by the Soviets. As a result, his every attempt was frustrated, and he was not allowed to publish the volumes of data he has painstakingly collected. He was also ostracized. Moreover, his mother's older sister, a renowned shaman, was imprisoned by the authorities. From his frequent references to this event, it must have hurt him deeply. Even her death had an especially cruel twist; the location of her grave was not divulged by the Communists, and remains unknown today.

Kenin Lopsan's personal tragedy is finally ending. By being the host of our joint scientific conference, the first in Tuva ever to focus on shamanism, he brought the issue of rehabilitating shamanism into focus. Media attention and governmental interest assured some action would be taken. Publication of conference papers in three languages (English, Russian and Tuvian) and of his life's work is underway. He showed the personal joy he experienced in his teaching role each time he lectured himself to exhaustion, despite and because of his severe heart condition. Still, the opportunity knocked at last and he would not miss a single chance to share. The teacher had students!

Between Worlds

The conference and every other activity in Tuva depended on accurate communication. Three languages were involved: English, Russian, and Tuvian. At times French and German were also necessary. The burden of the enormous task of translating what was spoken and written fell in the hands of our main interpreters: Rollanda Kongar and Dina Oyun.

Due to Tuva's isolation until the fall of the Soviet Union, few Tuvans were exposed to English and there was almost no opportunity to speak it with native speakers. As imperfect as translation had to be under these conditions, we were continually amazed at how well our interpreters did, and how quickly they adapted to the nuances of American, Canadian, Austrian, and Finnish English.

The Concert

Like rumbles of thunder on a distant horizon, we began hearing of a planned "concert" in which we were expected to take part. At first we were confused by the term, which we took at its literal meaning. "Why would our group be associated with such an event," we wondered? Evidently, this was a problem in translation. The actual meaning was something like "public performance on a stage." Several negotiations failed to resolve the issue. We were not able to dissuade the Tuvans from the position that there was to be a concert and that we would perform there. "Besides," they said, "we have already sold the tickets!"

In their subsequent written reports to the Foundation, members of the expedition covered many topics with different slants. This is expected when independent observers participate in complex events over

time. However, there is a voice of unanimity about the concert. Excerpting from the report by Norman Benzie, we learn how precipitously the concert went from discussions and uncertainty to concrete event.

We returned to Kyzyl in the late afternoon and were told of the "concert" which we would be attending. We thought it was to be in our honor. It turned out we were to be performers. The organizers began telling us that we should each do what we did the best.

The reaction of our group was one that was the closest thing to a revolt!

We were dropped off briefly to change clothes and then attended the concert. My thoughts were running rampant. "How could they possibly do something like this? What nerve! They were totally insensitive to what we do. This is a sacred event and they sold tickets to the public to put us on stage as performers!" I had brought my rattle to Tuva. I consider it a sacred instrument. There was no way I was going to take it on stage to perform in front of the public. I therefore decided not to take it with me and left for the concert with the others.

Even up to the last seconds before the curtain went up, we were backstage seriously considering refusing to do anything. They had absolutely no idea of what we did, or how we did it. The audience was clapping to get the "show" started and there we were, still considering what to do. We finally decided to form a circle on stage, to begin drumming, and trusted that the spirits would do what needed to be done. We also were told that the most popular actor in Tuva was there to be healed. He had been released from the hospital, specifically to attend this function. He had a serious heart condition. After considering refusal, we decided to have him come up on the stage to be in the center of our circle once we had begun.

The crisis caused by the concert taught us a valuable lesson: one that we were to have repeated more than once in Tuva; shamanism requires flexibility!

What followed those moments of final resistance on the stage of Tuva's National Theater, with the need of the actor and his desperate wife at the focus, was a major turning point for the rest of our work. Unknown to Larry Peters, who had served as a Nepalese shaman's apprentice during his research for his doctorate in anthropology, and who had recently been studying advanced Core Shamanism with Michael Harner, the spirits were about to make him the instrument of power in a breathtaking healing. Norm continues in his report that,

We began to rattle and drum. The energy moved to higher and higher levels very quickly. Larry got up and began to dance around the circle and still the energies moved higher. Larry then moved to the actor and began to frantically extract from his chest and different parts of his body. The energy continued to climb while Moon Heart rose up and almost broke the drum with her beating. The drunk shaman was beating erratically, the lama began ringing bells, the box of Tic Tacs I was using as a temporary rattle got louder and louder. The drums were shaking the stage until they created such a din that the actor on the floor in the center of the circle looked like he was going to immediately go into cardiac arrest. Still Larry kept frantically pulling and extracting. After some indeterminable time, the drumming slowed and stopped. Larry was totally spaced-out and completely exhausted, the actor was shaking and Mo was at his head trying to create some form of closure.

The actor shortly got to his feet and exclaimed that he was free of pain. He was returned to the hospital for observation, but was released the next day. There was applause and the hands — together praying — honoring gesture from the audience. We looked toward the wings of the stage. To our surprise, we saw the Tuvan shamans who had not joined us on the stage (four had) honoring us too. They also gave us hugs as we left the stage. From that moment the Tuvans accepted the authenticity of our shamanic work.

We then began a series of "concerts" and other healing sessions that continued until we left Tuva. (Readers interested in the full account of Larry's experience in this healing should consult the 1993 Fall/Winter issue of *Shaman's Drum*.) Four days later the actor and his wife, all smiles and filled with energy, served as our hosts at their flat. He continues to prosper as of this writing.

Pastoral Tuva

Two excursions to the countryside were high-water marks for members of our party. The first was for a single day to the south of Kyzyl where we visited yurts and experienced traditional Tuvan hospitality for the first time. The setting was picturesque; the first pair of yurts were in forested hills, beside a cold, clear stream with a flock of sheep grazing serenely on a nearby hillside. We were given traditional Tuvan foods such as various sheep, goat, and cow cheeses, butter, yogurt, mutton, milk-tea with salt, and such Russian foods as dark bread, tomatoes, and cucumbers. Araká, the traditional drink distilled from fermented cow's milk, accompanied this meal and all others we had with pastoral Tuvans. It is considered proper etiquette to offer this drink to guests, and is reciprocally proper to drink it down in a single draught. Russian champagne, cognac, and vodka are also normally served. At the second pair of yurts, located in a more open area, we observed the "white death" for the first time. This is the bloodless slaughter of a sheep said to have been decreed by Genghis Khan. By this method, two men hold a sheep down on its back. The master of the yurt makes a small incision in the animal's chest just below the breastbone, reaches in, and grasps the aorta. The sheep dies within minutes. It is then butchered, everything being used. The intestines, cleaned and filled with blood and then boiled, become blood sausage. The meat is also boiled. No seasonings are used with the mutton. The choice part is the fattest piece near the tail, which is served to the guest of honor.

After the meal a shaman conducted the fire ceremony, once done yearly, but not conducted for many years due to Soviet intolerance. He kindled a fire on a slab of stone placed on the floor of the yurt. Food and drink were offered to the fire as the shaman sang songs and blessed the yurt, livestock, water, and people. He used small brass mirrors to divine the health of the mistress of the yurt. Calling in good spirits and chasing away bad ones, he consecrated a single sheep that would never be slaughtered.

Sacred Places

On our second excursion we traveled west from Kyzyl, accompanied by a second Russian bus carrying Norwegian educators. We stopped at communities along the way where we were expected to do concerts. The format we tried to adopt of introducing ourselves and describing the Foundation and its work abruptly gave way to doing healing sessions for those who came forward with complaints. We learned from this the great need for healing in Tuva and the apparent lack of people (shamans, doctors, and lamas) to do it. Gabriele, reflecting on this phase of our work in Tuva, described our party as a "flying shamans' circus." Others chose a "rock band" metaphor. We felt uneasy about being thrust into the spotlight, but saw no alternative. In the one case where we refused to work due to great fatigue we were met by frightening hostility.

There was some one-on-one healing work done, but the most profound came from working in a circle. Drums throbbing, now one, and then another member of our group stepped forward to do a healing on someone brought into the circle. The spirits matched the healer with the client. For example, Paul moved into the center of the circle to work for a crippled man who was paralyzed on one side of his body. After an exhausting extraction, and a power animal retrieval, the man got up and danced to the applause of the audience. He bounded on our bus and spun around to show how well he could move just as we were about to leave.

The Tuvan shamans traveling with us joined us in these circles of healing. It was a new way for us to work, and for them, and it was a powerful one. What Larry had experienced in his "spiritual opening" in Kyzyl with the actor, others experienced in their own ways in the remote villages and towns with exotic names like Shagonar, Chadan, and Kyzyl Mazalyk. Or, this occurred in some other sacred context, but, it happened. Repeatedly, members of the team expressed the belief that they were undergoing a significant transformation, catalyzed by their shamanic experiences in Tuva. Surprisingly, the young Tuvan shamans were saying the same thing for themselves.

The Shaman's Tree and a Magical Flower

Along Tuvan roads, at crossroads, passes over low mountains, and other prominent places past which people travel, there are piles of stone, called ova. These are added to, stone by stone, by travelers as they make prayers to spirits of the place for safe travel, protection from illness, and so forth. Sometimes, small saplings are thrust into the stone piles. On these are tied bright bits of cloth, each representing a prayer as with the piles of stones. Trees are also used for these "prayer ties." Sometimes offerings of food and money are also left at these places.

Here and there in Tuva are special trees with multiple trunks coming from a single root. The number of trunks is a multiple of three if the tree is to have special significance. At a pass along the road to western Tuva from Kyzyl there is such a tree: one with twelve trunks. It is considered very special and is called a "shaman's tree." As we pulled off the roadway, we saw an ova on the side of the road and prayer ties in the branches of nearby trees. The shaman's tree here was standing alone in a meadow across the road from where we parked. On our way over to it, it began to rain, accompanied by rolling thunder. The tree was festooned with many ribbons and other offerings. Some of these trees are the abodes of the souls of dead shamans who have remained in the Middle World. They are considered very powerful. Mo recounts the following experience with this shaman's tree that also shows how spontaneous actions can lead to the unexpected.

On that certain day, we were headed for the shaman's tree (Bai Euish), a sacred tree with twelve trunks growing from one root. Those who live in this area feel that their lives are dependent on the life of this tree, and they make offerings to it. It is covered in strips of cloth tied to every branch. Rosa (one of the young Tuvan healers) says that this is the home of her spirit teacher. She says that she sees and talks to her just the way we are talking now. Her teacher is an old woman, dressed in a dark blue cape with holes in it. I ask if she will introduce me to her teacher.

Rosa and I walk to the shaman tree and stand in silence. People are all around us and all around the tree. The other two female shamans who are traveling with us are touching the tree, chanting and singing. As I start to step closer to the tree, Rosa takes my arm and points to the base, and says, "She's there. She is sitting there."

I stay at the tree until everyone leaves to follow Kenin Lopsan to a field nearby, where he begins to lecture on the plants to be found there. I sit for some time next to the place pointed to by Rosa. Nothing much happens. I feel very peaceful. It is a beautiful day, even with the rain.

I wander over to join the group. As I walk through the field, I become transfixed, literally, by a flower that is growing there. It looks like a small purple and gold lily. It hangs upside-down on a long stem. The field is covered with them. The stamens are a rich orange-rust color. My hand reaches out to touch the pollen-laden stamen, and the color paints my fingers. It seems appropriately and deeply correct to paint my face with the pollen, just for the fun of it. I see a branch has been broken off with three flowers on it. I take them with me. We pick no flowers

here. Tuvans hold that when a wild flower is picked, a child dies. As I join the group, really into this thing now, I paint stripes on the faces of Norman, Larry, Bill, and Gaby (Gabriele). Kenin is telling a story. It is the story of the Golden Eye Flower: the flower I have in my hand! When a marriage took place with a member of a far-distant tribe, this flower was the symbol of the connection, promising good will and pure intent.

Rosa tells me later that her teacher was very glad to meet me, and she saw her teacher come into my body and swirl all around me.

Sleeping in a Yurt and Healing the Land

After a long, bumpy ride following a track across the steppe, we arrived at a remote location in western Tuva just as night fell. The two yurts that were to be our overnight quarters were situated among green hills overlooking a majestic valley. Our arrival stimulated the usual warm milk offering and the demise of a sheep. Treated to yet another large meal with its accompanying araká and other distilled spirits, we were hosted in the best Tuvan fashion. Our Foundation party and five Tuvans were together in one yurt. The Norwegians and the rest of the Tuvans were in the other. So many bodies together gave the yurt a special "animal" intimacy. The small wood stove made the space cozy. Positioned like spokes of a wheel, we settled into the earthen floor in bedding secured from a hotel, and slept. Before morning the lack of a fire in the stove showed us how cool nights are on the central Asian steppe, even in the summer. Gaby, a light sleeper, reported that "during the night there was terrible noise: outside from straying pigs and dogs, and inside from snoring companions."

The morning broke chilly and indistinct for those of us up early — not quite enough light to photograph the still sleeping yurts against their backdrop of steep hills. With the full light of day, life returned to the camp. After breakfast we ascended a large hill (called "white mountain" by us because of its outcropping of white quartz) looming over the yurts and conducted a drumming to heal the land. We had been asked to do this blessing ceremony there. The drumming was very powerful for me. I could feel all the "nations" being carried along with us there by the pulsing drums that beat as one. I felt this intensely. I flew out over the Earth and then to the Sun, who gave me a message of love and healing to be shared. Mo's experience on this sacred hilltop bears repeating too.

From where I was sitting, the horizon was literally a circle. I had never seen that before. I knew this was an important day for me. This ritual was about land. This ritual was about drums. This was my ritual. In the circle, with all of us together, I began to drum a certain rhythm and sing. And it was as if something cracked open inside me and moved through me. The Tuvan shamans, Moon Heart and Pauline, drummed in sync with us for the first time. The circle pulsed together. It was a beautiful experience, having a visceral sense of the miracle of our coming together in this remote place, for this particular ritual, from Austria, California, Minnesota, Finland, Canada, Norway, and many places in Tuva.

Rosa says that she saw an amazing sight during the ritual. From every person, plant, and animal on the hilltop, a shaman, dressed in white emerged in the center and began to dance clockwise around the circle. Each dancing shaman had a yellow (or shiny orange) disc on its chest and ribbons falling from multicolored sleeves. There was an eagle-feather headdress and snakes were coming out of the top of the arms. She saw many black cords coming from each shaman's back. She told me, "As you began to sing, your face changed, and a spirit came through you. Your face became red and was surrounded by yellow feathers." Although at first uncertain, she concluded that the spirit had come from the sun.

We were joined on the top of the hill by our Tuvan colleagues, members of the families hosting us in their yurts, and people from other yurts in the area. We were also visited by a local shaman named Oorzak Sagan, who said. "Last night. I heard the drums in my heart, and I knew I was to come."

The son of the master of the yurt in which we stayed had been sent to get him, but met him in the forest, already halfway to where we were. He was very supportive of the work we did in this place, saying that the blessing we did here would spread across the land. He also predicted some of us would return to Tuva. Kenin Lopsan called this ritual and others we conducted "initiations." He vowed to join us in our circle after this one.

A Shaman's Grave

In the western part of Tuva, near the towns of Kyzyl Mazalyk and Ak-Dovurak, there is a reminder of the special place shamans hold in Tuvan culture. There, at the base of an enormous hill, is the grave of a shaman. As if keeping a vigil, the grave dominates the area visually. The shaman's earthly remains rest in a rectangular wooden box supported by four wooden posts. The lower jawbone of a bear shares the scaffold with the shaman's bleached bones. A weathered drum stick has fallen to the ground beneath the airy grave.

Sacred Spring: One of Nine

According to Tuvan reckoning, there are nine of everything that is important. It is a "ritual" or "sacred" number; all cultures have them. Our party spent several hours at one of Tuva's nine sacred springs, majestically situated on a slope overlooking an expansive valley framed by snow-covered mountains. Norm's description of this magnificent place follows.

The spring seeped out of the hillside, but it didn't appear to come out at any one place. At the top of the spring the local lama had placed a large sculpture of a white goat. To its side, a large arrow, eight or ten feet long, was raised off the ground pointing to the east. It had hundreds of prayer ribbons tied on it, completely covering the arrow. Nearby was a stupa with a deity in it. We were told that the waters had very strong healing qualities, and I went to an open-air enclosure into which the water was directed by three different-sized pipes. A small pipe was for the eyes, a medium-sized pipe was for the heart, and a large-sized pipe with rushing water coming through it was for the body/spirit. One entered the inner enclosure naked and the ritual is to put the right arm into the water flow first, then the right leg, left arm, and left leg. One then turns and backs into the water flow, directing the rushing stream of water to flow down the spine. I bathed in the flow of numbing, ice-cold water pouring from the spring, purifying myself, humbly asking the spirits for an inner cleansing and washing off of the veils, which surround me. I asked to have my third eye cleansed and purified. I felt totally "clean" after the experience.

We next walked up a hill in front of the spring where the view was stunning. The foreground was one of incredible beauty. An enormous and beautiful valley set off by an entire horizon of snow-covered mountain peaks took up our entire range of vision. The clear, sunny blue sky was non-ending. To add to that "energetic" of the planet, were the sacred spring behind us, the large prayer arrow with its hundreds of prayer ties, and the cleansing. We formed a circle and began drumming; people around us came up to be healed. The drumming stopped after a half-hour. We paused, with people sitting around us facing the panorama. The drumming started again, and healing sessions began with everyone encompassed in the one solid circle.

Drumming on this hilltop, as on the "White Mountain," was what we learned to call a "blessing ceremony," or a "healing of the land." The Tuvans told us that these were immensely valuable. This type of ceremony used to be done yearly at places such as these. We were told that our blessings were spreading across Tuva, to eventually touch all parts. There was in us the satisfaction borne of simply doing the right thing.

A footnote to this story of the beauty of nature and purpose is that not 100 meters from the pipes carrying the icy, clear water of the spring to those using it for purification, including drinking its pure substance, were ugly reminders of the 20th Century's contributions to nature. Discarded plastic bags, old shoes, and other modern refuse defiled this special stream as it made its way into that magnificent valley. Obviously, blessings to the land of other sorts are in order here in Tuva, as in so many other places.

Khaiyakan

The Bear Mountain, Khaiyakan, is Tuva's most sacred of its nine sacred mountains. Seeing it jut out of a flat valley floor from miles away is breathtaking! It is a saw-toothed, raw piece of nature with only a broadcast tower on its flank to mar its pristine statement of nature's power and dominance. Up closer there is a dirt road joining the main one that goes past a Buddhist stupa. This leads to a ceremonial area including nine stone-pile ova, a shaman's pole tipi (tschum) festooned with prayer ties, and a row of Buddhist symbols on staffs thrust into the ground facing the mountain. We visited this place twice: once at the beginning of our second excursion when there was a blessing ritual for the place conducted by a lama and a shaman together; and on the last day of this excursion as we returned to Kyzyl. What happened there, and the place itself, inspired most of us to write about it. Here, in Heimo's words, is what we observed on the first visit.

This festival, which was attended by about 200 persons, was led by Sendarsky, a lama from a temple in the neighboring village, Khaiyakan. During the ceremony the lama was seated by the side of the tschum singing Buddhist prayers while being assisted by Rosa, one of the young shamans accompanying us. Their roles were reversed in a healing ceremony for an individual in the lama's temple where the lama assisted Rosa. The co-operative nature of Tuvan shamanism and Buddhism could be seen inside the tschum, where there was a small table with common Buddhist offerings next to the normal inhabitant of the tschum: the bear skull. Most participants walked nine times around the circle of nine ova, adding a stone to the piles while circling. During the lama's singing there were also other people making (shamanic) offerings of water and vodka to the sky deities using nine-holed spoons (wooden spoons with nine concavities for holding liquids for just such offerings).

The syncretism in this ceremony was astounding and bore witness to the easy compatibility between shamanism and Buddhism in Tuva.

On our return to Bear Mountain, we conducted a blessing ceremony in a huge circle that included all those traveling in our party, including the bus drivers, security men, and the Norwegian educators. Up to twenty-five eagles at a time wheeled, soared and dove over our heads. The ceremony was beautiful in its setting, intent, and result. On one level, it was a farewell ceremony, for we would leave Tuva the next day. Although there would be a farewell party and an interview at the monument to the center of Asia, this was the final gathering of spirit. We held hands and invoked the power of the circle. We drummed and sang. And finally we sat holding hands; a single community united in sacred work for this beautiful land. We were bridging the immense cultural chasm that could have separated us. We said the things to

each other that friends say who have shared lives in a profound way. We were truly reluctant to end this final symbol of unity and spiritual work of inestimable value.

Departure and Endings

The Foundation expedition to Tuva ended on July 9, 1993, when all but our cinematographers, Tom and Tamia, departed for Krasnoyarsk. Tom and Tamia would remain in Tuva for another three weeks, considerably expanding our knowledge of the land and its people. Paul and Roswitha would travel from Krasnoyarsk to Irkutsk and Lake Baikal before returning to Austria. The rest would fly on to Moscow. From there we would scatter and eventually return to our homelands and our former lives. Heimo and I presented papers in Budapest at the 2nd International Conference on Shamanism, sponsored by the International Society for Shamanistic Research.

It would be accurate to describe our experience in Tuva as transformative. All members of the expedition feel that their lives have been changed by the experiences shared in this small central Asian country. The Tuvans assured us that they too had been changed. The shamans who participated in our circles learned a new way of working; cooperating with each other and drawing on the power of the circle to amplify and focus healing power. We were thanked profusely for introducing them to this way of working with the spirits.

Our healing work had a major impact on our credibility as shamanic practitioners, and it helped to restore confidence to those who received or witnessed the healings at the concerts or at private flats. Paul Uccusic, who is maintaining weekly contact with Tuva, reports that in addition to the actor all but one of our clients continues to prosper.

A major reason the Foundation undertook such a difficult expedition was to support the Tuvan effort to rehabilitate their shamanism. In meetings with the President and other officials, as well as our day-to-day activities, including the conference and healings, we were able to effectively assist in this effort. In addition to the healings, our scientific credentials and our being from the West had a positive impact on these modern, post-Soviet Tuvans. The President was particularly interested in our impression of the compatibility of Buddhism and shamanism. We were able to report that we saw no inherent conflict, and that both should be encouraged to blossom.

We seem to have won the debate over whether or not workshops can be effectively used to train people in shamanic methodology. There are so few old-style shamans in Tuva with a broad knowledge of those traditions that this generation may not be able to train enough young ones to replace themselves when they die. Of the young shamans we met, none was fully working in the traditional way, though some are in training. Our methods may help in this critical area. Kenin Lopsan, himself a leading shaman, was supportive of our approach.

We were also able to lend our voice to the chorus that is advising Tuvan authorities to go slowly and with consideration for the environment when developing Tuva's abundant natural resources. We were chagrined to learn that there is a tentative plan to mine the sacred Bear Mountain, Khaiyakan, for its deposits for cement!

After our return from the second excursion we met with shamans and other interested Tuvans at the museum for a final opportunity to discuss where we go from here. This meeting was very positive, an outcome of which is the hope, expressed by both sides, that we seek opportunities to continue our co-operative work, both in documenting Tuvan shamanism and participating in the healing work there. As

Michael Harner states in his introduction to this issue, a brief Foundation expedition to Tuva headed by Paul Uccusic is planned for this summer (1994).

Paul Uccusic writes in a recent letter that since our departure, Tuvans have adopted a new, democratic constitution that guarantees religious freedom and that professor Kenin Lopsan has been appointed chairman of a newly-created, government-funded organization devoted to the scientific study of shamanism. Rollanda Kongar, one of our very capable interpreters, also has been given a position in this organization. Their first task is to translate and publish the results of the conference in English, Russian, and Tuvianian.

Tom and Tamia Marg-Anderson, who documented the expedition on film and videotape for the Foundation, explored the far western part of Tuva and the Todja district in the east, where there are few roads. The Todja district of Tuva has mountains, taiga forest, lakes, and sacred springs. They visited some of these and searched for more shamans and information about them. They also searched for knowledge of the sacred landscape of this area. Currently, they are editing video footage for a documentary of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies 1993 expedition to Tuva. This video will be given to 1994 Sponsoring Members of the Circle of the Foundation.

The "Land of Eagles" is, or soon will be, back on maps used by Westerners. More people will visit this exotic place and will, as they always do, leave their mark on it. There is already activity in Tuva by Turkish business interests. We can only hope that the effort by the Tuvans to rehabilitate their shamanism and other traditions keeps pace with the winds of change from the outside. They desperately need to maintain their reverence for the Earth and its natural inhabitants in order to preserve the balance they had achieved before cities, roads and vodka. They, like other Siberians, are rushing into the 21st Century as they grasp for the golden ring of their identity as a people. Their shamans hold this ring in their hearts and minds.

After returning to the United States, Mo Maxfield was searching through her notes and memories. looking for how she might write about her experiences for her report. She opened her heart and out poured a lyrical poem about Khaiyakan, about Tuva, and about the ten who shared this adventure.

Khaiyakan - A Poem by Melinda Maxfield

To the continent of Asia, through the country of Russia,
far east from Moscow, south from Krasnoyarsk,
north of the Mongolian border, to the Republic of Tuva,
we came, we ten.

In Tuva, land of forests, lakes, and steppes
and mountain districts, called taiga,
where live fox, wolf, skunk, mountain goat,
willow grouse, sable and mink,
the steppes in summer grown of sage, and hemp and flowers,
where live squirrel, weasel, hare,
musk deer, wild boar, reindeer.
We walk through pine and fir, birch, and aspen,
poplar, larch, bird cherry and sea buck-thorn.

In Tuva, land of eagle and panther, and
dragon, who thunders in the sky

and lives in the mouth of the Earth in winter,
dragon, whose eyes are always open,
is master of the three worlds
and all the plants and animals.

In Tuva live those whose ancestors
were the ancient inhabitants of this,
the center of Asia,
where they walked with soft feet
in shoes with turned-up toes
so no harm would come to the sweet face of Earth,
where the people live with the land, and
the people are the land.
So they say.

In this world all plants and human beings
have their father and mother.
The deity created it all this way.
The man's father is the sky.
This is how they say.
From the very beginning, the sky was man's father.
So people say.
The black earth is my mother.

Mongush Kenin Lopsan gently, with skill and subtlety,
imprints us, teaches us with the stories of his people,
assures us of the love of the spirits of the mountains,
woods, and streams for music, song,
and the magic force of tale-telling.
He brings us to those who still live in the old ways,
the ancient rituals —
The shaman is poet and actor,
healer, and singer, drummer.

He brings us to the sacred place, the holy mountain
KHAIYRAKAN
home of ADYG KHAIYRAKAN, the bear god,
ancestor of man, who came down from the sky
ADYG KIZHI YGAANNING,
the bear with the human sense,
respectfully called other names like:
MAZHAALAI (quiet),
KARA CHUVE (a black creature with earthly ears),
TURKUG CHUVE (a frightful creature), and
ULUG KHAIYRAKAN (a great heavenly monster).

Bear came down from the sky,
from the country of Azarlar, sky people.
So they say.

The bear is man's ancestor.
So they say.
First bear was born in the skies of Azarlars
and descended down to the Earth.
There were shamans who came from the Azarlars' family.
So they say.
So Tuvinians say.

So we prayed and sang and drummed
for Khaiyakan — to Khaiyakan.
We rattled and sang and drummed and prayed
at Khaiyakan, the great mountain, the holy place.
And the rain came;
and the sun Came;
and the eagles came;
and the spirits came;
and the blessings came
at Khaiyakan.
So they say.
So we say — we ten.

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