

Tuvan Shamanism Comes to America

By Susan Grimaldi

[The Foundation for Shamanic Studies first became involved with Tuvan shamans in 1992 when Field Associate Heimo Lappalainen (now deceased) visited that small Central Asian (Siberian) Russian Republic in his search for Living Treasures of Shamanism who might have survived Soviet repression, prisons, and executions. Heimo's diligent work has helped the Tuvans, the Foundation, and shamanism worldwide. Readers of Shamanism are familiar with the resulting 1993 and 1994 FSS expeditions to Tuva and the 1995 presence of rejuvenated Tuvan shamans in Europe attending the First World Congress of Psychotherapy in Vienna and to work with advanced FSS students of shamanism in Austria and Switzerland.

The circle was closed this past summer (1998) when FSS Living Treasure Mongush Kenin Lopsan, shamans Ai Churek Ouin and Sailyk-ool Kanchyypool, and interpreter Rollanda Kongar traveled to California to teach graduates of the Foundation's Three Year Programs about practical aspects of their shamanic traditions and to exchange shamanic knowledge. These Tuvan colleagues, whom I had met on the 1993 expedition, graciously acknowledged to participants the pivotal role played by the Foundation in the renaissance of shamanism in their country and cast their American visit as a "homecoming" of sorts. In the article that follows, Field Associate Susan Grimaldi, who was charged with documenting this important occasion, describes her impressions of the Tuvans' return gift to the Foundation.

-the editor]

In July 1998, I joined with four very special visitors from the Republic of Tuva: Professor Mongush Kenin Lopsan, Ai-Churek Ouin, Sailyk-ool Kanchyypool, and Rollanda Kongar. They had traveled from the center of Asia to California to teach aspects of their traditional shamanism to forty graduates of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies' Three-Year Programs. My great fortune was to be there to learn from them, video-record their teachings, and serve as one of their hosts.

Welcome

In his opening remarks to the group, Professor Kenin Lopsan stated:

"We thank you, Dr. Harner, for this invitation. We think that we'll learn from each other: you from us and us from you. Together we'll work, so that world shamanism will have progress and all of us will prosper together. I think that your shamanism and Tuvan shamanism together is what is called "world" shamanism."

Before we came to the United States we had a meeting with the President of our Republic, who gave us his blessing. He told me that when we return from our trip, we will meet again and then we'll tell him who we met, what we learned, and what we think about the future of shamanism." For me, it is a great honor to attend this international gathering of shamans, because I know that when we join forces we will become much more powerful, and together we will move shamanism forward all over the world.

History

The "Professor," as Kenin-Lopsan was respectfully addressed, told us that shamanism is very ancient in his country. Buddhism, he said, was introduced in the seventeenth century. Christianity in the nineteenth, but shamanism was always important to his land and its people.

He continued:

"There was a great span of time when there was no connection between Tibet and Tuva at all. But for 157 years before 1912, we were under the yoke of the Manchurian Chinese Empire and this was the time when the bonds with Tibet, Mongolia, and India were very strong.



Professor Kenin-Lopsan demonstrating a Tuvan way to hold a drum. Michael Harner is at the right. (Photo by Susan Grimaldi)

Buddhism, with its written language, had a great impact on Tuva. The Buddhists even built some temples in Tuva. The fate of all these temples and all this culture after the October Revolution in 1917 was really very, very pitiful. We used to have 34 temples and they were very beautiful wooden temples. They were devoured by flames. There were 5000 monks, the majority of whom were sent to prison or exiled. The rest of them left our country. Now there is not a single Buddhist temple in my land.

A very small part of the population knew the language for it (Buddhism). Most people spoke the language of Tuvans and the shamans did the work with the Tuvan language. That is why the shamans' religion stayed alive and survived Buddhism.

I should also say that Buddhists get a lot of support and help, including material help, because the Dalai Lama helps them and everyone else helps them. That is why the shamans don't get so much support at all. So what Dr. Harner is doing for us is very important. It is important for shamanism and has a great international significance."

In commenting on the place of shamans in Tuvan society, Professor Kenin-Lopsan observed:

"In Tuva, if a shaman is genuinely a shaman, he is always very well respected and is a venerable person, regardless of who he is. When the shaman visits someone, he should listen to what the people say and what they want, and do it for them. The shaman's mission is to heal the people. If a shaman feels that the person he was invited to cure is not curable, he can offer to invite another shaman. It is a very open part of society. Shamans were always concerned about maintaining continuity. They always taught without charging anything. So they were always very successful in conveying their knowledge, their experience, and the history of their trade to other, young shamans. In light of this tradition, I hope that now our shamans will teach you something and we, for our part, will learn from your knowledge and use it in my land."

Soulful Connection

As we worked with these Tuvan shamans, I found myself resonating powerfully with the female shaman, Ai-Churek. We connected deeply: our hearts reflecting in each other. As the week unfolded, I traveled with her, felt the awesome vibration of her voice; learned of her history, and witnessed her style of healing. As I celebrated her strength and beauty, I began to feel aglow. Ai-Churek inspired me to be comfortable in opening to the source of creation, in melding with the vibration of life. I watched her see our trees, Pacific shore and bays; visit our city; eat our food; and try a whirlpool bath. I was reminded of being in life and how each one of us engages in the skills of being.

Some part of me has yearned to feel this kind of shared recognition with a female indigenous shaman. While in Inner Mongolia, I witnessed a female apprentice assisting in a shamanic healing ritual. That was exiting and helpful in shaping my personal identity. Kneeling beside Ai-Churek in a eucalyptus grove, dressed in full regalia, playing our drums, each opening together in a dance of consciousness, I felt her greet the land. Her eyes softly focused as she acknowledged all the life on this land, seeing the interconnectedness of creation. I could feel her gratitude. I could feel her taking pleasure, delighting the spirit of the land with her voice and her offerings of milk and juniper. It was her smooth strength and vast solidity that taught me to relax into my embrace with Spirit and trust the ease of my strength.

The Professor had introduced Ai-Churek, as a "heavenly" shaman. This means that she is a shaman of "sky origin." Her ancestors were also heavenly shamans. She works according to a lunar calendar, working with the stars and the moon.

Ai-Churek's Story: A Shaman's Calling and Initiation

A deeply impressive experience with Ai-Churek was when she shared her personal history with us. I was filming as she told her moving story.

She was born in the southern part of Tuva, near its border with Mongolia. She lived in her -birth village for her first five years, a village where there were two sacred stone piles. When her mother died, she was taken to another region to live with an elderly, maternal aunt. Her father was a hunter and spent much time away in the forests. As a result, he only saw his children now and then.

The most difficult period of life for her was from age nine to thirteen. This was the period where she was overwhelmed by illnesses, one after another. Despite this, she was very successful at school, and graduated.



Ai-Churek, in her Tuvan shamanic gear, sings while holding a container of sacred juniper drink. (Photo by Susan Grimaldi)

After finishing school, she recognized that despite her childhood illnesses, she had power. She was solitary much of the time because she was ashamed of her illnesses. She believed she was different from other people. She felt unclear and had little contact with others, preferring to be alone. However, the feeling of being able to help other people, to heal them, helped her to recover a bit. Despite her poor health, she continued to be very successful. At this time, Ai-Churek wanted to be a lawyer. She was very good in sciences and history, and was so eager to study that she moved to a town near Moscow where there was a military school. She only could stay there a month and was unable to resume her studies. The authorities at the school decided to put her to work at a military farm.

In her first year away from home, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital five times. She would undergo a course of treatment, but would not recover fully. She would seem

better for awhile, but would relapse. The medical practitioners were unsuccessful in diagnosing and treating her.

The only thing that Ai-Churek remembers about this period of illness was something black coming to her, taking her by the throat, and pushing her back. Then darkness would come. When she came to her senses, she would be all right, but she could not recollect anything. She got sick very often

Ai-Churek decided to find something to help herself. There was a very ancient Russian town, founded before Moscow, that had many Russian Orthodox churches, some of which had not been destroyed. She observed people entering and leaving these churches and noted how beautiful they were. Sometimes she heard beautiful singing coming from inside. She became aware of how peaceful the faces of people coming out of the churches looked, and decided to go in and see what was happening.

She observed that people entered the churches with black kerchiefs covering their heads. She found such a kerchief covered her head, and entered. Inside she saw a big man with hands spread, nailed to the wall, his feet covered with blood. She did not say anything, but went up to his feet and touched them. Standing there for awhile, she prayed to him, asking for help, not only for herself, but for her poor father somewhere far away from her, and for her brothers and sisters. She did this many times and began to recover.

At the age of 26, Ai-Churek remembers, she became quite healthy. She ceased having attacks by the blackness: it stopped with the birth of her son.

In 1993 Ai-Churek read in a newspaper about a great gathering of Tuvan shamans. In the newspaper article was a discussion of these shamans as historic healers. She decided to go see them for her son and herself.

On the day of the gathering, she went to the building, the National Theater building in Kyzyl, the capitol city of Tuva, where the first meeting was about to begin. She saw many people who wanted to attend what was described as a healing session. She saw Professor Kenin-Lopsan standing at the entrance to the building, selecting people. deciding who would be allowed to enter. Looking at her, he said, "Oh. I see that you want help from shamans; I see that you can become a shaman. Go, enter the building."

Inside, where the healing session was about to begin, there were many people. A very famous Tuvan actor had been brought to the theater from the hospital. He had a very poor heart. When they brought him to the stage he was totally blue; his lips and body looked blue. The physicians had warned his relatives that he might not live long. This healing session was their last hope.

(Editor's note: The shamans referred to here are the members of the FSS team who took part in the 1993 expedition to Tuva).

Ai-Churek watched how the shamans performed the ceremony. She saw them lay the sick actor on the floor. She had not seen this before. It was announced, "now the shamans will drum." She had never heard such drumming in her life. Kenin-Lopsan came up to her and gave her a drum and said, "Drum!" It was the first time she took a drum.

Then all the people on the stage started to drum. She saw a kind of beauty over their heads that suddenly broke into pieces. And then three women in white descended, holding something white that was like smoke. It was like a stream of smoke coming from these women. When she looked at the actor, he was not there. His place was totally occupied by worms. There was no actor, only the worms. This is what she saw.

She started drumming and singing: she felt she was doing something, but she could not understand what it was. Then she saw how the women began to disappear and all the worms disappeared as well. And then somebody touched her on her arm. It was Kenin-Lopsan. He told her. "Just come down. it is all over. It is all right. Just stop drumming." She stopped and everything was ordinary: the people on the stage, the actor lying on the stage, and her son among the people. This is how her first experience of drumming happened.

Some people came from the television network to interview the European, American and Tuvan shamans. Ai-Churek saw the actor sitting by himself in a chair with new color in his face, speaking. She understood, as she had a strong sense of "ah ha!" and felt the great power. She knew, "we are people wanted by other people and that is why we should do our work, the shamanic work."

Ai-Churek thinks that this first conference on shamanism opened for her the road to shamanic healing work. She expressed her gratitude to Professor Kenin Lopsan and to her new friend. Dr. Harner, and said, "If not for them, we people with shamanic gifts might never have opened that gift. They showed us the road to open it."

Ai-Churek shared her thoughts about becoming a shamanic healer. She told us:

"You cannot be taught to be a shamanic healer. This is born in you. The only thing that can be done is to have the road opened to you. When you meet others who follow the same road as you, it will enlarge your knowledge. This is how you become a real shaman, a healer of people. The more people of our kind we have on earth, the healthier our planet will be and the healthier our people will be."

After that conference in Kyzyl, she decided to work as a shamanic healer. She decided to return to her home village. She considered it to be her duty to return to the ancestors of her power, away of honoring her debt to them.

Healing Tuvan Style

Later in the week, Ai-Churek performed a healing ceremony. She provided us with instruction, as Professor Kenin-Lopsan offered commentary.



Sailik-ool, in full shamanic gear, drums and sings while demonstrating Tuvan techniques. (Photo by Susan Grimaldi)

"The shamanic mirror will show you who is ill or what part of your body is ill. You should wait to be shown." she said. She went to each person in the circle and passed a smoking bowl of juniper around our heads, smearing a stripe of ash upon each person's forehead. As she rang a bell over each of us in turn, we were asked to think of our lives, but only good things. Ai-Churek instructed us in making a medicinal drink.

You see here the herb, juniper. Usually only a respected elderly man can go up the mountain and pick this herb. It is usually very high up in the mountains. It should be clean, physically: no dust, no smoke, no smell, just naturally pure. The shaman makes a kind of drink, a medicinal drink. He puts this herb in water and he prays silently to this sacred drink, asking for a healing for the client. Now it is alive. It is alive, clean and clear, pure water. By saying the prayers, the shaman makes the water alive."

She invited those of us who were not feeling quite well to take a sip of this water. While kneeling, she began deep, multidimensional throat singing. Her costume jingled and wooden carvings on it clicked together.

Ai-Churek was drawn by the mirror to one of the women in the circle and she began to whip the ribbons of her costume sleeves against this person's arms and shoulders. The woman was requested to sit upon a rug across from Ai-Churek. She appeared to first gather power, then began healing. Not only does the throat singing help her to feel calm, but it also calms the client, so "everything goes well and they do not feel worried."

She explained, "I am not taught throat singing. All of sudden it goes out of me. I do not know why or how, but I start throat singing. This is the original, the most ancient way of throat singing. You call with the help of your drum, you call the power of throat singing to yourself. You gather your power and this is how you get your throat singing. You should not force yourself. You should not imitate. As you are a shaman yourself, you ask your power to help you. You ask your drum to help you: you ask the Upperworld to help, and then it comes to you."

Ai-Churek told us about how she experiences her healing sessions.

"When a client comes, I go in my mind to that sacred place where my spirit helpers are. It's a meadow very high up in the mountains. There is a nice little hole where he lives with his assistants. We all get together above the ground. My spirit starts traveling above the levels of the Upperworld, searching for the way to heal the sick person. My spirit helpers help me to find a way to heal a person. Sometimes they pour something into my mouth, sometimes they put something on my head, sometimes they whisper to me. I feel they are doing something. Then, suddenly, I see myself sitting by the fireplace with the client, remembering what I was told to do. Listening to what they are telling me to do, I start working as I listen and remember. They just pour into me that throat singing and I start."

In her description of this healing session, Ai Churek related her experience. She said that she did not go very high. She reached only the cloudy area. She saw puffy white clouds and then some very small creatures, all men with long white beards and rainbow wings, flying. These small creatures heard her drumming and they descended into her drum. They approached the client and sat on her face and started working. They walked on her face opening her nostrils, they looked into her nose, and opened her mouth. They took something out of her mouth. When

they saw this stone, they picked it up and lifted it. They were pushing and pulling on it. They pulled something long and black out of her mouth.

As Ai-Churek looked up to the sky at the clouds, the men went quickly up. Each time when she looked down, they were down. She had a feeling that these creatures were changing, working in shifts. There were crowds of them on the clouds, but many remained, healing the woman's face, her eyes, and her nose. They lifted the healing stone they were working with. They were pulling something out, black and slippery.

When the healing was over, Ai-Churek spoke to the client, telling her that she was concerned about a problem around the left side of the woman's heart. The woman told Ai-Churek of a problem she has been having with bleeding from her left eye. Ai-Churek thought that the problem might be connected to her heart.

Calling in the Heavenly Spirits

There is a great deal of attention paid the Heavenly Spirits and the sky realm by Tuvan shamans. The Professor began teaching us about this by saying:

I am an old man. I have never told or written any material about sky shamans. I am eager to share this knowledge with you because Professor Michael Harner renewed the road for shamanic practices in Tuva. Tuvan shamans use heavenly power for healing and rituals. For a sanctifying ritual, they use the heavenly power in the day. To hold a healing ceremony by calling the heavenly powers, you should do it at night. It is in the practice of Tuvan shamans to have some shamanic trees and other sacred places. When the shaman wants to use the heavenly power, he goes to that place and asks the spirits of the dead people to allow him to hold such a ritual. Tuvan shamans use heavenly power for healing. The mission of the Tuvan shaman is to heal the people.

The Upperworld power, together with the power of the shaman, results in great successes and great healing of people. The drum provides the common signal that puts to work the heavenly power with the shaman. The drum is associated with thunder. Heavenly power falls only on the drum. not on other things or people.

The most powerful attribute that shamans have in Tuva is a drum. As you know, Tuvans had the drum long, long ago. Before written language, before anything, we had the drum. The Tuvans call this instrument, tuga In the Tuvan language. the stem word for thunder and tuga is the same. As shamans mostly work with heavenly powers and use this power in their healing, when they hear the thunder, it means heaven sends its power and they start drumming.

When sky signals come down, they look like invisible fire, or fire rays. When a shaman calls and gets these heavenly powers, the people present at the ceremony feel differently. They faint. or they laugh, or cry, or they are happy. They experience different feelings.

Every shaman has their own specific way for how to call these heavenly powers. Sailyk-ool, the male shaman, demonstrated how he calls in the heavenly power. After singing and bowing, he explained,

You start with calling. 'Oh,' then, 'ooh.' in eight directions, then, 'oooh,' in just four directions. Start from the east and go to the other directions, clockwise. Do it with one inhalation. Look

around and prick up your ears after you have done the 'ooh' sound. You will notice something unusual happening—a bird, a bee or a snake. You will immediately sense the spirits' presence. If you call the spirits to come down, they will listen to you. The higher up you are, the better. So, I am not myself. But, I am being maneuvered by the spirits. They tell me. 'Beat hard, beat fast, beat a long beat.' And they also tell me when to stop.

Learning and Sharing

Each day participants in the work-shop, divided into two groups, worked first with one shaman and then the other. Throughout, the Professor explained what we were witnessing in quintessential Tuvan style. We were exposed to spirit calling, blessing, divination, and healing techniques. It appears that all Tuvan shamans are equipped with a small bag of polished stones with which they perform an elaborate divination technique. The results are uncanny!

Although the Tuvans were charged with teaching their traditional techniques to our FSS students of shamanism, they participated in an exchange as well. A notable example involved a power dance one evening. It was captivating to witness the Tuvan shamans, one after the other, filling with Spirit, dancing, and singing their spirit songs. The enormous cultural gulf seemed to evaporate at that point as we sang their song, buoyed by their spiritual connection.

All too soon the five days of the workshop ended. The Tuvans remained in the San Francisco area for another week, residing on a houseboat until their Aeroflot return flight back to their homeland. During that time, Michael Harrier and Bill Brunton were able to deepen their understanding of some aspects of Tuvan shamanism through interviews with Professor Kenin-Lopsan. The Tuvans also were taken to the California redwoods, local mountains, and the Pacific shore. They honored Nature in their traditional manner, thus connecting with its sacredness and demonstrating their respect for it, borne of countless generations of living close to the Central Asian Steppe.



Susan Grimaldi with Ai-Churek. From the left behind Susan and Ai-Churek are Michael Harner, Sailik-ool, and Christina Stack. (Photo by John Lawrence.)