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## FROM THE SOUND OF THROAT SINGING TO THE SOUNDS OF SHAMANIC PRACTICE: STRUCTURAL ORGANISATION OF SHAMANIC RITUALS IN TUVA

**Malgorzata Stelmaszyk**

University of Edinburgh,  
United Kingdom

## ОТ ЗВУКОВ ГОРЛОВОГО ПЕНИЯ К ЗВУКАМ ШАМАНСКИХ ПРАКТИК: СТРУКТУРНАЯ ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯ ШАМАНСКИХ РИТУАЛОВ В ТУВЕ

**Малгожата Стельмашик**

Эдинбургский университет,  
Великобритания

*This article concentrates on the characteristics of shamanic practice in Tuva, a republic within the Russian Federation. While delineating the unique features of shamanic craft, such as a lack of trance, the analysis concentrates on the significance of sound and music as indispensable elements of the shamanic repertoire. In short, the article argues that the organizational structure of the sound unit in Tuva employed in throat singing and based on the overtone-rich timbre system constitutes a wider framework of patterns of thought and behavior which underlies the organizational structure of shamanic rituals. In this way, the article shows how sounds are not only the integral feature of the shamans' communications and negotiations with spirits, but also an analytical lens for the broader understandings of shamanic practice and sociocosmic interactions in Tuva in general.*

*Keywords: Tuva; Tuvans; shaman; throat singing; shamanic practice; shamanic rituals*



*В данной статье описываются особенности шаманской практики в Республика Тыва (Российская Федерация). В качестве особенностей шаманского ремесла здесь отмечается отсутствие трансовых состояний, в которые могут впадать шаманы и в качестве неотъемлемых элементов шаманского репертуара анализируется значение звука и музыки. Утверждается, что организационная структура акустической системы горлового пения, богатого обертонами, расширяет возможности шаманских ритуалов,*

*представляя более широкие рамки шаблонов мышления и поведения. То есть звуки являются не только неотъемлемой чертой коммуникации шаманов при переговорах с духами, но выступают «аналитической линзой» для более широкого понимания шаманских практик и взаимодействий в рамках социокосмоса в Туве.*

*Ключевые слова: Тува; тувинцы; шаман; горловое пение; шаманские практики, шаманские ритуалы*

*Stelmaszyk Malgorzata, PhD (Candidate in Social Anthropology, Religious Studies), Tutor in Social Anthropology, School of Social and Political Science, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, UK. Postal address: CMB, 15a George Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9LD. Tel.: 0131 651 3060. E-mail: malga1234@yahoo.pl*

*Стельмашик Малгожата — докторант (PhD по социальной антропологии, религиоведению), преподаватель социальной антропологии Школы социальных и политических наук факультета социальной антропологии Университета Эдинбурга, Великобритания. Адрес: CMB, 15a George Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9LD. Тел.: 0131 651 3060. Эл. адрес: malga1234@yahoo.pl*



## *Introduction*

Tuva is well-known in the world for its tradition of throat singing. It attracts researchers and musicians from all over the globe who are eager to grasp the fineness of the Tuvan sound and understand where it comes from. Nonetheless, the music and importance of sound production extend beyond the realm of throat singing tradition. I first arrived in Tuva in November 2014 prepared to engage with the characteristics of shamanic practice, a research project which I had built from a variety of ethnographies and books prior to my visit. Needless to say, my expectations were rather naive and soon enough I realized that the world of the Tuvan shamans and the secrets of everyday life in Kyzyl would take a long time to be revealed. Indeed, it was not until the end of my fieldwork when I grasped the essential feature of the shamanic craft, which is the importance of sound production and, thus, communication with spirits. These 'sounded' shamanic negotiations involved unique sonic repertoire constructed from the sound of drums, shamanic instruments and the shaman's voice. Consequently, while learning about the sound theorem in Tuvan throat singing, I noticed significant parallels in organizational patterns between the sound unit and the structural organization of shamanic rituals. In this article, I am going to focus not only on the role of sound in shamanic rituals, but more significantly, I am going to show how the structural organisation of a sound unit provides an effective analytical framework through which structural patterns of shamanic work can be delineated. In this way, the article illuminates unique criss-crosses between music and shamans' work not only in terms of practice, that is what the sound does, but also within theoretical registers concentrating on what the sound is. In order to present my arguments, this article is split into two sections. In the first section, I am presenting the characteristics of shamanic practice in Tuva. In the second section, I concentrate on the phenomenon of sound in shamanic rituals and present the parallels between the sound structure in throat singing and the organizational structure of the ritual. In other words, I argue that it is through examining the process of sound production and the structural particularities of the sound unit that one can unveil and analyse the complexity of the network of sociocosmic politics in Tuva, politics that bound humans and spirits alike.

## *Characteristics of shamanic practice in Tuva*

Shamans in Tuva can be male or female cognatic descendants of shamans, albeit it is impossible to predict which descendant will become the shaman. Ability to shamanise prevails usually from an early stage, for instance, in a variety of visual occurrences, such as when children see spirits playing in gardens, wandering in the streets or talking to them. Interestingly, shamanic skill is also recognized through having piercing black eyes or, for example, when children show no fear of the shaman



and find the sounds of the drum and shamanic instruments particularly entertaining and providing joy. Nonetheless, numerous features of shamanic practice in Tuva such as initiation, education and inheritance of shamanic powers echo the elements of shamanic practices described in a canonical analysis of shamanism by M. Eliade (Eliade, 1964). Consequently, shamanic initiation begins with a sudden loss of mind, coma or tormenting disease triggered by a vision of a spirit. The process of initiation which involves physical changes in the shaman's body is what most explicitly separates the shamans from people who can spontaneously see beyond the empirical realm. Shamans in Tuva can have various bodily features that differ from those of non-shamans, for instance, bigger hearts and changed bone structures. It is indeed the process of initiation in which the spirits prepare the shamans and their bodies to handle the advanced levels of engagement and negotiations with spirits and gods. According to my informants, shamans are being prepared to gain access to things which otherwise drive people mad. Tuvan shamans often undergo the education process in dreams when their 'soul' (sunezin) splits and travels between different countries and worlds and studies with spirits and deities. Education is then completed by following and learning from a more experienced shaman. Shamans in Tuva say that you become a 'real' shaman once you are able to pass a final test in which you overcome your own ego. Although shamanic calling is mandatory, future shamans undertake the attempts at evading it, for instance, through trying to get their powers cut off by another shaman or by converting to different religions. Nonetheless, in cases of very powerful shamans the spirits remain adamant and force the chosen shamans through different physical sufferings to follow their destiny.

Despite numerous confluences with the characteristics of shamanic practice elsewhere (Africa, South America), shamanising in Tuva exerts some unique features. The most unusual is the fact that Tuvan shamans do not go into trance when they communicate with spirits. "We do not roll on the ground like crazy" was one of the first comments I heard from the shaman I worked with when I asked her about trance. "This is the show for the tourists" she continued. In the early stages of my fieldwork, on numerous occasions I was told by the shamans that they are never possessed by the spirits and spirits do not try to speak to people whilst using the shamans' bodies. The shamans in Tuva interact and negotiate with spirits by the means of sound which is produced through drums, the shaman's voice as well as shamanic instruments, such as chajar kymchy, a long branch wrapped in colorful material with attached silver bells. The spirits are seduced and tempted by the sounds which can both irritate them as well as excite them. Their reactions and willingness to cooperate with the shaman strictly depend on how the shamans can manage this sounded landscape and adjust their voices. Consequently, the shamans in Tuva never allow the spirit to overtake their bodies and use it as a vessel. The shamans I have observed never tended to lose their consciousness and exhibit the common features of falling into trance such as, rolling their eyes, speaking odd languages or falling on the ground. These elements were rather perceived as a part of the 'shaman show'.



Rather than falling into trance, shamans in Tuva, while employing blessed juniper during the rituals, mark the arena in which the ritual will occur and where the spirits will arrive. The clients never interact with spirits directly through the mediumistic body of the shaman, although, if the shaman's work is particularly effective, they might catch a glimpse of the spirit or physically feel their presence in a form of a cold blow. The shamans communicate with spirits, manipulate and trick them by the means of sounds. These communications are an immediate (re)action, an active response situated in a given momentum, rather than a fixed technique transmissible “in contexts outside of those of its practical applications” (Ingold, 2011: 25). The shamans constantly modulate and adapt their voice and drumming in order to please or threaten the spirits. In this way, the Tuvan shamans do not act as receptacles for spirits, but rather work as unique artisans of curses. In the next section, I am going to discuss the confluences between the structure of the sound unit in throat singing and the structural organization of shamanic rituals.

### *From throat singing to shamanic rituals*

In his study of the Tungus peoples of Far North Siberia, P. Vitebsky compares the notions of sacredness between sedentary and nomadic cultures (Vitebsky, 2012). In sedentary cultures, the sense of sacredness becomes more intense as the worshipper moves closer to the final point, that is the church or the altar. However, for the nomadic people the whole landscape is like a huge open-air temple in which there is no final destination and no site is more spiritually charged than others (ibid.: 436). Sacredness is about progression around succession of places that never comes to an end (ibid.). In Tuva, people say that the spirits are part of everyday life. They heavily populate landscape as masters of places or spirits of locality. They can linger around gardens and streets and live with people in their houses. In this way, “the real and the immaterial, earth and sky are inextricably linked within one indivisible field, integrated along the tangled life-lines of its inhabitants” (Ingold, 2011: 18). The main argument in this article rests on a premise that the intertwinement of the spiritual and the social prevails and resonates with wider patterns of thought and practice, the patterns which can be delineated in the structure of sound in Tuva as well as in the shamanic rituals.

In the shamanic songs called *algysh*, which are performed by the shamans during the rituals, the words *ezinneldir* and *dyvylendir* occupy a central position in relation to the drum (Kenin-Lopsan, 1995). They can be both translated as ‘whirlwind’, or ‘swirl’. In this context, the sound of the drum is understood as *kysh*, a power which creates winds, thunders or tornadoes, and thus allows to successfully conduct a ritual involving curses. During the ritual the shaman directly approaches the spirits and gods through the use of the following passages:

1. “The sounds of the drum are triggering whirlwinds” or “the drum sounds”.



This is the sound of the drum while it triggers whirlwinds' *ezinneldir edip turar dyngyrymny*;

2. “The drum (the sound of the drum) causes thunder and loud lighting while triggering whirlwinds” *dyvylendir dingmirej beer dyngyrymny*.

The words ‘whirls’ and ‘swirls’ can be metaphorically associated with turbulence (Süzükei, 2007) and refer to the wider role of timbre in the fabric of everyday life in Tuva. The concept of turbulence occupies a particular position in the Tuvan world. Apart from its connections with drums, turbulence is a state in which a client and his body find themselves under the influence of curses. Similarly, turbulence is used in relation to the spirits and their moods. If the spirits arrive at the ritual in the state of turbulence or whirlwinds, this means they are very angry and the shaman is doomed to work hard. The genealogy of the notion of turbulence is rooted in music and specific production of sound in Tuva. The Tuvans’ music is known throughout the world for their tradition of *xöömei* throat singing, a particular form of performance which involves solely the singer and his voice, where the voice is considered as an instrument. The Tuvan music experts often stress the fact that rather than throat singing, *xöömei* should be translated as the art of playing the throat. While performing *xöömei*, a singer produces one main sound-drone which is then split into numerous parts - overtones. In order to produce melody, drone and its overtones have to be sung simultaneously. Consequently, as the Tuvans explain, this innate simultaneity of sound(s) leaves the singer and his voice in a state of constant turbulence, that of the sound(s).

Tuva is a sonically dense environment and sound daash is one of the crucial forms of orientation in space. For instance, hearing and producing sounds is used during hunting practices. Moreover, the Tuvans refer to sounds while describing a place or giving a form of address such as “meet me near the river spot where the yellow bird sings”. Sounds and singing constitute further a form of entertainment during the long hours of pasture. Music in Tuva is defined as “the nomads’ experience of acoustical immersion in the sounds of their natural environment and the subsequent transformation of this experience into an artistic and creative consciousness” (Suzukei, 2010: 212–213). The origins of the Tuvan instrumental music are unclear as nomadic cultures do not offer any written sources. However, numerous speculations indicate that the musical system of the nomads was formed during the period of the nomadic empire of the ancient Turks in 6th and 7th centuries AD (ibid: 231). Nonetheless, Tuva, with its instruments, instrumental music and throat singing, constitutes a unique musical civilization on the map of Central Asian types of sound cultures (ibid).

In classical European tradition musical styles, theories and performances are based on the concept of tone. Tone constitutes a pure sound with precisely defined stable pitch and color. Each tone occupies a strict position on a pitch scale, the position which if changed may lead to destruction of the purity of the sound (as in the instances when a singer suddenly begins to sing out of tune). The theoretical



foundation of European music constitutes a musical-acoustic system in which the tone-pitch interrelation is based on the concrete mathematical expression (ibid: 193). In other words, classical music resembles a mathematical structure that is arranged into fixed music notations and becomes a written text which can be then copied and learned. Subsequently, any composition is organized around a specific conception of time. In short, tones progress through a form that has a certain duration and that moves towards the prepared conclusion. Moreover, in the classical musical composition, in order to produce melody, a new sound has to be produced each time from a different source and to move from one sound to another one needs a physical movement, changing pitch by pressing strings (ibid.). In this way, melody is construed from discrete sounds, sounds coordinated through independent row-organized pitch scale. In very simplistic terms, sound is put into discrete independent tones and oriented outwardly or extraverted (ibid.). The essential difference between the classical and the Tuvan conception of sound is that the Tuvan music cannot be correlated with row organized and linear thinking and structuring. In Tuvan music, the sound emerges from a drone-overtone system, a system in which a basic sound overtone is being split into its partials – overtones. Consequently, it is a system drawn on a subordination and coordination of the fundamental sound and its parts. Therefore, the Tuvan concept of ‘sound’ is based on timbre. In short, basic sound drone disperses producing a spray of overtones. As a consequence, the drone and overtones become an inseparable whole. One cannot exist without another. In this way, any sound unit or sound ‘atom’ in Tuva resembles a spreading fan. Inside, there is a whole acoustic world created by the dispersion of overtones. Rather than produce every time a new sound from a different source, “melodic alternation of overtones occurs against the background of uninterrupted and constantly sounding drones” (ibid: 194). In other words, the drone and its overtones exist simultaneously. This simultaneity construes a space of turbulence in which the singer and his voice are constantly enmeshed while performing *xöömei*. Consequently, what the audience hear is not a structure of pure tones, logically organized in a mathematical fashion, but rather timbral richness and wide range of free overtones. In his *Philosophy of Modern Music* Adorno suggests that the crucial aim in the Western musical systems is to achieve full musical domination over nature or matter. As he explains, “a system by which music dominates nature results. It reflects a longing present since the beginning of the bourgeois era: to *grasp* and to place all sounds into an order, and to reduce the magic essence of music to human logic” (1994: 64, original emphasis). Conversely, the theoretical understanding of music in Tuva provides a rupture in this conception by turning the classical and Western thinking about sound upside down and embodying the lack of logical, mathematical thinking. Therein, music in Tuva constitutes a nonlinear system, deprived of an ordered sequence of tones. In short, rather than in a linear structure, the structural essence of the sound production lies in the split of a drone into multiple overtones. Tuvan sound offers the structure



of disparity, a cluster of interdependent parts which in order to exist must remain immersed in the state of turbulence – that is, interrelated with and through the fundamental sound, the whole. In the article, I argue that this unique structure of the sound unit offers an efficacious analytical framework through which wider patterns of thought and behavior in Tuva can be grasped. In the next section, I am going to show how the structure of sound based on drone-overtone format and timbre is parallel to the structural organization and happenings during the shamanic rituals. In order to illustrate my argument, I am going to present a short ethnographic vignette from one of the numerous rituals I participated in during my fieldwork in Kyzyl.

### ***Shamanic rituals, turbulence and sounds***

During the first few days when I followed the shaman I worked with, we visited Ajlys and her daughters in a flat in the center of Kyzyl. Ajlys was working in the city hall and had been struggling to get promoted. The shaman recognized five different curses afflicted by a jealous colleague which impeded the possibility of professional success. The ritual begun with the shaman spreading juniper smoke around the room and howling loudly. Then, the shaman sat on a chair humming softly and very quietly. Suddenly, her voice strengthened and turned into a gurgling laughter. Then again she relapsed into humming as if nursing a child to sleep. A moment later, she jumped and shouted: “hyshh hyshh”, as if pushing away a nasty animal. She grabbed her eeren (shamanic idol with bells, which contains essential for the shaman powers) and run around the room shaking the bells. “Do not look at me,” she screamed, “they are all here!” (spirits). Her voice became louder, she picked up her drum and begun to sing *algys* – a shamanic hymn. Her voice was now deep and very strong. She stood up and, while making circle moves with the drum around mine and the client's head, she begun to drum fast. “When you come to the road cross, don't make a sharp turn”, she suddenly whispered to me, “do you understand?” I nodded. Suddenly, someone aggressively knocked on the door. No one from the people present in the ritual responded. The shaman focused on the client. She was drumming louder and louder, her voice at its highest pitch and strength. I knew it was the moment when she was forcing spirits which had caused the curse to leave. A baby on the client's arm begun to cry and she had to breastfeed it which irritated the shaman. She lowered her voice which was suddenly sweet and delicate and the drumming softened. A few minutes later the client's cousin showed up and decided to join the ritual. The shaman continued playing the drum and in gentle humming asked the spirits for blessing and good luck for the client. Finally, she stopped singing, sat down and after a few final and this time longer beats on the drum she finished the ritual. “Did you notice how violent kids' cartoons have turned these days?” were the shaman's first words after she collapsed in a chair. “I know,” sighed Ajlys and they engaged in a conversation on the quality of television programs leaving me still a bit shocked



and digesting the ritual. Afterwards, the shaman explained that the curse was very strong and the spirit did not want to leave. “I had to shout at them. There was a chetker spirit walking around the house, it was starring badly at Ajlys. Fortunately, the spirits from the yellow country did not arrive, and this means there was no death threat”, she concluded. “Did you enjoy it?” the women asked me. “Yes,” I replied. “Tell me, what is it like to exist in so many multiple worlds, like being with the spirits and at the same time here, surrounded by curses?” I asked them. “What do you mean, multiple worlds?” Ajlys replied. “It is interesting what you are saying”, the shaman added. “I never thought about it this way”.

The aforementioned ethnographic example when approached from an analytical perspective, besides the overall centrality and importance of sound, reveals fascinating convergence with the structure of the sound unit in throat singing. The flat of a client or a room where the ritual is conducted can be approached as a homogeneous whole. In other words, it can be compared to a closed fan. The shaman marks the space of the ritual with blessed juniper. Once the shaman begins drumming and singing *algys*, the process of dispersion of the parts begins. The drum instigates turbulence; “the sound of my drum creates whirlwinds/ turbulence,” sings the shaman. This is the moment when the ‘fan’ begins to open up. All of a sudden, the room materializes itself as filled with the clients and their curses, the spirits walking around the flat reveal themselves, and other spirits arrive from their respective ‘countries’ (*oran*). This is intersected with the sudden arrival of another cousin, abrupt knocks on the door and the child crying and demanding food. The shaman plays the drum and the ‘fan’ fully opens up. The room as a whole is split into its parts and all of the elements remain interdependent and immersed in turbulence triggered by the drum. The realms of the ‘social’ and the ‘sacred’ are entangled and constantly intertwining. The room turns into something of a shaken snowball. Like reflections on the water or reflections on a diamond these elements constantly shimmer, become more or less present. Similarly to the throat singer and his voice, the drum creates a state of turbulence, spreading the fan, and like the throat singer and his voice, the room turns into a state of turbulence, dispersion and simultaneity. Non-linearity occurs through the constant interchange of the elements without any concrete logical order – the cry of the baby, the spirit of the dead starring at the client, the knock on the door, the shaman's howl. All elements function simultaneously and remain hooked and turbulent because of the drum. Non-linearity prevails further in the way the shaman and the client reply to my comment about being in numerous ‘realms’ simultaneously without recognizing it. Life in Tuva is not conceived of moving along a logical chain of events, i.e. action/reaction. Rather, it is about smoothly sliding from one part to another, from one reflection to another. The client and the shaman do not feel as if they have to contemplate on what just happened. They swiftly move to another part, the everyday, to motherhood and the quality of upbringing the children.



In his analysis of throat singing, Hodgkinson argues that the essence of Tuvan music lies in a form of metaphysical metabolism, modulation of (multiple) being of the human within the (multiple) world(s) she or he inhabits (Hodgkinson, 2005/2006: 6). In this article, I challenge this notion and argue that the Tuvan world and the realm of the ritual should be approached through the notions of homogeneity and unity rather than multiplicity. As showed in the analysis, like the sound unit, the space of the ritual is introverted rather than extroverted in a sense that everything that occurs during the ritual happens and vibrates through and within itself rather than engages with the separate external elements. Like a spread fan or reflections on the water, the space of the ritual and its elements remain in the state of constant interdependency initiated and maintained by the sound of the drum. The spirits, the client, curse, the everyday are parts of one whole or one realm. It is during the rituals and through the sonically dense presence that the Tuvan sociocosmic politics reveal themselves in their full palette.

### ***Conclusion***

In this article, I sought to show that, similarly to the sound unit, the Tuvan world constitutes an introverted, inside oriented whole, where elements function in the closed interrelated and interdependent system. Consequently, I focused on the importance of sound and showed how the structure of the sound unit in throat singing offers an effective analytical framework to structurally grasp the occurrences during the shamanic rituals. Given this, it can be argued that in the fabric of the Tuvan sociocosmic interactions, like in the atomic structure of the universe in quantum physics, the shift of one atom implies an immediate change of another. Following this logic, there is no room for contingency in the Tuvan world, which is why the Tuvans often insist that everything in their life always bears an explanation, the statement which offers broad avenues for further research.

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