Transcultural Collisions; Music and Shamanism in Siberia - Tim Hodgkinson

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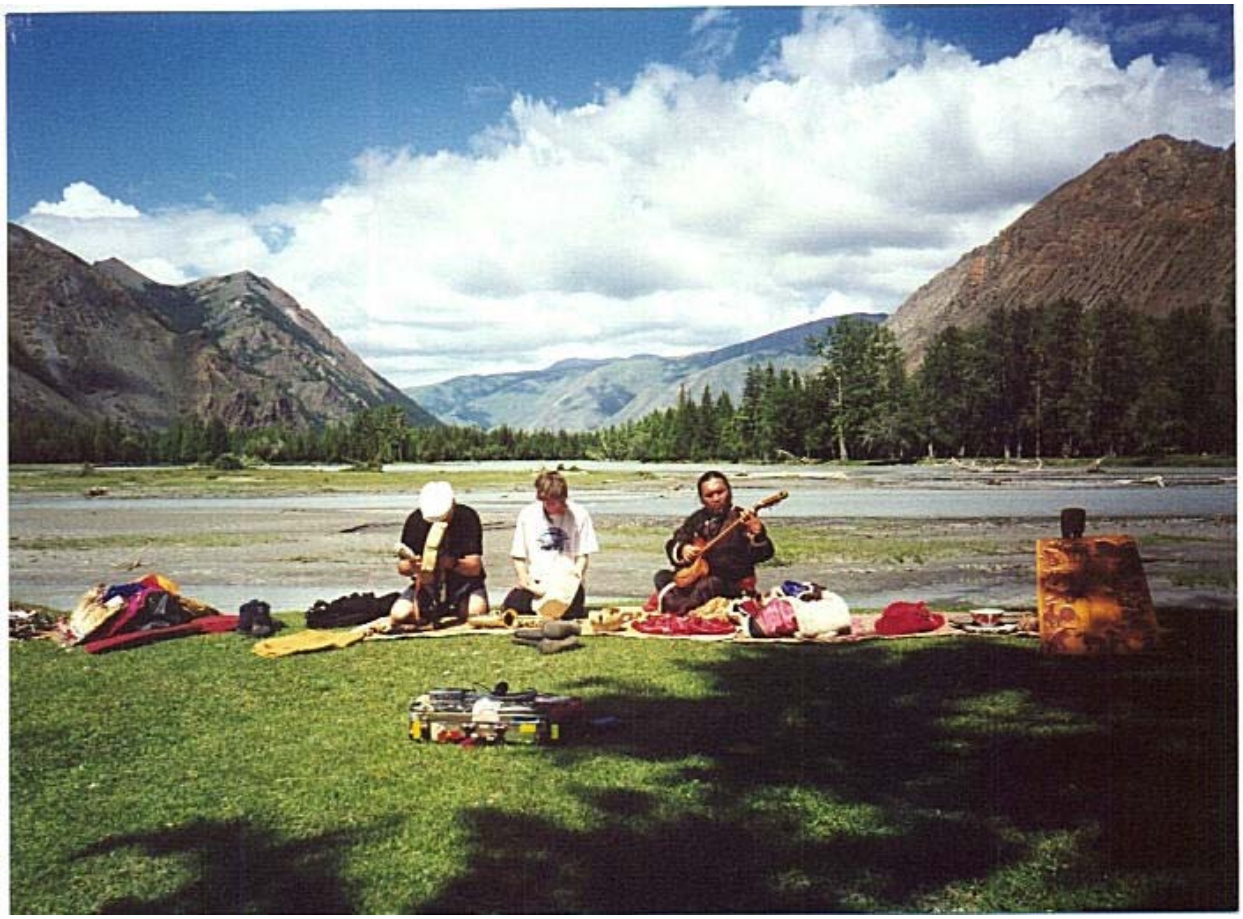
K-SPACE AT CHAGAN-OZOON, ALTAI



Abstract

This paper outlines from a personal perspective our work on music and shamanism in Siberia from 1990 onwards, starting out from our first preconceptions of what shamans were doing, our early encounters with a wider shamanic culture that seemed to provide a source for artistic inspiration, and leading, through a deeper and more long-term engagement, to the development of artistic, organisational and research-orientated projects.

Paper

I decided to write up our work on music and shamanism in Siberia as a process of learning from mistakes.

Alternating between observing and participating, being on the outside and being on the inside. I had wanted to set things out according to the years they happened in. But human time is not sequential but crosscut by memories and plans, and we are still re-understanding things said to us by musicians and shamans years ago.

By the late 1980's Ken and I had already been playing improvised music together for the best part of 10 years. We shared a belief in the aim of giving audiences an intense and extraordinary experience. And we'd got into the habit of talking through the ideas behind our playing. One night, discussing the relevance of states of mind to the playing of improvised music, I remembered shamanism from when I read anthropology at Cambridge. There seemed to be two potential connections. Shamanic performances had a large element of improvisation as compared with the fixed rituals and liturgies of other religions. And shamans prepared for their performances - which might suggest that improvising musicians should do the same.

By chance we found ourselves invited to tour Siberia as an improvising duo in 1990. We quickly realised that Siberia had been the home of shamanism and we wondered if anything of it had survived. On this first visit we met no shamans, but only people who knew them or spoke of them. In particular Sanka Kostiakov of the Khakass People's Movement, a young journalist and politician who told us that Russian culture had robbed his people of their spirituality, and was campaigning for the return of shamanism. Also in Abakan, which was only the second concert of the tour, we were suddenly given the opportunity to perform with the Khakassian throat singer Anatoly Kokov. 'Tomorrow morning you will have the television broadcast, and, by the way, will also be local singer, and maybe you can do something together…' We arrived at the studio, set up the gear and met Anatoly. Then it was time to record. We had no time to discuss what we were going to do. We played a short set of around 20 minutes. It seemed to us Anatoly was not at ease. He wasn't singing much, mostly staring into his cup of tea. We decided to try again and we said to him that we should not worry about the music but simply play the spirit as we felt it together. There was a longish pause whilst the technicians wound the tape back to the right place. They didn't have editing facilities so they would drop the new take in exactly the right place, recording over the first take, whilst keeping the introduction to the programme. The second take felt much better and Anatoly seemed very pleased afterwards. We had made a small but significant step, discovering that a common ground could be found with a musician of another culture on the basis of spirit.

During this tour and later tours this idea was reinforced many times by comments from Siberian audiences. The music we were playing was free improvisation of a kind bracketed as avant garde within Western culture, with an appreciation generally limited to a small educated group. Our approach to playing in Siberia was not to dilute this in any way but rather to play it as convincingly and as hell for leather as possible. Yet in Siberian cities, small towns, and, later, remote villages, we played to audiences representing an inclusive cross
section of society and spread right across the age range. Listeners spoke to us about closing their eyes and having visions, or mentally flying whilst they listened, and instead of asking about our equipment or telling us that our music was difficult, they asked about our energy levels during performances, or about how we managed to return to normality after a concert. Sometimes older people prayed during concerts. In Buryatia, the instrument maker Baldin Gamboyev told us that our music was 'the old spirit music, just played on new instruments'.

Something very strange was happening. We were sharing with Siberian audiences an experience vaguely defined as spiritual. It seemed to thrive in cultures that had had shamanism, but ethnic Russian Siberians were into it too. From our end we'd been thinking of jazz improvisers like Albert Ayler and John Coltrane. The spiritual for them was a consciousness or a force for unity, the transcendence of the ego in gnostic religious experience. A very different tradition from that of shamanism. Our audiences seemed to be drawing on a more elaborated, less apophatic collective imaginary…

Is it in fact possible to share an experience with someone from another culture? Is it possible to share an experience with another person of your own culture? Or do we at best share the codifications of such experiences in language? If one can make any movement towards this it will be through gaining some understanding of the narratives of the other, the underlying patterns and stories that organise the sense of what is codified. But in 1990 any access to this level was for us still in the future so far as Siberia went.

As for shamans themselves, we had still not had any direct contact. We were thinking of them as performers, in the Western sense, but performers who had developed skills to manipulate their audience's frame of mind. Possibly this was the way forward that we saw for our own music at the time. We'd noticed, from listening to the few recordings we had, that the way shamans played the drum seemed to involve almost constantly changing the tempo and shifting the accent, and that this seemed to be a unique characteristic of shamans' playing. Working from the ideas of Robert Ornstein about the sense of duration being linked to how information is grouped in the mind, we thought a shaman was probably inducing a kind of information processing crisis in the minds of the audience. Listeners would then enter a highly suggestive state in which their experiences would be organised by clues given by other aspects of the performance such as the chant.

As soon as we began to meet shamans themselves, from 1992 onwards, we realised that there had to be something very different going on, because everyone was talking about SEEING. We met the Buryat shaman Nikolai Mikhailov who told us that he could summon his helper spirit - his grandmother - with no more than a clap of the hands. Nothing that he described seemed to fit our model. Arriving in Tuva for the first time we interviewed Salchak Mongush, an actor in the Tuvan national theatre who specialised in the role of shaman. He told us that after performances of plays, when the company was out on tour in the taiga, people would sometimes ask him to

come to their yurt to heal someone; he would decline, because, he said, 'I do not see'.
Now a shaman seemed to be a person with a gift or training for seeing, and this was an internal kind of seeing, so they were someone whose imagination had been organised in a particular way. In Tuva in 1992 we also met Kenin Lopsan Mongush who introduced us to Tuvan shamanic mythology and cosmology, giving us our introduction, so to speak, to how this imagination might be organised. And we met the as-yet secret shaman Kunga-Boo Tash-Ool officiating as a Buddhist lama in Samagaltai. Both these characters seemed to resonate in our minds for long after we returned to England.
We now arrived at a phase, which would turn out differently for each of us. For the first time we felt as if we were entering under the influence of shamanism. It was no longer a cultural institution that we were observing from the outside. An enormous number of apparently random circumstances had brought us into contact with individuals who had the means to show us shamanism from the inside. We were imaginary apprentices of a training of the imagination. We started playing dungurs - shamans' drums - together. We acquired helper spirits and learned to summon them. Rather than just improvising we tried to focus on the non-musical purpose of the act of drumming.

KUNGA BOO

All this time we were gaining more experience of working as musicians with the local musicians we met.
We hung out and performed at a festival in Kyzyl with the Tuvan group Biosyntes. Their music was an extraordinary mix; everyone in masks and robes, pounding drums and shamanic leaping, violin and cello swapping hectic atonal lines. Before the concert they listened to some of our recordings: 'This has got drive', they said: 'we can work with this'.
On the same trip we met Marfa and Sergei Rastarguev in Yakutsk and recorded with them - also with Sasha Berioskin. Marfa and Sergei seemed to shape-shift effortlessly between cultural roles that just wouldn't fit together in the West. They could demonstrate acrobatic circus routines, and they could go into passionate free improvisations filled with animal and bird sounds.
It was starting to seem that a wider shamanic culture was available for use by artists, without them being shamans and without involving them in the specific dangers and responsibilities of shamanising as such. So far as music performance was involved, this shamanic culture could be referenced by the use of shamanic costume, dance and instruments. Hand in hand went the referencing of the natural sound environment, present not only as sound material, in the imitations of animal and bird sounds, but also in the organisation of the music as a parallel natural

sound world in which the different voices had ecological relationships rather than those recognised as 'musical' in the West.
This seemed to be as true of Sakha artists, such as the Rastarguevs and the rock based groups such as Cholbon and Ai-Tal, as of Tuvan musicians. This despite the fact that Sakha cultural leaders tended to the view that shamanism was dangerous and should be kept away from Westerners, whereas Tuvans favoured maximum media exposure and working with Western organisations.
One evening a local journalist seized the opportunity of a power-cut to interview us before a concert in Gorno-Altaisk. She asked: “How can you claim to play shamanic music, when there is no body on stage?” It took a second to realise that she meant that there was no sick person on stage waiting to be healed by the music. We explained that a concert could be a particular form of shamanising where the occasion, the demand, was not a specific one, but the general one of the state of the society, its spiritual health, and its relations to the natural world. But we were less sure about this than we made out.
This question of the boundary between art and shamanism would continue to come forwards towards us in many and varied situations. Back in London we met and worked with the Korean mudang Hi-ah Park. No longer inside her own culture, Hi-ah was formulating ideas about the universal pan-human value of her ritual dances, ideas in which the boundary between art and therapy was blurred. But from within a Western perspective the cultural politics of referencing shamanism was problematic. T.M. Luhrmann wrote about the appeal of magic in the modern West as based on the promise of emotional and imaginative intensity
but without the requirement of doctrinal belief that a rational person might find off-putting. Western neo-shamanism slots into this wider New Age scene and has the same ideological function of recuperating exploratory impulses away from social forms of change towards individual self-improvement. 'Other worlds' become virtual and not political possibilities.
…
What could we contribute to the teaching of improvisation in the West? For use in workshops, I started to draw loosely on the ideas of Eugenio Barba, ideas which taken together make up what is known as 'Theatre Anthropology'. We found Barba's techniques translated well from theatre training to music improvisation training. Barba believes that all performers in all human cultures do the same basic things when they prepare to perform, that is, they organise their bodies, and their minds within their bodies, differently from how they organise them in everyday life. There's a different balance, a different distribution of attention and physical energy within the body. Barba calls this the 'pre-expressive' because it is prior to any specific expression or discourse. But Barba's actual theatre work presented itself as if using these techniques moved it into a cultural zero-state, a privileged space outside all human culture. The effect is that of a cult, a kind of 'jargon of action' defending itself vainly from the surrounding actual socio-political context. The way we applied Barba's ideas stayed resolutely impure. I would say that we used the pre-expressive to get to the expressive, rather than as a way of pushing away the problem of what to express.
…
By 1996 we had started to learn from more extended collaborations with Siberian musicians. We did different series of concerts with the Tuvan musicians Albert Kouvezin and Alexei Saaya, together with Valentina Ponomarova, and with Altaian singer Bolot Biryshev. Going beyond the one-off meeting situation was important because you could start to place yourself alongside the other musicians in terms of trying to find solutions to problems that you faced together. One night with Bolot we arrived to play a gig in Novosibirsk to find ourselves in a particularly depressing and expensive cocktail club. Finally Bolot suggested that our approach to the gig should be to try to make people cry. Whether we succeeded or not I don't know but it certainly dissolved the alienating effect of the environment on us.
However the most important collaboration that we initiated - which continues today - is with the Tuvan musician Gendos Chamzyryn. Gendos is deeply rooted in tradition but his notion of tradition is extremely dynamic and adaptive. He says:
“Where I was born, when I was young, I started to sing, about 6 years old; music seemed to help me, to give me energy, to give me education, to bring me new ideas, acquaintances and knowledge..new places, interesting meetings with older men and women, and younger; from music I received what I wanted to receive; I've been playing and singing for most of 40 years and through this time I've reached a knowledge of our planet, our earth, I understand a bit what it is.”

GENDOS CHAMZYRYN

With Gendos we invented ourselves as the group K-Space, a playful image-field containing notions of connections across distances which could be cultural and geographic…..the Tuvan notion of a spiritual communion between land and people, but universalised via a Russian tradition of esoteric cosmology, K-Space, named after the Russian astrophysicist Nikolai Kozyrev, recognises specific times and places, such as when and where you are born, but allows them to be connected and traversed. It is a kind of symbol for the peripatetic collaboration of its members. Possibly it connects with the unmeasured nomadic spaces described by Deleuze and Guattari in Mille Plateaux, or indeed by the Bedouin poets of Arabia many centuries before. More recently the group has started using xenochrony in its recorded work, superimposing field recordings made throughout its entire history in extremely varied locations as a way of inviting listeners to join us in K-Space.

Like Gendos, Ken and I had early musical experiences that drew us out of our immediate backgrounds and into a wider world. It is probably this path that is initially shared between musicians of different cultures: it suggests a pattern of movement relative to the native culture of each. However, in the communicative field opened up in such meetings, cultural differences must then be allowed to collide. Without this, the work we do together is aesthetically untrue and politically dishonest. The work must never pretend to dissolve cultural difference. As work, it tries to take up into itself (to 'musicalise') the contradictions and problems of its own productive surroundings. This seems to me to be as good a definition of authenticity in art as you will get - as applicable to folk music as to experimental music. When someone comes from outside the productive conditions that have formed a musical tradition and tries to recreate that music, they are creating an emblem of the music but it is not the living thing itself. The outsider has one chance only, and that is to enter into the productive relations of that music, that is, to live, in part, the life that that music is musicalising.

But how is it possible to have such strong responses to the music of another culture long before ever meeting a musician or indeed any member of that culture? One answer might be that

music articulates the complex relations between the cultural and the precultural dimensions of the human. If so, then we already have half the equation. Perhaps we all already have an innate inner working model of outer acoustic space, a virtual sound-space primed to enact the movements of voices and sounds around us. Perhaps all music choreographs this space first, and only then out of it forms the territories we identify as tonal, or metric, or raga, or maquam. Perhaps such a fundamental transcultural sound-space is what allows us to be seized by unknown musics, even where we have no tools for decoding their meaning.

But this recognition is the beginning and not the end. Because otherwise cultural differences would be weightless and could be brushed aside. Or, to put it another way, the recognition would answer a question, when, in fact, it asks it. In one way the musician is working upwards and outwards from the primal material of movements of

energy, gestures and shapes of sound, dyings and continuations, outbreath and inbreath, working upwards and outwards towards the conventions of the cultural tradition, the language of sound a culture has built up in relation to the life around it. In another way, the musician is born first into a musical culture and its social habits, but discovers gradually that there is something in music which sucks you down towards more primal concerns. Music is always making this connection, or circulation of energy, between these two poles of the human being. It has to musicalise its exact and mundane circumstances but develop its vision of those circumstances, to see how deep they run, to make a very simple and familiar rhythmic pattern suggest the non-sequential quality of human time for example. …

The musician's job is to musicalise stuff.

By 1998 we'd been thinking about the organisational side of meetings between experimental art and the cultures of remote rural communities in the hinterlands of Siberia. Music tours usually finance themselves from concerts in big cities, but we wanted to get out into the taiga. We wrote a manifesto and developed a project that we named Radical Transcultural

Initiatives. On this basis our contact in Barnaul, tour-manager and agent Evgeni Kolbashev, fixed up sponsorship from local Siberian companies for a tour of the Altai Republic. Gendos Chamzyryn's presence on this tour was crucial, not only as a musician, but also as a speaker of the Tuvinian language - closely related to the Altaian language. Gendos helped establish a relation of trust and respect with villagers. A typical pattern emerged. We would camp some distance outside a village. Next morning we would drive in and children would come running after the cars. We would stop and do a short impromptu concert for the children. During this time, adults would show up. Then a more formal concert would be arranged, say outside the village, on a riverbank. Musicians would be fetched from their homes, perhaps bringing the village's important objects and costumes for display. Gendos would start proceedings with a demonstration of Tuvan throat singing. We would then play a freely improvised piece. Then the Altaians would show us their music.... and so on. All the time more people would arrive from the fields, some watching the concert on horseback.

Afterwards we assessed the results. Although we spent more time out of town we didn't get far enough with playing with local musicians beyond the very early stages of contact. We were still limited by lack of time, because to go into these regions you need a support team. Establishing contact and trust takes longer, and that means a big taxi meter ticking away somewhere…which day do we have to return the truck? When do the drivers have to get home? How many days' supplies have we got?

TUVA & ALTAI

In 2005 I decided to go to Tuva as a researcher to study the boundary between art and shamanism in the field. We had already recorded and transcribed many long interviews with shamans but now it was time to get things on a more systematic basis and concentrate on this question. I was talking to musicians, carvers and shamans. Luckily I

no longer needed a live translation, so I didn’t have to remember to record interviews in stereo with the translator one side and the interviewee the other - a trick that allows you to go back to what the interviewee is saying later, when you discover your translator got it all wrong. I did formal interviews, with a list of questions, though I changed the order depending on the way things were going. But I felt it was also important to allow my understanding of the information I was getting to develop through all kinds of informal contacts. This takes us back to the point I made earlier about understanding the narratives of another culture, the stories that organise the meanings of what is being said. Sometimes you just sit out on the porch with someone and you don’t rush into asking questions, but after a while a dog goes by and this dog, so to speak, places you together as two humans in the here and now, and a conversation starts that might turn out to be more revealing than anything you had had in mind. At other times the approach is the exact opposite, that is to say, it's disputatious. As in 'How did you become a shaman?' 'It's in the blood.' 'Do you have any brothers and sisters?' 'Yes, two brothers..' 'Are they shamans?' 'No.' 'Well then?'

What did I conclude about art and shamanism in Tuva?

As we have seen, Tuvan artists, like those elsewhere in Siberia, feel free to draw on a general shamanic culture. But Tuvan art is shamanic in a deeper way then simply referencing shamanism. Tuvan art is produced within the framework of a creative psychology that is conceptualised and experienced as spiritual. An artist is free to ask permission from spirits, and to receive help from spirits, within the context of an aesthetic process. Furthermore, a person who listens to, or looks at, art may receive kŸsh, the spiritual force residing in the work as a result of the artist's inner moment of creativity and dialogue with the spirits.

But what follows depends on how this person perceives and receives this force. So art does not make a direct and potentially drastic intervention like the shaman's ritual, which changes not only the person but all the relevant objective circumstances surrounding that person, not just inviting a response, but sending force directly into a person and their world.

What is censured in Tuvan society is, roughly speaking, behaviour that blurs tdifference. An artist should not carry out, or go through the motions of carrying out, a ritual act such as that which would change the world. Neither should a shaman simply go through the motions of ritual, on a theatre stage for example, without being in the real situation that makes that ritual necessary. (One of the forms that censure takes is the making of an explicit connection between a breach of the rules and something going wrong, a musician falling ill, for example. In which case it might be said that the musician disturbed the spirits by trespassing on shamans' territory..)

In Tuvan culture, the ritual actions of a shaman are aimed at objective results and are felt to have objective effects. It is the lived problems of everyday life, coming to an acute point, that provide the occasion for calling on the shaman. Shamanising is case-orientated, and art is not. A piece of art is in the world, something that a person could encounter or not. The connection between a person and a work of art comes from the way that work opens towards the cosmos, and the interplay between that opening and the person's circumstances. True, a performed art, such as music, tries to be as case-orientated as it can, tuning itself to time and weather, place, and the feel of an audience. But this can't match the detailed crafting of a shamanic ritual to fit a personal crisis, with the careful astrological reckoning, the 'inner' and 'outer' observation, the probing questions asked. Whilst art addresses persons, ritual objectively changes the world around and inside persons, dealing with all the circumstances, near and far, that bear on the case.

Although much of art's work takes place in the imagination, the artistic imagination is always fundamentally orientated towards an image that requires to be made in the real (i.e. 'this') world. The dialogue is between maker and materials, via the imagination. The convergence between the plane of imagination and the plane of material is effected by a physical process of making.

Ritual, on the other hand, establishes a special kind of meaning whereby concrete actions refer to, summon, and enliven a collective imaginary space designated as the sacred. Here is a movement starting in the plane of concrete acts, but going away towards the plane of imagination. What happens in the yurt, what a shaman physically does - drumming and singing, for example - is fundamentally orientated towards what happens in the domain of the sacred. Thus a shaman takes care of the material plane primarily to organise it in relation to the sacred, according to the special semantics distinguishing ritual acts and signs from everyday ones. Kara-Ool said: “The dungur (drum) plays music for the spirits, and for the shaman's spirit to find the spirits.”

It was particularly enlightening, in this context, to work with a shaman who had studied music and even attended music college in Kyzyl. Sergei Tumat said:

“When I shamanise, I'm not here, not in the place where I'm playing the dungur, it's just my material body that's there: I'm away with the spirits, that's where my total attention
is. If someone touches me, tries to get my attention there in the yurt, that's dangerous, it would be like falling a long way: so it's completely different from playing music to an audience, where you have to be there, to be attentive to what your material body is doing, to everything I learned in music school…”

SERGEI TUMAT

It would be wrong to oppose sacred imagination (as collective) to artistic imagination (as individual). Artistic imagination is itself culturally and collectively constructed. At the heart of Tuvan artistic imagination is an image of nature as a totality, as a cosmos. It is towards this cosmos that an artist strives to open. Artistic skill is knowing how to work this opening towards the cosmos into the materials of sound or stone, by revealing the inner nature of these materials. Thus the emergence of xoomei throat singing from a background of shamanic belief seems quite logical when understood as deriving from a cultural tendency to want to unveil the hidden inner character of a phenomenon, rather than to manipulate its exterior. By filtering and amplifying the upper harmonics of a fundamental vibration we are unveiling its hidden life. Tuvan melody is the unfolding of the inner nature of a single sound because it is made completely of these upper harmonics.

The power and cunning of artist and shaman diverge, the shaman primed to negotiate sacred worlds, the artist ready to hone a particular vocal technique or visualise the exact way a deer leaps. We can watch where the care goes, where the attention goes. Take the shaman Kunga-Boo, who is also a carver. When speaking of his carvings, he uses an unequivocally aesthetic tone: “Look at this, look at how beautiful it is, how the two goats are standing together, the composition”. As the only carver I know who works in horn rather than stone, he talks about horn being a finer and stronger material than stone, how this allows him to achieve greater delicacy in the figures. His work frequently shows a sense of exploiting variations in colour and texture of the material to achieve a more 'living' quality in the figure. In this sense the carver Kunga is truly a maker, focussed on taking physical stuff and crafting it into a physical thing. But as a shaman Kunga also makes ritual objects that have a ritual function, such as acting as vessels for spirits. Such objects may be the ongon given to householders to keep in their homes, to be prayed to, or given small sacrifices of food. Here his approach is completely different. Although the ongon depicts three human figures, it does so in the most rudimentary way: the work is done quick, using felt, metal, or wood, whatever is to hand. The care is directed at ensuring that the ongon really is a recipient and holder of spiritual energy. Its form is merely adequate to this function.

…

This particular trip, our most recent, was also notable for two concerts involving musicians and shamans that we organised in Kyzyl. This was not to make a point about Tuvan music, along the lines of Ted Levin 'curating' a tour of mountain streams to demonstrate that throat-singing is mimetic of nature. We wanted to offer this as something artistically innovative, but without disrespect for the deeper shape of Tuvan culture. The shamans we invited did not 'act like shamans' on stage. Innerly they shamanised, but outerly they were like musicians.