

Shamans don't want to be rich

Tuva, poverty-stricken and isolated on the Mongolian border, wants to return to ancestral values. But is this possible with the country now threatened by climate change, with its snow cover dwindling and rainfall erratic?

BY ANGELA ROBSON

At around three in the morning the temperature in the yurt plummets and the wind begins to howl. A young nomad woman, who earlier had tucked me into my makeshift bed on the floor, snores loudly in my ear. The dying embers of a wood-burning stove reveal the remnants of the evening meal – bowls licked clean of fermented sour milk and half a sheep's carcass strung up high on the yurt wall.

We are in the high steppes, in the remote province of Erzin Kozhuun in southern Tuva, close to the Mongolian border. Under a pile of blankets in one corner of the yurt is a shaman. Asleep, he seems a shadow of the person who, his face obscured by an elaborate feathered headdress, had lit a fire at midnight on the forested slopes outside, calling to sky spirits and beating a rhythm on his drum.

At first it seems I am the only one awake, then a pair of jet black eyes meet mine. A young boy with burnished cheeks and closely cropped hair stares at me for a few seconds, then dives under a thick quilt. His mother, in her early twenties, sleeps on the floor next to his iron bed. The previous evening, after wiping her hands clean of the blood of the slaughtered sheep, she had insisted on running off to apply eye shadow before posing for photos, wearing her high-heeled black leather boots.

I'd arrived at sunset, driven along a series of rocky, mountainous paths by Altair, a nomad by birth and now a businessman living in Tuva's capital city, Kyzyl. Altair had invited me to stay with his family – a group of herders who moved with the seasons. Altair, a stockily built man with a powerful presence, rarely smiles and initially seemed permanently on guard. We had met in Abakan, in neighbouring Khakassia, and he had driven at what felt like alarming speeds over the high snowy peaks towards Tuva. "The journey can take 10 hours by bus, I do it in five," he said after a long period of silence. "We have no railway and only seasonal flights. In winter we are entirely cut off." Was it not frustrating that Tuva was so closed from the rest of the world? As a businessman, how did he manage to trade? "We are grateful for our isolation," he answered. "It helps us to rebuild what the Soviets tried to destroy."

EVERYONE HAS AN EE

Ringed by 2,000-metre-plus mountains and far from major trade routes, Tuva's ancient civilisation has been preserved by its extreme isolation from other parts of Russia. A vast expanse, which includes some of the most unspoiled natural beauty in the world, it is home to such endangered species as the snow leopard and mountain ibex. There is almost no industry and the airport is a one-storey wooden shed. Uvs Nuur, a lake on the border with Mongolia, is a world heritage site of outstanding natural beauty. It is also where Putin comes to pose for his bare-chested macho photographs.

A census by the Tuvan People's Republic in 1931, 13 years before it became part of the Soviet Union, reports that 82.2% of Tuvans were nomads with set migratory routes. The country had 725 shamans, just under half of them women (1). Tuva was incorporated into the Soviet Union on Stalin's orders in 1944. The republic's 32 Buddhist temples were destroyed and Buddhist lamas and animist shamans were persecuted and often killed. Despite stiff resistance by the nomadic population, farming was eventually collectivised, new animal breeds were introduced and crops were grown that required heavy quantities of fertilisers, which steadily degraded the land.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, there has been a resurgence of cultural life in Tuva.

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A shaman woman conducts a ceremony at Sacred Mountain, one of the holiest sites in Tuva

Nomadic lifestyles and migration patterns have returned. Interdependence with nature is deeply ingrained in the Tuvan psyche and fundamental to their way of thinking. There is a strong tradition of respect for natural places. Every person has an *ee*, a master or spirit guardian.

Yet Tuva faces huge challenges. The few factories have closed and services such as electricity are in disrepair, especially in rural areas. Half the population is unemployed: most of those who work are state employees such as teachers, with families to support. There is a huge problem with alcoholism, particularly among young people who grew up at a time when core Tuvan values – respect for elders, nature and the Buddha – were repressed.

To make matters worse, climate change threatens both the environment and the population, and predictions for the future are alarming. Satellite measurements show a decrease in snow cover in the past 30 years. Rainfall has become erratic, less frequent but more intense. Tuva's Yenisei river, the fifth longest in the world, flows directly into the Arctic. It cuts the land in two and is increasing in volume, causing flooding. Fires on the land are increasing. And warmer conditions have

led to a dramatic increase in tick encephalitis, which attacks the nervous system and can lead to meningitis, brain inflammation and death. Tuva is estimated to have six times more people infected with encephalitis than elsewhere in Russia. In their latest report on climate change and its consequences, Rosshydromet (Federal Service for Hydrometeorology and Environmental Monitoring) concluded that climate change has already had a greater effect in Russia than in other parts of the world.

CLOSED TO RUSSIANS

Suddenly, in the flat of the valley hundreds of metres below, Kyzyl, the capital, comes into view. Once a Soviet industrial city, the industry was not sustainable once the Soviet Union broke up. Its ugliness is overwhelming – a grey blemish in the surrounding vast wilderness. Altair stops the car and we get out. "During Soviet times things were controlled or destroyed," he says, lighting a cigarette. "We were told that our traditions were primitive." Yet once in Kyzyl, the city seems to metamorphose. Dominated by the mountains that encircle it on all sides, all thoughts of it

being unsightly vanish. At dawn, I head to the waterfront. In front of the vast, slow-moving Yenisei River, a concrete obelisk, beloved by Tuvans, marks the geographical centre of Asia. Rising up in the distance, is what, in Soviet times, was called Lenin Mountain. Ignoring the fact that it was a sacred place, the Russians wrote Lenin's name on the surface of the mountain and erected a sign.

All this has now gone. In its place is the mostly widely used of all Buddhist mantras, *Om Mani Padme Hum* (hail the jewel in the lotus). Tibetan Buddhists believe that saying or viewing the prayer invokes the blessings of Chenrezig, the embodiment of compassion. It glistens in white Sanskrit like snow on the mountainside.

Further down the waterfront, where the city peters out into wild parkland, is Kyzyl's chief Buddhist temple. I had been told that, as a mark of respect, I must walk around the temple anti-clockwise four times before entering. A group of four intoxicated Tuvan youths saunter by and begin mocking me in drunken English. When I have completed my circuits, I find the door is locked. "The temple is closed to Russians," shout the boys.

In the late 1990s, post-Soviet Union, the writer Colin Thubron decided to explore Siberia by truck, river and train. Until 1991 foreigners were only allowed along the Trans-Siberian railway. In his powerful book, *In Siberia*, he searches for the "core of Siberia" – a difficult quest in a mass one twelfth of the Earth's land surface. Thubron had already lived 10 years longer than the average Siberian when he made his 15,000-mile trip at the age of 58. "The Tuvans were in the ascendant now [over the Russians]," writes Thubron when he reaches the "strange, isolated republic".

"Their country might lie in economic thrall to Moscow, but since gaining national sovereignty in 1991 they had been gathering strength... Racial riots seven years before had driven several thousand Russian workers home, and a suppressed violence was in the air. The police patrolled in threes. Twice I saw men searched, then arrested. In the desolate main square, where flowerbeds were going to seed, Lenin still flung out a shaky arm at the local parliament. But a monumental fountain was adorned with Tuva's disparate animals – camel, reindeer, yak" (2).

During a visit to the Tuva's National Museum in Kyzyl, the artefacts he glimpsed implied that shamanism was a thing of the past, corroborated by a lone shaman he hunted down in a poor suburb. "He said: 'The real shamans, the true shamans, have almost gone now. The traditions have faded away. The customs aren't known. There was one old shamaness in a remote part, eighty-six years old. But she was the last. No more than that. And there used to be so many. And people need us'."

LINK BETWEEN SPIRITS

"Shamanism was officially prohibited during Soviet rule, but we still did our rituals in secret. Even the officials who fought against shamanism publicly, came and asked us to carry out rituals in private." The speaker wears long furs and a headdress made from the feathers of predatory birds. She calls herself Moon Heart.

We are in a rocky alcove inside one of Tuva's holiest pilgrimage sites – Sacred Mountain, on the border with Mongolia. Moon Heart, with a group of female shamans from all over Tuva, has come to conduct a traditional ceremony. One offers food to fire spirits. Another beats a drum. Behind them, a woman ties prayer ribbons to a tree – white for purity, yellow for Buddhism and blue for the colour of sky. "Shamanism is not a religion, but a practice," says Moon Heart. "The shaman is the link between the spirits of the land and wildlife and human beings. People come to us for all important life events."

Dongak Vacheslav, Tuva's minister of culture, says there are now several hundred shamans in Tuva, around half of them women. He believes that Tuva has managed to maintain its language and culture because of its remote geographical location. "In Tuva, both shamanism and Buddhism were repressed during Soviet times," he says. "Shamanism was repressed as it was seen to be primitive, superstitious and magical. It was also perceived to be closely linked to the nomadic way of life, which was brought to an end in the Soviet period. The mystery of shamanism is how it managed to continue."

"In some ways, life was actually easier during communist times," says Radish Balchira, a nomad man from the Erzin Kozhuun region of Tuva. "We were moved onto a collective farm and the support from the state was good. They provided us with grass for the animals. Special trucks came bringing food for us. The communal farm was like the state. It took care of us. The negative side was that people were leaving the land for the city. We have returned to our traditions and it is much better. We can worship freely and move as we want."

His mother-in-law, Japuclayra Balchira, 49, believes that traditional nomadic life is better for her family but that they need to be open to the modern world. She points to a television set, DVD player and solar panel tucked away behind a pile of bedding at the back of the yurt. "The grandchildren like to know we have this before they come to us for holidays. They are used to such things in the villages where they live when they are at school. When they first arrive in the summer, they watch TV all the time. After a few days, they prefer to be outdoors, helping with the animals, riding with their uncle on the back of his horse, playing in the river. They forget that other life."

CHICKENS FROM THE US

Dalana Kadygo is the coordinator of a new joint project by Oxfam and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Russia, which hopes to promote new patterns of economic development in Tuva while protecting traditional ways of life. Planned activities include supporting small businesses, improving access to local and regional markets and reintroducing abandoned traditions such as felt-making for clothing and yurts. "Many of Tuva's goods are imported," says Kadygo. "Our chickens come from the US and our milk from the Netherlands. Imagine this for us Tuvans who pride ourselves on being an agricultural society. All these imported products are replacing traditional produce. We need to increase our own productivity and create jobs."

"This project is so needed and relevant right now in Tuva," Kadygo continues. "Traditionally, Tuvan people are very hard-working. They are used to providing everything for themselves. But many Tuvans still live as if the Soviet Union still exists – they are used to the state supplying everything. We believe that this project will allow local economies to develop as small businesses grow up, and our hope is that people will return to their traditions understanding that, with hard work, they can improve their lives."

Oxfam and the WWF's work will also provide protection to rare species such as the snow leopard and argali wild sheep, with a view to taking some pressure off wild resources through improved economic prospects. Activities will include involving local communities in national park planning and development, training and supporting national park staff to offer better protection and conservation of wildlife, and stimulating ecological tourism (3). "There's no guarantee that this project will reduce illegal hunting and some of the pressures on natural resources," says Nicholas Colloff, country director for Oxfam Russia. "It will, though, build more sustainable livelihoods for rural people, improve the local economy and the value of agricultural produce. The challenge will be integrating rural sustainable development with conservation, but if we develop a vibrant model for this in Tuva, WWF Russia will replicate this work in many remote, impoverished parts of Russia where indigenous people live precarious existences, caught between traditional patterns of life decimated by modernity and communism and the cut and thrust of globalised capitalism."

Later I meet Erzin's local district administrator, Bowa Marto, who drives me to Lake Tore-Khol, close to the edge of the Gobi desert. A *khuresh* (wrestling competition) is



A Buddhist shrine in northern Tuva



Nomadic Tuvans in the Erzin region of southern Tuva

under way. The wrestlers are dressed in brightly coloured leather short pants, cowboy boots and silk jackets. Wrestling is an aspect of Tuvan culture, as well as *khoomei* throat and overtone singing, banned during Soviet times. Bareback male horse riders gallop up and down the shores of the lake to the delight of the audience.

I sit on the ground next to the lake with Marto. Young Tuvans, he tells me, have a lot of challenges. "We have no industry and high unemployment rates. Most young people left our region in the 90s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now they are returning. We can't use their energy as we should; there's no work. We are not producing anything and so can't compete with countries outside."

CUSTODIANS OF NATURE

Tuvans are faced with a dilemma. The area is rich in minerals such as iron ore, bauxite, coal, gold and cobalt and there is the potential to start a profitable mining industry, build a railway to service it and create jobs. The railway would extend south from the Krasnoyarsk region north of Tuva to Kyzyl. Those in favour say it could create jobs and lead to the eventual construction of a passenger railway, linking to the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Yet the Tuvans' respect for nature means they are circumspect about developing a mining economy, aware of their position as custodians of one of the great natural wildernesses. Marto feels divided about it. "The railway could be good for Tuva. It will bring investment. But the potential for Tuvans losing out entirely on what is theirs is high."

He cites the example of a small gold mine close by. "When it was opened, the owners from Krasnoyarsk employed local people. But gradually they've replaced them with people from outside. One of the problems was that the local Tuvan employees, who'd been raised as nomads, had a very different sense of clock time from the owners and rarely showed up punctually."

Two days later, I walk in the bright mountain sunshine through the erstwhile industrial heartland of Kyzyl on my way to Tuva's ministry of labour. I can hear nothing but birdsong. Chash-ool Vitaly Sergeevich, the minister, is a jovial, tall, robust man who quickly gets to the point. He says the economic situation embarrasses him deeply, but he doesn't necessarily feel that the proposed railway link is the solution. "At first there'll be a lot of business coming to Tuva after the railway is constructed. It'll bring benefits to the economy. But for social and cultural life, it will probably affect us in a negative way."

He also believes that the potential for corruption is huge. "The business people coming in will not conduct their affairs in a legal way and they will try to take over factories and companies that belong to local people."

Altair reiterates what Chash-ool Vitaly Sergeevich has said. "We need the railway. We want to see Tuva developing, but in my opinion the best way forward is to develop small businesses, not by allowing outsiders to buy up and exploit the land."

An extraordinary exhibition in Tuva's National Museum shows gold ornaments, plaques and weaponry dating back to the eighth century BC. A curator tells me they once belonged to high-ranking members of an early nomadic community and had been excavated from an ancient burial ground in northern Tuva, called Arjaan 2, which the proposed railway would cut through.

Before I leave Tuva, I go to Kyzyl's main Buddhist temple to join the queue of people waiting to see the head lama. When I finally meet him, Baira Bashki's serene round face glows warmly. I ask him to explain the persistence of religious and cultural life despite the persecution of communism. "I don't have to explain it," he says. "I'm a Buddhist. I believe in miracles. When the Dalai Lama came to Tuva in 1991, people met him with so much joy it seemed that 30 years of Soviet law had never even existed."

LMD ENGLISH EDITION EXCLUSIVE

(1) Ralph Leighton, *Tuva or Bust! Richard Feynman's Last Journey*, Penguin, 1991.
 (2) Colin Thubron, *In Siberia*, Vintage, 1999.
 (3) Jules Pretty, *Integrated Community Development and Biodiversity Conservation in the Republic of Tyva*, University of Essex, UK, May 2009.

Oxfam on climate change

For millions of poor people around the world, climate change is already happening. Oxfam is campaigning for action to curb emissions and to help vulnerable communities protect themselves from the effects. Whether it be flooding in Bangladesh, rising sea levels

in Vietnam or unpredictable weather patterns in Uganda, climate change is devastating lives. People are losing their homes to floods, and food production is being hampered by drought or intense rainfall – putting lives at risk. www.oxfam.org.uk