

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

KIRA VAN DEUSEN, *Singing Story, Healing Drum: Shamans and Storytellers of Turkic Siberia*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004, xix + 198 p. + index.

Over the past 35 years in North America there has been a “storytelling renaissance.” Increasingly, people from different cultural and professional backgrounds take on the identity of storyteller, and perform in regional festivals and public, multicultural venues. The author, Kira Van Deusen, is a well regarded Canadian performer in this cultural movement. Van Deusen's social location as a storyteller brings a refreshingly nuanced voice to this study of indigenous Turkic Siberian shamans, storytellers, and musicians.

Van Deusen's interest in Siberian folklore began in a bookstore, and then led to her translating and assisting Siberian performers at Canadian music and storytelling festivals. Then, over a nearly ten-year period, she took several trips to post-perestroika Russia. This study is based on field research in the Russian republics of Tuva and Khakassia with indigenous storytellers, shamans, diviners, musicians, instrument-makers, healers, scholars, museum workers, and rural herding people. This study is also grounded in the Russian-language scholarship on Turkic Siberian folklore and cultures. Each chapter in the book includes several folk stories, with 33 stories in all. The book's 35 photographs interspersed throughout the text are a significant asset to this volume.

Khakassia was colonized by Russia. Currently, the region includes a population of 600,000, one-tenth of whom are indigenous Turkic people. Tuva, the geographic centre of Asia, was controlled at different times by China and Mongolia before being settled by Russians in the 19th century. More than two-thirds of Tuva's population of 300,000 are indigenous Turkic people. While the indigenous peoples experienced ethnocide, especially as a result of Russian religious persecution, political control, and re-education by means of residential schools, museum workers and the archives of researchers have provided a bridge to the past contributing significantly to a cultural renaissance.

Shamans are a culture's traditional healers who often negotiate between the spiritual and physical worlds. During shamanic ritual, shamans enter a parallel spiritual world. Often they confront souls or retrieve stolen souls from this spiritual world in order to heal the sick. The journey frequently

begins by shamans relating how things were at the beginning of time. Van Deusen portrays the geography and inhabitants of this spiritual world, which encodes the worldview of this indigenous culture.

One distinction of Turkic Siberian shamans is that they are often women. In fact, during political and religious persecution, women shamans became increasingly prominent as they were less likely to be perceived as a threat to the authorities. Another distinction is that the Turkic Siberian shamans are often identified as shamans when they suffer an extended illness. After one or two sessions with a practicing shaman, the individual is ready to enter a life of service to the community. This differs from other traditions which require the traditional spiritual healer to receive extensive training over a long period of time.

Van Deusen describes the power of sound and music as an entry point to the inner world in Tuvan and Khakassian lore. She emphasizes that folk music, as well as folk storytelling and healing, were an integrated part of human life. Rather than for purposes of entertainment or even enlightenment, these forms were part of a complex web of social relationships and meaning encompassing nature and human culture, internal and external worlds, and physical and spiritual health. Some music was not even intended for a human audience, but rather to be performed in nature to resonate with natural sounds. Van Deusen reports that many shamans associate color with pitches. Van Deusen does not mention that the association of color and musical pitch is a known neurological condition called synesthesia, which is considered to have a genetic basis.

In Tuva and Khakassia, after nearly a century of colonization, ethnocide, and re-education, indigenous communities are challenged by unemployment, alcoholism, and family problems. Many people experience dislocation as they transition from rural to urban life. Meanwhile, however, a renaissance of traditional shamanic practice is interfused with modern education and contemporary practices both to serve community and sustain the practitioners economically. While this raises expected questions about authenticity as individual artists, musicians and healers create new forms and even attract ecotourists. Van Deusen finds that storytelling and other traditional forms continue to serve for personal and collective healing and, at this historical moment, for rebuilding community in the face of political and social chaos.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, the book focuses on a culture relatively unknown in the West, with two-thirds of the stories in the book presented for the first time in writing and the remaining stories presented for the first time in a language other than Russian. Second, Van Deusen provides a consideration of gender that she states has been overlooked in the earlier Russian studies. Third, the voice and perspective of the book is one of a very nuanced location, that seems to be both inside and outside the culture being described with the result that the presentation is both gently respectful and thought-provoking. Finally, Van Deusen values both the story and the storytelling process. She not only presents

Turkic Siberian narratives, but also keeps the perspective of the performers central in her analysis and accounts for their personal agency.

This book is highly recommended to anyone interested in storytelling, religion and native spirituality, folklore, Asian and Russian cultures, or the relationship between language and power for indigenous peoples.

Jessica Senehi, University of Manitoba.

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