

**OVERTONE SINGING (part 2)**  
**XÖÖMII \* - THE MONGOLIAN TRADITION**  
by Brian Lee

There's a place in the west of Mongolia in a province called Xovd, in the district of Chandman where the people live on a plain surrounded by three big lakes and a spur of the Altai mountains. According to legend, when a certain wind blows onto one of the lakes which is known as Xar Us Nuur, (black water lake) it creates a sound which will then be held by the mountains for anything up to three days before being sounded to the people who live in that area.

This sound of the wind over the water echoed by the mountains is said to be the origin of xöömii, also known as throat singing or overtone singing. In this type of singing the voice appears to be singing two notes - you hear a fundamental note as usual and above it an overtone as an ethereal whistling sound. What is happening is that the mouth cavity is being used to create a strong resonance for one of the higher harmonics of the fundamental. A skilled overtone singer can so control and focus this effect that they can produce a melody using the harmonic series.

According to Michael Ormiston who has visited Mongolia on a number of occasions and who now teaches xöömii in the UK, singing is part of the social life of the nomadic herdsmen who still form most of the population. "If you are invited by the people into one of their felt tents, you are greeted with vodka or fermented horse's milk and you sing a song or you play an instrument." But the very land of Mongolia with its wide boundless spaces makes you want to sing. "If you're out on the steppe, there's you and the sky. You just open your heart out and you sing." When Michael asked his teacher Gereltsogt what he thinks about when he's singing a particular song about a river he replied "Well, I go where that river is and I imagine that I'm by that river and describing that river and it's a melody."

But in animist belief, the landscape is more than just an inspiration, it is the abode of spirits. Each place: mountain, river, lake or even a particular stone has its spirit, as do natural forces like wind and storm. Animals have spirits too with whom good relations must be maintained for the success of the hunt. It is the work of the shaman to raise and converse with these spirits for the purpose of restoring balance to the world.

As in other shamanic traditions, there are different ways of achieving the altered state of consciousness necessary to communicate with the spirit world, the most common being drumming. Other practices, more typically Mongolian may involve the use of fumes of juniper as a mild hallucinogenic or the muscaria mushroom as more potent hallucinogenic. The way the voice is used in shamanic ritual is important as well. For example to imitate the sounds of animals and birds, in particular the loons, bitterns and other diving birds who are believed to be intermediaries with the spirits of water. Some shamans will use xöömii to show that they are in touch with the spirits (represented by the overtones) while remaining physically on earth (represented by the fundamental tone).

However, not all Mongolians are in regular communication with the spirit world. A lot of the songs reflect the semi-nomadic way of life which has gone on unchanged since the time of Ghengis Khan (Chinggis Xaan) who united the Mongol tribes in the thirteenth century. The Mongolians are herdsmen and many of their songs are about their animals, in particular their horses. "They're like westerners with their cars." Michael Ormiston told me, "If they've got 20 metres to go, they'll go by horse." The titles of the songs reflect this: "The Four Year Old Light-tan Horse", "My Speckled Bay" and so on. Even their main instrument which has been described as quintessentially Mongolian is the horse head fiddle (morin xuur). This is a two stringed bowed instrument with a horse's head carved at the top whose strings are made from the tail hair of the horse. It is used to accompany songs of different styles, one of which is a beautiful melismatic style of singing known as long song where they sing about the beauty of nature, about love and about their animals. There are also short rhyming songs, lullabies and songs to praise the winners of "the manly sports": wrestling, archery and horse riding competitions.

Sixty years of communism did little to change the semi-nomadic way of life of the majority of the population, but during that time any form of religious practice was totally put down. Shamanism and Buddhism went underground and were kept quiet. The practice of xöömii singing survived by becoming secularised as part of “folk tradition” and lauded as “music of the people”. Nowadays in post-communist Mongolia, xöömii singers in the countryside perform mainly at events such as at weddings or at haircutting ceremonies. In the capital Ulaanbaatar there are the professional music and dance ensembles which are state sponsored and still very Soviet inspired. But they give a chance for the best xöömii singers to go professional and it gives us in the west a chance to hear recordings of their unique music.

\* The x in *xöömii* is guttural like the *ch* in *loch* or the *h* in *human*. The *ö* is the same as German or in French *oeufs*. Spellings of *xöömii* are many and various: *chöömei*, *khöömii*, *hömi*, *chöömij*, *xöömij*, *hoomi*. That’s what happens when you have a Mongolian word that has been written in the Russian alphabet and then transliterated into English!

Thanks are due to Michael Ormiston for help with preparation of this article. Michael teaches xöömii in the UK and can be contacted on <http://www.soundtransformations.btinternet.co.uk/>

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