
Citation:

Spracklen, K (2018) Throat-singing as extreme Other: An exploration of Mongolian and Central Asian style in extreme metal. *Metal Music Studies*, 4 (1). ISSN 2052-3998

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Throat-singing as extreme Other: an exploration of Mongolian and Central Asian style in extreme metal

Abstract

Throat-singing is a form of singing practiced in a number of cultures, but it is not part of the pre-modern folk cultures of Western Europe that shaped contemporary Western popular culture. In contemporary Western music, throat-singing from Central Asia is used or sampled in global fusion and dance music as an example of the mystical, timeless orient. In world music, another Western form of music, artists from China, Mongolia and Tuva who incorporate throat-singing and roots music forms have become popular acts at festivals and the touring circuit. Throat-singing has also been used by extreme metal bands from Asia to signify their authenticity and their connection to this traditional culture. In this paper, I explore how throat-singing is used by performers and consumers to construct belonging, authenticity, identity and extremity. I focus in particular on how throat-singing and traditional cultural tropes are used by the Chinese folk metal band Tengger Cavalry and Darkestrah, a black metal band from Kyrgyzstan.

Key words: Throat-singing; Orientalism; authenticity; extremity; nationalism; folk music; extreme metal

Introduction

As heavy metal becomes more global in its production and reception, metal fans in the West have searched for bands from around the world, and for new sounds (Wallach, Berger and Greene 2011). In turn, metal bands outside the West have adopted the norms and values of heavy metal, or constructed their own local hybrid sounds (Ferrarese 2014, 2015). This paper explores how throat-singing has been used in extreme metal as a form of authentic folk or roots music, and how it has been understood by metal fans in the West as a hybrid ‘extreme world metal’. Throat-singing is overtone singing that creates resonances and harmonies (Lindestad, Södersten, Merker and Granqvist 2001; Pegg 1992; Vainshtein 1979). It is a form of singing practiced in a number of cultures. While it is a style associated with a range of Arctic cultures from the Inuit to the Sami (Nattiez 1999), I want to focus here on the throat singing of Central Asia, which has become well-known in the West: *khoomei* throat-singing mainly from Mongolia, the Inner Mongolia region of China and the Autonomous Republic of Tuva in Russia. This form of singing even has its own Wikipedia page, which demonstrates the way in which the musical form has become known in the West. The page (Wikipedia 2016a) says:¹

Tuvan throat singing, Khoomei, Hooliin Chor (in Mongolian, ‘throat harmony’), or Mongolian throat singing is one particular variant of overtone singing practiced by people in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, Tuva and Siberia... The history of Mongolian throat singing reaches far back... The popularity of throat singing among Mongolian seems to have arisen as a result of geographic location and culture. The open

¹ The numbers in the cited text are footnoted references on the Wikipedia page. I have left them in because reference [3] read ‘Slobin, Mark. Ethnomusicology. Volume 36, No. 3, Special Issue: Music and the Public Interest. (1992), pp 444-446’, a reference found all over the internet in articles about throat-singing. Slobin (1992) is actually a review of CD recordings of Tuvan music and of Mongolian music that does not say what the Wikipedia page says about the singers travelling to find the right environment. Please note all quotes from secondary sources are presented with the original typological and grammatical mistakes.

landscape of Mongolia allows for the sounds to carry a great distance.

Ethnomusicologists studying throat singing in these areas mark khoomei as an integral part in the ancient pastoral animism that is still practiced today. Often, singers travel far into the countryside looking for the right river, or go up to the steppes of the mountainside to create the proper environment for throat-singing.[3] The animistic world view of this region identifies the spirituality of objects in nature, not just in their shape or location, but in their sound as well.[4] Thus, human mimicry of nature's sounds is seen as the root of throat singing. An example of this is the Mongolian story of the waterfall above the Buyan Gol (Deer River), where mysterious harmonic sounds are said to have attracted deer to bask in the waters, and where it is said harmonic sounds were first revealed to people.[citation needed]

The reader is here presented with an unproblematic, authentic relationship between the singing, the traditional music, a traditional culture and the landscape of the mountains, rivers, deserts and the steppes. We are told many tales here about the essential quality of the environment, the religion and culture of Mongolia and Tuva. There is no doubt that throat-singing is a part of the traditional culture and music of the region. But its continued existence, and its status on the global stage of heavy metal, is, as I will show, the result of an admixture of imagined community in Central Asia (and its diaspora) and Western Orientalism.

In Western music, throat-singing from Central Asia is used or sampled in global fusion and dance music as an example of the mystical, timeless orient. In world music,² another Western form of music, artists from China, Mongolia and Tuva such as Huun Hur

² I am aware the problems Hesmondhalgh (2005) has with the word 'scene', but in the absence of a better catch-all word to describe the industry, the musicians, the media and the fans I am resorting to the word with caution that it is merely a word and journalists fans use themselves to situate music.

Tu,³ Yat-Kha,⁴ Anda Union and Hanggai, who incorporate throat-singing and roots music forms, have become popular acts at festivals and the touring circuit in the historical span of their careers. These bands travel the world to sell traditional throat-singing and traditional songs and folk culture of the East to Western consumers. Throat-singing is something produced by the cultural industries, and consumed by audiences who have the money or time to be able to listen to music (Devine 2015; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013; Negus 1998).

Throat-singing has also been used by extreme metal bands from Asia to signify their authenticity and their connection to this traditional culture. In this paper, I focus on how throat-singing and traditional cultural tropes are used in the construction and reception of extreme metal by the Chinese folk metal band Tengger Cavalry and Darkestrah from Kyrgyzstan. Before I turn to the analysis of the bands, it is necessary to discuss in more detail key literature and theoretical concepts: on throat-singing itself; on notions of national identity and belonging, and authenticity and folk music; on Orientalism; and on extremity. I will then outline the key methodological issues and frameworks, before discussing and justifying the focus on heavy metal, and on throat-singing in extreme metal, and on the two bands in the case study.

Literature review

On Central Asian throat-singing

Throat-singing has been the focus of a very small number of key anthropological and ethnomusicological studies (Aksenov 1972; Pegg 1992; Levin and Edgerton 1999; Levin and Süzükei 2006). The first academic studies of Tuvan throat-singing were made by scholars in the Soviet Union (see discussion in Levin and Süzükei 2006). Parts of A. N. Aksenov's work

³ Huun Hur Tu, traditional Tuvan band: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bDntRWfL70>.

⁴ Yat-Kha, Tuvan rock band with traditional influences: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_8CPhtXyU.

on Tuvan folk music and folk traditions in 1964 were translated for the journal *Asian Music* in 1973 (Aksenov 1973). Aksenov was a composer and a member of the Union of Soviet Composers, based in Moscow. At the time of the Russian Revolution, Tuva was claimed by Mongolia and China, but the Bolsheviks secured control of it and declared it to be an independent republic. In the decades of its existence, this Tuvan People's Republic was viewed as a satellite state of the Soviet Union, and when the government of Tuva was seen to be supporting Buddhism it was replaced in a coup by Stalinists (Mongush 1993). Aksenov's interest in Tuvan folk music was a result of a posting to the Tuvan capital city of Kyzyl during the Second World War, the period leading up to the official annexation of Tuva into Russia, where it continues to this day as an Autonomous Republic. For Aksenov, Tuvan folk culture is presented as something essentially pastoral, underpinned by the Buddhism and Shamanism of Tuva, a repository of old tales and superstitions. Aksenov notes that throat-singing is not itself associated by the Tuvans with Shamanism, but he describes in detail the songs and practices of the Shamans, and shows how they are related to the songs sung by herders with their animals. Reading Aksenov today it is not difficult to think his ethnomusicology is based on Soviet stereotypes of the evolution and progress of Communist society versus the ignorance and timelessness of backward cultures: this is the period in which collective farming was transforming Soviet rural society, and Tuva's pastoralists were being forced to move into collective farms (Mongush 1993).

More recently, Mongolian throat-singing has been the focus of work by Carole Pegg, (1992) and Theodore Levin has researched Tuvan throat-singing with colleagues (Levin and Edgerton 1999; Levin and Süzükei 2006). Levins's work has been instrumental in fixing the Tuvan form of throat-singing, and its associated folk music and culture, as an authentic and pure expression of the landscape:

For the seminomadic herders who call Tuva home, the soundscape inspires a form of music that mingles with these ambient murmurings. Ringed by mountains, far from major trade routes and overwhelmingly rural, Tuva is like a musical Olduvai Gorge—a living record of a protomusical world, where natural and human-made sounds blend... Although the true genesis of throat-singing as practiced today is obscure, Tuvan pastoral music is intimately connected to an ancient tradition of animism, the belief that natural objects and phenomena have souls or are inhabited by spirits. (Levin and Edgerton 2006: 80)

Pegg's (1992) research is based on extensive fieldwork in Mongolia, and is a classic text of inter-disciplinary ethnomusicology. She has a strong grasp of musical theory and anthropology, demonstrating deep and insightful understanding of the role of throat-singing in contemporary Mongolia. For her respondents, throat-singing still has strong connections to religious or magical ideas and practices, and to particular landscapes and lifestyles: it is part of the folk music of the pastoralists who still herd in the deserts and the mountains, and survived the period of Communist rule in the country. But they also tell her that throat-singing was historically a secular form of music, one that some Buddhist lamas tried to discourage, and its revival occurred only in the late nineteenth-century.

On notions of national identity and belonging, and authenticity and folk music

In the account of Tuvan throat-singing by Levin there is an echo of the cultural essentialism in the work of Aknesov (1973). Both accounts of Tuva and Tuvan culture situate that culture as the authentic, timeless stuff of the people, the folk, or the nation. Nationalist accounts of national identity suggest that geographical spaces and their borders are simply reflected of the national culture of the people who inhabit those spaces (see discussion and critique in

Thomas 1992). Folk music becomes simply the music of the folk, the people who live in that space and who can show they have always lived in that place (Boyes 1993; Spracklen 2013a, 2015, 2017; Spracklen and Henderson 2013). For the nationalist writers of the nineteenth-century, folk music and folk culture was easily identified as something quintessential about the race that shaped their modern nation-states (Thomas 1992). In the nation-building stage of modernity, every nation had to have its elite culture and its popular culture united by a shared folk culture, a shared history and a shared set of myths (Billig 1995; Spracklen 2015, 2017; and for China and Inner Mongolia see Reeves 2013; William 2013). Of course, these myths centred around racial supremacy, the holiness of blood and breeding, and the casting out of other races that were considered to be lesser humans, dangerous to the purity of culture and race and nation (Daynes and Lee 2008; Spracklen 2013b).

Nationalist accounts of nation assume that nation, race and folk refer to essentially the same thing: the people bound by a common heritage or culture that gives them ownership of the land. But this account has been strongly critiqued in history and the social sciences, and I align this paper with that strong critique. Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) edited collection on invented traditions shows how cultural practices, leisure activities and folk music were consciously re-invented or constructed *ex nihilo* by ruling elites various emerging modern European nation-states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In each of these examples we can find clear evidence of such invented traditions becoming a way of describing, prescribing then proscribing certain things as true and correct (and therefore part of the community, and others as deviant and outside of the community – see Thomas 1992; Spracklen 2015). To be an invented tradition is to be something that defines belonging and exclusion within the community of the nation-state. Benedict Anderson's (1983) monograph extended the scope of the model of the invented tradition to the twentieth century and to newer nation-states. Anderson (1983) suggests that nation-states cannot – by their size, their modernity and their

relationship to capitalism – rule their citizens directly. So instead they generate what he calls a sense of imagined community among the citizens: thus the imagined community exists only in our collective imaginations (it is never actually experienced), but it is one imposed on us by the ruling elites through propaganda, schools, the invention of traditions and the co-option of rituals, leisure and musical forms. So there is no authentic folk music and folk culture in any nation-state, other than that which is invented by ruling elites. By listening to the correct forms of folk music, then, citizens can be assured that they belong to the nation-state, and the nation-state is protecting their interests.

What this warns us about is taking at face value any attempt to claim a given music is an authentic folk form. Authenticity of folk music is something that will be imposed by elites or outsiders with hegemonic power, or contested within any space with potential for counter-hegemonic agency (Morcom 2015; Rancier 2014). Authenticity itself is a chimera that can only exist as a contradiction: the authentic is constructed (Spracklen 2015, 2017; Thomas 1992). In Central Asia, such invented traditions are manifest in the post-Soviet period, when nation-states such as Kyrgyzstan are struggling to construct national myths and communities and belonging: in particular, invented traditions of paganism/shamanism called Tengrism are offered as a solution to the problem of national identity (Laruelle 2007a, 2007b; Laruelle and Engvall 2015; Marat 2016; Umetbaeva 2015).

On Orientalism

The idea of the West owes its origins to the rise of nation-state empire-builders in Western Europe. These nations believed they shared a common culture created out of Enlightenment rationality and Romantic neo-classicism: one that valued art as an expression of national identity; one that encouraged science and industry; one that promoted capitalism and trade; and (less importantly) one that supposedly valued a modicum of liberty. A particular set of

assumptions and ways of thinking were common across the ambitious bourgeois classes of Europe. These were the classes that embraced the idea of progress, of liberalism, of nationalism and of imperialism, paradoxical ideological standpoints brought together by the successful transition of European societies from feudal to modern. As Edward Said (1978) points out in *Orientalism*, this imagined community of the West was constructed through the stereotyping of its Othered rival, the East (meaning the Muslim Arab world and Asia). Westerners saw their economic and political supremacy in the Age of Empires as proof of the West's dynamic and positive civilization, contrasted with the weak and degenerate East (Said 1985). As the political hegemony of the West migrated across the Atlantic to the USA, the idea that old Europe and the New World shared a common culture and a common civil society was taken for granted on both sides of the ocean. Orientalism has been criticised by many in post-colonialism for reducing the agency of people and communities in the East into 'dupes' of Western hegemony, and for reducing the potential of hybridity in diasporic identity formations (Brah 1996). But it is still a valuable way of thinking about the power of Western societies to construct the East as something essential, different and Othered.

World music might be said to be an example of this Western power to make the East an inferior, essentialised and extremely distant Other – where music is selected and supported by Western labels and audiences because it represents something 'timeless' and 'authentic' about the East or the more generic Other (Connell and Gibson 2004; Spracklen 2013b). World music is part of the wider globalised popular music industry, with its own websites, magazines, record labels, festivals, managers, booking agents and bands (Marshall 2013). Its definition is, of course, not strictly policed, but it has come to mean 'roots' music from local cultures, global fusion and dance, and pop and rap music from various local cultures beyond the West. World music was invented in London in the 1980s as a term to embrace the genres above, while rejecting Western pop music, as well as any form of rock (Taylor 2015). The

consumption of world music, and the genre itself, is primarily Western in orientation. Connell and Gibson (2004) show how world music is a product of white, Western hegemony, or more generously, a response to globalization, hybridity and diaspora. Others such as Morcom (2015), Corn (2010) and Skinner (2010) argue that some forms of world music are rooted in genuinely local cultures, which serve to define communities and belonging. Whatever, Tuvan and Mongolian throat-singing is *constructed* in Western markets as *world* music, and musicians and bands who want to tour the West or sell records in the West present themselves as authentic to the tradition and culture. So Tuvan and Mongolian bands in world music are photographed in the mountains in the desert, in traditional costume – and not in their everyday clothes in the modern streets of their home towns and cities.

On extremity

At the heart of Orientalism is an idea that the East is far away from ‘us’, people in the West, who have the power and the hegemony to shape ideas about what the East is. In this critical-Orientalist account of the inter-cultural exchange of music, it is suggested that ethnomusicology concerns itself with maintaining its subject’s extremity and distance from the Western musical traditions (Connell and Gibson 2004). Western listeners consume exotic, Eastern folk music such as throat-singing because it is so extreme – it is sold as being from beyond the edge, something that is deeply spiritual and timeless, something located in place (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000). Extremity in music and culture, then, is part of the psycho-geography of Othering, the construction of spaces (the imagined communities) in which individuals in the West make belonging and exclusion. Throat-singing is extreme music in this sense, extreme in the world-view as viewed from the West.

Extremity might also be applied to the aesthetics and style of rock music itself. In heavy metal, the sub-genre of extreme metal is well-established and recognised by fans,

musicians, labels and taste-makers (Kahn-Harris 2006; Spracklen 2013a, 2015, 2017). In heavy metal, extreme metal is black metal, death metal, with possibly the forms of folk metal that draw on black and death. Extreme means the sound, the ideology and the practices associated with the scenes: extreme metal is the music of the underground, not the mainstream pop world (Kahn-Harris 2006). Extreme music might be defined in similar terms here: extreme music might be music from outside of the mainstream pop world, with harsh or provocative sounds and lyrics. In that sense, throat-singing, like black metal, is extreme music.

Methodological issues and frameworks

The framework of the research is a combination of content analysis and on-line ethnography, lurking and browsing over a period of twelve months as a passive observer. I have a certain positionality in the scenes: this paper is reflective of my long personal interest in throat-singing, world, folk and heavy metal as a music fan (Hodkinson 2005). As all the data collected is publicly available content on the internet, I have not had to deal with ethical issues around anonymity and informed consent. The content analysis is a semiotic reading of the music, videos, pictures and text associated with the bands. I have used Wikipedia as a record of what its editors think is the truth, because that tells us about how imagined community is constructed through myths (Spracklen 2014). The on-line ethnography is a search of the internet for comments and content about the bands, and this is also coupled with a discourse-tracing content analysis (LeGreco and Tracy 2009).

My own research interests have extended into exploring: the construction of the Other and of whiteness in world music (Spracklen 2013a, 2013b); national identities, gender and 'race' in English folk culture (Spracklen 2013a; Spracklen and Henderson 2013) and extreme metal (Lucas, Deeks and Spracklen 2011; Spracklen 2006, 2009, 2013a, 2015, 2017;

Spracklen, Lucas and Deeks 2014); and whiteness and hegemonic masculinity in folk metal in this journal (Spracklen 2015). The latter paper was critiqued across the internet – and some of those criticisms e-mailed privately to me used Tengger Cavalry and Darkestrah as examples of folk/black metal bands that were not white people singing about Vikings. So this paper is partly a logical extension of my wider research, and a response to that critical point. Both of these bands have ‘made it’ into the metal music press in the West, and are discussed by metal fans on-line. I am interested in heavy metal because it has globalised and is popular among middle-class urban liberals beyond the West (Hecker 2016), while carrying elements of subaltern resistance associated with its (mythical) white, working-class male roots in the West (Brown and Griffin 2014).

Tengger Cavalry

The first review of a Tengger Cavalry album on metal-archives.com was in August 2011, when the first album’s strange blend of black metal and Mongolian folk music was beginning to reach the ears of extreme metal fans. Satosuke (2011) wrote this reaction to *Blood Sacrifice Shaman* (2011):

It’s really damn hard to find a music group or album that’s absolutely, completely unique in this day and age. Tengger Cavalry manages to reach that nigh-impossible feat by blending fast-paced classic black metal and bits of slow, solemn funeral doom with folk music from ancient China, particularly the vocals and instruments associated with Mongolian shamans. Traditional Mongol throat-singers punctuate the solid black metal growls and shouts with otherworldly vocal sounds that sound like brooding demons and pagan priests invoking mystical incantations. On the instrument side, the thick, chugging sludge riffs and occasional, well-placed lightning strikes of soloing

are accompanied by various chimes, jaw harps, and most noticeably, the Mongolian horsehead bow. When put all together, the encompassing feel invokes an almost impossibly dark, vicious landscape of cavalry hordes beseeching the power of the deities they worship before charging to bloody warfare.

The reviewer is not quite sure what the influences are on the first album. We are told this is folk music from ancient China, but then the reviewer identifies Mongolian shamans and Mongol throat-singing. The reviewer is more certain on the extreme metal influences: fast, classic black metal (of the Norwegian second-wave kind) with elements of funeral doom. The reviewer is almost possessed by the strangeness and extremity of the music, and feels as if they are a spectator (but not a participant) watching a Mongol horde calling out to the sky god before racing to battle. The same album was re-recorded by Tengger Cavalry's most recent line-up, and released by American label Metal Hell Records in 2015. On [metal-archives.com](#) another reviewer, [flightoficarus86](#) (2015) has this to say:

History Channel Metal. That is my personal tag for Tengger Cavalry's latest opus.

While it is true that *Blood Sacrifice Shaman* is a reworking of the band's debut, this is anything but a re-record. What the original sports in black metal rawness, this 2015 version counters with a vision of beauty. Gone are most of the harsh vocals, replaced with an increased focus on throat-singing and instrumental compositions. Listening to this is a journey through time and a celebration of cultural heritage. This is quality metal even your mother could appreciate.

Here the reviewer is stressing a complete change of the sound. The extremity of the metal has been reduced, but the extremity of the folk music is central. The timelessness of

throat-singing and traditional Mongolian folk music is stressed, and the reviewer finds the celebration of cultural heritage implied by the traditional music important. This phrase is something that usually appears on reviews of European folk metal and black metal bands (Spracklen 2015, 2017) – the reviewer is clearly sympathetic to the idea of fixed cultural heritage, and supports a band that claims it. This is, the reviewer finally says, an album that is stripped so much of its black metal origins that it can be appreciated by your mother – what might be a snort of derision is here claimed by the reviewer as a legitimate way of expressing emotion in the beauty of the music. In their short history, Tengger Cavalry have made an impact: their Wikipedia page (Wikipedia 2016b) provides enough basic information to put their creation and evolution into some context:

...Originally founded in March 2010 as one-man project by Nature Ganganbaigal. The band is named after the ancient Mongolian and Turkic deity Tengri. The first international review of the debut album *Blood Sacrifice Shaman* by German heavy metal magazine *Legacy* in 2011 was cautiously optimistic about the band's potential... Meanwhile China National Radio featured the band. In 2012 three additional members joined the band and they released the album *Sunesu Cavalry*... Meanwhile, another UK magazine *Metal Hammer* commented the album is exotic and epic. In 2013 Tengger Cavalry released the second US&EU album *The Expedition*, which got reviews from more international media such as *No Clean Singing* and *Folk-Metal.nl*. At the same time, Tengger Cavalry had several important performances, including their opening performance for *Turisas* in May 22, 2013 when *Turisas* was touring in China. In 2014 Tengger Cavalry released their third album *Ancient Call*. The album was recorded in China and then produced and mixed in New York, United States... In 2015 the band released the album *Blood Sacrifice Shaman*, which

received attention from Metal Hammer, Revolver, Legacy, Noisey, Chicago Reader and other international recognized media.

This is a carefully edited narrative elides a few important facts. The band was established as a one-man project by Nature Ganganbaigal, a common phenomenon in the underground black metal scene, only later expanding into a band for the later albums. The first two albums of the band were released by Dying Art Productions, a small extreme metal label in China. The band was originally based in Beijing, where its founder grew up and lived at the time. He was not from the region of Mongolia in China, nor from Mongolia the independent nation, though he claims to have Mongolian ancestry in interviews posted online at the official web-site. The album *Sunesu Cavalry* was released by Metal Hell Records, a small American label that nonetheless has enough social and cultural capital to support and promote the bands on its roster. The band has remained with Metal Hell Records, and Nature Ganganbaigal moved to New York, where he has continued to maintain the band with a new line-up that includes local American musicians.

The song ‘War Horse’⁵ from the 2012 album *Sunesu Cavalry* typifies the confluence of the two styles at the heart of the band Tengger Cavalry. We can hear black-metal vocals, blast-beat drumming, and hard metal riffs; but alongside them are the traditional instruments of Mongolian folk music, and, of course, the throat-singing itself. The song’s title is self-explanatory, as is the name of the band, and the album cover. This is a band that celebrates the Mongols, the warriors that swept from the central Asian mountains to conquer China, then half of Asia and territories westwards (Man 2010; May 2012). The Mongols were warriors who rode horses into combat – and Tengger Cavalry represent this violent moment in the history of Mongolia. Most of the fans posting comments underneath ‘War Horse’ and

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUja-wrQVgs>.

other songs on YouTube talk about how the music makes them want to get on a horse and ride across the steppes with the leader known in the West as Genghis Khan (Man 2010).

There are some comments that question the band's authenticity, pointing out that the band is from China, so why are Chinese people conquered by the Mongols making music about them? The responses to those comments point out that the band is Mongolian, or created by a founder with Mongolian roots.

On the band's official web-site we see a photograph of the band dressed in traditional Mongolian costumes that evoke the Mongol warriors and shamans of the period. The band has a motto: We unite. We fight. Underneath this picture of the band is a potted history (Tengger Cavalry 2016) slightly different from that offered by Wikipedia:

Tengger is the name of the sky god of Mongolian grassland. Created in 2009 by the bandleader Nature Ganganbaigal, Tengger Cavalry blends overtone throat singing, Mongolian horse-head fiddle and other nomadic music tradition of Central Asia with heavy rock music, creating a unique music genre – Mongolian Folk Rock

In this description the band has moved away from being categorised as black metal or folk metal. Now they are called folk rock, a friendlier and less extreme sub-genre that brings to mind bands such as Fairport Convention. The traditional elements of the music are foregrounded. And the band is just described as Mongolian. This makeover to make them more Mongolian folk and less Chinese-Mongolian black metal has come at a time when the band has changed considerably – the latest albums are less extreme than the earlier albums; and Nature Ganganbaigal is now less extreme from the point of view of the American audiences, as he now resides in the USA. Searching for more information on Nature Ganganbaigal shows his emerging career as a composer of soundtracks for films and video

games, and a traditional Mongolian folk music performer. In a review posted at the Huffington Post the scary looking warrior shaman from the Tengger Cavalry web-site is revealed to be former postgraduate student in music, and one reason for the band's move to New York is made clear:

Nature Ganganbaigal is a Mongolian music composer and horse-head fiddle player from China who has recently completed his Masters in Music at New York University with a concentration in Scoring for Film and Multimedia. He has received several accolades and is the winner of New York University's 2014 Film Score Competition... Becoming a regular in the film festival world, Nature's cosmic sounds are unique and recognizable... In addition to his masterful composing abilities, Nature is also an accomplished Mongolian horse-head fiddle player, an ancient string instrument that plays the sounds of Mongolian culture. With one foot rooted in his Chinese past and the other sharing these roots with an American audience, Nature is a well-rounded musician who is even the composer and lead singer of Tengger Cavalry, an internationally recognized rock band.

There is no doubt from that career review, and videos of interviews posted in the media section of the official web-site, that Nature Ganganbaigal is a musical talent who can transcend and combine the genres of black metal and Mongolian folk music. There is no doubt that he is composing Tengger Cavalry's songs and arranging the traditional tunes, playing the horse-head fiddle, and doing all the singing.

Darkestrah

Ahead of the release of a new album called *Turan* (2016), Darkestrah posted an intriguing video on YouTube.⁶ The video is an edited sample of music from the album, set to images of shamans and Buddhist festivals. Some of the footage looks as if it belongs to the first half of the previous century, but the close-ups of the shaman dancing may be modern – the film shows us that the music is part of older folk traditions. The music itself is a combination of black metal, throat-singing and traditional instrumentation. Darkestrah, according to their own web-site and Wikipedia,⁷ are a band formed in 1999 in Bishkek, the capital of the post-Soviet independent republic of Kyrgyzstan. This country is in the same region of Central Asia as Tuva and Mongolia, and has a similar mountainous geography and culture. But Kyrgyzstan is also pre-dominantly Islamic, not Buddhist or Shamanic (Laruelle and Engvall 2015). Darkestrah, then, are similar to Viking metal bands in Europe: rejecting dominating religious traditions (Christianity and Islam) for an imagined pagan past (Lucas, Deeks and Spracklen 2011; Spracklen 2015, 2017; Spracklen, Lucas and Deeks 2014). At some point the band, or at least one of its key members, re-located to Leipzig in Germany.⁸ Being in Europe allows the band to be closer to important extreme metal labels and media, but of course it allows them to be able to write about traditional Kyrgyz culture without offending the religious and state authorities back home. Wikipedia (2016c) describes their career as follows:

The Kyrgyz Pagan Metal group, was established in Bishkek and their first demo... was recorded in December 1999... In 2003 February, NCR recorded their first worldwide known album called as “Sary Oy”. In this album, traditional folk songs with the traditional instruments were combined with metal. It is about a Kyrgyz

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1k-0iF2GOv4>.

⁷ See below.

⁸ <http://www.metal-archives.com/bands/Darkestrah/15448>.

legend. In 2004 March, “The Way to Paganism” was recorded and it was followed by “Embrace of Memory” in 2005 October. In 2007 they recorded a new album, “Epos”... “Epos” is almost fully dedicated to Issyk-kul Lake. It is filled with Pagan motives. In 2007, Darkestrah cut its ties with DNR and it signed a contract with American Paragon Records. In 2008 March, they released their new album, “The Great Silk Road”.

A fuller account is given on the page of Darkestrah’s current label, Osmose Productions in France, which is identical to the one on their own web-site (Osmose 2017). Like the Wikipedia page, the narrative stops before *Khagan* (2011) and *Manas* (2013), the first two albums released by Darkestrah for Osmose. And, like on Wikipedia, we are told explicitly about the pagan themes of the songs and albums, though we are given more information on the traditional instruments and tales:

Formed in mid 1999 by Asbath in Bishkek/Kyrgyzstan. The first demo, entitled ‘Pagan Black Act’ was recorded in December 1999... In February 2003 the debut album ‘Sary Oy’ was recorded, which gained a wide response worldwide through NCR in 2004. Great melodic parts were paired with traditional instruments like Kyrjak, Komuz or Sygyt. Female Black Metal vocals and throat singing that created the atmosphere of the spiritual shamanic people. Sary Oy lyrically brings the ancient Kyrgyz tales about three sisters of nature in three songs. This record marked Darkestrah’s as one of the most interesting bands within the Shamanic Pagan Black Metal genre... In January 2007 we released the 3rd album “Epos”... This ‘Epos’ is completely dedicated to our beloved lake Issyk-Kul’, which is located in Central Asia. There are more than ten legends, histories, myths and fairy tales about this lake. Every

aspect of Epos signifies a spiritual, almost pre-historic journey... Darkestrah's approach to pagan expression this time has been one of using subtlety to convey power of expression... March 2008, DARKESTRAH has finished the recordings for the new studio album "The Great Silk Road" and the final work, was released in August 31, 2008 through Paragon Records. In February 2011 the band signed to French label Osmose Productions. This is without a doubt the beginning of a new era for the band...

This official history of the band, with its account of pre-Islamic tales and pagan themes, is resonant of Turkic nationalist ideologues and movements in Central Asia aligned with the rejection of Islam and its replacement with 'authentic' Tengrism (Laruelle 2007a). But the band does not project this ideology beyond the lyrics, the web-site and the images on the album sleeves. The band members look like metal musicians. While members of the band are credited on the listings at metal-archives with playing folk instruments on Darkestrah's albums, it is not clear who does the throat-singing. The band's original female black-metal singer is described on Wikipedia as being responsible for 'harsh vocals', but nowhere does it confirm that the throat-singing is by her, or her 2015 replacement. We are led to believe that the band is responsible for the throat-singing, but live performances present the band as any other black-metal band, wearing black clothes and corpse-paint, with a vocalist who only growls in a black-metal style.

It is quite possible that the throat-singing on the records is sampled, or sung by a session musician. This does not stop metal fans raving about the throat-singing and the authentic folk they can hear in Darkestrah's music. In a review of *Sary Oy* posted on metal-archives.com, NausikaDalazBlindaz (2007) has this to say:

Outside black, doom and drone metal, I'll sometimes listen to the folk and modern music of various cultures in different places around the world and in particular to the music of Central Asia which among other things features a type of singing called throat singing... So you can imagine I was interested in the idea of black metal combined with elements of the music and folklore of Kyrgyzstan, the original home of the band under review, Darkestrah, which is located in Central Asia close to where the world champions of throat singing, the peoples of Tuva and western Mongolia, live. Throat singing seems to be a fairly widespread tradition in this part of the world, several ethnic groups including the Kyrgyz have some form of throat singing though the Tuvans and Mongols have developed it the most. On the whole, "Sary Oy"... based I think on a Kyrgyz story about three sisters, is a likeable and accessible BM work that comes close to being a mainstream rock / pop record and with touches of Kyrgyz folk music and singing that add exotic flavour to the music without being intrusive. I actually wish the music had been grimmer with more of the Kyrgyz native music throughout but probably at the time the album was being made, the band had just arrived in Germany where the musicians are now based and they needed to release something that didn't seem too way out and foreign in concept and style.

For this fan, Darkestrah are the authentic real deal: a band from Central Asia using throat-singing to great effect within black metal. This fan thinks the band needs to include more of both elements in future work: more grim black metal with more 'native' music. Another poster tried to position the band's style in between epic pagan metal and what the poster, Kluseba (2014), calls 'symphonic extreme metal':

Darkestrah is an epic black metal band with major Eastern European and sometimes Middle-Eastern folk influences. The band's sound should sound familiar and pleasing to fans of the Finnish pagan metal outfit Moonsorrow... or Ukrainian symphonic extreme metal band Nokturnal Mortum. What makes this band rather intriguing is that it hails from Kyrgyzstan, but has now been relocated to Germany, and that the front singer is a woman. Usually, the band employs English vocals, but for their new conceptual output *Manas* (about a national hero from their home country), they chose to record in Russian. A performance in Kyrgyz would have been even more interesting, in my opinion.

The confusion in trying to place Darkestrah's sound and 'home country' is understandable. Darkestrah play a form of epic black metal that is similar to other bands in Russia and Ukraine because their home country was part of the Soviet Union, and retains strong cultural and economic ties to Russia. Russian is still an official language in Kyrgystan, and Russians are still an important minority group in the country (Laruelle and Engvall 2015; Marat 2016). So Darkestrah have made an album with Russian lyrics because Russian is one of their home languages.

Discussion

Throat-singing is used by both bands as a way of identifying their music and their lyrical themes with national identity and nationalist ideologies. For Tengger Cavalry the construction of Mongolianness and Mongolian identity is stressed by the band. They are Chinese but want the world to realise they have access to Mongolian culture and identity through their roots, and through their re-presentation of the music. The band leader has laid claim to Mongolian identity through his mastery of Mongolian folk instrumentation and

throat-singing. For a band from Beijing, in the heart of Han China, to make this claim is potentially very dangerous. The Mongols who are the heroes in the songs of Tengger Cavalry raided, invaded and conquered China (May 2012). In the modern era, China has stamped its control on the Mongolian region formally part of China that holds millions of Mongolians, and has struggled for influence within the independent country of Mongolia. China has been very reluctant to lose political and economic hegemony in its sphere of influence, as exemplified by Tibet (William 2013). Despite that suspicion within China of ethnic nationalism and separatist movements, there has been a resurgence of interest in traditional Mongolian culture and music within the Mongolian region of China and beyond in the rest of the country, where there is a realisation that Mongolia and China share some common beliefs and folk traditions (Reeves 2013). Anda Union, for example, a throat-singing and folk music ensemble from the Mongolian region of China, have a huge following in the region, and tours extensively in the West. But how far this toleration goes is questionable. Now that he is based in the United States, the leader of Tengger Cavalry is able to present himself and his band as defenders – to borrow Billig (1995) - of a banal nationalist Mongolian identity and Mongolian folk culture.

Nationalism in the case of Darkestrah is more complex, but no less salient to understanding the use of throat-singing and Turkic or Kyrgyz themes. The band is aligned ideologically with the Tengrism of pan-Turkic nationalism, which rejects Islamic identity in favour of a cross-border Turkishness (Laruelle 2007a; Marat 2016; Rancier 2014; Umetbaeva 2015). It is no coincidence that most of the comments under their YouTube videos are in Turkish or Turkish-related languages. For Darkestrah, throat-singing is used to convey their commitment to this pre-Islamic or otherwise marginal Shamanism. They are committed to constructing this pre-Islamic cultural identity as something that actually existed, and something that they believe needs to be celebrated and honoured as part of their cultural

heritage. Throat-singing is borrowed by Darkestrah from the Turkic Tuvans and used as a way of creating the impression that the style belongs to Kyrgyzstan. For Darkestrah, throat-singing and songs about Tengrism and Shamanism are clearly things that they wish Kyrgyzstan's culture and national identity were founded on, instead of the modern country's invention of its own traditions as part of the Islamic *ummah* (Marat 2016). At the same time, Darkestrah seem to celebrate the recent historical connection between the country and Russia, through their use of Russian language and Russian folk tales. So as well as expressing some kind of Tengrism and pan-Turkic nationalism, there is a form of mourning for a Russian national identity. In other words, Darkestrah have an ambivalence about their belonging, their national identity, which rejects the Islamic imagined community of Kyrgyzstan (Anderson 1983), while simultaneously celebrating other kinds of imagined community and national identity. The move from Kyrgyzstan to Germany gives the band the chance to construct these counter-narratives without fear of censorship or being physically attacked by Kyrgyz Islamic nationalists.

The musicians in the two bands have approached throat-singing in different ways. For Tennger Cavalry, throat-singing and folk music is used because it is supposedly an authentic part of Mongolian music and Mongolian folk culture. The lead member of Tennger Cavalry is trained in the practice of throat-singing and is an accomplished folk musician, and he has family roots in Inner Mongolia. While the heavy metal parts of Tennger Cavalry owe their origins to Western forms of extreme metal, the folk parts are recognisably Mongolian. So throat-singing is an essential part of Tennger Cavalry's performance of authenticity, alongside the traditional costumes and the songs about Tennger and riding to battle. Tennger Cavalry's lead member and American label want us to believe that they are the real deal across two musical worlds, authentic in world/folk music, but also authentic in heavy metal. So as well as the traditional music, we have the songs and the romantic, invented traditions

about warriors. For Darkestrah, the throat-singing and folk music is incidental to their performativity of black metal musicians. In their actual live performances, this part of their recorded output is not readily apparent. On record, the throat-singing is used to give their music a performativity of extremity and pre-Islamic authenticity.

Both bands have constructed a form of Tengrism that they want to present to their listeners as authentic. For them, their stories, the music, and the throat-singing combine to create what they claim is a genuine representation or performance of a pre-modern, pastoral, warrior culture. Tengger Cavalry celebrate a shamanistic form of Tengrism that has been re-invented, in Mongolia and Tuva (Levin and Süzükei 2015; Pegg 1992). This Tengrism is important for Tengger Cavalry because it is something they presumably believe has been lost, or is under threat, in modern China. As Thomas (1992) argues, culture is always something that is constructed and reified in opposition to hegemonic forces, and the magnified effect of globalisation, modernity and Community Party policies in China make Mongolian folk culture both acceptably quaint and fixed in form. Tengger Cavalry have ridden roughshod over that quaint, fixed form of Mongolian culture by using heavy metal's forms to promote a more oppositional if mythological form of Mongolian culture. Darkestrah want to show us what they think Turkic and Kyrgyz culture was like before the coming of Islam, and before the rise of the Russia Empire and the Soviet Union. This Turkic world-view is given to us in mythological form, through the folk tales Darkestrah draw on, and the folk music and throat-singing they add to their songs. For Darkestrah, authenticity is constructed in opposition to Islam, both the traditional forms of Islam in what is now Kyrgyzstan, and modern equivalents legitimated in the Kyrgyz public sphere (Laruelle 2007a, 2007b; Laruelle and Engvall 2015; Marat 2016).

Looking at the reception of the two bands in the wider metal scene, it is clear that Western metal audiences are fascinated by the throat-singing and the Central Asian folk

music used by both bands. There is in the presentation as well as in the reception of these bands a re-construction and validation of older Western Orientalism: the comments in the reviews and under the videos on YouTube confirm that for the metal fans who listen to these bands, Central Asia is far away and extreme. Furthermore, these bands represent an unchanging form of the East and Eastern culture unaffected by globalisation and modernity, and throat-singing is valued for its supposedly authentic connection to a continuing folk culture in this imagined Orient (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000; Said 1978). For the extreme metal scene, and for the heavy metal industry more generally, folk music forms and styles within metal are contentious, but for many extreme metal fans there is an acceptance of folk in a fetishized form within black metal, heathen metal and (obviously) folk metal – where forms of folk music are used to link a particular band with its national culture and heritage (Spracklen 2015, 2017; Spracklen, Lucas, and Deeks 2014). In other forms of fusion between pop and folk music, this fusion may be viewed as something progressive and inclusive, but in extreme metal folk music from northern Europe has been used in conjunction with black metal to promulgate myths of elite Vikingness, whiteness and hegemonic masculinity (Spracklen 2015). The construction of authenticity and belonging in extreme metal is defined and controlled by the Western metal industry and scene, as world music is by the Western music industry. Folk metal and ‘Shamanic’ black metal are both predicated on a shared understanding of extreme metal’s *communicative* rationality (Habermas 1984, 1987): being the outsider and rejecting modernity, while being constrained by the instrumental rationality of warrior masculinity and cultural nationalism. But that nationalism is a Westerner’s view of Oriental nationalism – that is, it is fixed not fluid. This is why some of the responses to the two bands have been confused about the actual hybrid and multiple identities of the musicians: listeners in the West need to place these bands in cultural nationalist boundaries,

and are suspicious of anything that might indicate these bands are products of modernity and migration.

Conclusion

The motivations behind the creative choices of the musicians remain uncertain until further research with them, but some things are reasonably clear from my analysis. Extreme metal bands have to sell authenticity: they have to be seen to be competent at the rules of the sub-genre, while also showing their commitment to the sub-genre's ideologies and myths. What the two bands are doing, this research shows, is selling their authenticity to fans and the wider extreme metal scene as folk metal and pagan black metal. Throat-singing is used to signify fixed roots and fixed cultural heritage, around which the metal riffs are built. To the bands, the combination of metal with folk or world music is a free creative choice, a communicatively rational act in the constraints of the instrumental rationality of the culture industries more generally (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013; Morcom 2015; Negus 1998). That is, each of the bands uses throat-singing to signify both geographical and sonic extremity, and historical gravity: they play with the idea that this is music from the East, from a far-away place and time, even if this is just where they come from: both bands are performing a fixed, Orientalist stereotype of what they claim as their own culture, whether it is the Tengrism and pan-Turkic identity of Darkstrah's mythology, or the Mongolian nationalism and traditions of Tengger Cavalry.

For heavy metal fans and extreme metal labels in the West, Tengger Calvary and Darkestrah are performing exactly how they should: many metal fans in the West want to hear metal music played by bands from far-away, and they want to hear those bands using the Viking/folk/pagan metal template of Europe to tell tales of Eastern warriors set to traditional instrumentation and tunes. Throat-singing in metal represents the extension of musical taste

and cultural capital, perhaps, but it also conforms to existing patterns of elitism, nationalism and hegemony, as well as the metal scene's embeddedness in global capitalism. Adding folk music to rock music is always a political act, and one loaded with possible significations of invented tradition and cultural nationalism. But there is other agency and power at work in the creative choices of these bands. For Tengger Cavalry, it is a celebration of personal heritage and a desire to teach Western audiences about Mongolian culture and history. And for Darkestrah, there is a desire to reject Islamic histories for ones that retain their country's connection to late modern, Neo-Orthodox Russia. For both of these bands, then, the choices reflect the tensions around history and social identity that continue to shape politics in Central Asia and China. Throat-singing more generally might yet still be viewed as a form of counter-hegemonic resistance, in its use by these metal musicians and in its consumption in the West.

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