

Zeitschrift:	Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber:	Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band:	63 (2009)
Heft:	2
Artikel:	Religious revival in modern Buryatia
Autor:	Amogolonova, Darima
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147816

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RELIGIOUS REVIVAL IN MODERN BURYATIA

Darima Amogolonova, Ulan Ude

Abstract

The paper deals with the revival of shamanism and Buddhism in present-day Buryatia and its impact on the construction of a Buryat collective identity that is represented in the idea of a Buryat nation. In the discursive creation of the Buryat ethno-cultural nation the idea of space modeled after indigenous and Buddhist symbolical and sacral concepts is predominant. Legitimized within the framework of political statehood this space represents the ethnic sphere, which is being created and reproduced through the collective imagination. The author argues that within the set of national symbols Buddhism acts as the major instrument in constructing this Buryat cultural ethnosphere.

Introduction

The discourse about religious revival in modern Russia and Buryatia demonstrates a deep change in the social role of religion and its status in a context of transformation of the society from totalitarianism to modernization. Modernization in this context describes the freedom of thought an individual acquires, no longer being dominated by socialist ideological stereotypes, one of which was a negative attitude to religious beliefs. Religion and religious beliefs were previously treated both as an antithetic to the Marxist-Leninist scientific outlook and as an ideological diversion aimed to interfere with the education of a communistic atheistic person. Although twenty years have passed since the slogan of the freedom of conscience became popular, it is remarkable that the religious modernization in Russia, though considered a qualitative evidence for deep social changes, nevertheless has not become an integrative part of the All-Russia movement for the creation of a new nation – the Russians (*Rossiyane*). The reason for this is not only the result of the distinctions between the principal faiths – Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, and Buddhism – but also and mainly of their capacity to cultivate and reproduce archaic representations about cultural space, one's own and other. Thus the distinctions in religious belonging have become a restraining factor in the adaptation process of the individual to the state-national community.

Moreover, under the contemporary conditions of a poly-confessional society the deep distinctions that existed in the traditional Russian society concerning the ways and modes of life, values, and life strategies are increasingly erased. Therefore religion as inherently differentiating characteristic takes over the differentiating functions that earlier belonged to other spheres of social practices, for example, economics. Thus, in the present situation of globalization and Russian modernization, religion occupies perhaps the most prominent place in the ethno-cultural discourse of identity-building.

Religion takes on the function of a marker for social identification at a time when the Russian society as a whole has been transformed into a highly rationalized and secularized society. In comparison to a traditional society, religious belonging at present mostly plays a symbolical role in the ascription to a community. Thus, the actual revival of religiousness takes a considerably smaller place in the life of an individual than the nominal belonging to a religious community; when declaring his or her religious creed, a person draws a parallel between the religious and the politico-cultural community. While in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century nationalism took the place of religion,¹ in the post-soviet epoch we notice the opposite process, i.e. religion has substituted nationalism, or more precisely – ethno-nationalism. In this process it does not matter whether the religion in question is considered the cultural characteristic of an ethnic minority or majority.

In the discourse about the Buryat national revival, it is not so much the institutionalized religion, i.e. institutions and practices of Buddhism and Shamanism that matters but the predominant idea of space modeled after symbolical and sacral concepts. It is irrelevant whether these symbolic representations are traditionally inherent to the religion or newly acquired. Therefore the declaration of one's religious denomination serves as one of the principle signifiers of the national idea and, secondly, as a means of symbolical communication. In this sense, for an ordinary person identifying him or herself by ethnicity, religion is a primary marker of ethnic boundary in any given sense, from the socio-cultural to the political.

On the other hand, due to the fundamental change in the relationship between state and religion, religious institutions have undergone an essential modernization. This concerns practically every aspect of their activities, from the narrow confessional, i.e. world concepts, ritual, educational and institutional aspects to the participation in everyday life and international affairs.

1 ALTERMATT 2000:140–141.

Thus, religious revival in Buryatia needs to be considered on two levels: the revival of religiousness and the substantial change of the social function of religion. The interdependence between these levels is established and developed through a constant exchange between the nominally believing public and the leaders, among which, at first sight paradoxically, the most active promulgators of religious revival are not the clergy, but the intellectual and political elite.

Religion and the Nation

Within the last twenty years, Buryat national ideology has undergone a substantial transformation from the inculcation of the concept of the birthright to the land, i.e. militant secessionist and irredentist nationalism, to the present-day propaganda to preserve its ethnic cultural traditions. Religion is considered to be the most stable and universal element of Buryat culture, and therefore in the public understanding Buddhism and Shamanism have been transformed into religions which are ethnic space markers as well as national symbols – the national religion.

Notably in the last years the discourse on national identity, both in the scientific literature and in the mass-media, has emphasized the national character of Buddhism and Shamanism, despite their obvious distinctions, and has attributed to them a unity of world-view and conceptual apparatus, created by using the terms and categories of Buddhist religious-philosophical thought. Moreover, in the discourse Buddhism and Shamanism have become synonyms for the ethno-national culture of the Buryats. The components of this culture, notably the traditional world-view, the folklore, the spirituality, and other features of an ostensibly national character (tolerance, responsiveness, hospitality, aspiration to knowledge, etc.) are exclusively explained by religious values. Therefore it is not astonishing that in sociological inquiries the Buryat respondents maintain that the “preservation and development of the national culture” (religion in the first place) is a more important presupposition for national revival than the “development of market economy and wide economic independence”.²

Despite the decrease in ethno-political mobilization in Buryatia since 2000, religion as a cultural boundary marker has become one of the main arguments in the discourse about political identity: The phrase “the people of Buryatia” in the

2 See YELAEVA 2005:117–227.

sense of a fellow-citizenship³ solely denotes the fact of joint residence in the same territory. Though the peaceful character of this joint residence is often emphasized, the boundaries between the ethno-cultural components of such a community appear to be much more important than the common historical destiny. Therefore, the newly created community of a “Buryat nation” –an ethno-nation – is capable of producing more emotions and empathy than the well-known and recognized but featureless and amorphous category “people of Buryatia” does.

Buddhism and Shamanism (which in public understanding appear most often as indistinguishable entities) are considered instruments of ethnic integration and ethnic belonging, irrespective of the individual depth of belief and knowledge (if at all existent) of their religious mythologies and dogmas. This conclusion can be drawn from the results of sociological inquiries in which the respondents (persons with higher education) answered the question “What in your opinion is first of all associated with the concept of our Buryat people?” 44.4 percent of the respondents chose the answer “our religion”, whereas only 22.2 percent chose the answer “the state, in which I live”.⁴

However, it is notable that under the present-day condition of religious freedom and the ongoing politicization of religious belonging the overwhelming majority of Buryats describe themselves as belonging to the Buddhist religious community. Both national ideology and public discourse consider Shamanism as an obviously insufficient integrating factor. Moreover, the importance of clan-territorial membership in Shamanism is judged as a destabilizing factor for the Buryat nation. At the same time, despite of declaring themselves Buddhists, the majority of people, when talking about their belief, prefer to define themselves from the position of religious syncretism. In other words, the cultural interdependence (the coexistence of Buddhism, Shamanism, Old Belief and Russian Orthodoxy in Buryatia) as well as the years of militant atheism resulted in a simple belief in God and supernatural forces.⁵ Hence, in the people’s syncretistic religious understanding the very fact of belief is much more important than religious dogmas.

The emphasis on the religious component of culture in the discourse of ethnic identity promoted a growing interest in the rituals as well as the contents

3 The Constitution of the Republic of Buryatia proclaims the existence of the “multinational people of Buryatia that in the course of historical development have united the Buryats, Russians, Evenks, and citizens of other nationalities”.

4 BILTRIKOVA 2001:75.

5 BILTRIKOVA 2001:74.

and the meaning of the Buddhist religion. Sociological research has brought to light that many educated people who call themselves Buddhists, want to obtain a better knowledge about the history of Buddhism and its philosophy. Therefore literature on Buddhism, publications in the mass media, and to an even higher degree the various teachings of Buddhist lamas, especially Tibetan, are very popular among intellectuals.

The Revival of Shamanism

Though in Buryatia people seem firmly convinced that Buddhism and Shamanism are the major religions preserving the Buryat cultural traditions, nevertheless all religious institutions are being actively transformed, thus adapting to modernity. This process is especially notable in Shamanic organizations that aspire to institutionalize their practices, an aspect that was completely absent in the traditional clan society. Though some shamans still prefer to perform their practices and rituals individually, many of them have joined officially registered organizations such as “Boo-Darhan”, “Tengeri”, and “Luusad”. The audience shamans address is getting wider: practically any interested person irrespective of his or her place of residence, confession or nationality can participate in the socially important rituals (tailgan), especially in the city of Ulan-Ude. Moreover, by now the all-Buryat tailgans have become a common event. In the countryside, there still exists a tradition of adhering to the clan shaman, and the clan rituals are of exclusive character, i.e. people from outside are not allowed to participate in them. However, in Ulan-Ude these boundaries have been erased. For the townspeople (not necessarily of Buryat ethnic origin), the choice of a shaman depends mainly on the information about his or her power and skills. People wait in long queues in front of the residences of the shamans who have, on hearsay, the highest degree of devotion and are capable to help in any everyday trouble. Spring and autumn tailgans (rituals of opening and closing the ground) that are performed in the city zone of rest are announced in advance in the media and street advertisements. People take part in such rituals willingly, irrespective of their declared religious creed.

It is not less characteristic for the present day shamanic revival that some shamans express the desire to participate in politics alongside with a lack of mutual understanding between the single shamans and shamanic organizations. Shamans willingly discuss these disagreements in the media. For example, in

2007 an All-Buryat spring tailgan was announced under the initiative of the female shaman Nadezhda Stepanova who planned to conduct it under the slogan “Let us protect Ust’-Orda!”.⁶ However, the shamanic organizations in both Buryatia and Irkutsk region refused to support such a tailgan because they feared to aggravate relations with the authorities.

While in today’s Buryat Shamanism the social base is gradually transformed, at the same time keeping its textual narrative stable, the changing face of Buryat Buddhism has acquired even more visible forms and manifestations. It is worth noting that during its spread in the Buryat territories Buddhism incorporated all the most significant social-regulating functions of Shamanism and its symbolical space (for example, the spirit-masters of locality were given Tibetan Buddhist names); thus, in the public mind there is no conflict of world-view between the two forms of the “national religion”. This syncretistic approach rationally unifies the simplified Buddhist dogmas (ideas about Samsara and Nirvana or about endless reincarnations) with Shamanic representations of the spirits that dominate a particular space and the necessity to give offerings to them. Additionally, there exists the belief that every person has to give offerings to his or her clan and family ancestors.

The Revival of Buddhism

Buddhism presents a different case: its advanced philosophy and enormous global importance suggest that a person who declares him or herself a Buddhist must possess a high intellectual ability and morality. Nevertheless, the eastern (Transbaikalian) Buryats are confident that Buddhism is their native religion while they consider the western (Prebaikalian) Buryats to be shamanists by birth because historically Buddhism was not prominent in those territories. Nowadays, however, the majority of Buryats, irrespective of their local origin, declare themselves Buddhists. Moreover, in recent years the idea that Buddhism is a kind of “genetic accessory” of all Buryats has taken root in public discourse.⁷

6 In the context of a state project on strengthening vertical power in Russia, the Ust’-Orda Buryat Autonomous District was merged with the Irkutsk region. Thus, the former full subject of the Russian Federation has lost its political status.

7 For example, the journalist M. Saidukova writes that most Buddhists in Buryatia are Buddhist by birth (SAIDUKOVA 2006:11).

Due to the ethno-national revival, Buddhism has acquired a quality of social integration which was not characteristic to it within the framework of traditional Buryat society. This essentially new quality of the Buddhist religion serves various functions, enforcing a particular ethno-identity as well as creating different ethno-identities. First, Buddhism as the national religion of all Buryats becomes the core of the national idea in its political aspect because the preservation of the national values is identified solely with Buryat statehood and the Buryat Autonomous regions in Russia. Secondly, the Buddhist revival is considered one of the principal components in the return to a Buryat historical, political, and cultural memory. Theoretically, this leads to the exclusion of the Buryats from the existing Russian community and to their affiliation to a different historical and cultural community, such as the All-Mongolian and Central-Asian community. In a global perspective, the territorial space of such a community is the 'Buddhist world civilization', and the Buryats have obtained a most worthy place in this space as a people living on sacred territory. Thirdly, at the present time when socialist reference points have disappeared, Buddhism becomes the sole moral imperative and driving force behind the moral education of the Buryats. It is supposed to counter the bad influence of Russia and the West through its adherence to a spirit of compassion and contemplation. One can compare this aspect of the Buryat discourse to the ever extending role of Orthodoxy in the socio-cultural discourse of the Russian ethno-cultural majority in Russia.

Constructing a Buryat Ethno-cultural Sphere

Nowadays the Buryat nationalist project has already been completed. At the same time, despite the ethnic elite's far from complete realization of programs on ethno-cultural revival, ordinary citizens seem to feel a residual sensation of participation in ethno-politics which in its latent form includes ethnic as well as religious practices. Since Perestroika and down to the most recent past this latent politicization has been brought about by ethnic mobilization. Paradigms about ethnic community have shaped the Buryat public and individual discourse. A modern ethnic cosmology was formed, which, being based on the idea of cultural sovereignty, is nothing more than the transformed and depoliticized idea of political sovereignty. Moreover, the political element (political sovereignty in its specific Russian connotation) has by now become a constant, and the notion of ethnicity that is still topical, fills the ethnic cultural space.

In Russia and Buryatia lay people seem to agree that modern life forces the religious institutions to adapt to change. Therefore, the participation of the clergy in politics, especially at an all-Russia level, does not meet with disapproval, on the contrary: the political commitment of clerics is considered evidence of the increasing role and importance of the Buryats in the Russian state. At the same time, however, lay Buddhists are not apt to accept religious innovations which obviously contradict the aspiration of higher spirituality. This is also a question of the increasing diversity of the previously indivisible Buddhist community,⁸ which led to conflicting public claims of the Buddhist leaders and even to mutually addressed public insults. It is obvious to the believers that such behavior has nothing to do with religious belief and dogma but is aimed at the seizure of spiritual territory and the acquisition of the flock. The problem is closely connected with the commercialization of Buddhist practices that in the opinion of the lay community is also incompatible with the true Buddhist belief.⁹

The Buddhist institution is not alien to new trends in the technical sphere and effectively uses the achievements of modern electronic communication. Modern technology even renders personal participation in prayer sessions in the Datsan obsolete: one only has to buy a special Internet telephone card, then give the Datsan a call, inform the operator about his or her data and then “book” the prayers.

The revived Buryat Buddhist institutions are proof of the successful construction of a Buryat cultural-ethnic sphere. They obtain an increasing importance in various aspects of daily spiritual life including both religious and worldly practices. People resort to the authority of the Buddhist clergy when the strategies of district or area development are under discussion, when people face personal or family troubles, and even when artistic shows or sports competitions take place. For example, Buddhist lamas enthusiastically supported the idea of

8 In Soviet times, the few functioning Buddhist temples were subordinate to the Buddhists' Central Spiritual Management of the USSR with its center in the Ivolga datsan near the city of Ulan-Ude.

9 Hambo-Lama Damba Ayusheev openly approves of the commercial activity of clerics: “A Datsan is nothing more than an airport, in which the dugans, suburgans and other cult constructions are the alarm beacons. [...] During the service the lamas invite gods to go down on their air liners to them on the land and to render the feasible help to each believer who is taking part in the service. And here the lamas play the role of avia dispatchers. However, the service ends, and the invited visitors-inhabitants of Heaven take their liners and depart for home. [...] In this case the believers are the sponsors who pay for gasoline” (*Dozhd' iz tsver-tov* 2005:26).

developing tourist-recreational zones in Buryatia, taking into consideration the problems of spiritual keeping and the cultural traditions as the Republic's brand. At the All-Russia scientific-practical conference in Ulan-Ude which was devoted to the exposition of a "regional brand", the participants concluded that Buddhism and Orthodoxy must become the trump card of Buryatia.¹⁰

In this way Buddhism, alongside its role as a major spiritual value becomes an integral part of the collective idea about Buryatia and the Buryats. Buddhism is transformed into a consumer good, a rare and exotic bait for tourists. In both world-views, the traditional and the modern market oriented, we note the construction of an extraordinary – sacral, wonderful and even magic – spatial continuum through symbols of spiritual continuity, thus stressing the spiritual aspects of the Buryat cultural and socio-political history.

Spiritualizing the Secular Discourse

Scientific and popular scientific literature as well as the mass media (newspapers, journals, and the Internet) deals with outstanding Buddhist personages who return from oblivion: Agvan Dorzhiev, X Pandito Hambo-Lama Dampil Gomboev, XV Pandito Hambo-Lama Tsengunzhap Baniev, XIX Pandito Hambo-Lama Zhargal-Dorzhii Gomboev, Lubsan Sandan Tsydenov, Bidiya Dandaron and many others. The popular representation of their biographies and achievements promotes the process of de-secularization as well as the spiritualization of the secular discourse.

Literature also focuses on this task. The local bestseller *Flowers' Rain. Buryat Buddhist parables* (collected by Igor Muhanov) contains various stories, most of them about modern popular Buddhism in ethnic Buryatia. The stories concentrate on the changes in social life and public discourse and at the same time provide a moral evaluation of them. The advice offered in the book is given by prominent lamas such as Hambo-Lama Ayusheev. Their moral maxims are illustrated by accessible and clear examples. Children's books opt for the same lesson. In Victoria Alagueva's *The Diamond Book about the Buryats. Bases of the Universe*, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (White Tara, Avalokiteśvara and others), the spirits of the ancestors and the territory (the Lord of Baikal and the Mistress of the river Angara) appear as "our neighbors for life". Simultaneously, the

10 SHEVCHENKO 2008:1.

author explains the principles of the Buddhist dogmas, in particular the Eightfold Path for Salvation.¹¹ The religious-educational orientation of the book correlates with its social-educational purposes: “Many thanks to our lamas, modest workers to whom we owe the preservation of our world”.¹² In order to present a religious world view suitable to everybody, Victoria Alagueva merges the characters of Christian and Buddhist mythology: “Archangel Michael is a Defender and Military leader. He possesses tremendous force; not without reason he is named ‘equal to God’. [...] In the Buddhist tradition Michael bears the name ‘Vajradhara’”.¹³ This judgment bears witness of the ongoing dynamics and fluidity of the Buryat ethnic sphere and of its ability to include different cultural symbols.

Despite the active participation of the Buddhist clergy in political activities (membership in political parties and the elective government bodies), in Buryatia there is no explicit politicization of Buddhism in the sense of support for the nationalist (either secessionist or irredentist) propaganda of the elite.¹⁴ On the contrary, institutionalized Buddhism – the Traditional Sangha of Russia – quite well meets the requirements demanded from the state religions. These requirements consist, in particular, in a protective function, i.e. the support of legal power and the counteraction to any attempt to change the political and social conditions. In this sense, Hambo-Lama Ayusheev’s public work is characteristic because he personifies a qualitatively new role of a Buddhist monk in Russia and the alliance between the Buddhist institutions and the Russian authorities. He actively advertises the indissoluble ties between Buddhist religious leaders and the Russian authorities by means of his personal participation in the Public Chamber for the President of the Russian Federation.

11 ALAGUEVA 2007:80.

12 Ibid:67.

13 Ibid:64.

14 Clerics acting outside institutionalized Buddhism sometimes express their negative opinion on the fusion of the Buryat autonomous districts with the Irkutsk and Chita regions that has already become a fact. As the well-known teacher of Buddhist philosophy who became a layman (i.e. he renounced his Buddhist vows and titles including the Geshe title) Jampa Tintelley states: “The integration of the regions will interfere with the spiritual development of Buryatia. The disappearance of the unique and original Buryat culture will be a tragedy not only for Russia but also for the whole world. Before making any decision, the government should be interested not only in the material aspect but also in the spiritual life of the people. I am a citizen of Russia; therefore I can allow myself to express my views on the given question” (UCHITEL 2005:1).

Whereas in-datsan activity and the appearance of Buddhist lamas in the media seems to be less effective for the de-secularization of Buryat public discourse, the lamas' presence in everyday life and in ethno-cultural rituals leads to their acceptance as advisers for every-day problems, especially with the authorities. To mention just two examples: Hambo-Lama Ayusheev provided essential help to the veterans of the Second World War in getting their relatives registered for social housing. Due to his active support the offspring of the veterans can now stay in their apartments after the death of their parents. In another case, at the request of the management of an electric power company the Buddhist clergy called on their flock to pay their accounts for the electric power they used. Drawing on the training and educational impetus of Buddhism, the lamas explained the close relation between unsettled accounts and karmic requital:

The attitude of humans to the work of other people very much defines their spiritual culture. Buddhism says that one of the most evil acts is to take what does not belong to you and use what you are not allowed to use. This fully concerns larceny of electric power. The loss of riches and well-being will be the consequences of such evil acts. The person who has not paid for the contribution will be doomed to poverty. This is the law of karma.¹⁵

In post soviet Buryatia it has already become a tradition to carry out sport competitions under the aegis of Buddhist institutions. Even the lamas themselves participate in the competitions. Foremost are still the Three Games of Men – Eryn Gurban Naadan – the traditional Buryat sports wrestling, bow shooting, and horse racing, but at present the competition can also include other kinds of sports, like table tennis and chess. The winners are awarded impressive and expensive prizes, even cars. The Buddhist leaders always point out that the religio-spiritual meaning of these competitions is deeper and more important than the obvious aspiration to victory. As Hambo-Lama Ayusheev states:

Our wrestlers communicate with our patron Bodhisattva Ocirvani who personifies the power and authority of the Buddhas of the three times, who grants to our people strong sons and patronizes them. [...] A wrestler who has lost balance and touched the ground with his hand is considered defeated. This is a key to the possible understanding of the most secret Teaching of the Buddha, his middle way in Madhyamika. Its essence consists in finding a middle way in order not to fall into extremes. [...] The winner of the contest shall repeatedly pass a thin rope above a precipice. In Buddhism this signifies the possible finding of the Middle Way.¹⁶

15 *Zakon karmy* 2005:8.

16 ANZHILOVA 2008a:4.

The Buddhist clergy participate in socio-cultural practices because they are well aware of the marginal role religion plays in everyday life. Therefore, through the media, they explain to the lay people the importance of religion as an ethno-integrating factor. They also advertise ethical values that are quite obvious for the uninitiated; thus the conviction in the necessity of the lamas' religious activity is steadily growing.¹⁷

Both the religious and secular elite pay special attention to the revival and development of the Buddhist Sangha. When answering a journalist's question about the main mission of the Sangha and lamas, Hambo-Lama Ayusheev states:

The Sangha is not clerics only, it is also many thousand believers, to whom we are obliged to serve and help. We are to serve people both in pleasure and sorrow. It has been like this since the very beginning of the spread of Buddhism in Buryatia. Now we simply recollect and renew much of what was expelled and banished from the memory of the people in the times of militant atheism. Since his birth every person must be connected to a lama. In each village, there must be a lama to exercise the daily religious needs such as sahyusan, divaazhan, maani, oboo, and lusuud.¹⁸ There should be a group of active practitioners for carrying out these rites as it has been arranged in the Kizhinga district. The religious rituals should be standardized whenever possible, because we all are Buddhists wherever we live. The "Arya-Baala" and "Green Tara" communities can and must do much in this direction. All this work should become a tradition and norm. Say, in some regions accidents begin to occur frequently. The lama should reveal the reasons and perform a rite to drive out evil. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assign everything to the lama. The believers themselves should be able to read a prayer and perform the necessary rituals. A parishioner should know for sure, which of his actions from the point of view of the Buddha's Teaching are good and which he is to reject. And it is the lama who brings all this to the consciousness of the believer.¹⁹

As mentioned above, in the de-secularization process the leading role does not belong to religious dogmas but to popular explanations of truths, exemplified in the Buddhist religious figures of the past. A kind of sacred biography (namtharas)²⁰ is created. These narratives deal with both lamas and laymen who in Bury-

17 The strengthening of the vertical power in Russia has resulted in the understanding by the political elite that to play the ethnic card in the struggle for access to resources is destined to fail. Therefore the elite in every possible way show their loyalty to the central political authorities and usually join the "United Russia" party. The people's growing distrust in the Buryat politicians is evident in the new slogan: "The Buddhist Sangha is now the only thing that really unites the Buryat nation".

18 Names of various rituals in the Tibeto-Mongolian-Buryat Buddhist tradition.

19 BADMARINCHINOV 2000:4.

20 From the Tibetan *rnam-thar*.

atia are put on a par with lamas because of their service to the lay people, their preaching of Buddhism, their sacrifice and patriotism. The latest newspaper publications about the late Lubsan Sandan Tsydenov describe his activity as a founder and head of the Balagat theocratic state in the territory of Buryatia during the civil war in Russia; at the same time journalists write about the improbable miracles he allegedly displayed: infallible predictions of underground water springs, or his ability to levitate and his transformations. The journalist Buda Budaev hints at the miracle of his resurrection: “People say that quite recently he has been seen in the territory of the Ivolga datsan”.²¹

The Itigelov Miracle

Without doubt, the most public event in the Buryat Buddhist revival is the “Return of the Imperishable Body” of Hambo-Lama Itigelov.²² Every year hundreds of thousands go on pilgrimage to his shrine. The site has long since turned into an internationally acknowledged pilgrimage center.

Though the Itigelov phenomenon has aroused wide-spread scientific interest in Russia, for the Buryats themselves, both the believing Buddhists and those who ascribe to Buddhism, it is much more important that “Hambo-Lama Itigelov achieved the state of a Buddha, that is total perfection, all-encompassing knowledge, the termination of his future rebirths in the misery of Samsara, and boundless compassion to all living beings.” For the layman, however, it is still important to get scientific affirmation of the validity of the miracle, a need that mirrors the ongoing rationalization of the spiritual sphere and the spiritualization of everyday life. Therefore the opinion of those scientific authorities (especially from Moscow), who have shown interest in the Itigelov phenomenon but have not yet released their final judgments, strengthens the claim to the veracity of the miracle and its extrapolation on the Buryat territory as a whole. The gist of the media discourse about the Itigelov phenomenon lies in statements like: “Buryatia now is spoken of as a land where a true miracle took place” or “the

21 BUDAEV 2007a:8.

22 Shortly before his death in 1927 Hambo-Lama Dashi-Dorzho Itigelov told his disciples about his future return. After 75 years, in 2002, the lamas of the Ivolga datsan took his sarcophagus from the ground in the presence of forensic medicine experts. The fixed medical-physical parameters of the body corresponded and still correspond to lifetime characteristics.

Itigelov miracle did not happen accidentally, it is proof of the Buddhist essence of Buryatia and the Buryats".

The return of the holy lama who was declared the reincarnation of the first Buryat Hambo-Lama Zayaev, proved to be the central feature in the re-coding of the Buryat territory as the center of spirituality in Russia and the Buddhist world.²³ The discourse about Buryatia as the center of the Buddhist world emphasizes the administrative and spiritual autocephaly of the Russian Buddhist "church". The Hambo-Lama Ayusheev actively pursues this project. The idea of autocephaly is closely connected to the situation in Tibet and the further destiny of both the institution of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism in general. On the one hand, Ayusheev's project aims at minimizing Chinese influence in Buryatia. On the other hand it aims at the official registration of a Buryat Buddhist "church" as a special form of northern Buddhism. It is, however, easy to note that the personal ambitions of this religious leader who wants to occupy a more prominent position in the Russian clerical hierarchy are of no less importance in his activities against Tibetan Buddhist institutions.

To prove the new and central role of Buryatia in a global Buddhist context, the Buryat lamas stress the all-Russian and global relevance of the Itigelov phenomenon:

Predicting dark times, he [= Itigelov] kept his physical body on Earth in order to return to the world of samsara at the appropriate time for the liberation of the people from suffering. Since the moment of his return, Hambo-Lama Itigelov has brought enormous benefit to the people and to all living beings in general. It is especially important in our dark time when in our surroundings evil spirits of different kinds have multiplied extraordinarily, as is shown in fantasy movies. Actually, they are living beings with hard karma, i.e. those who in previous births brought a lot of harm to people. They are not visible and have no physical parameters, but still they exist. For karmic reasons they cannot be born to an auspicious destiny. Experiencing cruel tortures, they stay in the "bardo" intermediate space. Having been filled with compassion for them, Hambo-Lama Itigelov helps them to leave suffering behind and take on an auspicious rebirth. Thus, the joint karma of Buryatia, Russia, and the whole world is purified.²⁴

23 The Director of the Hambo-Lama Itigelov's Institute, Yanzhima Vasilyeva argues that the phenomenon proves the validity of the Buddha's words who allegedly predicted a new up-swing for the development of Buddhism in the most northern point of its hemisphere that is Buryatia (*Novaya versiya* 2007:1).

24 BADMARINCHINOV 2006:4.

Itigelov's miracle is even connected with Russian political discourse. Hambo-Lama Ayusheev pays attention to the "historical" law of his return in connection with Vladimir Putin's presidency:

I would like to draw the attention to a noble historical connection. Empress Elizaveta Petrovna, who ascended the throne in 1740, issued a Decree in 1741 which legally recognized the right of the Buryats to be Buddhist. Furthermore Ekaterina II, who became Empress in 1762, in 1764 established the institution of the Pandito Hambo Lama. Moreover, in 2000 Vladimir Putin was elected President of the Russian Federation, and in 2002 we found the Precious Body of Hambo-Lama Itigelov. This is to be specially understood through a prism of history.²⁵

The media support the Buddhist lamas in their aspiration to emphasize the impact of Itigelov's "return" on secular everyday life in the Russian federation:

Since Itigelov's return we note a certain calmness has affected the whole of Russia – the war in the Chechen Republic is discontinued, local civil wars for property in the big cities have stopped. Let us also consider the prices for oil. In addition, why did the President suddenly remove a pipe from Baikal? Was this done by the President at all? As for the persecutions against the oligarchs, Itigelov in his message to his descendants warned: "The riches which have been madly collected and saved up will be transformed into strong poison".²⁶

Buddhism and the Construction of National Identity

The present-day Buddhist revival, in which the phenomenon of Hambo-Lama Itigelov is an organic element, does not only demonstrate its stability, but also gradually draws in the Buryat populace. Contrary to the political field, in the religious field there is a strong interaction between the religious elite and the lay believers. This interaction is evident in the sociological data gathered by scholars from the Institute for Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan studies of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Based on her fieldwork, Irina Yelaeva prepared a Table "Ranking ethno-integrating attributes". The Table shows an essential increase in the number of persons who declare themselves to be ethnic Buryats by the common markers of culture, customs, and rituals – from 59,6 percent in 1996-1997 up to 71,5 percent in 2002-2003.²⁷ The number of

25 AYUSHEEV 2008:4.

26 BUDAEV 2007b:8.

27 YELAEVA 2005:146.

those persons who single out religion as an ethno-integrating marker increases from 35,2 percent in 1996-1997 up to 46,7 percent in 2002-2003.²⁸ The figures are no less impressive for the answers to the question "What conditions are necessary for the Buryat national revival?" In 2002-2003 38,4 percent considered support to religion to be the most important factor for national revival, whereas in 1996-97 only 15,8 percent took this position.²⁹

Furthermore the interest in religion generally promotes the display of a self-perceptive religious identity. The case of Itigelov's miracle is exclusively relevant to Buddhism and acts as scientific proof for the validity of this religion. Thus, a person obtains both rational and irrational affirmation for his or her Buddhist self-perception. The unconditional connection of Itigelov with Buddhism, its wide discussion in the media alongside the emphasis of the educational function of religion give an additional push for the strengthening of the ethno-cultural (religious) identity.

The Itigelov miracle has been transformed into a symbolic event, which gave new life to the Buryat national idea. The evidence suggests that this idea will further develop in the spiritual-religious and ethical field. After the de-politicization of the social practices and the public sphere, religion is rapidly becoming the major marker of the national space. Moreover religion increasingly provides the moral-spiritual and ideological basis for the formation of a "blood and soil" solidarity and a shared national political memory.

The principal difference between Buddhism (though it is understood as an ethno-national religion) and political nationalism consists in the character of Buddhist dogmas that go back to the Indian tradition. Because of its heritage Buddhism has not turned into a tool of exclusiveness; when communicating with lay people, Buddhist lamas do not pay special attention to their patrimonial creed or religious initiation. This is why in Buryatia not only Buryats feel an interest and respect for the Buddhist traditions, and Buddhism is able to draw believers from all ethnic and social groups.

The Buddhist institutions of Russia – the Sangha – are seriously concerned with current political issues, in particular with the global problem of security. In this respect, the Buddhist institutions aim at a social-critical role. At their IV Sugungy (Congress) the Buddhists of Buryatia (monks and laymen) have appealed

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.:149.

to all believers and people of good will to stop enmity and violence, to keep peace and consent in the world. We, the representatives of one of the world religions, condemn evil, display of hatred and rage, terrorism and extremism as means for the resolution of conflicts and disagreements between people and nations. Life is given to us for the fulfillment of blessings for the sake of life on Earth, for the sake of the blessing of all living beings. We live in an epoch of major changes, in the epoch of globalization and integration of all spheres of life of a modern person and society. [...] The delegates of the IV Sugungy of the Buddhist traditional Sangha of Russia will always aspire to bring to the world the Buddha's word about tolerance as one of the principles for keeping peace, harmony, and interethnic and inter-religious consent.³⁰

Conclusion

The Buryat national idea has not yet been represented in a final and conventional “edition”, but it is already a national text, which is close, accessible, and topical for everyone it concerns. Moreover, the text implies that any interested person can enter the national discourse if he or she accepts the existing semantic context. At present, the Buryat ethno-national idea does not imply the extrapolation of the ethnic over the whole set of social practices; on the contrary, the space of its functioning is rather limited. Legitimized within the framework of the political statehood (Republic of Buryatia) this space represents the ethnic sphere, which is being created and reproduced through the collective imagination. Within the set of national symbols Buddhism acts as an instrument in constructing the Buryat cultural ethno-sphere, which includes the whole variety of ethnically colored practices that manifest group belonging (ethnic identity).

Moreover, in every day life many features of the traditional religious culture have been incorporated into the regional values and spatial images of the Buryat ethno-cultural sphere. Therefore the syncretism of religious practices, which has developed during the period of long cultural interaction between Russians and Buryats is still prevalent and gets even more pronounced, due to an increased interest in a kind of “syncretic mysticism”. As an indirect result of these processes we note a kind of interethnic trust and tolerance in everyday practices.

Shamanic and Buddhist revival in Buryatia typologically coincide with the observed adaptation practices to changing conditions. These practices are embedded in the spatial context of a culturally delineated territory. Thus in the reli-

30 ANZHYLOVA 2008b:12.

gious-ritual sphere of modern Shamanism and Buddhism a feeling of belonging to a particular territory which is the Republic of Buryatia is produced. The worship of the obo is observed by most of the inhabitants of Buryatia, both Buryats and Russians. The custom "to drip" alcohol to the spirits of the territory in a feast marks the collective cultural-religious perception of an enlivened space. These practices are performed by people irrespective of their ethnic or religious affiliation. We should not, however, forget that it is Buddhism, not Shamanism that holds the status of the official religion of the Republic: the presidents of the Republic and honored guests of Buryatia pay visits to the Ivolga datsan, and not to shamanic institutions.

In spite of the fact that both Shamanism and Buddhism basically mark the Buryat socio-cultural space while Orthodoxy marks that of the Russians, Non-Buryats eagerly attend shamanic tailgans, Buddhist services, and visit lamas and shamans who specialize in Tibetan, Mongolian and Buryat folk medicine and astrology. The announcements (always in Russian) in the newspapers about tailgans, rituals in the shamanic communities, or Teachings which are given by Buddhist teachers always stress that "everybody is welcome". The religious specialists of the different denominations offer "reception hours for the citizens". The faceless official term "citizens", inherited from soviet times, takes on a new and civic meaning.

For the citizens of modern Russia (both ethnical Russians and non-Russians), who have only recently been granted "freedom of religion", religious identification is most often carried out nominally, as, in particular, research carried out by the Institute for Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies has brought to light. Public opinion about religious identity is often based on ideas about an ethno-cultural relation of the Buryats with Buddhism, while in this logic all Russians should belong to Russian Christian Orthodoxy (or the Old Belief which is still popular in Buryatia). However, the conditions of a multicultural and poly-confessional Republic promote complex notions of religious representation that have concrete meaning for religious specialists only. The lay people usually do not bother about religious intricacies, and the intrinsic distinctions between Orthodoxy and Buddhism do not trigger conflicting emotions, though the cultural-traditional divisions do not disappear. I maintain that, apart from the already mentioned factors, other aspects also promote a syncretic religious self-perception: 1) for the overwhelming majority of the lay people religious experience and the knowledge of dogmatic elements of the different religions is extremely dim; 2) in the hierarchy of values there is no conflict of perceptions about the ethnic religion because traditions, customs and stereotypes

of social behavior formulated in the ethnic culture within the historical framework of confession have been appreciably leveled in the course of cultural interaction.

I have shown that the revival of religious practices in present-day Buryatia reflects the deep changes in the Russian social climate. These changes concern both the world-view and the functional sphere of religious practices. Buddhism, speaking a language of self-awareness, has become the prominent characteristic of the Buryat national image. Whether Buddhism will remain merely an element of traditional culture or whether it will become an instrument for the politicization of the public sphere will depend mostly on the development of the civil society and the easing of interethnic tension in Russia.

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