

УДК 168.522 + 323.1

## Symbols of Post-Soviet Buryat National Consolidation

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Received 3.06.2011, received in revised form 11.06.2011, accepted 17.06.2011

*The paper presents the findings of research that constitutes a part of a larger project titled "Buryat Ethnicity in the Context of Sociocultural Modernization". This is the first time scholars studying Buryatia have undertaken such a comprehensive research on the question of the relationship between the Buryat ethnic consolidation integration and sociocultural modernization. The complex methodological principles introduce new ground for scientific discourse to analyze the processes of national-cultural revival far beyond the Buryat topic. The research of ethnopolitical processes analyzes: (i) elites' activities directed at re-ethnicization; (ii) coexistence and opposition of national (ethnic) and Russian (civil) identities by placing ethnicity in the first place within the hierarchy of ideological, public, and individual identities; construction of a so-called boundary identity that implies a separation from Russia and an affinity for other historical and cultural groups; and (iii) identification of distinct stages in discourses of ethnicity. The authors argue that sociopolitical discourses in Buryatia are ethnonationalist and ethnoregional with simultaneous recognition that political processes among Buryats occur in the conditions of recognized identification within Russia, which nevertheless loses in competing with ethnic identity.*

*Keywords: Nationalism; ethnicity; re-ethnicization; historical and cultural memory; desecularization*

### Introduction

In the last two decades sociopolitical changes in Russia have produced new social practices and national consolidation construction efforts made by the members of the Buryat intellectual elite. Today, the preservation of Buryat national culture has become a key political issue in the agenda of de-ethnicization of the state structure. The ethnic elite is expecting inevitable assimilation and loss of cultural values. Our goal is to identify the forms of Buryat ethnic elites' constructing ideologems/mythologems to

maintain ideas of history and culture that serve as a base for national consolidation in public imagination.

At present, Buryat sociocultural modernization includes active reconstruction of the Buryat community according to some principles based on ethnic kinship. Such reconstruction is marked by materials and instruments of ideological discourse as a subject of history (especially the historical commonalities that exist among Mongolian peoples); the territory corresponding to those historical commonalities

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(and legitimizing indigenous ethnic rights); traditional culture (mainly, Buddhism and Buryat language as the principal conditions for *re-ethnicization*); ethnic consolidation; and preserving and strengthening the political status of Buryats' within the Russian Federation.

### Materials and Methods

In the present work we employ materials from relevant scientific and public discussions, such as the proceedings of the All-Buryat Congresses (1991, 1996, 2003 and 2006), roundtables on the problems of Buryat statehood (UOBAD, 2003; Ulan-Ude, 2005), pronouncements made at conferences, including one called "The Tragic Date in Buryat History" (Ulan-Ude, 2005); editorials and letters published in such newspapers as *Buryatia* (1992-2005), *Molodezh Buryatii* (1993-2005) *Ugaim zam* (2003-2005) etc., materials from the Archive of the All-Buryat Association for Culture Development, as well as scientific and popular literature and various cultural events, both religious and secular.

The research applies the constructivist paradigm methodology (Anderson, 1991; Barth, 1969; Cohen, 2000; Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1986) of contemporary social and political anthropology in combination with the system principle of social processes. According to the constructivist paradigm, we understand ethnicity as "a continuing ascription which classifies a person in terms of their most general and inclusive identity, presumptively determined by origin and background as well as a form of social organization maintained by inter-group boundary mechanisms, based not on possession of a cultural inventory but on manipulation of identities and their situational character" (Barnard and Spencer, 2003: 192). This approach focuses on the situational and contextual character of ethnicity to make

a clearer understanding of such political dimensions as the formation of inter-group relations, political mobilization and social stratification. While constructivism satisfies the needs of our research on contemporary Buryat ethno-ideology more than any other theoretical framework, we still cannot accept its concept of "an imagined community" completely with the reference to the historically developed ethnos. At present, ethnos, even of a speculative and "imagined" form exists due to the cultural and political circumstances. Therefore, we place ourselves in the position of *moderate constructivism*. Besides, modern investigations in culture, even regarding its politicization, need semiological approach in combination with the structural method (Lotman, 2001).

### Results

As sociopolitical changes in Russia within the last two decades gave birth to a wide array of new social practices, Buryat intellectuals began mobilizing efforts to reconstruct and revive Buryat identity. An important issue at stake for these elites is developing the idea of the Buryats as a specific ethnic group, a process largely shaped by the rejection of Soviet-era politics and experiences. As a result, when constructing Buryat identity today, national intellectual elites use longer-term historical paradigms for self-identification.

Recent sociological studies aiming to measure ethnic identity in Buryatia demonstrate in what way the elites are producing and mobilizing ethnicity for the purposes of national-cultural revival. One sociologist, comparing the studies she had conducted in the Ust'-Orda Buryat autonomous district in 1990 and 1997, noted that in response to the question "who am I?" none of respondents specified an ethnic form of belonging in the first round of the survey, while in 1997 "Buryat" category appeared in

the responses of a quarter of those questioned (Yelayeva, 1999: 61-62).

We contend that the increasing importance of ethnicity on the scale of identity preferences results from the intentional efforts of national intellectual elites to mobilize ethnicity. The Buryat national movement actively formulates common interests and constructs boundaries of ethnicity, by which we mean ethnic indicators used as symbols of group identification:

*“In the beginning of the 1990s, the All-Buryat Congress established the preconditions for ethnic consolidation under the new circumstances. The following tasks were put forward as significant for ethnic revival: strengthening the sovereignty of the Republic, strengthening the sense of shared history and connection with the Mongol world, revealing and reviving the richness of the national culture, art, language, and national consciousness ... In the search for a national idea, attempts were undertaken to create new theories ... Modified ideas of ‘pan-Mongolism’ were revived as a foundation for political tasks. However, the leaders of the Buryat revival mainly focused on the ideas about the past. Reflecting upon the future is an unusual occurrence”* (Yelayev, 2000: 308).

Buryat intellectuals are actively involved in developing a way of supporting and preserving Buryat ethnic identity, creating an image of the ethnic group, forming ethnic stereotypes, and identifying attitudes towards such a phenomenon as markers of ethnicity. The reference to cultural traditions is becoming especially important in the creation of a symbolic system distinct from that of the socialist past. Traditional culture and the ethnic paradigm of the *Buryat-Mongols* serve as the most important resources of ethnic symbolism for constructing the discourse of national-cultural revival.

## Discussion

*History in Buryat consolidation:  
All-Mongolian past, Genghis Khan  
and his Empire*

In constructing a modern political ideology, Buryat intellectual elites pay appreciable attention to such concepts as national consciousness, national originality (which implies a connection with culture), and the unity of the Buryat people embodied in the *Buryat* ethnic name. A wider common Mongolian unity finds its expression in the paradigm *Buryat-Mongolia* or *Buryat-Mongols*, which links Buryatia to wider understanding of Central-Asian civilization, which the Baikal area is recognized to be an integral part of, and which is based on notions of common origin (“consanguinity”) and common territory (“native ground”), in a recognizable ‘Blut und Boden’ theme.

Buryat scholars keep debating over the historical development of Buryat culture, with the ideological dividing line between those who emphasize the historical contingency and social constructions at work in the development of Buryat ethnicity, and those who posit the existence of a primordial Buryat nation. In our opinion, the professional academic point of view on this phenomenon was set forward by T. M. Mikhailov, who argues:

“The ethnic and geopolitical understanding of the terms *Buryat* and *Buryatia* arose in the modern and contemporary periods. During the Mongolian period of our history (from the 12th to the first half of the 17th century), Zabaikal and Prebaikal were a part of the Mongolian state, and during the time of the Khan and his descendants they became core components of the Empire. *There was no such thing as Buryat nationhood.* ... The sense that ‘we are Buryats’ did not arise all at once. However, over the course of 150-200 years, as a result of the formation

of a completely new culture and social psychology, ... the ethnic label 'Buryat,' with the active cooperation of the Russian state, became a symbol of the coming together of an entity and a political slogan" (Mikhailov, 1996: 18-19).

While Mikhailov acknowledges the social and political factors at work in the construction of a Buryat identity, many other contemporary Buryat intellectuals strive to establish the most historically remote ethnogenesis possible, driven by ethnic ideology that symbolically links authenticity with "roots" and "ancientness." For this reason, Mongolian history is preferable to Buryat history proper. The powerful importance of time for ethnic ideology means, first of all, *constructing a "great history,"* because as P. Chatterjee said, "a nation, as nationalists believe, must have a past" (cited by Kaplonski, 2004: 119). In this context, the revitalization of the *Buryat-Mongols* name attains special, instrumental meaning with the beginning of Perestroika, when the *Buryat-Mongols/Buryat-Mongolia* paradigm was reintroduced, marking a new stage of identity construction. This paradigm corresponds to the problem of national consolidation and revival of the spiritual culture of the Buryat people. The information statement, "About the name *the Buryat-Mongol Republic*," submitted in 1991 by the Scientific Council of the Buryat Institute of Social Studies to the leaders of the Republic, asserts:

"...all Mongolian peoples have a common ancient culture, rooted in the Central-Asian civilization, and had a common writing system – the classical, so-called old-Mongolian vertical script. Mongolian scholars have always stated that Buryat-Mongolian culture and the Buryat-Mongolian language should develop on the base of a traditional, common Mongolian foundation, for being separated from it they will lose

their prospect for development.... We think that in everyday use, in press and literature, such ethnic labels as "Buryat" and "Buryat-Mongols" can be used similarly, however our *Republic* should carry the traditional name, *Buryat-Mongolian*" (Bring back the name, 1998: 11, 13, 14).

At present, the name *Buryat-Mongols* carries a particular symbolic impotence. This is connected to the fact that it became a symbol of national revival when it was officially recognized for the first time as a marker of state formation (of the Republic), being formed on the basis of a widely shared ethno-territorial unit including Pribaikalye and Transbaikalia that had come into being in the post-revolutionary years, to be precise, in 1924. The concept of a unified ethnicity of Buryat-Mongols is a key component of the discourse of national and cultural revival, and the Buryat Institute of Social Studies has argued that restoring the name of the Republic is one of the most important goals:

"We consider that the reintroduction of the traditional name, the *eternal name* of 'Buryat-Mongolia,' would enable the following positive tendencies, which we have noticed in the freeing-up the traditions and the culture of our ancestors, not only in our Republic but in other autonomous areas: playing an important role in the spiritual rebirth and consolidation of our people, in the future journey of the Mongol peoples on the paths of democracy, and in the social progress and harmony of civilization" (ibid., 13).

The emphasis made on the *eternal* character of the name, which only became a historical fact in 1923, focuses our attention on the *sacramentalising* nature of this name. It has the *magical* ability to organize the country, locating the Republic within concentrically larger entities emanating from the center to the periphery:

from our Republic – the autonomous *okrug* – to our people – the Mongol people – to human civilization (ibid.).

As we can see, the *Buryat – Mongolia* paradigm, as one level of ethnic loyalty, has found its place in a number of hierarchies of national/ethnic loyalties in modern Buryat political culture. Due to the revitalization of “Blut und Boden” ideas connecting Buryats and Mongols, the discussion of national ‘belonging’ has been given a prominent place in newspaper publications and articles within the last decade. One primordialist writer, Professor Chagdurov, Doctor of Philology, applied anthropomorphizing imagery to Buryatia and Mongolia, as he lamented that current regimes continue to limit the national revival:

“... the paradox ... is that within the power structures of Buryatia and Russia, a primordial ethnic group (Mongols by blood) has not been allowed to be named legally by the names of mother and father simultaneously – as Buryat-Mongol, as it had been before July 7, 1958, even though it would be more ethical for those who hold power in the Republic of Buryatia, including those who represent the interests of the majority of its population, to dare to return to the native ethnicity its mother name” (Chagdurov, 2003: 52).

Notably, leaders of the modern national cultural revival do not try to revive pan-Mongolism as a political project, a source of major anxiety for Soviet and presently Russian leaders. The key question for Buryat leaders concerns emphasizing shared national cultural features. As Chimitdorzhiev stated:

“We think that restoration of the primordial name (Buryat-Mongolia) will open up certain opportunities for reviving and deepening the national basis of our language and culture as a whole... Having restored the

Buryat-Mongol name, we will recognize that the Buryats had an ancient culture that was created together with other Mongolian peoples. This act will promote wider contacts between them, and will strengthen their friendship and cooperation, first of all, in the field of culture and language” (Chimitdorzhiev, 1991: 50).

Legitimizing the primordial rights of the Buryat ethnicity is first and foremost based on the idea of “*ancient*” and “*privatized*” history. This assumption can be seen in publications which recommend, for example “paying closer attention to the Sayan-Baikal region as the most probable and most ancient fatherland of the Mongols” (Angarkhayev, 2003: 70), or to consider the probability that the native land of Genghis Khan is ethnic Buryatia (Damdinov, 2003: 72-75).

Another arena in which attempts are made to prove the antiquity of the Buryats concerns evidence regarding their participation in the workings of the Mongol Empire. This argument relies on inaccurate re-definitions of the meanings of the terms *ethnicity* and *territory*, insofar as these researchers claim that the ethnic group (Buryats) were from the start spread over their modern territory. For example, “The Buryat lands in the Baikal area (Bagrudzhim-Tukum) were, both in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, drawn into the unified Mongol state –first of Khan and later into the Mongol kingdom of the Lesser Khans” (Chimitdorzhiev, 1996: 60).

This formulation, published in 1996, was later developed and re-stated in the following form: “Our ancestors – the Buryat tribes and their forefathers –became, early in the Middle Ages, a single ethnic body along with other Mongol tribes. They lived in the northern reaches of the Mongol world in the country of Bargudzhin-Tukum, on both sides of Lake Baikal” (Chimitdorzhiev, 2000: 32).

The establishment of the *Buryat-Mongol/Buryat-Mongolia* paradigm in contemporary discourses of national-cultural revival becomes an essential part of historical and cultural practices, and the restoration of the joined Buryat-Mongol name is closely connected with demands for recognizing Buryats as a *repressed people*. If the central authorities agreed to return the former name, they would nearly automatically acknowledge that the partition of the republic in 1937 was illegal; this in turn could bring about the further escalation of nationalist agitation. The possibility of establishing such a precedent is considered dangerous, because irredentist feelings were rather strong among many (if not all) ethnic minorities in Russia.

### *Genghis Khan*

Genghis Khan occupies a particularly prominent place in the discourse of national cultural revival, linking together the great state of the past with a cultural hero of Buryat ethnic ideology. For Buryats' historical and national consciousness as well as for Mongols', the image of Genghis Khan is one of the major "national" images. Certainly, Genghis Khan is represented as a quintessential cultural hero: from demiurge – the creator of the new (fair) world and mankind – to the creator of writing, as mentioned above. His birth was connected with Sky Signs and symbols of the Mongol Empire that occupied a significant part of Eurasia. In the historical and cultural discourses, increasing importance is given to the correlation of Buryat history with the history of the Mongolian Empire. Professor of Philosophy I. S. Urbanayeva emphasizes Genghis Khan's full realization of his goals and his purposefulness: "... the great steppe reformer consciously cultivated the Central-Asian tradition that he reflected ... to provide unity to his world and to introduce order in it, corresponding to the concept of Man and human self-respect" (Urbanayeva, 1995: 214).

Urbanayeva further characterizes the Yasa, or collected laws, rules, and words of wisdom, as the mechanism through which Genghis Khan tried "to return the lost order, to restore the Great Truth ... to put people on the right road" (ibid.: 206).

The globalizing importance of Genghis Khan is emphasized by the archaeologist, B.B. Dashibalov, a Doctor of History whose words echoed the quotation above, in some places verbatim. In our view, such repetition serves the purpose of creating a sense of reality, much as incantation: "But Genghis Khan belongs to the whole world. He cannot be only Chinese, Mongolian, Kazakh or Buryat; he was outside of ethnic frameworks. Mongols of the 13th century were carriers of the idea of Eurasianism, they destroyed isolation, stagnation of consciousness, religious intolerance and created open Eurasian space and a planetary worldview. The enormous state of Genghis Khan existed for more than 200 years because its inhabitants found validity, law and order" (Makhachkeyev, 2003: 15).

The destruction that inevitably results from aggressive wars is interpreted as preparation for the transition to a new stage: "During these intrusions they – the ancestors of our native peoples of the republic – not only destroyed countries higher than their own ("more civilized settled lands". – *S.Ch.*), the centres of civilizations of Iran, China and other Christian, Islamic and Buddhist countries, but also restored everything, erecting on the ruins of what had been destroyed a *more effective state and political system, a steadier economy, a more capacious culture*" (Chagdurov, 2003: 48-49). This allows the author to name the Mongolian Empire the "Golden Age" of the history of mankind. A common topic of such claims is the civilizing function of Genghis Khan, who is said to have ordered the space of Eurasia: "In conquering peoples, he, first and foremost introduced into the conquered

territories order and justice, and forbid robbery of the enemy, under penalty of death” (Choibonov, 2003: 242). Such discourses, we argue, exemplify the mythologizing of history – an ideological use of Genghis Khan aimed at constructing a new cosmos of ethnic space.

Representatives of the creative elite – unsatisfied with the results of scholarly work – actively include themselves into the process of modelling the Mongolian Empire as their “own” space by placing it in the modern territories inhabited by Buryats. A member of the Union of Writers in Russia, A. Gatapov, places the birthplace of Alan-Goa (whose youngest son, Bodonchar, was Genghis Khan’s ancestor), not on the whole territory around Baikal, but in a valley of the Barguzin river – a site with highly evocative symbolic value, for it is considered the location from where the Buryat civilization had originated in ancient times, from where the genetic kinship with Mongols and especially with the Golden Clan of Genghis Khan had stemmed (Gatapov, 2003: 6).

There are numerous examples of what Hobsbawm famously titled the “invention of tradition” in regard to putative ancient connections between Genghis Khan and Buryat lands. Much of this occurs as historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and other experts focus extensive attention on questions concerning the origin of the Mongols – the territory they came from, their genetic and cultural roots, the boundaries of their nomadic dispersion and settlement, etc. What is known is that they first appeared in the territory of present-day Mongolia not earlier than the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries (or later). Specialists in Mongolian history are very careful in these issues, especially in the use of terminology, because the term *Mongol* most likely did not exist at that time.

However, for the discourse of ethno-political revival, scientific assumptions and discussions are easily swept aside; *defenders of the nation* find it

much more productive to present suppositions as facts. A notable issue is how the contemporary division of Buryats in geographically distinct regions plays into narratives regarding the origin of Mongols. Buryats are divided into Western (Predbaikalskiye) and Eastern (Transbaikalian) communities, and the ‘western’ version of Mongolian ethnogenesis has become so important in both pan-Mongolian and internal Buryat contexts. Thus, nationalist activists claim that it was the territory of ethnic Buryatia where the legendary land of ancestors of all the Mongols – known as Ergune-Kun – was situated. For example, A.L. Angarhaev *privatizes* Genghis Khan by connecting him with *the Buryat lands*, arguing that Ergune-Kun is the Irkut river (a main tributary of the Angara, a single river that flows from Lake Baikal). This connection between the ancient name and the familiar river on Buryat lands that enables him to establish the shared quality of Buryat/Mongol “blood and soil” (Angarkhayev, 2003: 69). In contrast, Professor I.S. Urbanayeva connects this historical locality with the valley of the Selenga River (Urbanayeva, 1995: 194).

The journalist C. Gomboin has been the most consistent spokesperson of the idea that Genghis Khan belonged to the ethnic Buryats. Referring to the statement of his grandfather, he insists that Genghis Khan was both born and buried “on the river Onon near the mountain Delyun-Boldok, in the Yikhe-Aral locality” (Gomboin, 2002: 49), situated in the territory of the Aga Buryat autonomous district (Chita region). As authoritative evidence of his view, he cites legends that still exist in the Aga Buryat autonomous district. “From Esukei ... in 1160 on the bank of Onon, a little bit higher than the village Chindat (Shindan), at the bottom of Delyun-Boldok Mountain that is three versts from the Kuchuyev sentry, the great Temuchin, subsequently known under the name Genghis Khan, was born.

According to the legend, Transbaikalia is the native land of Genghis Khan” (ibid.).

Localizing Yikh-khorig in the territory of Buryatia is an important step in the development of the idea of shared “blood and soil.” Burial places of outstanding ancestors (forefathers) are of great importance in the sacralisation of space. Ancestors connect all parts of the cosmos in space and time from their position in the centre of the cosmological model of the world.

As a result of such spatial constructions, the sacred centre of the Mongolian Empire is connected with the territory of Buryatia. B.B. Dashibalov, citing for added authority the respected archaeologist Kiselyov, provides an illustrative example of this:

“Can we can say that Genghis Khan was a Buryat? It is necessary to note at once that the Buryat people in today’s form did not exist at that time. There were tribes of Khori-Mongols, Bulagachins (Bulagats) and Keremuchins (Ekherits), which became a part of the Buryat ethnicity. These facts permit us to answer the question under discussion affirmatively. Yes, he was a Buryat! <...> Genghis Khan was born among *Khori Mongols* who had been wandering on the banks of the river Onon since ancient times. The archaeologist and Corresponding member S.V. Kiselyov specified as the place of his birth the natural border of Deljun-Boldok in Aga. A similar natural border is also located on the other side of the border in Mongolia, where the Buryats of Khori origin also reside. These two places are located near each other and the border that divides them didn’t exist before. *Therefore Genghis Khan can rightfully be named a Buryat*” (Makhachkeyev, 2003: 15)

This analysis of Genghis Khan’s image in historical and cultural discourses reveals the perceived urgency of both projects underway to

reconstruct Buryat collective identity: at stake is the immediate *Buryat* ethnic-identity, as well as the assertion of a more expanded identity, *the Mongol-Buryats*, which are often used as synonyms. In both cases, one symbol of identity, Genghis Khan, is used, and transformed as necessary when used in other identity practices. Intellectuals are engaged in an active search to prove that Genghis Khan belonged to the Buryat land and Buryat “blood” as a means of establishing a foundation for unity between the Buryats and Mongols, based on common origins (“consanguinity”) and a common territory (“the native land”), ‘Blut und Boden.’

#### *Culture in the Practice of Ethnic Identity*

The important role of elite intellectuals in mobilizing the revival of Buryat identity is visible in the frequent use of sociological surveys on the idea of ethnic identity presented to the population. These surveys raise the topic, give it importance, and provide respondents with possible answers regarding the meaning and importance of the Buryat identity. The responses highlight the ways ideas of Buryat revival are focused on a combination of culture, claims of national sovereignty and a vision of ethnic identity based on common origins with the Mongols. In reply to the question, ‘What conditions are now most necessary for the revival of your people?’ slightly more than a half of all questioned chose the ‘revival and development of national culture,’ more than 48 % chose the ‘development of a market economy, broad economic independence,’ and for urban areas the share of this answer constituted 56 %. Yet a significant number of respondents (44 %) chose ‘strengthening independence, the sovereignty of the republic, and control over the use of natural resources’ and about 34 % chose ‘support for language’ (Yelayeva, 1999: 63).

Despite some statistical differences caused by distinctions in how the questionnaires were formulated, these surveys enable us to see the hierarchy of identity paradigms through which Buryats construct their ethnicity. According to A.V. Biltrikova, the question “What are your principal associations with the idea of our Buryat people?” yielded the following distribution of responses: 1) *the place where I was born* – 66 %, 2) *our land, territory* – 63,2 %, 3) *the language of our people* – 60,4 %, 4) *our past, our history* – 55,2 %, 5) *our religion* – 44,4 %, 6) *personal qualities of our people* – 42,5 %, 7) *the state in which I live* – 22,2 % (Biltrikova, 1996: 75).

It is notable that the basic concepts deployed to promote national integration by intellectual elites, such as *traditional culture*, *national culture*, and *ethnic culture*, are not precisely defined, and used interchangeably as synonyms. A vivid example of this can be found in a program speech of the former Chairman of the Congress of Buryat people E.M. Yegorov:

“The basic goals of the Congress include the *restoration of the ethno-cultural foundation of the Buryat people as inhabitants of that vital environment which daily feeds us...* I think that *the intellectual centre* of the Congress should *accumulate values of traditional culture* of our people, revive its symbols, achievements of science, philosophy, ethics, ethnopedagogy – everything that comprises the genebank of the nation. (Whatever) ... stimulates the national spirit, serves the cause of the survival of the people and is of interest for all mankind... Due to historical circumstances, the loss of belief *became one more source of the disintegration* of our people, and recent conflicts among Buryat lamas do not at all promote the cause of spiritual revival and consolidation of the Buryats. ... The main priority here should be the strategy of ethnic survival and

development of the Buryat ethnos within the commonwealth of ethnic groups of the Russian Federation” (Yegorov, 1998: 56-57) (In this and subsequent sections, the italics put by the *authors*).

It is also worth noting that 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 taken their roles as 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-outlook and conceptual apparatus, brought about 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. The components of this culture, notably the traditional world-outlook, 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 condition for national revival than the “development of market economy and wide economic independence” (See Yelaeva, 2005: 117-227).

### Conclusion

Elite reflections on the problems of national revival are marked by the absence of certain programs and policies, and can be said to suffer from the more general, post-Soviet crisis in the humanities, in which scholars confront the simultaneous strains of economic collapse and the urgent contest to establish appropriate analytic frameworks and theories. Despite these challenges, their efforts to construct a mythic-symbolic system focused on the past (and specifically, the connection of generations) that promotes ethnic integration, is notable. They are undertaking the creation of an *intertextual* cultural meaning system, where continuity is traced over space and time, from the nomadic civilizations of Central Asia – the Mongolian Empire and Genghis Khan, through the spread of Buddhism, the national movement of the early 20th century, and the formation of BMASSR—and all are portrayed as moments of the manifestation of a unitary ethnic identity.

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 people of Buryatia” in the sense of fellow-citizenship<sup>2</sup> solely denotes the fact of joint residence in the same territory. Though the peaceful character of this joint residence is very often emphasized, nevertheless 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 more capable of producing emotions and empathy than the well-known and recognized but featureless and amorphous category “people of Buryatia” is.

Buddhism and Shamanism (which in public understanding appear most often as

indistinguishable entities) are considered as instruments of ethnic integration and as symbols of ethnic belonging, irrespective of the individual depth of belief and knowledge (if at all existent) of their religious mythologies and dogmas.

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 particularly about their belief, prefer to define themselves from the position of religious syncretism. In other words, the cultural interdependence (the coexistence of Buddhism, Shamanism, and Russian Orthodoxy in Buryatia) as well as the years of militant atheism resulted in a simple belief in God and supernatural forces (Biltrikova, 2001: 74). Hence, in the people’s syncretistic religious understanding the very fact of belief is much more important than religious dogmatics.

At the same time, the emphasis on the religious component of culture in the discourse of ethnic identity promoted growing interest in the rituals as well as the contents and the meaning of the Buddhist religion. Sociological research has brought to light that many educated people who call themselves Buddhists, want to obtain better knowledge about the history of Buddhism and its philosophy. Therefore literature on Buddhism, publications in the mass media, and in an even higher degree the various teachings of Buddhist lamas, especially Tibetan, are very popular among intellectuals.

- <sup>1</sup> In 1937 the USSR Supreme Council approved the creation of the Irkutsk and Chita regions that included the districts inhabited by the Buryats (UOBAD and Aga Autonomous District, respectively). Another important event was the decision of the Supreme Council (1958) to drop the second component in the Buryat-Mongol politonym by renaming the republic into the Buryat ASSR. Both decisions traumatized the nation, and became impetuses for political mobilization during Perestroika and post-Soviet period. The recently occurred merge of two Buryat autonomous districts with Irkutsk and Chita regions was also negatively and painfully accepted in the Buryat public consciousness.
- <sup>2</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of Buryatia proclaims the existence of the “multinational people of Buryatia that in the course of historical development united the Buryats, Russians, Evenks, and citizens of other nationalities”.

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## **Символы постсоветской бурятской национальной консолидации**

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*В статье представлены некоторые результаты выполнения проекта «Бурятская этничность в контексте социокультурной модернизации», который является первым комплексным исследованием проблемы соотношения между идеологией бурятской национальной консолидации и социокультурной модернизацией. На основании комплексных методологических принципов формируется новый научный дискурс, анализирующий процессы национально-культурного возрождения не только в Бурятии, но и во всем постсоветском пространстве. Исследование этнополитических процессов включает анализ (1) деятельности элит по реэтнизации; (2) сосуществования и конфликта между национальной (этнической) и российской (гражданской) идентичностями вследствие того, что этничность занимает главенствующую позицию в иерархии идеологических, социальных и индивидуальных идентичностей; (3) выраженных этапов в дискурсах этничности. Авторы доказывают, что бурятские социополитические дискурсы являются этнонационалистическими и этнорегиональными и одновременно характеризуются неоспоримой идентификацией с Россией, хотя и вступающей в конфликт с этничностью.*

*Ключевые слова: национализм, этничность, реэтнизация, историческая и культурная память, десекуляризация.*

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