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## BUDDHISM IN BURYATIA – AN INSTRUMENT OF COLONIAL POLICY OR A FIELD OF PRESERVING CULTURAL DISTINCTIVENESS?

One of the fundamental problems considered in this article is the question of identity strategy in the social and cultural adaptation of a region to the situations of collision with the dominant culture of the state and the need to enter into a broader, culturally distinct community while maintaining native specificity and cultural difference. The case I would like to consider in this context concerns the role of religion in Buddhist Buryat culture in the process of integration into the structure of the Russian state and the further functioning within its frameworks while maintaining and developing separate cultural identity<sup>1</sup>.

I would like to start my article with a focus on the specifics of colonial practices which existed in the Tsarist Empire and the latter Soviet-type colonialism, which is obviously an extremely complex problem. Nevertheless, I shall point out some most important issues relevant to the subject presented in this article. Alexander Etkind<sup>2</sup> notes that researchers of Russia have developed two main narratives of this country and its history. The first one is the story of a powerful country which has built an impressive culture, great literature, achieved success in resisting and competing with the political and cultural influences of its European and Asian rivals. The second one is the story of an economically and socially backward country teetering on the edge of disaster, with rampant poverty and ignorance, where the state authority can apply an almost unlimited violence towards its own subjects. Interestingly, many researchers believe the two narratives are equally true and not mutually exclusive at all. But how can this be possible?

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<sup>1</sup> The term *cultural identity* is defined here as “identification with the values entrained and propagated by the culture of a community, or internalization of specific, observable norms and values, and ways of interpreting the behavior and events. As the result of building this kind of identity one is able to identify to which culture he affirms, why, and above all to point the tangible signs of that culture” (Mamzer 2002: 107). In the present case, we assume that “cultural identity stems from a deliberate orientation of people to the core, central values, such as language, religion, territory, traditions” (Mamzer 2002: 109 cited after Nikitorowicz 1995: 80). Religion and other related ideas are understood here not only as a significant source of cultural identity, but at the same time as one of its distinguishing marks.

<sup>2</sup> Etkind's views are summarized primarily on the basis of his famous work *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (2011) and, to a lesser extent, the book *Warped Mourning. Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied (Cultural Memory in the Present)* (2013).

To answer this question, Etkind resorts to the concept of internal colonization, which generally refers to the process in which the state colonizes its own nation. In other words, it is the implementation of colonial practices within the political boundaries of state. In times of Russia's imperial period, internal colonization essentially involved ethnically Russian Orthodox population and has been associated with the system of serfdom (*крепостное право*). Etkind considers the Soviet era policy to be the continuation of Tsarist colonial practice, although we assume the Soviet practice had a more drastic character. Etkind calls the collectivization carried out in the 1930s a "radical project of internal colonization" pure and simple.

Etkind also argues that when we speak about colonization processes, we should take into account two concepts introduced by Antonio Gramsci, i.e. cultural hegemony and political domination. Together with conquering and colonizing new territories, the Russian Empire colonized also the people living in its central, traditional provinces. Both types of colonization processes, that is external colonization spreading political domination outside the state and the internal one, took place in parallel at the same time. Etkind even states that these two processes were to some extent competing with each other. In this context, he consciously uses the term "colonization", noting that the term "colonialism" carries different contradictory connotations and ideological discourses, which he would like to avoid<sup>3</sup>.

The idea of colonization in the interpretation of Russia's culture and history of both Tsarist and Soviet periods has been introduced relatively recently. Even in the late 1980s and early 1990s statements proclaiming Ukraine, Poland, Finland, Central Asia and Siberia to be colonies of the Russian Empire caused multiple disputes and controversies. This happened in spite of the existence of a rich historiography in this field. Still in the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonization was the subject of reflections of, among others, Sergei Solovyev and Vasily Kluchevski.

Classic postcolonial discourse ignores colonization practices implemented by either Russia of the Romanov dynasty or the Soviet Union. Edward Said writes about colonization and "Orientalism" in the Arab countries, Africa and India. He is interested in cultural implications of colonial expansion of the British Empire and France

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of "colonialism" is often used interchangeably with the term "imperialism". Referring to the definition from the Oxford English Dictionary, Ania Loomba notes that the word comes from Latin term "colonia", which meant a farm or settlement and concerned citizens of Rome initially settling in foreign lands conquered by Rome. Loomba points to the fact that the dictionary definition is devoid of references to people who are not colonizers, i.e. those who had already lived in places where colonies were set up. This way of defining frees the concept of "colonialism" from the elements of interpersonal contact, conquest and domination. In her view, colonialism should be defined as "the conquest and control of the lands and property belonging to other people. Modern colonialism – Loomba writes – is not only economic exploitation of goods and wealth from the conquered areas (...) It is also a transformation of indigenous economies, tying them in a complex ways with each other and starting the flow of human and natural resources between colonized and colonizing countries" (Loomba 2011: 17–20). It needs to be added that the processes inherent to *modern colonialism* began even before the so-called industrial age, and its mechanisms transformed not only the economy, but also the social structure and culture – both material and spiritual.

(Said 2005). Said's lack of interest in Russian and Soviet colonialism is explained by Etkind partly with political correctness, which did not allow for the use of the same concept regarding the so-called Third World and the Second World, i.e. the former colonies of Western empires and the countries of the Eastern bloc. Internal colonization which took part in the USSR was not taken into account by the classics of the post-colonial discourse.

Etkind also draws attention to the fact that in Said's works, the idea of colonization is very closely related to the romantic notion of sea voyages. Russian Empire was a state which extended overland. Russia, with the exception of Alaska, had no overseas lands. Speaking of Alaska, Etkind reminds us that it would have taken about a year to travel by sea from this province to the European part of the Empire, while by land it required from two to three years of travel. Contrary to what it might seem, inland territory was therefore much more difficult to overcome, while traveling through oceans and seas was only a matter of technical facilities.

Huge territories were inhabited by subordinate peoples, who in fact had a certain space of autonomy and were foreign and hardly understandable to the metropolis. Military conquest of new territories and taxation of its population were not sufficient to maintain the relative order and force the local population to cooperate. It was necessary to look for other ways of gaining such loyalty. Methods applied to this end included intimidation and terror, for instance building stockaded towns (*ostrogs*). Apart from that, some cultural influences were implemented, for example Christianization by violence or bribery. However, those communities were generally left on their own and nobody interfered with their culture, way of life or beliefs (see more: Khodarkovsky 2009: 187–222).

In any case, indigenous peoples in colonized areas represented a complex problem for the government, which required an immediate solution. Therefore the areas subjected to external colonization enjoyed much greater autonomy and freedom than those subject to internal colonization. Thus, in the case of external colonization, political domination does not always go hand in hand with cultural hegemony, while in the case of internal colonization, cultural hegemony is its constant element. In this light, let us return to our main point, namely to the role of Buddhism in the social and cultural processes of colonization in areas to the east from Lake Baikal.

#### LOYAL BUDDHISTS, THE SUBJECTS OF THE EMPIRE

It is difficult to identify the point in time when the areas of today's Buryatia became an integral part of the Russian state. The appearance of Cossacks on the western shore of Lake Baikal may be considered to have been that moment. The year 1661 may be taken as the beginning of the "Voluntary Entry of Buryatia in the Russian State", or, conversely, it may be the memorable year 1666, when the Cossacks built a winter camp at the mouth of the Uda river, which later turned into a stronghold, Verkhneudinsk and eventually Ulan-Ude. It may also have been the Nerchinsk Treaty

signed between Russia and China in 1689. The division of the spheres of influence in Inner Asia between the Romanov empire and the Qing empire may also be considered a crowning act of colonization. It seems, however, that even the final closing of the border and the cartographic cutting off of Buryats from their Khalkah-Mongolian kinsmen in 1727 did not complete this process.

From my point of view, only the recognition of Buddhism as one of official religions of the Empire completed this century-long process. Still, in this case we are also dealing with a range of consequent events. Already in 1741 the administration of Elizabeth I considered Tibetan Buddhism represented by the Geluk School to be one of the official religions of the Empire. In 1764, the administration of Catherine the Great officially recognized and appointed Damba Dorzhi Zayayev as a superior over those subjects of the empire who professed Buddhism in Eastern Siberia. Zayayev was the first Buryat Khambo Lama recognized by the Empire. Thus, in addition to the religious and spiritual sphere, the function of Pandita Khambo Lama acquired the status of political power and formed a system of the administrative management of territories gradually included into the Empire. In response to this, Buryat Buddhists recognized Elizabeth I and Catherine II as the incarnations of White Tara (Sagaan Dara), and the subsequent tsars gained the title of White Khans (Sagaan Khaan).

Furthermore, becoming a Khambo Lama required an oath of allegiance and loyalty to the Romanov dynasty. In return, Khambo Lamas received care and support from the state as local religious and political leaders. The authority of Buryat Khambo Lamas from the very beginning resulted from the validation of their position by imperial administrative apparatus. In turn, the imperial power acquired sacred legitimacy in the context of the Buddhist religion. In this way, Transbaikalian steppes had become an integral part of the state and began to be associated not only with economic and military resources, but also with political and symbolic ties.

Dugbima Chimitdorzhin points to the fact that the Buddhist leaders from the beginning acted in accordance with the idea of “two laws” which placed a subject in a spiritual hierarchy and provided the ideological legitimacy of an emperor’s authority (Chimitdorzhin 2004: 19–27). The concept of the “two laws” unity has, of course, deep historical roots in the culture of Inner Asia. It was expressed in the so-called “White History”, *Tsagan Teuke* (White History of the Ten Virtues). The teaching of the ten virtues, which is opposed to ten negative actions, contains ethical concepts of Buddhism and occupies a central place in Buddhist soteriology. It had been thoroughly discussed as such and developed by Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Geluk Buddhist School, in a canonical work *The Great Interpretation Steps on the Path of Enlightenment* (Lam-rim Chen-mo). Tsongkhapa explained there the essence of the way leading Buddhists to Enlightenment (Powers 1995).

Nevertheless, the “White History” was in fact addressed to the ruling class – kings, aristocracy and the upper-level clergy. It describes, among others, the question of the relationship between the secular and spiritual authority in governing a state. The secular authority acts as supreme, and the power of the clergy is to sacralize and thereby legitimize it ideologically. The tradition of applying the idea of the political unity of

“two laws” in practice regarding the relations between the representatives of secular and ecclesiastical powers dates back at least to the time of Kubilai Khan. The ideas contained in the “White history” are likely to have resulted from the attempt to use Buddhism to create a new state ideology that would allow the Mongol Yuan dynasty to neutralize the influence of the Chinese bureaucracy, which effectively sought to prevent the ruling Mongols remodeling the Chinese state system. In the reign of the Manchu Qing Dynasty, the Mongolian Buddhist leader Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar returned to the concept of this model of rule. Moreover, officials of the Qing Empire noted that Buddhism could be not only a part of state ideology, but also a tool of practical, social and administrative regulation. Leonid Yangutov argues that after the conquest of Mongolia by the Manchu China, Buddhism gradually became a component of the spiritual, moral, social and political life of Mongolia, while the imperial administration was trying to stage it in order to maintain the political status quo of the Qing state. On the other hand, Buddhism became the space consolidating Mongols, allowing them to keep their separateness and shared social, cultural and ethnic identity in terms of political dependence from the Manchus (Yangutov 2012: 24–26).

Buddhism reached the Buryat steppes a little later – approximately in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Most importantly, Buddhism arrived there almost at the same period as the first Russian Cossack troops, followed by merchants and imperial officials. Residents of the Transbaikalian steppes quickly began to treat this religion as a cultural link with Mongol nomads, who found themselves on the other side of the Russian-Chinese border. In this situation, the strengthening of Russia’s position in the newly subordinated territories required obtaining control over the contacts between the local population and the visitors from abroad. From the viewpoint of tsarist administration, establishing control over Buryats’ contacts with Mongolian and Tibetan lamas and overcoming the influence of Mongol clans, some of which settled on the Russian side of the border, were of particular importance. Closing the border and limiting the influence of foreign lamas were not sufficient; the state had to find another way to secure the loyalty of local nomads. Similarly as the officials of the Qing Empire, the administrative apparatus of the Romanov empire decided to use Buddhism in the Transbaikalian steppes for political needs. It was therefore decided to support the authority of lamas originating from the local population and then extend the state’s control over it. Above all, it was considered crucial to increase the number of those lamas.

In this way, the emerging local Buddhism came under the special protection of the state. It was necessary to support the influence of Buddhism within the social structure of Transbaikalian clans, where the leading role was allotted to shamans. Innovative policies regarding lamas and Buddhists were implemented by the newly appointed imperial officer, “Extraordinary and Fully Authorized Envoy of Russia”, Count Sava Raguzinsky. In accordance with his recommendation, the most talented boys (two from each clan) were to be allowed to learn Buddhist doctrines. Also orphans and to some extent other candidates were sent for studies. Yangutov notes that already in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the consolidation of clans was oriented towards

the policy of the colonial administration. The establishment of new administrative units covering clans (*vedomstvo*) in 1728 was an important event that had an impact on the shape of the social structure of Buryats living on the eastern shores of Lake Baikal. Thereafter, clan (*rod*) became a local unit of administrative division in this area of the empire. Clan as administrative units, as well as the rapidly spreading new religion, became the basis for social structure formation and for cultural transmission. It can be said that was is not simply a major change, but a kind of a socio-cultural breakthrough. It can also be added that it was to a large extent a part of the colonial activities of the Romanov empire, although the policy of the tsarist administration was not uniform and often contradictory. Despite the support given to Buddhism as an element of control in new provinces, local officials and representatives of the Orthodox clergy did not give up Christianization of the new territories and quite often conducted it by force (ibidem 25–26).

On the other hand, some scholars, for instance Tsongool Natsagdorz, note that Buddhism was from the very beginning seen by Transbaikalian Buryats as an important element of a broader Mongol identity (Natsagdorz 2012). Being theologically, philosophically and above all institutionally stronger than shamanism, Buddhism allowed them to preserve their cultural identity and ties with the Mongol world much more effectively. At the same time, the strictly institutionalized hierarchy structure of Buddhism was more convenient to Russian administrative apparatus than shamanism.

Slightly simplifying the matter, we can say that both these reasons are contradictory only at the first glance. Nationalization of Buddhism and its recognition by the Buryats as a rich philosophical and religious system that offered the possibility of developing and keeping close ties with the Tibetan-Mongolian culture, while at the same time it served as means of defending identity and cultural autonomy against the Russian dominant culture and finally caused the rapid development of this religion in Transbaikalian steppes.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, local Lamaism was gradually subordinated to the state. Due to the rapid and not fully controlled increase of datsans and lamas, in 1838 the Ministry of Internal Affairs undertook a detailed investigation of Buryat Buddhist clergy. The essential problem was the fact that the position of Buryat Pandita Khambo Lama in the eyes of the local authorities did not fully correspond to his position among the followers of Buddhism. Local officials failed to realize the strong hierarchical dependence of Buryat clergy on the Buddhist religious leaders and institutions which, by virtue of being located on the other side of the border, were beyond the control of the administration. In order to weaken the “unfavorable” dependence of Buryat lamas from the Dalai Lamas, the Mongolian and Tibetan masters and teachers, in 1853 tsarist officials developed the “Regulation on Lamaist Clergy in the Eastern Siberia” (*Положение о ламаистском духовенстве в Восточной Сибири*), which was confirmed personally by Tsar Nicholas I. According to its instructions, the Russian Tsar became the supreme and the only head of Buryat Khambo Lamas. Therefore the only legitimate authority over the Buryat Buddhist hierarchy belonged to the state. Any ambiguities in this regard were eliminated by the force of law (Tsyrempilov 2013: 152–167).

In this way, the state centralized the administrative management over the Buddhist hierarchy. Khambo Lama was appointed by the authority of the tsar's decree and he could not be changed or removed without the tsar's approval. Khambo Lamas also gained many privileges and rights, being free to make decisions on religious and ritual matters. The rank of *shereete* lama (datsan chief) who had full control over the lamas, was set. This limited the splits and disintegration within the Buryat Buddhist structures which used to occur earlier<sup>4</sup>. Sangha became the *de iure* a part of the complex administrative structure of the state (ibidem 152–167).

After this period, a clear division appeared between “staff lamas” (*штатские ламы*) authorized by the government officials and the rest – the unofficial ones, operating outside datsans, but present in the countryside and having authority among the population by virtue of their repute. The administration failed to eliminate their presence and effect on the population of Buryat steppes. It also failed to eliminate the influence of foreign lamas. Moreover, the choice of Khambo Lama candidates remained to be *de facto* an internal matter of the Sangha. The tsar approved the proposal of the candidate, but the administration had a great impact on the immediate choice of Khambo Lama, as it could simply oppose the selection of a given candidate.

The centralization of the Buddhist hierarchy strengthens and increases its impact on society and culture and thus it plays a significant role in the formation of the Buryat identity. Khambo Lamas pursued a policy of loyalty to the Empire, but at the same time they were able to maintain autonomy and cultural distinctiveness and to resist the Slavic-Orthodox dominant culture. Buddhism gradually became one of the leading areas where Buryats could determine and formulate their cultural identity. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thirty-four datsans, which were not only religious but also cultural and educational centers, existed in the areas inhabited by Buryats. A datsan was a space where fine arts, the writing system and literature in the Tibetan and Old-Mongolian languages printed in books could develop. It also provided medicine education to healer lamas (*emchi*) for the needs of population. It must be assumed that had there been no restrictions from the state, the number of datsans would have been much higher.

Until the takeover of power by the Bolsheviks, Transbaikalian areas of Buryatia were subjected to colonial political dominance, but it is difficult to speak of a total cultural

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<sup>4</sup> The first split took place after the death of Damba Dorzho Zayayev. The Chronicles of Selenga Buryats contain information that together with the rise of Tamcha Datsan (Gusinoozierski Datsan), clan groups living on the left bank of the Selenga separated from the area governed by Tsongol Datsan; these were Atagans, Hatagins, Sartuuls, who went to the area of influence of the new center, where the official leader was Khambo Lama Zhimba Akhaldayev. As a result, there were two conflicting religious centers. In addition, in 1752 the Borderland Affairs Chancellery (*Канцелярия по пограничным делам*) approved Lubsan Shirab as head lama of 33 lamas of Khori. In this way, three centers appeared, with their own religious leaders officially recognized by the administration. Although formally all Transbaikalian lamas recognized the sovereignty of Pandita Khambo Lama residing in the Tsongol Datsan, they actually remained loyal to their own local centers. It is true that in 1809 the appointment of Danzan Gavaan Yeshizhamsuyev to the position of Pandito Khambo Lama of all Buryat datsans united independent centers under a single leadership, but the issue was ultimately closed only through the regulation of May 15, 1853 (Rumiantsev 1959: 30, cf. also Chimitdorzhin 2004: 19–27).

hegemony on behalf of the Empire, even though such attempts undoubtedly did appear, especially in the last decades of the Romanovs' rule, which were characterized by, among others, the rising of Great-Russian nationalism (e.g. in 1890 the tsarist administration attempted to bring about a split within the Buryat Sangha in order to weaken its influence). Buddhism was undoubtedly used by the tsarist administration as a tool for managing this part of the Empire. The dominant role in the relationship between Buddhism and the state still belonged to the state. The authorities treated the Buddhists as an object and not the subject for realizing the internal and external policies. Buddhists had to adapt to conditions created by the administration, but at the same time, as Nikolai Tsyrempilov indicates, they were quite successful in achieving their own goals (*ibidem* 236–237). This leads to a certain interesting ambiguity. The paradox lies in the fact that deliberate colonial manipulation can be a tool of the center's political domination, but at the same time it can preserve cultural autonomy against itself. This situation helps to avoid a possible conflict between the center and the periphery and, in fact, protects the center's interests without destroying the sense of cultural autonomy and distinctiveness of the periphery.

Let us see how the center and the periphery delineate each other in this context. Alexander Etkind shares the views of the American historian Ronald Suny, who argues that in the case of the Russian empire it is difficult to talk about the metropolis or colonial center which could be clearly identified and defined on the map. In this case, the metropolis was rather a social stratum which can be described as the Russian socio-political elite. This implies that this stratum cannot be completely abstracted and extracted from the geography. Russia used to have two capitals – Moscow and St. Petersburg, together with province centers where decisions were made and where officials in charge of these provinces were sent. If we agree with Etkind, we can conclude that the center/periphery relation occurs between the local administrative apparatus and its power elite, and the indigenous population represented by its own elite. Buddhist hierarchs were obviously an important part of the peripheral elites recognized by the center. Their relationships with the local provincial authorities served generally as relations with the center.

#### FROM REPRESSION TO REVIVAL

Internal colonization associated with total cultural hegemony took place only during the Soviet period. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Soviet Union gradually broke the distinct cultures and communities which constituted its population. This process began in the period of collectivization in 1927–1929 and the abolition of religious institutions, with its most radical phase occurring in 1934.

Repression was a process with several stages. The first acts of violence against religious institutions had taken place still during the Civil War. However, this period was chaotic and inconsistent. After the Civil War, a part of the representatives of the Sangha hoped to establish a correct relationship with the Bolsheviks. In 1922, the Central Spir-

itual Buddhist Council (*Центральный духовный совет буддистов*) was founded, which tried, among others, to find common elements that made Buddhism approach close to Marxism. The majority of council members consisted of the so-called *obnovlentsy*, the representatives of the reformist trend. The Communists did not proceed to the brutal systematic persecution of Buddhism immediately. The beginning of the 1920s is also the time of an apparent compromise between the still fragile Bolshevik state and a part of Buryat national elites. In 1923, Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Soviet Republic was founded as the first form of statehood in Buryat history, which sparked hope among Buryat elites. But the optimism quite quickly turned to frustration. Finally, the national carnival and the so-called *korenizatsya* policy resulted in a series of brutal repressions both in Buryatia and the whole of the USSR.

In the 1930s, all Buryat temples and Buddhist monasteries were dissolved and the clergy was subjected to brutal persecutions. The Central Spiritual Buddhist Council ceased working. The reason for the persecution of Buddhist lamas was grounded both in their religious role and in their authority guaranteed by their high position in the social hierarchy. The scale of repressions against the lamas is difficult to estimate. Most of the documents were kept in the archives of the NKVD and then were taken over by the KGB. Today, documentation is stored in the classified archives of the FSB. It would not be an overestimation to say that the repressions of varying degree affected the entire social group, which the lamas were. The actions of the Soviet authorities against the lamas differed depending on specific lamas' place in the monastery hierarchy and position in the social structure. Lubos Bielka distinguished three major groups in this context.

**The first group** consists of high-born, rich lamas occupying a high place in the hierarchy and enjoying the highest authority in society. The group included, among others, lamas regarded as incarnations of the famous and high-ranking lineages coming not only from Buryatia, but also from India, Tibet and Mongolia. Their fate was the worst. Many of them were executed without trial or bogus lawsuits were arranged, which usually ended with predetermined death sentences, sometimes convertible to long-term deportation to concentration camps. This group was almost entirely destroyed. Only a few individuals who managed to escape to China or Mongolia survived the repressions, but in practice, this only postponed their arrest. **The second group** comprises lamas with an average position in the hierarchy, who usually did not come from the most affluent families. Those were more often sentenced to long-term deportation to camps, forced labor or imprisonment, where they often died from exhaustion due to age or physical weakness. A small part of the lamas belonging to that group managed to hide, escape across the border or to change their identity in advance. It is worth noting that lamas from this group were those who after returning to their home places, continued an unofficial religious activity after the World War II. **The third group**, the largest one, comprised of young, novice lamas and *khuvaraks* (students). If they voluntarily abandoned monasteries and the religion, they were generally left alone. Of course, in the time of Stalin's terror, no one could feel completely safe; their position compared to the previous two groups

was by far the best, however. Many of them joined the Communist Party, founded families and became loyal citizens of the Soviet state. But even in the latter group there were some who only seemingly abandoned Buddhism (Bielka 2012: 152). It should be added that the lamas' views also influenced the character of their sentences. For the "traditionalists" the procedure was much more brutal and they were frequently immediately sentenced to death. The reformers – many of whom were linked with the Central Spiritual Buddhist Council established in 1922 – had slightly better chances of survival, being sentenced to imprisonment or deportation to concentration camps.

Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union created a completely new situation. War opened the doors of Christian churches, Jewish synagogues and Muslim mosques which had slammed shut. The need to mobilize all inhabitants of the Soviet Union also gave hope for the restoration of Buddhist temples. In 1944, a group of Siberian lamas gathered from among those who had survived the most brutal period of repressions formulated the content of "Patriotic Appeals to the Buddhist Believers". The lamas called on the believers to offer all possible means of supporting the Soviet homeland and the Red Army which was defending it.

Stalin rewarded this act of loyalty. Repeated requests to reopen the Buddhist datsans were given ear to in Moscow. On 2 May 1945, shortly before the surrender of Germany and the impending offensive on the Far Eastern front, the Stalinist authorities of Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Soviet Republic officially permitted the restoration of activities of two Buddhist datsans. However, the Tamcha Datsan (*Gusinozierski* or *Tamchinski datsan*; Bur. *Tamchiin datsan*), the traditional seat of Buryat Pandito Khambo Lamas, was not allowed to re-open. A completely new site was indicated as the new center of Buryat Buddhism, free of dangerous associations rooted in multigenerational tradition caught up in a dangerous, uncontrollable human memory. In this way, the Ivolga Datsan (*Ivolginski datsan*; Bur. *Ivalgiin datsan*) today is the center of Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia (BTSR). The historical Aga Datsan (*Aginski datsan*; Bur. *Agiin datsan*) was reopened and recommenced its activity. Under the façade of religious freedom, both monasteries were fully controlled by the state. In 1946, in place of the Central Spiritual Buddhist Council, the authorities formed the Central Spiritual Buddhist Board of USSR (*Центральное духовное управление буддистов СССР*) (see Chimitdorzhin 2007).

Most of the lamas who survived repressions did not find their place in the datsans. Many of them were still staying in camps or living in distant points designated by compulsory settlement. Only the death of Stalin gave them the opportunity to return and settle down into their new life as ordinary secular people. In spite of rehabilitation, the repressed lamas did not regain their former social position. However, many of them soon began to play the role of unofficial, hidden sources of social authority. Many of them also returned to religious and medical practices in which they were engaged before the prosecutions. This is the way how a specific social and cultural phenomenon emerged.

In 1945–1991, on the basis of Buddhist tradition, some local communities of Buryat society created social and cultural practices which were distinct from Soviet form,

but neither alternative nor oppositional to the dominant cultural system of the USSR. These were independent grassroots practices allowing the population to maintain the distinct cultural identity while adapting to the political and socio-cultural realities of the Soviet state. The appeal to, among others, the local invariants of the Buddhist tradition made it possible to create an informal, very narrow margin of cultural autonomy with regard to the internal processes of colonization pursued by the state. The activities of the Central Spiritual Buddhist Board of USSR, fully regulated by the state, and the simultaneous operation of the “unofficial lamas” in Buryat villages may evoke an association with a division between the “staff” and “steppe lamas” known in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, like with any historical analogy, we should be extremely wary of misreading this case. Still, even if the analogy is imprecise, it must be assumed that in the case of Buryat culture, the strategy of a “double life” of local communities located far from the centers, by not handling the constraints imposed by the State, formed much earlier than in the period between 1945 and 1991 (*ibidem*).

According to my field research carried out from 2012 in Buddhist areas of Buryatia, to some extent the gap between “official memory” and “hidden memory” of local communities still persists. Although the memory is no longer oppressed or “forbidden”, it still remains locked, indescribable. Repressed lamas doubtlessly played the role of an unofficial, local source of social authority. All in all, the memory of them was alive all the time. They were a group of “outsiders”, which performed the role of keepers and guardians of the living culture and tradition. Their biographies “after returning”, recollections about them, etc., clearly point to the phenomenon of the aforementioned dual – hidden and official – life of local communities, which was co-created by those lamas. Currently, recollections about them usually do not go beyond a family circle or the memory of local communities. Of course, the social issue of about the remembrance of repressed lamas is not completely absent in the wider dimensions than the local or individual memory; it still has a niche character, however. This is despite the fact that in 1991 Buryat lamas began to actively rebuild their lost social status on the large scale.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Buddhism regained the status of a traditional religion supported by the Russian state. The Central Spiritual Buddhist Board of the USSR was renamed the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia (BTSR) and inherited its predecessor’s privileged relationship with the state. The BTSR also became the heir and continuator of the official Buryat Buddhist tradition dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The activities of the Sangha are aimed at, among others, strengthening the participation of Buddhist religious elements in the commonly adopted formulas of Buryat ethno-cultural and national identity. The important influence of the global network of social Tibetan diaspora on contemporary religious life in Buryatia is also worth mentioning. A very interesting phenomenon in this context includes the BTSR representing the tension between the traditional, regional Buddhism in Buryatia and the current Tibetan lamas who represent its more universal, globalized form. Dharma Centers and Tibetan teachers, such as Geshe Dzharma Tinley or Yeshe Lodoy Tinley Rinpoche, work in Buryatia independently from the BTSR. The topic requires

a more elaborated research; hence in the current article I shall only outline the matter without going into details (See Amogolonova 2011; Amogolonova, Varnavskiy 2012; Dorzhigushaeva 2012; Varnavskiy 2011).

The revival and development of Buddhism in Buryatia is often described in the context of the phenomena associated with processes of desecularisation carried out in the post-Soviet space after 1991. According to Darima Amogolonova, desecularisation of social life which occurred in Buryatia after 1991 is not a simple reversal of secularization. It is a different process, which plays a very important role in, among others, the development of the ethno-national ideology and construction of cultural identities (Amogolonova 2012: 133). A very interesting case in this context is the “phenomenon of Etigelov”.

#### THE RETURN OF YOGI

In September 2002, in the territory of the Ivolga district, in a locality of Khukhe Zurkhen, the body of the former leader of East Siberian Buddhists, XII Pandita Khambo Lama Dasha Dorzho Etigelov, was exhumed. The body has survived in an excellent condition. Initially, it was thought that the subsequent decomposition of the body would be a matter of some hours, a day or of a few days at best. But it happened otherwise. Subsequent medical and scientific committees recognized that the body did not undergo mummification, but at the same time could not clearly explain the reasons for this phenomenon. Gelek Balbar, a lama with considerable authority, without waiting for further test results announced that veneration of such a powerful yogi, one who was able to preserve his body intact, would bring great blessings to the believers and the land they inhabited. The news of the unusual discovery quickly spread also far beyond the borders of Russia. Soon the XIV Dalai Lama expressed his opinion on this issue, stating that only the greatest masters are able to keep the body in the meditative state even long after the medical determination of death. He also added that there is nothing supernatural in this in general. In one of the comments on this topic he also said: “Many Buddhist monks meet death in meditation and thus free themselves from earthly existence. They meditate decades, their bodies do not decompose. An example of this is the lama in Buryatia, whose body is not decomposing already for 75 years” (ibidem 139). According to the official interpretation of the phenomenon adopted by BTSR, Dasha Dorzho Etigelov is still in a deep meditative state of *samatha*, into which he entered back in 1927.

Soon the cult of XII Pandita Khambo Lama and the belief in his miraculous power became a commonly accepted fact. It quickly turned to be also an element of social identity and political games. Most of the biographical facts of the lama's life intermingled with fantastic stories come from one source, which is the BTSR and the associated Institute of Pandita Khambo Lama Etigelov. Biography of Etigelov, both actual and mythologized, had also caused a wave of mass media attention. In 2005, among others, documentary “The Message of Khambo Lama” (Послание

*Хамбо Ламы* directed by Aleksey Blinnikov) was produced by the Buryat channel *Arig Us*, presenting a perspective on and an interpretation of biography of XII Pandita Khambo Lama. Articles dealing with Etigelov's departure and "return" of regularly appear in the Buryat press. They are published, among others, in such popular newspapers and magazines as "Argumenty i Fakty v Buryatii", "Buryad Unen", "Nadezhnyi istochnik", "Belaya Yurta". Many articles dedicated to the Khambo Lama Etigelov can be found in the magazine "Legshed" published by the B TSR (one of the issues was dedicated exclusively to him). Sometimes information about Etigelov is published in all-Russian media – for example, "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" in 2005; "Novaya Gazeta" wrote about the lama on the occasion of the exhibition "The XII Pandita Khambo Lama Etigelov. Serving Russia", which took place in the autumn of 2012 in Moscow. The Russian press has given much attention to the phenomena associated with the cult of Etigelov on the occasion of Russian president's visits to Buryatia in August 2009 and April 2012. We will return to those visits later on.

Analyzing popular descriptions and interpretations of the so-called "Etigelov's return", Darima Amogolonova distinguishes three basic complementary discourses. The first is the **scientific discourse** involving attempts at a scientific description and explanation of the reasons the body of XII Pandita Khambo Lama did not undergo decay. She adds that the frequent abuse of medical terminology, anatomy and biochemistry is *de facto* a part of the process of mythologizing the phenomenon. Language of science becomes in this case a kind of an esoteric narrative, incomprehensible to an average reader, which is also useful for the unusual "phenomenon of Etigelov". Furthermore, the results of scientific research are often invoked to prove that it is indeed impossible to explain the essence of this phenomenon in terms of the natural sciences. Much more profound explanation could be only provided in the framework of Buddhist **religious discourse** – the second one distinguished by Amogolonova. The third discourse, the most interesting from our point of view, is the **ideological discourse** (ibidem 138–141).

The ideological discourse exists in two basic dimensions: the ethno-cultural one and the state-political one. Let us start with the first one. The cult of Etigelov is, according to Amogolonova (2012), an important element of national revival. The "return" of Etigelov in this case is a symbolic proof of the revival of national culture and national spirit. The secret of immortality of the XII Pandita Khambo Lama thus becomes the symbol of Buryats' endurance and ethno-cultural distinctiveness. This interpretation is promoted in particular by the B TSR (ibidem 145) The chronological sequence of historical events turns to a symbolic sequence in this case: in 1927, with the beginning of collectivization, shortly before liquidation of the religious institutions, the XII Pandita Khambo Lama "leaves" in order to "return" in 2002. History takes on a sacred meaning. Khambo Lama leaves to save the religion and the Buryat identity associated with it, returns to crown the religious revival that took place after 1991. He appears at the time when Buddhism was once again recognized by the state as the official religion of Buryats. In this way Etigelov is not only a symbol and a spiritual patron of desecularisation, but becomes a performer of this process.

It is interesting that the narratives of “Etigelov’s return” do not refer directly to the actual facts of the unofficial functioning of repressed lamas and their roles in local Buryat communities, which have been mentioned above. This context is usually not expressed directly, though doubtlessly is present.

Lamas of the B TSR, especially its current leader, the XXIV Pandita Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheyev, are trying to build the Buryat identity around the “phenomenon of Etigelov”. The production of memories, senses and meanings connected to the phenomenon of Etigelov is the task of international conferences held regularly since 2007 in Ivolga Datsan by the B TSR and the Institute of Pandita Khambo Lama Etigelov. The Institute received a land plot in Nizhnyaya Ivolga, where a conference and tourist information center dedicated to Etigelov are going to be built. According to plans, there will be a lecture hall, museum, archives and souvenir shops with traditional garments and other items. The center is to be funded by the federal budget (*ibidem* 142). The cult of Etigelov has also become a tool for boosting the status of the B TSR and Damba Ayusheyev as its leader. One gets the impression that the ambitions of the XXIV Pandita Khambo Lama are spreading beyond the borders of Russia. In recent years, he has clearly been trying to establish his authority also in neighboring Mongolia. One of the primary methods employed for this purpose is putting himself in the role of the keeper and the custodian of the body of Dasha Dorzhi Etigelov, who is increasingly popular and venerated in Mongolia.

The “phenomenon of Etigelov” has to be taken as evidence that such a high spiritual development is possible not only on the banks of the Ganges and in the Himalayas, but also on the Buryat steppes. It is here where the powerful yogi, whose spiritual lineage appeared 3,000 years ago in India (it is assumed that Etigelov is the 11<sup>th</sup> incarnation of an Indian yogi who lived before the birth of Buddha Shakyamuni), decided to stop. The cult of Etigelov spreads symbolically in the Buryat culture not only as in the wider culture of the Mongolian steppe, but also as the ancient culture of Indo-Tibetan world. The matter concerns not only ethno-cultural identity of Buryats but also their civilizational identity.

Etigelov’s body has also become part of state rituals. The relations of secular power and the B TSR are now very close. The XXIV Pandita Khambo Lama Ayusheyev strives to make his socio-political position in the traditionally Buddhist Russian regions similar to the role of the Orthodox Patriarch of All-Russia in the whole country. During his visit to Buryatia in August 2009, President Medvedev went to the Ivolga Datsan straight from the airport. One of the most important points was a visit to the Ordon – a palace specially built in Ivolga Datsan, where the body of Etigelov is kept. Medvedev said then that he was extremely touched by what he had seen, and also expressed his respect for the sincere and deep Russian patriotism, for which in his view the XII Pandita Khambo Lama was famous. Only then the president met with the president of the Republic of Buryatia, Vyacheslav Nagovitsyn, deputies of the People’s Khural (Parliament of Buryatia) and the rest of the officials awaiting him. A similar situation occurred when President Vladimir Putin came to Buryatia in April 2013. His visit to Ivolga Datsan began with entering the Ordon of the XII Pandita

Khambo Lama. At the end of his visit to the datsan, Putin asked to be allowed to enter the palace of Dasha Dorzho Etigelov once again, which was read as particularly positive gesture by locals.

Also the visit of a sport team carrying the Olympic torch for the Olympic Games in Sochi had a partly political dimension. Sportsmen visited many recognizable places of Russia, ones which are considered to be special “identity brands” of the country. Here we deal with another important aspect of the “phenomenon of Etigelov” – the marketing dimension, which should not be overlooked. Amogolonova writes explicitly that in recent years the body of Pandita Khambo Lama Etigelov has been regarded as one of the distinguishing marks of Buryatia, used also as a touristic brand of the region. In this case, Buryatia is presented as an attractive tourist destination not only because of the charms of Lake Baikal, Khamar Daban trails or Barguzin mountain ranges. Exotic Buddhist monasteries, places of shamanic cults may interest tourists no less than the attractions of nature and landscape for which Buryatia is quite famous. In this context, the incorruptible remains of Etigelov are a part of the image of Buryatia, which is promoted as a spiritual and exotic tourist destination (*ibidem* 141–144).

These types of projects are the part of a wider phenomenon connected with the production of a new regional identity of Buryatia, accompanied by attempts to develop tourist infrastructure (e.g. the creation of special economic tourist-recreation zones on the eastern shore of Lake Baikal). Attempts to strengthen the specific symbolic borderland identity of the capital city Ulan-Ude as an attractive area encompassing the cultural space of European Russia and Asia have recently been noticeable. The identity of Ulan-Ude as an intermediate area of cultural and civilizational contacts is being developed in this context. The concept of the “Gate to Asia”, used in reference to the capital of Buryatia, appears for instance in contemporary development strategies of the city.

Creating the specific borderland identity of Ulan-Ude is also associated with the processes of ethnic construction of symbols within the urban space. This is particularly evident in the architectural and urban projects, for example in the presence of various “Asian” designs of buildings. Also, many new monuments referring to the steppe and the Asian traditions of Buryatia have been erected in recent years (e.g. the monument of Geser Khan – the hero of a traditional folk epic, the “Gostepriimnaya Buryatia”, “Yunost Buryatii”, the monument of Mergen, the statues of Mongolian warriors on the Bogatyrski bridge or figures of steppe riders in front of the modern Buryat Business Center building) (Breslavskiy 2012; see also: Amogolonova, Batomunkuev, Varnavskiy, Kuklina, Misyurkeeva, Sodnompilova 2008: 119–186).

#### THE SACRED PLAYGROUND

Each anniversary of the extraction of body XII Pandita Khambo Lama has a special atmosphere. Since 2003, the feast called “Etigelov’s Games” (*Этигеловские игры*) has taken place in the first half of September; it combines a religious ceremony with

traditional sports competitions. The most important element of the religious part is the opportunity to see Lama Etigelov. Specially for this occasion monks carry his body from the Ordon to the Tsogchen Dugan, the main temple of the monastery complex, where the pilgrims can get a blessing from the monk. The sports competitions resemble those of Surkhabaan, the traditional, local Buryat festival, during which competitions of three traditional sports: wrestling (*bukhe barildaan*), horse racing (*mori urildaan*) and Asian archery (*suur kharbaan*) are held. Similar competitions in different variants can be seen not only in Buryatia, but throughout the former Great Steppe – from the Far East to the plains of Russia's Kalmykia.

A stadium was built near the Ivolga datsan especially for such events. It is located so close to the main part of the monastery that generally it can be considered a part of the complex. In the northern part of tribunes there is a place for honored guests. During "Etigelov's Games" local politicians and the president of Buryatya sit there next to the Buddhist hierarchs, businessmen and other representatives of the local establishment. Most of participants represent the local Buddhist datsans. Sport teams concentrated around datsans are the only evidence of the B TSR's aspirations to perform an integrative social function. The Sangha wants local datsans to be not only the places of prayers; in its view, they should become centers of local "micro-worlds" and provide a focus for the everyday life of communities. The small centers focusing on micro-scale social worlds should gravitate toward the main Ivolga Datsan with the holy XII Pandita Khambo Lama Etigelov and with the XXIV Pandita Khambo Lama Ayusheyev watching over him. The latter, in turn, is the sign and a guarantee of loyalty of local micro-worlds to the state. The culmination of the ceremony is the introduction of the flag of "Etigelov's Games", which shows Khambo Lama Damba Zayayev, who announced Empresses Elizabeth I and Catherine the Great to be incarnations of White Tara. Zayayev is officially considered to be the previous incarnation of Etigelov. It can thus be said that the symbolic legitimation of the Russian Empire's power over Buryatia was made by that same Etigelov in a previous incarnation.

The cult of Etigelov/Zayayev has a few other interesting ideological nuances. The first Buryat Pandita Khambo Lama officially recognized by the Russian state strengthened the position of Buddhism by, among others, consistently fighting the influence of shamans. Currently the XXIV Pandita Khambo Lama Ayusheyev also is known for his very unfavorable view on shamanic traditions. Some of his statements have triggered controversy even among committed Buddhists. This was the case when a few years ago he publicly compared shamanists to cavemen. This statement raised great objections connected with the fact that the local, traditional Buryat Buddhism is characterized by a strong syncretism, it includes ideas from the pre-Buddhist era, which generally can be defined as shamanic. On the other hand, despite the controversy that sometimes accompanies him, Khambo Lama Ayusheyev is currently the most influential figure trying to consolidate Buryats as a nation, awakening their self-pride and consciousness.

Zayayev's actual attitude to the Russian state was not as clear as it is officially represented in the ideological discourse. Very interesting information on that subject is stored in the archives of Urga *ambans* (officials) in Ulan-Bator. Extant documents indi-

cate that before the trip to St. Petersburg, where he declared Elizabeth and Catherine to be the incarnations of White Tara, he quite seriously considered the possibility of escaping with his people to the Qing state. Tsongool Natsagdorzh sees the inconsistency of the Russian state as the major cause of Pandita Khambo Lama's vacillation. Conflicting decisions taken by the state officials could have led to halting the development of Buddhism in the modern Buryatia. He supposes that Zayayev planned to cross the border to avoid potential consequences of the edict issued by Irkutsk Provincial Chancellery (*Иркутская провинциальная канцелярия*) on 28 April 1752. The edict forbade it to exceed the number of 181 lamas, as many as had been officially registered in 1748. Natsagdorzh points out economic reasons which stood behind this limit. In his opinion, Irkutsk administration wanted to avoid the growth of population exempted from payment of *yasak* (tax) (Natsagdorzh 2012: 93–97).

In spite of his hesitating stance, the first Tsongol Cossack regiment was formed, with Zayayev's support, in 1764, and subsequently other three regiments of Selenga Buryats were established to serve at the borderline of the empire. A year later Zayayev as a provincial delegate went to the imperial court. The visit to the capital and the declarations he had obtained finally closed the problem of territorial pretension of the Manchu authority. After returning, Zayayev declared unequivocally that the Buryats should profess only Buddhism while remaining loyal subjects of the earthly incarnation of White Tara, the empress of Russia (*ibidem* 98).

Also Etigelov's loyalty was not totally unconditional. After the February Revolution in 1917 which forced the tsar to abdicate, he almost immediately recognized the new Provisional Government as the only legitimate authority in the country, thus breaking an oath of unconditional loyalty to Tsar Nicholas II and the Romanov dynasty. This gesture may be viewed as just an expression of the principles of *realpolitik*. In fact, however, Etigelov, like many other members of the Buryat elites, hoped that the new government would make concessions to the national aspirations arising among Buryats. In July 1917 Etigelov chaired the Second All-Buryat Congress, which took place in Tamcha Datsan. The XII Pandita Khambo Lama counted mainly on easing the regulations from 1853 and on obtaining equal rights for Buddhists and Orthodox Christians on the use and ownership of land; on obtaining state subsidies for Buddhists, analogous to those received by Orthodox Christians; and on legalization of Buddhist societies and associations (granting them the status of a "legal entity" by the State) (Amogolonova 2012: 135, after Gerasimova 1964). Although detailed studies of history have little impact on the reconstruction of simplified ideological discourses (as they more often hamper than help in their reconstruction), I decided to quote some of these facts to illustrate the specifics of the ongoing game between the colonial center and the peripheral elites.

In conclusion, let us refer back to the issue related to the celebration of "Etigelov's return" and the sacred sports ritual held annually by Damba Ayusheyev and the BTSR. Participants in and spectators of "Etigelov's Games" have a chance to experience the spiritual and performative essence of Buryat identity there; to immerse in its indivisible political, ideological, civilizational and cultural dimensions; to feel the power of

the XII Pandita Khambo Lama and the vital power of competing athletes. On the other hand, behind the contrast between the muscles of Buryat wrestlers and the immobile face of yogi solidified in a meditative pose lies silent the many-generational trauma of colonial conquest and the need to maneuver relations with the dominant centers of the game where the prize is avoiding the final acculturation.

Similar holidays had been arranged before the Revolution, and then in the Soviet era when local Party committees adapted Buryat traditional festivals and folk surkharbans to their needs. The stage folklore was a compound of the machinery of the Soviet system. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, lamas decided to use all existing models in order to reproduce the identity pattern of a Buddhist Buryat. With centuries-old steppe traditions of war games and Soviet folklore festivals, a “new tradition” is built around the cult of Pandita Khambo Lama Etigelov; in the minds of believers this tradition has an “ancient” history, although it is barely twelve years old. It is both a cheerful, folk entertainment and a solemn sacred occasion; the cynicism of political games merges with an authentic spiritual experience. These apparent contradictions expressly exclude themselves only in theory. In social practice, they are consistent, understandable almost as a matter of fact. A similar case concerns the question posed in the title of this essay. Is religion more an instrument of colonial, state policy here, or a field of preserving cultural distinctiveness? Is it a tool or a field of escape from dominance, a safe niche where the social rules of the game dictated by the dominant center are being reduced? The answer seems different depending on the situation, context and historical moment. At a deeper dimension, religion is certainly neither one nor the other.

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BUDDHISM IN BURYATIA – AN INSTRUMENT OF COLONIAL POLICY  
OR A FIELD OF PRESERVING CULTURAL DISTINCTIVENESS?

**Key words:** Buddhism, Buryatia, Cultural distinctiveness, Colonial policy, Internal colonization, Cultural hegemony, Political domination, Cultural identity, Empire, USSR, Russian Federation.

Buddhism might be considered as cultural, social and political field of negotiation between state and one of its culturally different regions. As the article's title says, the religion may be an instrument of colonization but can also help to preserve cultural distinctiveness. Text describes complex relations between these two dimensions of religion which shaped Buryat culture and identity starting from the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries till nowadays.

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