

Review essay: Recent Scholarship from the Buryat Mongols of Siberia

Etnicheskaia istoriia i kul'turno-bytovye traditsii narodov baikal'skogo regiona. [The Ethnic History and the Traditions of Culture and Daily Life of the Peoples of the Baikal Region] Ed. M. N. Baldano, O. V. Buraeva and D. D. Nimaev. Ulan-Ude: Institut mongolovedeniia, buddologii i tibetologii Sibirskogo otdeleniia Rossiiskoi Akademii nauk, 2010. 243 pp. ISBN 978-5-93219-245-0.

Keywords Siberia; Buryats; Mongols

Siberia's vast realms have often fallen outside the view of Asian Studies specialists, due perhaps to their centuries-long domination by Russia – a European power – and their lack of elaborately settled civilizations like those elsewhere in the Asian landmass. Yet Siberia has played a crucial role in Asian history. For instance, the Xiongnu, Turkic, and Mongol tribes who frequently warred with China held extensive Southern Siberian territories, and Japanese interventionists targeted Eastern Siberia during the Russian Civil War (1918-1921). Moreover, far from being a purely ethnic-Russian realm, Siberia possesses dozens of indigenous Asian peoples, some of whom are clearly linked to other, more familiar Asian nations: for instance, the Buryats of Southeastern Siberia's Lake Baikal region share particularly close historic, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural ties with the Mongols. The Buryats, who fell under Russian rule over the seventeenth century, number over 400,000 and are the largest native Siberian group. Most dwell in the Buryat Republic, or Buryatia, which borders Mongolia to the south and whose capital is Ulan-Ude (called "Verkheneudinsk" during the Tsarist period); others inhabit Siberia's neighboring Irkutsk Oblast and Zabaikal'skii Krai (formerly Chita Oblast), and tens of thousands more live in Mongolia and China. The Buryat language belongs to the Mongol branch of the Altaic family. Most literate Buryats used the vertical-script Literary, or Classical, Mongolian language until the 1930s, when it was replaced by vernacular Buryat written first in Latin, and then in Cyrillic letters. Like their Mongol brethren across the border, most Buryats practice Tibetan-style Buddhism or Shamanism, both of which have survived Communist anti-religious campaigns that – just as in Mongolia – decimated shamans and lamas and laid waste to the numerous *datsans* (Buddhist monasteries) that previously existed in the region. The Buryats' traditional economy – like that of the Mongols – revolved around horse, cattle, sheep, goat, camel, and yak herding, often nomadic; hunting and agriculture played secondary roles. Just as the Mongols of Chinese-ruled Inner Mongolia confront Sinicization and massive Chinese immigration, the Buryats' cultural survival is threatened by centuries of Russification policies, and they are greatly outnumbered by Russians in their homeland.

The history, archaeology, language and literature, folklore, religion, and sociology of the Buryats and other ethnic groups of the Baikal region from antiquity to the present are treated in *Etnicheskaia istoriia i kul'turno-bytovye traditsii narodov baikal'skogo regiona* [The Ethnic History and the Traditions of Culture and Daily Life of the Peoples of the Baikal Region], edited by Marina Namzhirovna Baldano, Ol'ga Vladimirovna Buraeva and Daba

Dambaevich Nimaev. Most of the twenty-seven chapters' contributors are researchers at Ulan-Ude's Institute of Mongolian Studies, Tibetology, and Buddhism of the Siberian Division of the Russian Academy of Sciences; others are affiliated with the same city's Buryat State University, East Siberian State Academy of Culture and the Arts, Ethnographic Museum of the Peoples of Transbaikalia, and Buryat branches of the Siberian State University of Telecommunications and Information Sciences and the Russian State University of the Humanities.

Nikolai Vladimirovich Imenokhiev and Evgenii Vladimirovich Pavlov investigate the pre-conquest Buryats' archaeology and ethnohistory. Examining the Buryats' various methods of corpse disposal – cliff burial, ground burial, cremation, and exposure – Imenokhiev connects cliff burial to the prehistoric groups that occupied Southern and Eastern Siberia during the second and first millennia B.C.; ground burial, to the influence of the Xiongnu and early Mongols; cremation, to the Turkic Kurykans and Yenisei Kyrgyz of the ancient Baikal region; and exposure to the entry of Buddhism from Mongolia by the seventeenth century. Pavlov ponders the origins of the Khamnagadai clan, a subset of the Western Buryats' Ekhirit tribe. Folklore and linguistic evidence suggests that at some point in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, the Ekhirits defeated a local Evenk (Tungus) clan in the upper Lena River basin; they initially enslaved the Evenks, but later incorporated them into the tribe as equals after the Evenks' archers helped the Ekhirit defeat an enemy proto-Yakut group: these Evenks subsequently became the Khamnagadai clan.

Saiana Iur'evich Darzhaev, Irina Batoevna Batueva, Elena Aleksandrovna Bardunaeva, and Olga Vladimirovna Buraeva address aspects of Buryat life under Tsarist rule. Darzhaev shows how the Russian autocracy's search for political and cultural unity and fear of minority nationalism resulted in the following assimilationist policies towards the Buryats at the turn of the twentieth century: the abolition of traditional self-government, Russian colonization of Buryat lands, aggressive proselytization by the Russian Orthodox Church, and conscription of Buryat males. Instead of inculcating a "Russian" self-identity and loyalty to the Russian state, however, these measures increased Buryat alienation from the regime. Batueva and Bardunaeva describe examples of prerevolutionary Western Buryat architecture preserved by the Ethnographic Museum of the Peoples of Transbaikalia. The climate and soil west of Baikal favored settled herding and agriculture, so Buryats there constructed permanent homes, unlike nomadic Eastern Buryats. Alongside the portable felt yurts common to all Mongol peoples, they built six-, eight-, ten-, and twelve-sided wooden "yurts" that mimicked the form of an actual yurt (including the smoke hole in the center of the roof), as well as wooden storage buildings, fenced enclosures, and heated barns. Buraeva examines changes in the Buryat diet wrought by contact with Russians between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries. Pre-conquest Buryat cuisine had consisted primarily of boiled meats and dairy products – the fruits of herding – but Russian contact brought new foods (e.g., grain products) to the Buryat table. Occasionally, the state's alcohol policies had deleterious results: when the distilling of *tarasun* – the traditional mare's-milk liquor – was outlawed to protect alcohol tax revenues, some Buryats turned to commercially-produced vodka, increasing alcoholism and poverty.

Sesegma Gendenovna Zhambalova, Bair Bal'zhinimaevich Dashibalov, and Bair Sonomovich Dugarov investigate the life and works of the renowned prerevolutionary Buryat ethnographer and educator Matvei Nikolaevich Khangalov (1858-1918). Zhambalova employs unpublished reminiscences by Khangalov's fellow teacher, the Russian V. A. Zarechenskov, to shed light on his pedagogical activities at the Bil'chir primary school for Buryats near Irkutsk between 1902 and 1918. Dashibalov seeks the origins of the

“Khorii Mongols” and “Khoruduts”: powerful, occasionally malevolent spirits featured in folklore materials gathered by Khangalov and other Siberian ethnographers. He concludes that superstitions about such spirits reflect an ancient folk memory of Mongol-speaking groups – separate from the Buryats themselves – who formerly inhabited the western Baikal region, perhaps as early as the thirteenth century. Dugarov discusses Khangalov and Nikolai Nikolaevich Agapitov’s (1840-1900) groundbreaking research on the Buryat Shamanist pantheon, which provided the first systematic enumeration, description, and hierarchical arrangement of the *tengris*: the ninety-nine deities and other supernatural figures that play crucial roles in Buryat religion, myth, and epic.

Svetlana Vladimirovna Vasileva and Liliia Vladimirovna Kal'mina investigate non-Buryat migrants to prerevolutionary Buryatia: the Old Believers (ethnic Russians who left the official Church after an unpopular seventeenth-century liturgical reform and arrived in Buryatia fleeing persecution), and Polish, Jewish, and Tatar migrants who arrived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Vasileva surveys materials on the Old Believers held in the State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia and the Institute of Mongolian Studies, Tibetology, and Buddhology: these include prerevolutionary police, judicial, and local-government documents; photographs of traditional clothing and architecture; correspondence between Old Believers in Buryatia and Harbin, China; audio recordings of Old Believer tales; and unpublished folklore studies by local scholars such as Lazar' Efmovich Eliasov (1914-1976). Kal'mina examines the economic and social life of Polish, Jewish, and Tatar diaspora groups in the Baikal region. Some Polish migrants, particularly well-educated political exiles, took up medical and clerical work, while others helped build the Trans-Siberian Railroad as engineers or laborers; Jews and Tatars tended to enter urban commerce, although some Tatars took up farming. Poles and Jews frequently intermarried with Russians, but the Muslim Tatars refused to do so on religious grounds, which hindered their acculturation.

Turning to the Communist era, Svetlana Viktorovna Baldano, Larisa Galsanovna Rakshaeva, Viktor Mizhitovich Mitypov, and Khishikto Vasilevich Kishiktuev address the impact of Soviet policies upon Buryat intellectual life, religion, and language. Baldano examines Buryat nationalist intellectuals' attempts to come to terms with the new Soviet order, whose ideology subordinated national issues to class ones and denounced nationalism as reactionary. In the 1920s, the ethnographer Tsyben Zhamtsarano (1880-1940) and the left-wing activist Elbek-Dorzhi Rinchino (ca.1885-1937) espoused a “National Communism” (p. 101) that allowed them to defend native culture while embracing Communist egalitarianism and modernization; the Buddhist reform leader Agvan Dorzhiev (1853-1938) argued the compatibility of Buddhism and Communism. But the Stalinist regime's intolerance and implicit Russocentrism made such ideological maneuvering impossible, and the Purges subsequently decimated the native intelligentsia. Rakshaeva follows the Buryat scholars' campaign to preserve the site of the Gusinoozërsk *Datsan*, which once had housed up to one thousand lamas and had served as Buryat Buddhism's official headquarters. It was forcibly closed during the Party's 1932-1933 anti-religious drive, and its surviving buildings – unique examples of Buryat Buddhist art and architecture – fell into disrepair. After 1940, administrators of Ulan-Ude's Antireligious Museum periodically petitioned Party and state officials to restore the *datsan* for educational purposes. However, documentary evidence of their campaign abruptly and inexplicably ends in 1961, signaling its failure. Mitypov examines relations between the Buryat Buddhist clergy and Communist authorities between the late 1960s and the early 1980s. Although the Soviet Union's leaders signed numerous international agreements supporting religious freedom, in fact the regime severely perse-

cuted Buryat Buddhism. The most infamous example of repression was the 1972 trial and imprisonment of the *lama* Bidiia Dandaron (1914-1974) and his followers on fantastic charges of attempted murder, debauchery, and ties to foreign powers. Less sensational forms of persecution included officialdom's interference in the day-to-day operations of the few remaining *datsans*, and its close surveillance over their visitors: informers reported worshippers' donations and their overheard prayers to Party and KGB officials. Kishiktuev traces the shrinking role of the Buryat language in primary and secondary education between the 1930s and 1980s. A steady stream of assimilationist measures undertaken by Soviet officialdom, coupled with some Buryat parents' concern that bilingual education would deny their children the Russian fluency required for professional success, led to the steady reduction in the teaching of Buryat. By the early 1980s, Buryat no longer served as the medium of instruction and was rarely taught even as an academic subject, resulting in a sharp decline in knowledge of the native tongue.

Problems of public services and urban growth in Ulan-Ude (Verkhneudinsk) over the pre-revolutionary and Soviet periods are addressed by Darima Sergeevna Danilova, Aleksandr Mikhailovich Imenokhoev, Marina Namzhilovna Baldano, and Baiarma Babasanovna Tsyretarova. Danilova examines firefighting in pre-revolutionary Verkhneudinsk, a crucial matter since – just as in traditional Japan – most buildings were made of wood. City authorities expended much effort and material on equipping fire stations and extinguishing and investigating fires, but not enough on preventing them; firefighters often lacked specialized training and were burdened by unrelated duties such as watering the city garden and removing snow, trash, and the corpses of murder and freezing victims, so fires continually plagued the city. Imenokhoev investigates the challenges faced by Ulan-Ude's health-care officials during the first two decades of Soviet rule. The collapse of public sanitation during the Russian Civil War and the influx of industrial workers and refugees from collectivization in the early 1930s helped the spread of typhus, cholera, and tuberculosis, and the harsh conditions of Stalinist industry fostered workplace illnesses and injuries. Shortages of funds, personnel, medicines, equipment, and bed space hampered attempts to provide medical care and control the spread of disease. Baldano examines the effect of Stalinist industrialization upon Ulan-Ude's development. As Buryatia's processing, extractive, and manufacturing workforce grew exponentially, so too did its cities and towns, especially Ulan-Ude. However, urbanization was shaped by the state's economic needs, not the population's wishes, and local officials paid scant attention to infrastructure and the quality of life, resulting in haphazard and poorly-planned growth, the effects of which linger to this day. Tsyretarova addresses Ulan-Ude's housing problems during the Second World War, when refugees and war-industry workers overwhelmed the city's inadequate housing stock. State and Party authorities responded by relocating nonessential workers to the countryside by turning warehouses, stores, and cultural institutions into barracks; by foiling unauthorized immigration through stricter document checks; and by building temporary housing. Nevertheless, monetary, material, and personnel restraints limited these efforts' efficacy.

Daba Dambaevich Nimaev, Vsevolod Iurevich Bashkuev, Elena Vasil'evna Banzarakt-saeva, Bair Zorigtoevich Nanzatov, and Maria Mikhailovna Sodnompilova take up developments in post-Soviet Buryatia. Nimaev considers the plight of the Aga Buryats of far eastern Transbaikalia. Although their territory had been included in the Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic formed in 1923, Stalin abruptly transferred it to neighboring Chita Oblast in 1937; however, he granted them an "Aga Buryat Autonomous Okrug" there, and they successfully used its limited autonomy to protect and develop the native culture and economy. Beginning in 2000, the Putin administration began to press

for the Okrug's dissolution, a move that the Aga Buryats initially opposed. Yet in March 2007, they voted overwhelmingly to merge with Chita Oblast into a new administrative unit called the Zabaikal'skii (Transbaikal) Krai. Nimaev traces this change of heart to the federal government's guarantees of administrative, economic, and cultural autonomy, but the abolition of local institutions soon after the merger leads him to doubt that these promises will be kept. Bashkuev considers the prospects for Buryatia's economic development and modernization in light of a partnership envisioned by Russian and Chinese leaders in which Russia will export raw materials from Irkutsk and Amur Oblasts, Buryatia, and Zabaikal'skii Krai for processing in Northeastern China. Bashkuev concludes that Buryatia is ill-suited to benefit from such an arrangement: it lacks Irkutsk Oblast's large urban population and well-developed industrial base; it does not border directly on China like Amur Oblast and Zabaikal'skii Krai; and it possesses a backward infrastructure and few raw materials of interest to China except lumber and nephrite. Additional drawbacks are local elites' corruption and incompetence and – perhaps – Kremlin concerns that Buryatia's successful development might fuel separatism or pan-Mongolism. Banzaraktseva examines post-Soviet cultural revival efforts among the Soyots, a small indigenous Turkic herding and hunting people of Southwestern Buryatia's mountainous Oka Raion who suffered decades of Russification under Stalin and his successors. The decay of traditional skills has hampered the Soyots' return to reindeer breeding, but favorable climate and geography have fostered the growth of yak herding, and a few local schools have introduced Soyot language classes. Nanzatov and Sodnompilova examine the impact of traditional Shamanist attitudes towards nature upon post-Soviet rural Buryat economic choices. For instance, an ancient superstition warns that wantonly cutting live trees will shorten one's lifespan, so some native owners of timber concerns assign logging work to Russians or Chinese migrants, who are not bound by the taboo. Often, however, the demands of survival in the market economy outweigh a mystical regard for nature: field researchers note an increasing tendency to over-hunt game and to gather pine-nuts (a Siberian delicacy) unsustainably.

Liudmila Sanzhiboevna Dampilova and Ekaterina Vladimirovna Sundueva investigate topics in Buryat literature and linguistics. Dampilova examines the language and imagery employed by the Buryat lyric poet Galina Radnaeva (1949-present) in her 1992 collection *Khete, sakhiuur* (Steel and Flint). Radnaeva's lengthy, imaginative descriptions of landscapes and nature display extensive use of allegories and allusions drawn from Buryat mythology: for example, the sky appears as a father or grandfather, and the earth as a mother or grandmother, while the stars are described as the campfires of countless heavenly warriors. Sundueva investigates the etymology of the *yookhor* (a.k.a. *ëkhor*), a traditional Buryat round dance. She discusses variant forms of the dance's name in different Buryat dialects and provides a comparative discussion of the names of similar Slavic, Turkic, and Caucasian dances. After considering several possible etymologies and analyzing the texts of songs that accompany the *yookhor*, Sundueva traces its most likely origins to the verb *yookhoikho* "to bow, to incline oneself," in light of the bowing motions within the dance's moves.

Of particular interest to Asian specialists outside Siberian studies are the contributions of Bazar Dogsonovich Tsybenov, Vladimir Andreevich Khamutaev, and Larisa Batoevna Badmaeva on two Mongol-speaking groups of China's Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region with ties to Siberia: the Dagurs and the Shenekhen Buryats. Tsybenov ponders the origins of the Dagurs. Linguistic, anthropological, religious (Shamanist), and folkloric evidence, along with accounts by Chinese and Russian travelers and historians, convince Tsybenov that the Dagurs are descendants of the proto-Mongol Khitans (Qidans) of the Liao Dynasty (947-1125). Following their defeat by the Jurchens in the twelfth century,

some Khitans journeyed north to the Amur River basin and eastern Transbaikalia: there, they absorbed smaller Tungusic-speaking indigenous groups, along with elements of their cultures and languages, before Russian invaders drove them to their present territory in the seventeenth century. Khamutaev and Badmaeva turn to the recent history of the Buryats of the Shenekhen area, whose ancestors arrived in several waves between the 1900s and 1930s fleeing Tsarist Russification, the First World War's military draft, the Russian Civil War, and Stalinist collectivization and terror. Once in China, they experienced Japanese wartime occupation, postwar repression for alleged collaboration with the Japanese, Maoist collectivization, and persecution as potential Soviet agents during the Cultural Revolution. Despite this tragic past, their isolation has helped them preserve their language, crafts, folklore, music, dance, and lifestyle to a very high degree. As Khamutaev informs us, patriotic nostalgia has brought hundreds of Shenekhen Buryats "back" to Buryatia since the late 1980s: in their own simple but poignant words, "Shuhan tatana" ([My] blood calls me [back]) (p. 110). But poverty, lack of Russian-language skills, bureaucratic obstructions, and difficulty in finding work and housing have forced some Shenekhen Buryats to return to China. Badmaeva discusses loan words in the vocabulary of the Shenekhen historian Bodongut Abida's (1917-2006) *Short History of the Buryat Mongols* [Buriyat mongyol-un tobči teüke], published by the Inner Mongolian Publishing House in 1983. The *Short History* is written in Classical Mongolian, in which the Shenekhen exiles continued to write long after its proscription in Buryatia itself. Beyond its intrinsic historical value, Bodongut's work provides examples of Russian, Chinese, and Manchu loan words that are no longer used by modern Siberian Buryats but are crucial for understanding administrative, political, and technological matters of daily life in the Buryat past.

Etnicheskaia istoriia i kul'turno-bytovye traditsii narodov baikal'skogo regiona is a sterling example of the progress that Buryat scholarship has made so far in the post-Soviet era. The authors' topics and methodologies display great originality and thoughtfulness, and their use of sources, editing, and citation practices show a vast improvement over most Soviet-era works (although the book would have benefitted from the removal of occasional typographic errors, inconsistencies in Buryat orthography, and ambiguities in the citation of archival materials). Researchers of Siberian and Mongolian issues will find this volume particularly useful, but Asia scholars of all specialties can discover between its covers valuable comparative material on a wide range of issues ranging from minority policies to urbanization to linguistics.

*Robert W. Montgomery, Associate Professor, Department of History,
Baldwin Wallace University*