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PERFORMING ETHNICITY, CELEBRATING MULTICULTURALISM.  
THE ETHNO-CULTURAL FESTIVAL YORD GAMES  
IN THE CONFLICT BETWEEN “INDIGENOUS BURYAT TRADITIONS”  
AND “EURASIAN UNITY”

BURYAT ETHNICITY AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGE

After disintegration of the Soviet Union, ethnic minority groups have tried to expand the presence of their cultures in the public sphere, but with the change of leadership in the Russian Federation at the beginning of the new millennium, policy of state unification was imposed. Russian state authorities on the central and local levels defined ethnic diversity as worth protecting but only within the framework of multiculturalism understood as “unity in diversity”. What “unity” in fact means and where are the limits of ethnic and national diversity is the object of social struggle between national majority and ethnic minorities. We can observe this conflict in almost every aspect of social life, but in this article we analyze the example of symbolic strife for territory during one of the ethno-cultural festivals. Terms like “indigenous”, “traditional” and “multicultural” are deconstructed during festival performances and the concept of “traditional autochthonic culture” (strictly connected with a particular territory) becomes the tool of these deconstructions. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its ideology provoked national majority to fear the decentralization tendencies within the Russian Federation itself. It was therefore necessary to rebalance not only the political field, where the politics of centralization were systematically enforced (Goode 2011), but also the symbolic one. The ethno-festival Yord Games is an example of how manipulation with symbols within the context of “ethnic revival” built up a multiethnic local community, based on commitment to the inhabited territory, its development and prosperity. Actions on the establishment of such territorial, multiethnic communities are associated with the conflict over legitimating the ethnic traditions.

The revival of a tradition is always associated with references to different kinds of authorities and social agents who would support specific visions of how “tradition” of the ethnic group should look like (Hobsbawm, Ranger 2012). This revival also serves a variety of purposes ranging from the exploration of individuals’ and groups’ identity by seeking their space in a multi-ethnic and multi-national social system to strengthening the groups’ economic potential, for instance, in the field of tourism (Comaroff, Comaroff 2009). According to the performance theory, ethnicity has to be acted out and constantly reproduced in everyday life (Clammer 2015), but also, if not principally, in the “special” circumstances such as ethno-cultural festivals which are designed for expression but also for neutralization of the ethnicity by its folklorization and proclamation of “eternal harmony” of ethnic relations (Foxall 2014). However, they are sometimes the only opportunity to present ethnicity at the collective level. They are a “part of the game” in which the prize can be the secularization, the aestheticization, and the transformation of the old rituals into the symbol of ethnicity (conf., for instance, Weidman 2010), but they are also the only “legal arenas” of performing ethnicity.

Social framework, in which the Buryats live, was shaped by the processes of post-communist transformation. After the decades of the communist system and the period following Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika, indigenous peoples of Siberia, similarly to other groups living in the former Soviet Union, have vigorously begun revival of their cultures. The concept of “revival” (rus. *vozhzhdenie*) refers to a number of coordinated (to a varying extent) projects aimed at increasing the knowledge of ethnic culture among the members of a particular ethnic group, as well as creation of the culture’s image on the state and global levels. Siberian peoples represent a small fraction of Russia’s total population. The largest of the Siberian ethnic groups are the Buryats (see Abaeva, Zhukovskaia 2004), with the population of about 500 000<sup>1</sup>. In Russia, they live in three territorial units which have the word “Buryat” in their legal names: the Republic of Buryatia, Ust-Orda Buryat Okrug (west from the Lake Baikal) and Aga Buryat Okrug – east of Baikal, near the border with Mongolia and China (see Quijada 2012). Although the Buryats are one of the most educated ethnic groups in the Russian Federation and occupy various positions in local governmental and educational structures, they are not the heads of respective administrative units. The relation between national majority and ethnic minorities in the Russian state determines the range of their possible activities.

The Buryats’ position is twofold – on the one hand, the community power is based on personal ties, the strength of moral virtue and purity of intent regarding

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<sup>1</sup> The Buryats in the Russian Federation number 461 389 according to the census of 2010 (in the Republic of Buryatia – 286 839, in the Zabaykalsky Krai including Aga Buryat Okrug – 73 941, in the Ust-Orda Buryat Okrug – 77 667 and other regions) [[http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/perepis\\_itogi1612.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/perepis_itogi1612.htm) access date 24.04.2014]; in Mongolia – 45 087 according to the census of 2000, though it is argued to be even 80 000; in China – approximately 25 000 including Barga [[http://new.chronologia.org/volume10/turin\\_burjaty.php](http://new.chronologia.org/volume10/turin_burjaty.php), access date 24.04.2014].

the idea of preserving indigenous, “ancient”, ancestral culture. On the other hand, the Buryats’ position is based on the power of tradition perceived by the Buryats and other groups as indigenous, thus closely related to the Cisbaikalia<sup>2</sup>. It is therefore the “authentic” tradition in the sense that no one questions the place of its cultivation. The parties are aware that the territories inhabited by the Buryats used to extend far to the west in the past, though currently the western shore area of lake Baikal is treated as their most western flank. The tradition is legitimized by two sources. First, it is confirmed with its “ethnographic” character objectified by academic (historic, linguistic and ethnographic) data, eagerly collected by Buryat scholars (see Pshenichnikova 2006); and secondly by its “social” character – its presence in a particular place and cultivation by a particular group is seen as evident by all groups living in areas of the Baikal region. Therefore, the attempts on aligning the moral power of the Buryat tradition by the dominant group rely on two types of activities: representing this tradition as one of the many traditions in Siberia or marginalizing it to the rank of ornament, ethnographic attraction and local folklore having no significance in everyday life but serving as amusement.

The conflict on the right to protect and develop their own culture started when the Buryats – on the wave of ethnic revival associated with perestroika and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union – began to look for ways to revive and strengthen their own culture and national identity. There appeared initiatives such as teaching of the Buryat language and traditions in schools, promotion of shamanic rituals, Buddhism revival, issuing books and newspapers in the Buryat language, producing films on Buryat culture and organization of ethno-festivals. Buryat political, social and cultural activists have become more and more engaged. Buryat intelligentsia believe that, despite the fact that years of russification and acculturation under the communist ideology resulted in the loss of native language and culture among many Buryats (especially Western Buryats), it is still possible to restore the tradition for the youngest generation. The western Buryats were in greater extent affected by the processes of acculturation and such activities carried out among them, led to question (at least in some degree) the local social relations: Buryats, apart from their affirmation to the all-Russian culture, still possess their own tradition and claim to gain the status of the “rightful owners” of the territory.

There is opposition coming from the state authorities, whose rhetoric is dominated by the discourse of financial success and life chances<sup>3</sup>. Such a gradual change in attitude brings local Russian authorities to a dualistic “colonial” anxiety. On the one hand, there is a fear of excessive – from the viewpoint of the majority – increase of local revenues of Buryat minority; on the other – the need to provide their

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<sup>2</sup> The word denoting the region west to the shore of lake Baikal.

<sup>3</sup> The questions regarded the sense of maintaining the tradition, especially the language – whether it is a waste of time which makes it difficult to focus on acquiring the skills necessary to make a career in the modern world, or whether it opens new possibilities (see: Głowacka-Grajper, Nowicka, Połec 2013).

“wards” (the Buryats tend to be defined overtly this way or in a more indirect way by Russian officials on various levels of administration) with appropriate, pro-social ideology. The Russian paternalistic discourse defines the goals of this ideology as minimizing the possibility of social pathologies inducing degeneration and lack of controlling of separate individuals by the group. The consolidating communist ideology had fallen together with all its institutions including the communist centralized power structure, communist organizations (childhood and youth organizations, the Party organizations at various levels), its educational program, which would set out a clear life path from being a good student to becoming a well-rewarded retiree or even the hero of socialist labour (see: Humphrey 2002). This currently inadequate biographical scenario had to be replaced. In the case of the Russian population, this Soviet scenario could remain with minor changes, including some references from the culture of Tsarist Russia and the Orthodox Church. This state of affairs, however, can hardly be adapted to such groups as Buryats, hence, there appeared attempts to establish the appropriate – from the viewpoint of the majority – biographical scenario for the Buryats *per analogiam* to the Buryat tradition reconstructed in different ways.

The collapse of the communist ideology, which formerly bonded the entire Soviet society, provoked a sense of crisis and instability (see Humphrey, Sneath 1999, Buyandelgeriyn 2007). It also created a social space for the emergence of a tendency to re-explore and to strengthen the cultural differences of religious and ethnic minorities, which deepened the sense of instability in the majority community. We are dealing with the mounting crisis caused by the anxiety about the future and the selection of the right ways of life both at individual and group level. There appeared certain fears that after the collapse of the Soviet Union a similar fate awaits the Russian Federation. Redressive actions on the establishment of territorial, multiethnic communities are the next phase of the social process associated with the conflict over legitimating ethnic traditions.

Establishing such a community requires social reintegration. However, this is not based on the same conditions as previously. The aspirations of reviving ethnic cultures can no longer be stopped. The crisis ends with the reintegration of the disturbed social group, or with the social recognition and legitimisation of irreparable schism between the contesting parties. In this case, it is the recognition of the impossibility of full acculturation and assimilation of the minority ethnic groups. While the Soviet era was dominated by the idea that all nations and ethnic groups in the Soviet Union have a common socialist culture and identity, after its collapse, it became clear that both the culture and the identity of separate groups were far from being homogenous and would gain manifestation in the public sphere and not only in the private one. A new, multicultural reintegration sought by the Russians is possible, as well in the case of the Buryats, who are not ethnic Russians (*Russkiy*) but defined as Russians (*Rossiyanin*) in the sense of citizenship – Russia gives them the possibility for expression of cultural and ethnic diversity. But only in the sphere of culture, not politics.

THE YORD GAMES  
– CONSTRUCTION OF MULTIETHNIC TERRITORIAL COMMUNITY

During our fieldwork in Siberia, in Irkutsk Oblast (in 2000) we conducted participant observation and interviews during the first Yord Games – the ethno-festival which according to the official folders was dedicated to “the traditional culture of Mongolian nomads of Eurasia”. The Yord Games of 2000 were announced to be the revival of similar games which were allegedly held for the last time about a hundred years ago in the area of lake Baikal. In 2010<sup>4</sup>, we attended the festival in a substantially transformed socio-political context which appeared in the Russian Federation. This time, however, almost on the eve of the event, the festival was cancelled and instead, short performances were hastily organized. The organizing committee assured that the Games would be held next year. After this incident, subsequent games were held successfully in 2015, gathering a few thousands of spectators.

We believe that the history of the Yord Games festival with its successes and failures may serve as a very good example for analysis of manipulation of ethnic categories and terms associated with them (“traditional”, “indigenous”, “multicultural”), actions focused on ethnic minority culture revival in the context of state unification policy and processes shaping performative Buryat identity in the light of conflicting ethnic and national interests.

The first Yord Games which took place in July 2000 were presented as a local equivalent of the Olympic Games. This interpretation formed part of a wider “colonial/post-colonial” discourse. On the one hand, it places the Buryat tradition among the global heritage of humanity, showing that the Buryats are characterized by cultural and social achievements similar to other societies perceived as the most civilized in the contemporary world. According to this discourse, Buryats for centuries had their own “games” with their “sports”, just like the ancient Greeks. On the other hand, this discourse focuses not on the competition, but on compensation: the Yord Games compensate the absence of the Siberian peoples at the Olympic Games. Therefore, they are obliged to organize a separate event of this type. This fact was highlighted during the Games in a speech delivered by one of the state officials, who emphasized that mainly the local population was involved. Although ethnic Russian community does not compete in the Yord, it is represented at the “true” Olympic Games by its national team, whose sportsmen are representatives of various ethnicities and nationalities, including Buryat. Since Siberian peoples do not have their own “national” teams at the Olympics, the Yord Games can be perceived as a local substitute, allowing them to be a part of international sport games.

The Buryat traditions are closely linked to the territories they inhabit (Bardamova 2011), and to be more exact – to the specific locations of ancestors’ origin protected by the spirits. Cultivation of many Buryat traditions cannot therefore take place in

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<sup>4</sup> The authors of the article conducted two fieldwork trips: in 2000 funded by the Foundation for the Development of Polish Science (professor subsidy of Ewa Nowicka) and in 2010 funded by the National Science Center (grant NN 116300038 headed by Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper).

other parts of the world, but only in the precisely defined areas. Such inseparable connection between tradition and land provides an opportunity to include or exclude particular groups from the territorial community through manipulating their traditions. Therefore, the traditions of all ethnic groups, including the Buryats, become the subject of – sometimes contradictory or complementary – performances.

A characteristic feature of the festival is its strict territorial location. While in case of the Olympic Games the reference to its place of origin – Olympia, is merely symbolic today, the Yord Games are held only at the foot of the Yord mountain. This mountain, resembling a natural pyramid, lies in a valley of the Anga river surrounded by mountains. This place is situated within a distance of 8 km from the regional centre Yelantsy of the Olkhon district in Irkutsk oblast. The distinguishing feature of the district is the highest percentage of the Buryat population (51%) Oblast-wide. The district, however, was not included in the Ust-Orda Buryat Autonomous Okrug<sup>5</sup>, which was merged with the Irkutsk Oblast in 2008. The place attracts many visitors from all over the Russian Federation and abroad for its localization near Olkhon island, which is the most important tourist destination of lake Baikal. At the same time, lake Baikal and the Olkhon island are treated as sacred places, or at least places significant for the Buryat culture. The fact that the Yord Games take place in that very locality proves that it is a kind of typical pilgrimage destination, common in other parts of the world. What is interesting here is not only the “sacral” character of the place, but the fact that it becomes a scene of “social drama” in which the key element is the answer to a fundamental question: to whom do the Games belong? In other words, who has the right to them, whom and why do they serve, and what do they symbolise?

On the one hand, Buryats desire to present themselves as indigenous, autochthonous people of the land west to Baikal and on the other hand – they cannot go beyond the bounds of loyalty to the Russian state institutionally represented by local authorities. The organization of the modern version of the old sacred feast occurs therefore in various social and political contexts, with distinct values and ways of perceiving reality. Areas on the westerly shore of lake Baikal are an important place for at least four distinctive groups with different interests and power of action:

- 1) Western Buryats who have lived in this area for hundreds of years, whose culture and shamanic religion are closely linked with the territory;
- 2) Russians, who are the dominant majority group throughout the country, including Irkutsk Oblast (as well as on each nominally Buryat territory), who own the area and have lived there for nearly 400 years;
- 3) Yakuts, for whom the western shore of Baikal is a mythical ancestral land from which they migrated north along the Lena River;
- 4) for the Evenki, who are often ignored, and who equally can call the region their “home” also in terms of their ethnic tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> In 2000 the district was still autonomous – it was not subordinated to the authorities of the Irkutsk Oblast but directly to Moscow. In 2008, however, the Okrug lost the autonomous status and was subordinated to the Oblast’s authority in Irkutsk, which resulted in reduced control over the ethnic Buryat areas due to the lack of their own budget independent from that of Oblast’s.



Symbolic actions of these four main groups intersect in one place – at the foot of the holy mountain Yord, where in 2000 the long-forgotten feast, the Yord Games, was revived and then organized regularly every four years. Both the first festival, as well as its later edition in 2010, which can be considered a crisis leading to the cancellation of the whole ethno-festival, were the stage of struggle over recognizing the importance of the Buryat tradition by local residents and recognizing the Buryats' right to decide how to present their ethnic culture.

Ethnographic sources, which served for the reconstruction of the Yord Games are few and do not contain detailed descriptions of the feast. The contemporary Games are rather a creative reference to the old customs than their exact reconstruction. What unites this ancient and modern event is primarily the place. The Yord Games are directly and inextricably linked with the place that has a specific and unique character. Although there is no indication that the Yord mountain was man-made, it certainly could be thought to be as it strikes the imagination with its shape – a huge pyramid with fairly regular flanks standing in the middle of an almost a flat valley surrounded by high mountains. From the top of the Yord, one can watch the sacred for Buryats lake Baikal. Therefore, it brings no surprise that the mountain could be marked as a holy place for different rites, but what really surprises is the poverty of historical and ethnographic data supporting it.

Contemporary festival organizers, apart from oral traditions, refer primarily to the works of the remarkable Buryat ethnographer M. N. Khangalov (1858–1918), who mentioned in his notes a feast near the Yord Mountain. It bore the name *khatarkha* and was associated with the raid hunting. Khangalov (1958) relied on informants saying that the feast lasted for thirty days. This event was supposed to be an opportunity for making friends and arranging future marriages<sup>6</sup>. The records by Khangalov are supplemented by the materials of D. S. Dugarov (1991). Both Khangalov's and Dugarov's descriptions have much in common: there existed a custom among the Buryats to meet at the Yord mountain, during which a Buryat circle dance *Yokhor* was held (see Dashieva 2009; cf. also Nowicka 2012).

The opening speech of the 2000 Games, however, did not contain references to traditional feasts of the Buryats. The main topic of the speeches was peace and prosperity of the whole Olkhon district – the festival's location. The representative of the Buryat shamans in his welcoming speech stated<sup>7</sup>:

The Yord Games are the sign of great respect for grasses and berries, good cattle, peace among nations, prosperity and harmony, the blessing for the people who live under heaven on earth. We wish all the best to our youngest offsprings, happiness to married couples, love and goodness, mercy, joy, blessings and prosperity to you and your families. The circle's ritual dance will be held here, a completed circle – *Yokhor*. We are here in large numbers, and if you complete the circle around the holy mountain, then the year will be rich, good and happy, and we – the participants – will get a boost of energy. We – the shamans participating in the festival – wish you success in sports arenas, strength, masculinity, pleasant songs and dances. To guests and viewers, we wish good rest, fine moments.

<sup>6</sup> [www.bur-culture.ru/fileadmin/download/YYP%202011%20%E2%84%962%20\(25\)/YYP\\_1.pdf](http://www.bur-culture.ru/fileadmin/download/YYP%202011%20%E2%84%962%20(25)/YYP_1.pdf)  
access date: 18.08.2015.

<sup>7</sup> Transcription of recording made during the Yord Games in 2000.

The head of the district administration in the opening speech did not refer to the Buryat traditions at all but rather appealed to the community, including all the inhabitants of the district regardless of nationality:

I would like to greet all the participants and wish success, friendship to all of them, and tonight we should stay in a circle and join our hands. It is a rite that will bring prosperity to the whole district.

During the staging, representing shamans coming down from the mountains to announce the arrival of the symbolic “king of Olkhon”, one could hear references to the same kind of motto: “Our land is in the taiga near the Baikal; all nations should live in friendship; our land is peaceful”<sup>8</sup>.

The modern Yord Games should be interpreted as a reference to specific purposes and contexts of multiethnic and multicultural community. The ethno-cultural festival is a peculiar combination of folklore and entertainment. Local traditions serve as a starting point for building the consolidating ideology of the multiethnic community, or they merely serve as a convenient pretext for propaganda of that ideology. Words of the shaman and ritual gestures could be seen as “staged” in the same manner as “vestal virgins” were staged during the inflammation of the Olympic torch. Nevertheless this does not imply that the Yord Games are not considered as an “authentic” event, referring to the old traditions and the feast, from the viewpoints of the Buryats.

#### THE VIEWS OF THE TRADITION

The festival organizers included the elements that could be found in the ethnographic literature on the Games, such as competitions of singers and reciters of traditional epics and poems called *uligery* in Buryat (Bairova 2004) – the so-called “three games of men” (archery, wrestling, horse riding) as well as competitions on pulling wooden sticks and throwing stones. Awards that were given to the winners of each competition – sheep – also contributed to the tradition’s reference of the event. Delegations from different regions and settlements were dressed in traditional costumes. The *gers* (the Buryat word for *yurt* – nomad’s tent) were constructed, where one could buy “ethnic” souvenirs (Buryat and Yakut). There were folk bands dancing and singing. Invited shamans, both local and from other regions, held the rites. There were also elements less reminding of the reconstruction of the past, but which had already become a common arrangement of the Buryat ethno-festivals such as the Buryat beauty contest and playing popular or disco music, both in Buryat and Russian language.

Even though, the key event of the Yord Games was traditional only for the Western Buryats, today it is promoted by the Buryat elites as a symbol of the whole Buryat culture, i.e. the *Yokhor* dance around the mountain Yord. *Yokhor* is usually danced in a circle. Dancers face the centre of the circle, holding hands. During such rhythmic dance, songs are performed without accompanying instruments. These songs also

<sup>8</sup> Transcription of recording made during the Yord Games in 2000.



have a form of short chants performed by one person and repeated by others. The chanter sometimes sings traditional verses, but they can also be composed spontaneously as the event progresses. This was also the case of the *Yokhor* in 2000 – participants received cards with the words of the song in Buryat language. One of such songs was composed specially for the Games. Its text was distributed among the guests, and stated: “Our land is very beautiful, we dance around the mountain, let it always be, we are together”. Due to the large number of dancers, the whole circle could not simultaneously sing the same songs – various folk groups danced in a circle and often sang songs from their repertoire.

Everybody could dance the *Yokhor*, regardless of age, gender or ethnicity. The participants’ reactions clearly showed that the dance was not merely a festival attraction for them. The organizers in their speeches from the stage repeatedly stressed that *Yokhor* is the most important element of the festival and its success will bring welfare not only to one’s individual life but also to the whole region. For many people, it was an event of supernatural power. They guarded the circle from being disrupted, as it would bring bad luck. There were various interpretations of the dance around the mountain – some argued that in order to ensure well-being, one needs to circle the Yord in a dance three times, others claimed that during the dance one should not scream as it brings misfortune. People who spontaneously began to guard the dance’s integrity were not only the Buryats, but also Russians, who participated in this dance for the first time (and drew the information about it from the local press).

The *Yokhor* around the Yord Mountain was to symbolize the communality of all gathered people. It would not, therefore, include exclusively the Buryat community. Nevertheless, elements borrowed from the Buryat tradition would serve as a framework integrating all nationalities living near the Lake Baikal, and even – in accordance with the idea of festival organizers – the nations of the whole Central Asia or at least Siberia. This can be interpreted as a symbolic break of the crisis connected with discovering Siberian nations’ past and traditions. This aroused the fear of nationalism threatening the state integrity: the fear of being accused of “nationalism” lasted throughout the period of the Soviet Union<sup>9</sup>. However, the process of discovering and reviving ethnic traditions could not be restrained anymore, otherwise after the collapse of communist ideology people would have found themselves in a complete ideological vacuum. The Yord Games are therefore an attempt to apply the tradition in integrating activities supporting the communality of multinational Siberia. Breaking the circle of the dance or the inability to create it were clear signs of decay of such community and were interpreted as a potential threat of disaster. It should also be noted that *Yokhor* is an element of tradition relatively easy to reproduce, since it largely survived among the Buryat population living west of Baikal. Moreover, it hardly bears controversial connotations as the group’s performance of

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<sup>9</sup> During the Stalinist purges starting in 1937 the “nationalistic deviations” were the pretext for imprisoning and executing the major part of Buryat intelligentsia, shamans and clan aristocracy. In almost every family there was someone who had been repressed during this period.

a circle dance can ultimately be reduced to an ordinary folk amusement, while this is impossible in case of the shamanic rites, the revival of which would have to imply the declaration of a particular worldview.

#### THE YORD GAMES AS A SHAMANISTIC FEAST

The motives for ensuring the prosperity of the entire region (not just a single national group) were also seen in the way the activities of shamans were presented. At the beginning of the festival, shamans performed the “fire feeding” rite at the main stage for the feast success. A shaman woman (bur. *udagan*) who came from the area inhabited by the Eastern Buryats also participated in the rite. On the other hand, during the *Yokhor* around the mountain, three shamans carried out rites on the top of the Yord Mountain – women were not allowed to climb up there. At the same time, the festival’s brochure stressed that the ethnographic records do not report any rites held during the games in the past. Thus, the shamans’ presence does not have to be seen as an attempt to reconstruct the old course of the feast, but can attest their increasing role in the local community<sup>10</sup>. In the subsequent years, we could indeed observe the spontaneous development of shamanism in these areas. The presence of shamans can also be interpreted as strengthening of the territorial communality, especially since the Russians often seek the assistance of the Buryat shamans. Thus, the authorities seek the support everywhere – even in the supernatural sphere – to ensure the prosperity of the region, which, however, depends on peaceful non-conflict relations between groups inhabiting the region.

The Yord Games can also be seen as a return to the old Buryat shamanistic feast. In Soviet times, shamanism was regarded as a relic of the bygone era and a testimony of backwardness. There was no formal possibility to practice shamanic rituals, although they were held in secret. After the days of perestroika and the collapse of the USSR, shamans could at last act openly and new people started fulfilling the shamanic rites. The official recognition of shamanism, though not supported by any legal act, received its culmination during the Yord Games. The official statement of organizers proclaims that the celebration of shamanic and folk rites is one of the main objectives of the festival. Press materials issued by the organisers of the Games emphasize that it is the shamans who choose the date of the festival. The decisive factor is the compliance with the “religious calendar”.

The festival is addressed to the broad audience, regardless of nationality, but there is no doubt that the ritual practices are part of the Buryat, not Russian culture. It was the Buryat culture that dominated during the festival, apart from the presented Yakut and Russian cultures. The Buryat culture is therefore not the only one represented at the festival, but it is no more suppressed and marginalized by limiting it only to the private sphere. The Buryats are thus socially excluded from the “potential Russians”,

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<sup>10</sup> Some researchers, for example Dashieva (2009), point out however that originally *Yokhor* used to be a form of shamanic rite and a shaman stood in the centre of the circle.

whose only way is total assimilation with the majority, though there is a constant reminder to them that they should be loyal citizens of the Russian Federation. In this regard, the Yord Games acquire the liminal character when the hierarchies and roles become temporarily suspended, superior and inferior relations stop and matters of the ethnic structure of the empire disappear. At least, the circle dance *Yokhor* creates the clear sense of *communitas* (cf. Turner 1969), where national background ceases to matter. At the same time, *communitas* is shamanic (and thus Buryat) in its nature, though the flag of the Russian Federation still flutters on the high pole set on the main stage of the Yord Games.

However, another kind of discomfort in social relationships could not be ignored, namely the relation with their kin referred as Eastern Buryats. Relations between Eastern and Western Buryats represent a very delicate issue. The Eastern Buryats constitute the Buryat majority, which were more successful in keeping the Buryat language and customs than the Buryats from the western shore of lake Baikal which were subjected to a longer and more intensive Russian influence. The Eastern Buryats profess Buddhism (Lamaism), while the Western Buryats are mostly shamanic. Buddhism is considered to be the official Buryat religion; Buryats in Russia are being associated primarily with Buddhism, which binds the group's structure. However, shamanism is a religion historically older and more "original". Prior to the adoption of Buddhism, shamanism was the religion of all the Buryats (Abaeva, Zhukovskaia 2004). The shamanistic elements of tradition are preserved even among the Eastern Buryats and play a very important role today in their everyday practices existing in parallel with Buddhism. Shamanism does not, however, distinguish Buryats from other peoples of Siberia, though in each ethnic group it has a slightly different character (Głowacka-Grajper, Nowicka, Połec 2013).

Religion has become one of the key factors shaping the Buryat community. The Eastern Buryats would like to promote Buddhism as the "true Buryat" religion uniting the whole nation. Meanwhile, the Western Buryats do not wish to refuse their ancestral customs; and although they do not deny their affiliation to the Buryat nation and aspire to strengthen it, the Western Buryats do not believe that religious unification is required for that. Shamanism serves important functions as a religion closely linking people with the territory of their origin. These places remain sacred regardless of the proportion of Buryats in the population living there currently. On the other hand, the spirits take care of the landscape objects – hills, springs, rocks, and cross roads. Shamanistic beliefs and practices which cooperate well with the ecological ideas are increasingly gaining popularity in Russia. Shamanism therefore seems to have more chances to become the religion or tradition uniting the inhabitants of the territory, though it has clear roots in the culture of the Buryats, and its adoption by non-Buryats only seems to confirm the "Buryatness" of the territory. The processes of ethnic revival in the post-communist Russia in the case of the Buryats are marked with two contradictory trends. On the one hand, the activities determined to strengthen unity and communality with the majority group – the Russians; but on the other, favouring the revival of regional and local traditions, which

break this unity (or at least make it less obvious)<sup>11</sup>. That is why what may be seen as an attempt to resolve the conflict, can be in fact an attempt to neutralize or to distort the “Buryatness” of the Yord Games.

CELEBRATING MULTICULTURALISM THROUGH “NEUTRALIZATION”  
OF BURYATNESS

The official descriptions and reports on the festival consistently emphasize its unifying character. Back in the past it is said to be a feast which brought together “the nations of Central Asia”<sup>12</sup>. The opening ceremony of the Games presented delegations marching with banners informing about the region they represent, which reminds the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. There were representatives of regions inhabited by the Buryats and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). The declaration of the festival addressed to nations from the broadly understood Central Asia, allows including the Yakuts. Indeed, they consider themselves to be the descendants of the Kurykans who lived one thousand years ago in the area of lake Baikal. In this way, the territory no longer belongs exclusively to the Buryats, and becomes a “multinational” territory, referring to other indigenous peoples of Siberia. Moreover, the Yord Games could rather be a Kurykan tradition, and thus be more a Yakut than a Buryat one (Dugarov 1991).

The policy on unifying the nationalities of Siberia goes beyond the indigenous peoples. The largest group currently living in these areas are in fact the Russians. Both festivals presented a conjunction with the Russian culture: most of the speeches were in Russian and popular Russian songs were performed. In 2000, next to Buryat girls welcoming the guests with a bowl of white milk on a traditional blue sash, there were also girls who greeted visitors with Slavic bread and salt. In 2010, the biggest attraction of the festival was the choir of the Chinese singing Russian songs, which aim was to emphasize the internationality of the festival. In the official brochure of the festival in 2000, the governor of Irkutsk Oblast stated: “Interregional ethno-cultural festival the Yord Games is organized within the activities dedicated to the 2000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christianity.” Indeed, this needs not to be interpreted as joining the Shamanistic and Christian elements within the festival as no references to Christianity during the festival ever appeared. It is rather an attempt to define the Yord Games into numerous events organized all over the world on celebrating the coming of the third millennium. This date was established in the Christian calendar, but the arrival of the new millennium celebrations in different countries often has a completely secular character.

<sup>11</sup> Hence, the stress on full religious, shamanic character of the Yord Games is not beneficial for Western Buryats as this could separate them from the Eastern Buryats. It is, therefore, more important to emphasize the Buryatness of the Yord Games and their unifying aspect. *Nota bene*, the “three games of men” are sometimes seen as “Buddhist”, although they root in the shamanic past of Mongolian culture.

<sup>12</sup> [www.bur-culture.ru/fileadmin/download/YYP%202011%20%E2%84%962%20\(25\)/YYP\\_1.pdf](http://www.bur-culture.ru/fileadmin/download/YYP%202011%20%E2%84%962%20(25)/YYP_1.pdf) access date: 18.08.2015.

The neutralization of the Buryatness is seen more clearly in the festivals held after 2000, when the festival was announced to be cyclical. It was then emphasized that we are dealing with a festival rather than with an ethno-festival, which does not privilege a specific culture (Buryat), but rather the “local traditions” and customs, which can take more or less various traditional forms.

THE PERFORMANCE OF UNITY IN THE FACE OF CRISIS:  
THE UNSUCCESSFUL FESTIVAL IN 2010

The Yord Games were assumed to take place every four years but, obviously, something went wrong in their sequence. The next Games scheduled in 2004 were in fact held a year later, in 2005. The next ones planned to take place in 2009 also was postponed for a year. The funding difficulties resulted in cancelling the already planned and announced festival almost at the last moment – less than a month before the scheduled date. It was not entirely clear, however, whether the festival would take place or not, therefore some of the folklore groups and guests arrived on the scheduled date in Yelantsy. This forced the organizers of the cancelled festival to substitute it hastily with a feast “Meeting at the Yord Mountain”. It was announced to be a preview of the Yord Games, which would take place in 2011, when it actually managed to be organized.

The reason of cancelling the Yord Games in 2010 was the object of numerous discussions. Taking the emic perspective, thus referring to what our informants shared – both the Buryats and Russians – the Games were cancelled because of the lack of funds, which could always be an acceptable excuse and therefore taken as the “objective” clarification. Moreover, the administrative changes could have been an important factor: in 2008 the Ust-Orda Buryat Autonomous Okrug lost its autonomy and was included into the Irkutsk Oblast. It probably resulted in the need for the budget reorganization, which could have therefore reflected on the festival funding.

At the same time, the cancellation of the festival could also be attributed to an almost simultaneous organization of another ethnic festival – Altargana – held just two weeks before the scheduled date of the Yord Games 2010. Some of our informants whom we met before the date of the planned Games stated that they would not attend it, because they had chosen to go to Altargana and did not have enough financial resources to participate in two festivals held one after another. They gave their preference, as one might guess, to the Altargana, which in 2010 was held in Mongolia, and not to the Yord Games, which took place much closer. It is likely that the Altargana was considered to be a more “Buryat” festival than the Yord Games festival, which officially was presented not so much as Buryat, rather as an interethnic event. The rivalry between the Yord Games and the Altargana might be an interesting topic, if we look at it in categories of “ethno-festival market”. The Yord Games in 2010 lost most of their participants (when compared to the previous edition of the Games): it appeared not only to be less important than the Altargana but could not be realized in the full scale due to insufficient number of participants to complete the *Yokhor* circle around the mountain. In this context, it is significant to refer to the poster from

2005 showing a shaman on a background of mountain Yord with the inscription: “The Yord Games – 2005. The circle was completed”<sup>13</sup>. The circle was completed, and it was a good omen for the coming years. In 2010, the circle, even if attempted to be formed would probably not have been completed. That could have proven to be a bad omen and therefore should have been prevented. It should be pointed out however, that this was not advantageous from the viewpoint of the festival market, according to which the Yord Games are presented as an “ethno-touristic brand of the Lake Baikal”<sup>14</sup>. Tourists should not, therefore, take part in the failed events bringing bad omen.

Tensions related to the organization of the Yord Games in 2010, were also associated with the institution, which was then one of the main organizers of the festival – the Centre for Preservation and Development of the Buryat Ethnos. The centre with clear goals related to the protection of the Buryat culture (as can be deduced from its name), had to reconcile different interests. On the one hand, it had to deal with the authorities, which were not interested in strengthening of a single ethnic group and on the other – with progressive revival of ethnic processes resulting, among other things, in growing number of shamans and strengthening of their social position. The centre even opened a kind of shaman office, where clients could contact and receive consultation and help from shamans. However, not all shamans appreciated this. On the one hand, there appeared a dilemma to what extent the festival organized by the Centre was to be Buryat, and to what extent an inter-ethnic one; at the same time the festival lost the supernatural status of “shamanic” festival. Shamanic rites on the Yord Mountain were to become the key element of the “Meeting at the Yord Mountain”. Interestingly, the president of the Shamanists Association present at the festival refused to participate, though a local shaman, who had the right to contact with the local spirits, wanted it to be held. However, in accordance with the tradition, the most important shaman rites should be performed in the rising moon, while the day, when the shamanic rites were to be held was after the full moon. It was not clear exactly who and why determined the date – the organizers assured that it was selected after consultations with shamans. The shamans were also puzzled with the situation: whether to proceed with the rites at any cost or to abstain as the time and circumstances were inappropriate.

Although the program of the “Meeting at the Yord Mountain” was quite poor compared to the previously organized Yord Games’ programs, there were performances of regional folk bands showing local varieties of *Yokhor*, a performance of an archaic rite of fertility presented by a folk band, as well as a show of of beauty contestants which participated on the Altargana festival two weeks earlier. The element of “internationality” was provided with the performance of the renowned Yakut band “Cholbon” playing contemporary rock music with songs “saturated” with the national Yakut ideology in Yakut language. The band was accompanied by a Yakut folk group and

<sup>13</sup> [www.rubur.ru/sites/default/files/imagecache/node-gallery-display/images/kniga/1/igry.jpg](http://www.rubur.ru/sites/default/files/imagecache/node-gallery-display/images/kniga/1/igry.jpg) access date: 18.08.2015.

<sup>14</sup> [www.rubur.ru/article/erdynskie-igry-mogut-stat-brendom-jetnicheskogo-turizma-na-baikale](http://www.rubur.ru/article/erdynskie-igry-mogut-stat-brendom-jetnicheskogo-turizma-na-baikale) access date: 18.08.2015.



a young rapper. The Chinese band “Kalinka” performing Russian songs also received great interest and sympathy from the festival guests.

From 2010, the festival “Meeting at the Yord Mountain” proved not to be very successful: controversies and conflicts over its organization were breaking the Buryat community and the regional multi-ethnic communality. The following year, however, the Yord Games were organized in full scale, returning to the motto of the multi-ethnic Siberia as the cradle of various peoples. The Yord Games were defined as the “traditional festival of various nomadic peoples of Eurasia”<sup>15</sup>, and were attended by representatives from fifteen different regions of the Russian Federation, as well as performers from China, Mongolia and Korea. Nowadays the festival has gained the reputation of a well-known ethnic event. The same year, the “Centre for the Protection and Development of the Buryat Ethnos” changed its status and name and now it is the “Centre of Cultures of Native Peoples of Cisbaikalia”. Still most of the initiatives of the Centre are linked with the Buryat culture, though in the official title and symbols the Centre had been aligned with other cultures of the region.

Established as a festival of “various nomadic peoples”, the Yord Games persist – after 2011 they were held every two years, in 2013 and 2015<sup>16</sup>. The 2015 edition of the festival gathered, according to different sources, from 4000 to 10 000 or even 20 000 participants<sup>17</sup>. Now the organizers (Irkutsk Oblast, Republic of Buryatia, Sakha (Yakutia) Republic and local administration) stress the connection of the festival with lake Baikal and put forward the shamanic face of the festival. After the crisis of 2010, the position of the festival seems to improve and one sign of this is the long broadcast from the festival in the countrywide TV channel “Rossiya 1”<sup>18</sup>. However, some signs of the crisis still remain. In 2015 a group of people openly criticized the festival as an artificial show for tourists, where more journalists than shamans are present<sup>19</sup>.

#### SUMMARY: BETWEEN INDIGENISM AND MULTICULTURALISM

The crisis of 2010, which resulted in a failed festival, was a sign of vulnerability. The concept of multiethnic community based on relationships with the territory (it is homeland for the Western Buryats and local Russians, and the mythical homeland for Yakuts) collides, on the one hand, with the attempts of building a unified Buryat nation, and on the other – with the fear of strengthening the “ethnic separatism” within the Russian Federation. This conflict could be concealed with socially accepted formulas and actions. One of them is the requirement for all the parties of conflict to

<sup>15</sup> [www.erdy.ru](http://www.erdy.ru), access date: 18.08.2015.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.etno.pribaikal.ru/v-mezhdunarodnyj-etnokulturnyj-festival-yordynskie>, access date: 18.08.2015.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.infpol.ru/glavnye-novosti/item/12390-erdynskie-igry-2015.html> access date 18.08.2015; <http://ria.ru/society/20150615/1070304186.html>, <http://vesti.irk.ru/news/culture/174251/>, access date: 18.08.2015.

<sup>18</sup> [http://russia.tv/video/show/brand\\_id/3966/episode\\_id/976211/](http://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/3966/episode_id/976211/), access date: 18.08.2015.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.infpol.ru/glavnye-novosti/item/12390-erdynskie-igry-2015.html>, access date: 18.08.2015.

manifest the acceptance of cultural diversity: the consent on regulation of the ethnic content, and the affirmation of the Russian state. The public discourse, official “opening speeches” and “summary speeches” of ethnic events contain the subcutaneous tension, which is rooted deeply in the conflict of loyalty.

For the Buryats their “indigeneity” is the only capital which they can employ to raise their position and make their voice be heard while governing the territory, if only for the social harmony and tourism development of the region. Paradoxically, the realization of the last two projects requires the preservation of Buryat traditions, but in a way that could both satisfy the desire of the Buryats to “revive” their ethnic culture and to avoid initiation of the processes of ethnic separatism. The chosen method here is to emphasize the multicultural variety of Eastern Siberia – due to the fact that many different groups are represented during the ethno-festival, all of them can feel equally recognized. However, a number of elements in the festival are rooted deeply in the Buryat culture because, as it is explained, the event takes place on the Buryat territory. Thus, these traditions and the way they are presented become the subject of conflicted performances. The manipulations of symbols within scenarios known to all inhabitants of the region can be once portrayed as a presentation of unique beliefs, symbols, customs and values belonging exclusively to the Buryat culture, and another time as a framework for cooperation of all other peoples living in the region, where Buryats are indigenious.

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MAŁGORZATA GŁOWACKA-GRAJPER, EWA NOWICKA, WOJCIECH POŁEĆ

PERFORMING ETHNICITY, CELEBRATING MULTICULTURALISM.  
THE ETHNO-CULTURAL FESTIVAL YORD GAMES IN THE CONFLICT BETWEEN  
“INDIGENOUS BURYAT TRADITIONS” AND “EURASIAN UNITY”

**Key words:** Autochthonic groups, Buryats, Ethnicity, Festival, Minority, Tradition

In the paper authors analyze conflicted actions focused on revival of Buryat ethnic minority culture and state unification policy on the local level, in the Siberian part of the Russian Federation. Using the example of the fifteen-year history of a Siberian ethno-cultural festival authors show how manipulation of categories of “traditional culture”, “autochthonic peoples” and “multiculturalism” can serve for taking the symbolic control over part of state territory and how the minority group performs its ethnicity in the frames imposed by the majority group. In the successes and defeats of the festival's organizers one can reconstruct the process of neutralization of Buryat culture in favour of multiethnic unity. Detailed analysis of the way of using ethnographic and historical sources and processes of negotiating the right to be the host and the guests of the festival is presented in the paper. The festival constitutes the platform for performance of ethnic and religious identities. These performances build multilevel meanings of the festival – from the tourist attraction through celebrating the unity of Eurasia peoples to the shamanistic rite of the fundamental importance for local community.

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