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TOWARDS THE CREATION OF MODERN ETHNICITY AND IMAGINED COMMUNITY: ETHNOFESTIVALS AND CONSTRUCTING THE BURYAT NATION¹

INTRODUCTION: ETHNOFESTIVALS IN THE LIFE OF A MODERN NATION

This article is devoted to contemporary social and political processes within the ethnic Buryatia, aiming to build the modern Buryat nation. On the one side, it is necessary to present both the positive and negative factors affecting this process and the conscious and intentional activities on the part of intellectual elites on the other side. I find that ethnofestivals play the prominent role as the significant factor in the process of self-presentation, in mobilisation of ethnic groups, in developing their aspiration to gain the position of independent, separate, accepted, and even sovereign nations. Ethnofestivals are at times involved in a kind of political performance to establish the special right of an “aboriginal” group to the particular territory. In other words, through these theatrical productions they show “the ownership” of this territory. The socio-political role of ethnofestivals grow in significance in the contemporary postmodern cultural reality (Sulima 2001) together with the regional and ethnic movements. We can even speak about a movement of ethnofestivals, which is part of the phenomenon called *ethnicism* by Anthony Smith (Smith 1986: 47; Dziadowiec 2013). The movement is characteristic for ethnic minorities, groups with ethnic culture in danger and/or being in the position far from equal to other groups of the same kind, struggling to claim their rights (Palczny 2010). To present its specific cultural pattern, the group has to reconstruct or to construct genuinely a new ideology from the selected pieces of knowledge furnished by specialists (scholars) coming from previous epochs (Ziółkowski 2006: 377). The elements are shown as entirely authentic, though their “authenticity” is of a special character that will be demonstrated later.

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METHODOLOGY

In this article, I demonstrate (1) how three great Buryat ethnofestivals transfer elements of national culture between generations, (2) how the canonical pattern of Buryat tradition is constructed out of still “living” traditions and ethnographic knowledge, and finally (3) how these festivals work for the process of unifying construction of the shape of Buryat nation.

The article refers to the following body of research I conducted over several years: in the Autonomous Buryat Ust-Orda Okrug² in 2000 and then in 2010 (when Okrug lost its autonomy), in Buryat Aga Okrug and in the Republic of Buryatia in the years 2012 and 2013 – all in all during four expeditions to areas covered by the three administrative units of the ethnic Buryat character. My basic field research materials are: observation notes, photographs and films, and interviews with significant informers – administration officials, school teachers, museum workers, specially active participants of the observed events, and persons engaged in NGOs activities. I also use additional online documents concerning all three analysed festivals. The three ethnofestivals – Yord Games in 2000 and 2010, Night of Yokhor in 2012 and 2013, and Altargana in 2012 were my areas of observation and interpretation. All of them are analysed as crucial Buryat public events, showing how to construct a canonical pattern of national Buryat culture. Thus, I type up my findings with the constructivist trend in reflection on ethnicity and nation (Edensor 2002; Smith 1987). However, I strongly emphasize that ethnic group, nation and national or ethnic ties, ethnic and national symbols cannot be created in a vacuum “out of nothing”. Activists, creators of symbols and scenarios of events always refer to “something” that exists in social and collective memory, common awareness of symbols and current social associations. This is precisely the case discussed here, i.e., constructing and reconstructing all these forms of intellectual activities which are implemented in creating the modern Buryat nation. In this way I locate my theoretical position in between primordialism and modernism (Smith 2000: 2; Gellner 1999; Anderson 2001).

OBSTACLES TO THE MODERN NATION

In present times, the situation of Buryat culture, Buryat identity and ethnic group as a social unit is extremely complex (see Nowicka, Wszyński 1996). The Buryat nation development faces several factors, which act as obstacles in the nation building process. One of them is the territorial dispersion of the Buryat population, of about half a million people. Areas where Buryats still live are large (though much more limited than it was centuries ago when they lived as an entirely nomadic people) and differentiated in terms of natural environment and political (legal) status. The territory of “ethnic Buryatia” (this concept appeared in recent decades) consists of several units. Buryat ethnic population is located in three administrative units of ethnic type

² Okrug is Russian word for region, district.

in the Russian Federation: (1) the Republic of Buryatia – the largest and institutionally “the most Buryat” political unit (286,839) (2) Buryat Ust-Orda Okrug – west to Baikal Lake in Irkutsk oblast³ (77,767), (3) Buryat Aga Okrug (73,941 in Zabaykalsky Krai)⁴.

The two latter administrative units are smaller differing substantially from each other in terms of demography, ethnic composition of population and cultural tradition. These three administrative units are the main concentrations of the Buryat population, having nominal status of Buryat territories. Yet, the political, social and cultural situation of Buryat population is vastly different in the Republic, two Okrugs, in diaspora, in Mongolia, and in China. (4) Buryats live also in more dispersed groups in many places in South Siberia and in the large territory of the Russian Federation, including Russian big cities – Moscow (3,000–5,000) and Saint Petersburg. Moreover, in a dispersed way, Buryats live in Zabaykalsky Krai (73,941). (5) Furthermore, considerable groups of Buryat ethnic identification live in the northern part of Mongolia (80,000) and in China (in Inner Mongolia: 20,000–40,000). Similarly, until recently, that is, to the third decade of the previous century, Buryat tribes were territorially flexible, roaming, moving generally from the south to north, but also back south. In the period of economic reforms initiated by the Russian Prime Minister Stolypin (1906–1911), which hit the Buryat shepherds economics, migrations to the south intensified. Then, as the result of communist repressions, and especially of forced collectivization, thousands of Buryats moved to the area of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia (China), where they live till now (Głowacka-Grajper, Nowicka, Połec 2013: 26–49). However, in spite of their relatively good position in the Republic of Buryatia, even on this territory, both the Buryat language and their ethnic tradition are in danger despite the nominal Buryat ethnic character of the territory, and despite the vivid endeavours of Buryat ethnic elites.

Buryats, the northern Mongols, even today are divided into several tribes and regional groups. Individual identity is still determined partly by being member of the local territorial affiliation, tribe and lineage membership. The tribal and regional structure preserve the division of contemporary Buryat nation into the groups traditionally highlighted as Khori Buryats, Bulagats, Ekhiryts, Khongodors, Tsongols, Sartuls and others. Territorially though, a fundamental division separates the western and Eastern Buryats – Baikal Lake being the “borderline”. Until recently, this “macro-regional” distinction is still a ground for the split, having a character similar to one of the ethnic type of “border”. Mutual stereotypes persist between the two groups which are other indicators of this split. The loud, entrepreneurial and energetic Western Buryat is in sharp contrast with the slow, quiet, traditional Eastern Buryat. Several cultural differences result in the most vivid “ethnic boundary” (Barth 1969), dividing the common thinking Buryat population into definitely different groups. The division into the Western and Eastern Buryats is still an uneasy rupture in the structure of the Buryat nation. On both sides (Western and Eastern Buryats) there is a deep

³ This is another word for region or district, but usually larger than okrug.

⁴ (http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/perepis_itogi1612.htm – access date 13.06.2014.

sense of separateness. The religious aspect of the macro-regional differentiation plays the key role. The most important symbols of religious belief such as shamanism (the animistic religion of nature and ancestor worship) in the West contrasted to the Tibetan Buddhism of the East. The latter is heavily promoted as a purely Buryat religion, and is rebuilt from scratch with the construction of new Buddhist temples (datsans) – centres of Buddhist worship are the eyewitness signs. Moreover, the symbolic Buddhist pronunciations within a coat of arms symbol, located in the Buryat flag, were introduced at a competition in 1992. The three above-mentioned factors i.e., (1) the territorial dispersion of Buryat population, (2) the local, regional, tribal, and macro-regional differences (as seen by social actors of Buryat ethnic identity), as well as (3) the minority position in the perspective of the political body of the Russian Federation are the factors of challenge for the Buryat elites vying to build and consolidate all-Buryat national community.

TRANSMISSION OF BURYAT CULTURE

The intergenerational transmission of Buryat culture is distorted in contemporary conditions as it was limited by the political institutions in Soviet times, following the policy of the great plan to create the big Soviet Nation.

In the modern world, the conditions and opportunities for intergenerational cultural transmission are fundamentally changing. The transmission of culture cannot be limited to traditionally important means – it cannot take place only in the family life, through the intra-familial generational transmission between older and younger generations. Moreover, the school is not able or willing to relay issues and values crucial for the construction of ethnic identity. In this situation, public events organized by the intellectual elite and administrative centres are gaining importance for the process of transfer of tradition. Ethnofestivals, rallies, reunions and entertaining activities became the platform for presentation and ideological construction of cultural national canonical pattern of important contents. In this process, the selection is always made among some of cultural elements that is very precise, while the selected elements cannot be entirely new, unknown, incomprehensible or totally dead in social life of the general public. In the contemporary world, large scaled public events are the most convenient way, a sort of practical social tool to convey the strengthening of ethnic or national identity. This is done in an atmosphere and circumstances, which imply an increased value of transmitted content, in the atmosphere aimed towards the sacralisation of symbols accepted as canonical elements for the transferred ethnic culture and for the ethnic identity. Sublimity, affectation and festive mood create an emotional context of intense absorption of transmitted contents.

Ethnocultural festivals as a form of social interaction are becoming extremely convenient and an effective tool in the elite's struggle for national unity. Analysing this new phenomenon – Buryat ethnofestivals – we should take into consideration the following three aspects of the social context:

1. The disappearance or weakening of family communication and the source of the phenomenon,
2. The creation of all-Buryat cultural canon formation out of separate regional and tribal elements, and
3. Building the intertribal, all-Buryat relationships through minimizing differences and cultural divisions within the ethnic Buryat community.

Public events and also those involving a lot of people (in some cases the whole group or an exactly defined part) is not a new phenomenon in the history of human culture. The events analyzed here, include collective ceremonies, often engaging elements containing the sense of the sacred. Usually, the events play the role of social rituals, which mark the division between performers and its audience. Rites always served the function of relation building – sustained, confirmed, keeping the social bond and the social structure in balance (Mauss, Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard). In the face of the lack of communication through written means, rituals also served as a form of preservation of cultural resources of the group, the knowledge already acquired by former generations, skills, physical and material wealth gained by the community during earlier historical periods (Barnes, Becker 1961). Today, public events, festivals, ceremonies, parties with partly ludic and partly religious character play the same role in all (also post-tribal) societies.

The type of communal event play particularly important social role within the societies of the threatened identity and poorly shaped structure of the cultural communality. The process of creation, shaping and even inventing (Hobsbawm) the cultural canon, become a necessary step for sustaining social identity. Creative inventions become the basis for the process and a sense of community construction, which is inevitable especially in the case of an ethnic group (nation) formation. The individual being a member of a minority ethnic group strengthens and, sometimes, discovers his/her identity while having an opportunity to watch ethnic canonical elements participating in the official events, studying the ethnic acknowledged pattern and accepting it as a cultural property of their ethnic group.

Another important question includes the source of broadcasting such contents that is the environment of organisers and the decision makers. They are the centres of intellectual and political life, and at the same time, centres possessing such power, which allows both organizational and financial implementation of the projects of a festival. The three ethnofestivals analyzed below – the new public events, play an integrating role, causing ethnic mobilization in the Buryat society. The symptoms of the ethnic revival process appeared in the 1980s and gained momentum in the last two decades.

After years of building a communist system, since the time of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*, indigenous peoples of Siberia, like all the other nations inhabiting the then Soviet Union, began with increasing energy work for the revival of their cultures. Under the name of "rebirth" here understood as a series of more or less co-ordinated efforts to raise the level of knowledge of the elements of an ethnic culture among members of various ethnic groups and to raise the profile of this culture in the context of both national and global levels. "Festival Yord Games – the Construction

of a Multi-ethnic Territorial Community". The festival Yord Games is said to be related to a specific Buryat feast that was used to be held in a special place, which is the Yord mountain on the shores of Lake Baikal. Quite another matter is that the modern Yord Games "imitate" the traditional patterns. In fact various Buryat ethnic festivals represent numerous identical elements building a canon of "Buryat ethnic festival" (See Nowicka 2012, 2013). The first "new" Yord Games took place in July 2000. Opinions repeated frequently during this festival say that the current games were held over a hundred years earlier and it was a Buryat holiday. Today, they have the character of "ethnofestival" where it brings together different folk groups (singing and dancing ensembles), uligershins (– tellers of traditional Buryat epic poetry), Buryat women beauty contest "Dangina". During Yord Games shamans celebrate auspicious ceremonies for the wellbeing of all gathered people.

Besides the artistic content of the program, Yord Games are concentrated on the traditional Buryat sports "The three games of a real man": wrestling, horse racing and the archery. Yord Games are presented by the organizers as the "ethnocultural festival". At the same time, Yord Games were presented as the equivalent of the Olympic Games and as such should be organized regularly. On the one hand, the festival "revives" the Buryat tradition in the global heritage of humanity by showing that the Buryats are characterized by the same cultural and social achievements, as the groups considered to be the centre of today's civilization. According to this discourse, Buryats for centuries had their own "games" with their "sport disciplines" as the ancient Greeks. On the other hand, the festival is interpreted as the sort of compensation deprived with the possibility of independent development. Besides, the organization of the Yord Games justifies the fact that native Siberian peoples do not have the opportunity of independent presentation at the Olympic Games. They should therefore, organize a separate event of this type. In 2000, for the first time, after at least one hundred years, the festival called "Yord Games" took place. It was described as "restored" (but practically rather constructed) and it was proclaimed that the festival should be organised every four years on the Western shore of Lake Baikal, around the mountain Yord. In practice, the festival is held fairly irregularly, and announced officially rather late.

"Yord Games" aspire to the role of the all Buryat festival, and even more broadly – the festival of indigenous peoples of Siberia. For example, teams from the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) usually participate in the artistic and sportive program of "Yord Games". Since the festival takes place in an area inhabited by Western Buryats, in the program, the elements of shamanism and ancestor worship, aspects of Buryat culture clearly distinctive group of residents West of Lake Baikal are present with a great clarity. These shamanic cultural elements are muffled by all aspects, themes and symbols of Buddhism during the celebrations of another Buryat ethnofestival "Altargana", which in 2012 took place in the Aga Okrug. Aga Okrug represents Khori 8 Eastern Buryat tribes living in the Eastern part of ethnic Buryatia, near the Mongolian and Chinese border. The territory is dominated by Buddhism. Beyond shamanism, specific elements of Western Buryat culture (though present also in other Buryat places), almost all promoted as "typical" Buryat cultural elements of the canonical version of invented tradition, can be seen at "Yord Games". All of them are presented as sym-

bols of ethnic identity within other two festivals, which are presented in subsequent parts of the article. During “Yord Games” we can observe: (1) specific Buryat dress – *dygel* – (having some minor regional diversity, always perfectly clear to all Buryats regardless of their tribal and regional affiliation). (2) “Yord Games” presented Buryat beauty contest – “Dangina”. Young women presented a specific content of Buryat concept of female beauty, attractiveness and charm. It contains not only the aesthetic qualities of a girl, but also her way of clothing, behaviour in important situations for the Buryat culture: the ability to welcome and greet guests, the ability to present themselves in terms of family and ancestral affiliation, knowledge of the Buryat etiquette of politeness. She should also develop her individual skills, the right tone and body language during greetings. For Yord, they were also presented and evaluated during the “Dangina” performances of young women in the recitation of passages from national epos “Geser” in Buryat language. (3) In all situations it should be stressed that the knowledge of Buryat language is valuable and strongly emphasized. In the situation of significant decrease of ethnic language competence, this aspect of the festival can be understood in terms of the ethnic revival (Nowicka 2013). At the same time, however, the young candidates for the “Dangina” title should know the state language (Russian), and some boasted also their fluency in English, manifesting participation of Buryat population in the world civilisation. (4) The most important part – the essence of the original meaning of “Yord Games” are competitions in traditional disciplines of Buryat sports, teasers Siberian version of the Olympic Games. It should be noted that during all public events, important Buddhist holidays and celebrations, ethnic culture rallies are accompanied by the cultivation of traditional sports. This is an element present among indigenous peoples of Eastern Siberia (e.g. Sakha), which evoke and stimulate intensive excitement and enthusiasm of local audiences. For, “Yord Games” are – like many other public events, e.g. Buryat surkharbans meetings (mainly devoted to sports competitions) or contest after the Buddhist rites in datsan – grown in the traditional Buryat sports: Buryat style of wrestling, archery and horse riding. They are all grown in accordance with other rules than those known in European tradition. The specificity of their rules is widely known and recognized as an important sign and emblem of cultural distinctiveness of Buryat nation.

The ethnofestival went through crisis during and after the process of profound economic transformation of once Autonomous Ust-Orda Okrug, and in 2008 void of autonomy. In 2010, for instance, Yord Games were reduced to less than one day, being called “Meeting St. Yord Mountain”. It took the form of artistic performances of teams with very diverse profile: one of them consists of old local people’s role-playing the most archaic rituals of fertility. Buryat folklore groups together with various local territories, as well as the famous Yakut (Sakha) rock band (patriotic rock) “Cholbon” (North Star) and the Chinese team, made up of older people, which apparently long ago studied in the Soviet Union performed this ritual. They were well acquainted with the language and popular Russian music from a few decades. But it was an incomplete festival, in an unfinished form. It was depleted from the most important elements that emerged during the first festival in 2000, when the “Yord Games” lasted a full two days, and had a visible financial backing and has been carried out with real panache.

“Yord Games”, which took place several times – most recently in June 2013 (unfortunately, the very poor weather, discouraged participation), fix the event’s shape, underlying ethnic canonical contents during the program, which presents the whole range of the basic symbolic cultural elements. They show the Buryat culture both for outsiders and the natives.

In present days, “Yord Games” have the status of a fixed cultural festival, which uses the constructed Buryat cultural canon also among Buryats themselves as a means of uniting a dispersed and internally differentiated nation.

“ALTARGANA”

The most important of all Buryat cultural festival under the name “Altargana” is held every two years since 1994. The name of the event comes from the Buryat word for a small, inconspicuous steppe plant, flowering yellow, but extremely resistant to drought and frost (Latin systematic name: *Caragana pygmaea*). Altargana symbolizes the strength of the survival of the Buryat nation in difficult natural and social conditions. “Aginska Pravda” – newspaper of Buryat Aga Okrug in 2012 (issued from 1930), two days before the start of the festival (19 July, 2012) writes about the event. This is an interview with B. B. Zhamsuyev who is the main federal inspector for the Zabaykalsky Krai. The journalist asks about the historical significance of “Altargana”: “for the cultural development of the Buryat nation, including language, traditions and customs”. The politician adds: “The festival Altargana corresponds to this beautiful flower called “Altargana”. The feast originates in the boundless space of Mongolia with strong roots, oblivious to everything and every spring it blooms and sends out new shoots. And it is symbolic of the Buryat nation that is not an easy story with a harsh climate. Changes in the formation of political and other realities were not conducive to preserving the language, culture and traditions. The whole point of holidays is the spiritual uniting people living in different regions of our country, China and Mongolia. It is a sign of spiritual and physical health of the nation, the creative energy and talent. The festival gives a powerful impetus to the development of culture, traditional types of sports and customs”. The assumption is that the Buryats organise this event for the Buryats themselves in order to strengthen their sense of national values, and at the same time the festival shows off the global extent of accomplishments, achievements and benefits of Buryat culture. The world may be acquainted with achievements and the general character of the nation. The festival is filled at the same time with the task of building and disseminating the national and canonical symbols, transmitting it and inculcating among the young generation. Software Foundation as expressed in officially proclaimed program of the event speaks openly about building unity and self-esteem among Buryat ethnos. Officially, the program refers to educational objectives – education of the young Buryats in the spirit of national tradition. The text of the program, formulated by the organizers contains on the one hand, the concern to preserve the tradition – the old cultural forms characteristic for the Buryat ethnos, and on the other hand, it expresses a full awareness that the transformation of modern

living conditions do not allow for strict adherence to traditional patterns and the need to adapt to existing features of modern society. The organisers therefore, shape the Buryat cultural canon's search for the ways to integrate ideas valuable and crucial for the symbolism of the ethnos – traditional elements, with a new form of life. One of the elements of the formation and duration of the nation is the canonical pattern of the culture, usually codified by ethnic intellectuals. Nations, which were given to form in conditions of relative security and where the various stages of development were not disturbed by great transformations of civilization, built gradually their cultural canons over centuries, but in its construction, it involved the elite who dreamed that the books written by national writers and poets “will wander to the masses”. The Buryat elite constructs the cultural canon in a reverse order – go back “to the masses” and build a whole national culture of fragments discovered in folk tradition, often partly forgotten. The selected fragments, elements and aspects of Buryat cultural tradition that were important (as it is estimated now) are presented during the “Altargana”. Within the last two decades, the official pattern of Buryat-ness has been constructed. Strictly speaking, the selected elements took on the significance of this tenet, given them the symbolic meaning. In this way, Buryat culture gains standardisation, treated as necessary for any nation.

In 2012, the program of the “Altargana” comprised, in addition to the opening and closing ceremony at the stadium, various artistic competitions and sports. Among the first competitions the following events were held: (1) Competition “One day of a Buryat”. In the theatre were presented individual rituals, traditions, such as the rite of adoption of the son or the daughter, (2) competition of performers of traditional Buryat songs, (3) competition in contemporary Buryat songs, (4) exhibition of folk crafts products, (5) competition of uliger performers. Uligers are a kind of traditional epic poetry. It is an improvised poetry, extolling the great heroes and extraordinary events in Buryat history, combined in all-Mongolian epos – “Geser”. It consists of many (hundreds, thousands) verses. There are sometimes hours to recite one uliger. The performers are sometimes accompanied by the traditional musical instrument – morin khuur. (6) Pageant of girls beauty contest (“Dangina”), which assesses not only the beauty, but also the dress, gestures, the ability to correct humility, and a nice behaviour adapted to the situation, including greeting elders, thanks and greeting the guests. (7) Presentation of traditional yurts which shows the architecture of differently constructed and differently furnished details of traditional Mongolian dwellings, also used as recreational buildings in recent times. During “Altargana” mainly yurts, show the once important economically, socially and ideologically forms of homes. Each part of the yurt had its symbolic meaning associated with the division of roles and activities related to gender, age and social status. In addition, the construction of a yurt with its details reveals the philosophical and the Buddhist way of viewing the world as a complex form of three spheres, in which the central pillar of the yurt represents the idea of the axis mundi, which plays the role of connecting these three spheres. (8) Competition of clothing designers: “Buryat dress: tradition and modernity”. Competing designers presented the possibility of incorporating traditional themes to contemporary design costumes utility, suitable for everyday life and for

ceremonial occasions, not only for ethnic events, and yet aimed at portraying traditional culture. (9) Exhibition centres of ethno-touristic projects “Buryat Settlement”. The competition presents proposals of architecture, building dwellings for tourists along with expected attractions for visitors. The accommodation constructions are planned to be located in places attractive for tourists, both foreign and domestic – from different neighbourhoods of Zabaykalsky Krai and throughout the Russian Federation, as well as residents of the Aga Okrug. People come to enjoy the beautiful place and to relax. The program of „Altargana” includes also competition works in the media, including:

- Competition of journalistic materials – “Altan Sag” (Golden Time).
- Competition in artistic photography “The world in which we live”.
- Competition in television and movies and other journalistic materials.

An important part of the events within the festival were sports, to mention just a few:

- Buryat wrestling “Barildaan”.
- Archery competition by national rules.
- Contest in horseback riding.
- Contest in the Buryat – chess “Shatar”.

A set of events at the festival reflects the established and sustained cultural canon, which became established as a permanent part of the various public events bearing the label of Buryatness that could also be noticed in “Yord Games”. They were created based on the selected elements of traditional culture still understood or well known and, as such, a tradition symbolizing national and cultural peculiarity.

During the festival of “Altargana” well known and widely accepted symbols of national identity of Buryat ethnos appear: (1) dress shows (Degel), worn by the majority of participants, together with the male decoration of the neck (enger), containing three colours: white located in highest position, symbolising highest moral values, black in the middle, symbolising the hard life man full of physical exertion and difficult choices, and red in the lowest position, symbolising bad instincts and inclinations, which should be dominated by highest white values. (2) Ornament used in female hairstyles (tuiba), underlying the social position and the beauty of women. (3) Yurt (ger) already discussed, (4) furnace in a yurt (gulamta), (5) Old-Mongolian alphabet, used in decorations, official inscriptions, titles of books, (6) Panache (tug) – “standard”, military branch emblem, made of horsehair, “Altargana” also has its flag, which is a set of symbols. It consists of a form of a swan on a blue background. The body of a swan is the stylized shape of an “enger”, the above-mentioned symbolic of male ornaments of Buryat outfit. The head and neck of the bird is white, and the body of a white top, black and red on the bottom. Swan is a mythical figure – ancestor, mother, animal totem for the eleven Khori tribes (Eastern Buryats) that worship it. It should be noted that symbols that appear on “Altargana” refer mainly to the body of the Eastern Buryat cultural elements, ignoring or marginalizing elements of the shamanistic traditions of the Western Buryats. Around these issues there are inflammatory components in relations to the two communities on the accumulation of manifest animosity, using old and new mutual stereotypes. The Buryat intellectuals are trying to fight with them aiming to build a unified national community of all Buryats.

“NIGHT OF YOKHOR”

In 2008, the authorities of the Republic of Buryatia decided to establish an annual festival, called “Night of Yokhor”, which usually takes place in July in the capital town of the Republic of Buryatia, Ulan-Ude (Nowicka 2012). In 2012, it was the fifth edition of the festival “Night of Yokhor” with focus on Buryat traditional circle dance. Subsequent editions of the festival associated with dancing Yokhor were held in 2012 and 2013 at the central stadium in Ulan-Ude. In 2013, the event gained even a greater momentum – it was attended by around 5,000 participants and spectators. The whole folk event is built around dance and dancing. The material on this festival was collected during participant observation of “Night of Yokhor” in 2012 and 2013.

Yokhor is a sacred dance and has a historical relationship with shamanic rituals. It is originally limited to Western Buryats territory, which has always had an important social and cultural significance; it was danced in times of an important change for the community – it symbolises its rebirth. The circle of Yokhor symbolizes unity and communion of the ancestral group. Along with deep social and civilization transformation, the meaning and symbolism of Yokhor have profoundly changed, being engaged in the process of Buryat cultural revitalisation and modern form of Buryat nation formation. Subsequent edition of the festival associated with dancing Yokhor has seriously changed – dance on the pronunciation of ancestral group transformed into the national dance of a symbolic type. This process is driven by an intellectual Buryat elite (Nowicka 2012: 123). Nobody denies that the origin of this dance is the Western Buryat shamanism, but at the same time, it is visible that it works as the invented tradition of all Buryats. Yokhor during the festival promotes the dance as a tradition of all Buryats. The analysed festival is the phenomenon of building a canon of national culture from different parts of the originally territorially limited range (Edensor 2002). Today it is in the areas of Western dance on the occasion of shamanistic rituals associated with the worship of ancestors and spirits’ (hosts) specific locations, but this only applies to the Western Buryats, those who for centuries lived west of Lake Baikal. However, in this particular territory, some elements of the most archaic Buryat tradition are preserved. The festival “Night of Yokhor”, through the efforts of creative Buryat intellectual circles, takes a supra-national sense. The dance became an expression and instrument of a new Buryat national idea. Buryats in all places of residence – in the Republic of Buryatia, in both Okrugs (Ust-Orda and Aga), in Mongolia and China (Inner Mongolia) or everywhere in the world, dance Yokhor at important occasions and festivals as a symbol of their national community (Nowicka 2012). At the Fifth Avenue in downtown New York, a group of Buryats also performed it during their New Year celebrations. They dance in celebration of the most important Buddhist holidays crucial for Buryat New Year – sagalga. Then, in Ulan-Ude, despite the cold weather (holiday falls consistently in the middle of winter), the mass of people dance together Yokhor in the street. Participants of the festival “Night of Yokhor” beyond passive reception of artistic performances, also perform Yokhor circle dance. Yet, it happens that Yokhor is sometimes denied the right to

name it the “national dance” because of its association with its shamanistic origins. The festival was criticized by the supreme lama of Buryat Buddhists (Khambo Lama), who claimed that Yokhor is incompatible with the Buddhist tradition, the Buryats basic, and that festival, which is centred on the elements of shamanism should not be organized. It is symptomatic that during “Altargana” Yokhor is danced on stage very briefly, and in general the shamanist tradition of western Buryats devotes little attention, as the festival dominated by Buddhist symbols, increasingly seen as deeply connected with Buryatness.

Historically speaking, Yokhor had various forms and tribal differences that could be significant, although some features were and still are permanent: (1) dancers in a circle, (2) holding hands, (3) clockwise movement of dancers. Historical Yokhor was observed and interpreted over a hundred years ago by M. N. Khangalov as a dance ritual. Always held in a circle, and in any case to maintain a solid circle should be sought. The first scientific description made by Khangalov is as follows: “The National Dance *khatarkha* is divided into three parts: the first, when dancers are forming a circle holding hands, and this time moving slowly in the direction of the sun and sing songs lingering. The second step is to bring the dancers to each other and entwine their hands waving up and down. During this time, the song accompanying the dance is sung less drawled and louder than the first phase. The third step consists in the fact that dancing stands are very close to each other, with their elbows at a right angle, and all jumping up. They dance so tiring” (Khangalov 2004). During the dance the singer changes the song, the tempo and the pace (Dashieva 2009: 25–28). In earlier times dance indulged the structure of the community – in the middle of the circle was Tobshi (the head of the family or shaman) and his helpers Gazarshi (Dashieva 2009: 24). According to Khangalov, featured dance was intended to reflect the behaviour while hunting with beaters. The first stage started with the dance of old men and women, as well as clan chiefs or shamans began hunting with beaters. Cheers issued while dancing and hunting, as well as the movement of the tightening wheel are characteristics of behaviour that also compares the behaviour while hunting with beaters. Dancing is also interpreted as preparation for future warriors to defend. It is also regarded by researchers as a way of sustaining tribal communities. Furthermore, dance rhythm to be tied to the cult of the horse, and the acceleration of movement while dancing will symbolize the movement of the horse – from the slow pace of the walk for a very fast gear (Khangalov 2004). It is emphasized that all the dances performed in ancient times were collectively sacred dances.

Modern Buryat intellectuals are aware of the origin of the dance Yokhora preceding the hunt, though its former economic sense, thing of the past and the dance takes on a symbolic meaning. Today we can point out two forms of Yokhor functioning: the first is practically devoid of instrumental music facilities, accompanied only by collective singing. Yokhor, in this embodiment exhibits very large local variations, the sense of ritual dance is a combination of fun, singing and magic action motion on the circle (Dashieva 2009: 31). Today it is also associated with shamanistic rites of sacrifice, propitiate divine beings and bring happiness. However, this form is pre-

served only among the Western Buryats, who retained the oldest and most archaic shamanic cults, by its nature, reflecting the structure of the ancestral (Dashieva 2009). Dancing Yokhor among the Western Buryats is associated with tailagan, shamanic rite today is resurgent in areas west of Lake Baikal, along with the entire shamanism. Yokhor danced at the end of the tailagan, atonement, which is bringing good luck, prosperity and fertility for the ancestral population. Only since the 1960s, Lamaist elements along with the expansion of the religion in the areas of Western settlement of Buryats according to Dashieva, appear in Yokhor of the area.

CONCLUSION

Traditional ethnic groups as well as contemporary “new” nationalities use recent forms of “old” myths, adjusted to recent social language, presenting particular events selected from the mythological history of the group – in particular they glorify the nation. The suggestions expressed by Anthony Smith (1987: 47–50) are the same and valid in the case of traditional ethnic groups as in the process of consolidation of recently formed nations. Contemporary Buryat ethnofestivals, here analysed, openly focus on showing the uniqueness, greatness, value, deep historical roots and the complexity of national tradition as well as the necessity of its transmitting to younger generation. The figure of “White Old-Man” leading by hand a young boy during the performance of “Altargana” in 2012 clearly symbolised the tie between generations – the transmission of valuable national culture, calling it “national tradition”. As Smith described in traditional “ethnies”, ethnic symbolism introduces order into historical events hidden in the structure of national myths (Smith 1987).

All the three above analysed ethnofestivals refer to the same universe of Buryat culture, though they select and stress not an identical composition of selected traits. The “Night of Yokhor” concentrates on one regional dance, “Altargana” promotes all elements of shepherd grassland Mongol Buddhist tradition, and “Yord Games” focuses on shamanistic ideology and rituals, stressing simultaneously sport traditions existing in all Buryat regional and tribal communities, and even – in larger scale among numerous native nations on the territory of western coast of Baikal Lake or even of entire Siberia. This is why “Yord Games” may claim the role of “all – native-Siberia” festival. The festivals construct, diffuse and strengthen the “invented” cultural canon.

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TOWARDS THE CREATION OF MODERN ETHNICITY AND IMAGINED COMMUNITY:
ETHNOFESTIVALS AND CONSTRUCTING THE BURYAT NATION

Key words: Buryats, Ethnofestivals, Ethnic elites, Transmission of culture,
Altargana, Night of Yokhor

The article presents certain aspects of the modern Buryat ethnicity formation. It concentrates on the conscious and intentional activities on the part of ethnic intellectual elites. In the modern world the conditions and opportunities for intergenerational cultural transmission are fundamentally changing. The transmission of culture cannot be limited to traditionally important means – family life or school education. The author finds that ethno-festivals play a prominent role as significant factor in the self-presentation, in ethnic mobilization, in developing aspiration to gain the position of accepted ethnos. Through theatrical productions Buryat elites show “the ownership” of ethnic territory. Struggling to claim its rights, ethnic group has to present its specific cultural pattern – reconstruct or construct new ideology from the selected pieces of knowledge furnished by scholars. The author analyses Buryat ethno-festivals: *Altargana* and *Night of Yokhor*. The research material used in this article was collected during subsequent field trips in 2012 and 2013.

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