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THE AUTHENTICITY OF CULTURE AS A PROBLEM  
OF EVERYDAY LIFE.  
ACTIONS AIMED AT THE REVIVAL OF WESTERN BURYAT CULTURE

Questions about the authenticity of a culture or of various cultural elements are not a new phenomenon in anthropology and sociology. An example referring to as early as the 1930s can be recalled, namely Claude Lévi-Strauss's chase for the “authentic savage” – whom, however, he failed to find – described in the book *Tristes tropiques* (1955). Problems of authenticity and the processes of creating cultural differences are analyzed in the rich literature on the “tourist experience” (for example, *The Tourist* by MacCannell, 1976). In the social sciences, we can find also studies aimed to show the “inauthenticity” (a quality expressed by the term “invented”) of various traditions considered to be eternal and essential for the given group (initiated by *The Invention of Tradition* edited by Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). However, a critical reading of works dealing with these issues (e.g. Comaroff, Comaroff 2009; Lubaś 2008; Theodossopoulos 2013) leads to a question which is crucial to the entire “problem of authenticity”: for whom “authenticity” (or rather the lack of it) is actually a problem? Is this a problem for the anthropologist who recognizes that what he has observed is different from what he had read about in earlier ethnographic works? Or is it a problem for groups or individuals who are starting to think about their own cultural heritage?

The issue of “authenticity” became important to me during my fieldwork among Western Buryats living in Irkutsk Oblast of the Russian Federation, close to the north-western shores of Lake Baikal, and the subsequent analysis of the collected data<sup>1</sup>. But

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<sup>1</sup> The project, partial results of which are presented in this paper, focused on the problems of perception of their own socio-cultural situation by Western Buryats and on the activities carried out by them in the framework of the so-called “cultural revival policy” in Russia. The choice of such research problems determined the selection of interviewees. We talked with Buryats who are engaged in protecting their ethnic culture. We conducted interviews with teachers, principals and students in schools with Buryat language, in community centers, libraries, cultural departments of the local administration and with members of folk bands, as well as with important representatives of local communities, i.e. the oldest members of the clans and shamans. The first survey was conducted in July 2000 in Ust-Orda Buryat Autonomous National District in four regions (Osa, Bochan, Bajandaj and Ehirynt-Bulagat), in the Olkhon region included in the Irkutsk Oblast, and in Irkutsk. After ten years, we repeated our field study in order to observe what changes had occurred in the defining of their own situation and the state of the ethnic culture among Buryats. The study, conducted in July and August 2010, covered the same areas and towns as in 2000, and in addition Olkhon island on Lake Baikal.

this was not because I thought that “authenticity” was an important analytical category, but because the phrase “authentic/real Buryat culture”, “authentic/real Buryat tradition” and the like turned out to be emic categories. Buryats to whom we spoke asked themselves questions about the authenticity of the customs and traditions they were trying to revive, and they used various methods to find an answer. Often we saw our interlocutors wondering what was “really Buryat” or “more or less Buryat”. They were reporting to us disputes among Buryats about these problems or they were discussing them among themselves. This concerns both elements perceived as common for all Buryats and those specific for Western Buryats.

In this paper, I propose to understand “authenticity” as a property of a culture or a cultural element that generates some positive feelings among the participants of social life. These feelings are connected with the origin of the given element placed in the distant past (preferably the earliest, though unspecified), the continuity of the occurrence and such a relationship with members of the ethnic group which could demonstrate the uniqueness of this group in relation to the others. The criteria and methods of assessing the authenticity of the cultural element, however, may be varied, which I will show later on. To analyse this issue, I have used interviews collected during field research among Western Buryats, as well as books and papers by Buryat scientists and national activists<sup>2</sup>. I took into account these statements and analyses in which a person was talking about “authenticity”, “truthfulness”, “antiquity” of the individual elements of culture and about their origin, history and changes over time.

Discussions on the “genuine culture of Buryats / Western Buryats” are important not only for the Buryats’ identity, but also for their socio-political position. “Indigenous-ness” (i.e. priority to stay on the inhabited territory), “antiquity” (i.e. having a history and tradition as long as the Russians have, or even longer), and “cultural authenticity” (i.e. having the culture worth protecting – in the opinion of the social majority) form the basis of their socio-political capital which allows them to put themselves on a equal footing with the Russian majority in the society. It is also the starting point for actions undertaken on behalf of their own group, from deciding on the content of school education to making money on ethnic tourism.

#### THE SOCIAL FRAMEWORK OF QUESTIONS ON THE AUTHENTICITY OF CULTURAL ELEMENTS

Buryats do not have their own state and in the Russian state, they are a minority. Even in their own autonomous federal republic they constitute about one-third of inhabitants. In the Soviet era, Buryats were subjected to denationalization policies and their national elites were liquidated under Stalin’s regime in the 1930s (see Wyszynski 2010; Zajączkowski 2001). The Soviet state conducted national policy in two ways. On the one hand, it strongly promoted the Soviet culture (expressed in the Russian

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<sup>2</sup> Often these are the same persons. Many works of Buryat scholars of the humanities and social sciences consider the issues of building a modern Buryat nation and present various recommendations in this area.

language and in Russian cultural patterns); on the other hand, the state constantly controlled members of different nationalities living on its territory by granting different rights to different groups. To do this effectively, the state required every citizen to define his or her national identity, which was entered in the personal documents (cf. Brubaker 1996). As a result, the national identity of Soviet citizens was not only their private matter, but at the same time cultivating their own national traditions openly was much more difficult (especially in the sphere of religion).

All threats to the survival of the Buryat culture and actions aimed at its protection should therefore be considered taking into account their minority status. This means that these activities should be viewed not only as a reaction to the emergence of global patterns of cultural modernization or transformation (which is not insignificant), but primarily as a reaction to the actions of the Russian state. For this reason, the Russian culture and its indispensability, and the rules in force in the Russian state, must always be taken into account in efforts to revive Buryat culture.

Changes in the economic, moral and identity aspects of social life, manifested in attempts to return to the ethnic and religious tradition, are not accompanied by an increasing degree of political sovereignty. What is more, many actions aimed at the revival of Buryat traditions take place precisely through the Russian state and its local structures. Buryat actions can be treated as signs of the struggle against the cultural, economic and political domination of the Russians, but resistance to the consequences of this dominance is only one element of social reality. Local social reality consists also of a strong civic identity (identification with the “strong state” recognized as a world power), local “economic patriotism”<sup>3</sup>, positive memories of the Soviet empire and the rebirth of the ethnic culture not in opposition to, but in conjunction with other cultures whose representatives live in Siberia (especially with other indigenous peoples, but also with the local Russians). In addition, fidelity to tradition no longer refers to a moral imperative or a set of thoughtless practices, but often becomes a part of the “individual life opportunities” discourse and of consciously pursued social policies aimed at replacing the Communist ideology with ethnic traditions and regional multiculturalism. Balancing between these two strategies – resisting the dominant culture and merging the ethnic heritage with it – is a characteristic feature of the post-Socialist reality in which Buryats live today.

The situation of Western Buryats is determined by their double minority status. On the one hand, as Buryats, they are a minority in the Russian state. On the other hand, they are a minority within their own ethnic community, i.e. Buryats. They are distinguished primarily by their religion, which is shamanism, while other Buryats (the Eastern Buryats) are Buddhists – lamaists. There are also some other distinguishing features, for instance the dialect (or language, depending on the adopted terminology), the way of living (formerly Western Buryats were rather “people of the forest”, connected with the taiga, not with the steppe like Eastern Buryats), or

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<sup>3</sup> “Economic patriotism” is an attitude which consists of caring primarily about the economic development of one’s region or country. In this approach, hard work is the main value.

their greater degree of assimilation to Russian culture due to the fact that Russian influence was earlier and stronger on the western side of Lake Baikal (see Dameshek 1995; Dorzhev 2005; Mantykov et al. 2009). Those Western Buryats who work for the preservation and revival of their culture are therefore facing many social and identity-related challenges. They need to place themselves in relation to the Russian state and Russian culture (being aware that they cannot in any way reject either) and in relation with Eastern Buryats who are a model of national survival for them. They cannot, however, efficiently assimilate themselves either to one or to the other group. Adoption of the Russian identity is impossible, because a Buryat will never be fully recognized by Russians as a member of their national group and, moreover, this could mean the breaking of ancestral ties, which are the key factor for social identity and all social relations among Buryats. The same ties mean that one cannot change one's tribe and easily become an Eastern Buryat – one can only sometimes be included in that group by marriage. Furthermore, such a change would also mean adopting another religion. However, many of the cultural elements are common for Eastern and Western Buryats; so sticking to ancestral and local traditions does not mean rejection of Buryat-ness on a national level (although many authors emphasize that strict adherence to ancestral and tribal ties hinders the creation of a Buryat national identity, see for example Dugarova 2010; Vasileva, Dugarova 2007). Actions undertaken by the Buryat intelligentsia on the western side of Lake Baikal have therefore two aspects – first, protecting specific cultural elements (shamanism, a close connection with the territory, clan ties within each group) and second, maintaining all-Buryat ties (e.g. teaching the Buryat literary language, based on eastern *hori* dialect, in schools, celebrating national Buryat holidays, maintaining contacts with the Republic of Buryatia and highlighting their importance).

Buryat activists and representatives of local authorities have been carrying out the “policy of cultural rebirth” since the perestroika and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR. Its basic objectives are the revival of ethnic language and religion and return to traditional practices and values. No-one has any doubts, however, that a return to the “old times” is not possible, no matter how far in the past they are located. The revival of tradition means therefore recalling the past in contemporary social and cultural conditions, increasing the relevant knowledge, deepening the degree of awareness of their own cultural distinctiveness among Buryats, and bolstering pride in their origin and heritage. Specific people were delegated to deal with the “rebirth of culture” policy – teachers in schools, the employees of various departments of culture in local administration structures, employees of museums and various cultural institutions. This does not mean that the movement does not appear as grassroots initiatives – there are some local activists for whom the rebirth of Buryat culture is a mission of their lives. These grassroots movements encompass also the rebirth of shamanism (although in the last few years, with the creation of various types of shamanistic associations, the activities of shamans have become more formalized). With all these activities, there emerge questions regarding the “authenticity” of customs, traditions and rituals which are the subjects of “rebirth” processes.

The problem of “authenticity” as an emic category requires the appearance of a particular social framework. In the area west of Lake Baikal, this framework consists of nine main factors:

1. Broken intergenerational transmission.

This is the most important factor determining the social situation of Buryats nowadays and the main reason for the emergence of contemporary social questions regarding the authenticity of the Buryat traditions and customs. As a result of repression of the 1930s and the subsequent policies of building the communist Soviet society, the intergenerational transmission of culture was interrupted. Most of the members of the ethnic elites, both the “traditional” (shamans and elders of the clans), as well as “modern” (educated Buryat intelligentsia) were killed off or locked in prisons and labour camps for years. Shamanistic rituals were prohibited. The base of the traditional economy was destroyed, and collective and state farms were established in the areas inhabited by Buryats. Ethnic tradition was being presented as an obstacle to building the socialist and communist society and as evidence of backwardness and mental limitations. In this situation, parents and grandparents did not pass Buryat culture on to their children and grandchildren in the same way as they had before. Many people thought that acculturation to Russian culture would give their children better opportunities in life. Sometimes people were afraid to talk about the past, or simply there were no longer people who knew Buryat tradition sufficiently well.

2. Processes of ethnic revival after perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

When the central government changed its policy towards national and ethnic minorities, many groups began to emphasize their separateness, to practice their customs publicly and explore their own tradition and history. Among these groups were also Buryats.

3. Permanent contact with ethnic groups which manage to preserve their own culture

The interlocutors often compare their own group and the state of preservation of its traditions and language with other nationalities who either live nearby (as the often-mentioned Tatars), or are generally known throughout the Russian Federation (and previously – throughout the Soviet Union) because of their resistance to Russification and their preservation of their own traditions (such as Chechens and Georgians; these examples were invoked during the interviews). Examples of these groups show that it is possible to resist Russification and for the interviewees, they are points of reference which make them feel some kind of (openly expressed) shame, because Buryat language and ethnic traditions are not equally preserved.

4. The very spontaneous resurgence of shamanism.

The collapse of communist ideology in the former Soviet Union resulted in, among others, a religious revival, including the rebirth of shamanism, which is the traditional religion of Western Buryats. Although shamanism is closely linked to the

issue of the revival of Buryat culture and it occupies an important place in the ethnic ideology, its present rapid development is not just an ethnic issue. One can get the impression that it is the cultural element of Western Buryats which does not require institutional support and actions specially undertaken by ethnic elites in order to develop. People (and not just Buryats, but also members of other nationalities living in the local community) used to go to the shamans in the face of the difficulties of everyday existence and the increasing uncertainty of life or in the face of illness.

5. The quest for the “purpose of social life” after the collapse of communist ideology.

Some interviewees pointed out that the fall of the communist ideology had caused a void that had to be quickly filled up. Without the proper frame of ideology, society began, in their opinion, disintegrate (cf. Humphrey 2002). Ethical criteria allowing to distinguish the good from the evil and the motivation to act on behalf of the community collapsed (or at least weakened). It turned out, however, that the ideology of ethnic revival (including religion) may well fill this ideological void (see Vasileva 2009). Therefore it quite quickly became part of the educational curriculum in the schools and the basis for activities undertaken by the local administration (for instance, as a source of new holidays that the whole community could celebrate).

6. The quest for the “purpose of individual life”.

Ideological emptiness had its consequences not only at the group level, but also on individual one. Moreover, with the collapse of the old system, the existing path of social advancement was closed and the existing ways of gaining respect in society and of shaping one’s own identity were abolished. Here, too, turning to ethnic tradition could be recognised as a good solution, at least for some people.

7. The quest for compensation for repressions suffered in the past.

A sense of ethnic ties is amplified by a sense of shared repressions suffered from the communist system (which is most often treated just as impersonal system, not a set of specific people). In fact, in the post-Soviet reality there is no other method of fulfilment than an official confirmation that a person was “repressed”, i.e. wrongly convicted, and therefore is rehabilitated. At the group level, historical research and the transfer of knowledge to the next generations about the causes and consequences of repressions and about their individual victims are of major importance. These studies not only make it possible to show the past of the given group, but also require an understanding of its culture and tradition, because only then is it possible to explain the social impact of the murder or imprisonment of clan elders, shamans and members of the intelligentsia (and also what in fact was their offence against the system).

8. Debates on the Buryat identity.

A lively debate is currently unfolding among Buryat intellectuals, national ideologists and researchers on whether Buryats should strive to become a single national group (which means the loss of many local cultural elements, but also gives greater

strength in the fight against Russification) or whether clan, tribal and local divisions are values that should be preserved (cf. e.g. Hilhanov 2005; Chymytdorzhev 2008; Dugarova 2010). Western Buryats must, therefore, deal with the questions posed to their separate identity – whether the division into Western and Eastern Buryats is “authentic” or whether it was invented by Russians and the Russified Buryats in order to weaken and break the cohesion of the Buryat nation from the inside.

#### 9. The emergence and development of ethnic tourism in the Baikal region.

Lake Baikal has attracted tourists for a long time, but after the collapse of large industrial plants and a decrease in agriculture production, tourism has become one of the most important sources of income for local communities. Tourists come to these territories not only from Russia, but also from abroad. Beyond the contact with nature, they are also looking for experience of ethnic tourism – and they are not interested in the Russian culture, but precisely in the culture which has “its place” around Lake Baikal and carries the flavour of the “exotic”, that is the Buryat culture. In these circumstances, knowledge of their own culture begins to pay off for Buryats.

#### LOCAL PRACTICES OF SEEKING “AUTHENTICITY” AND THE CONTACT WITH THE PAST

Writing about the problems of defining authenticity, Charles Lindholm (2013: 363) shows two ways of understanding its presence in the social life:

- genealogical or historical (characterizing the authenticity of the entity by the study of its origin),
- identity or correspondence<sup>4</sup> (the emphasis is put on the expressive content – a sense of intimacy, solidarity and belonging)<sup>5</sup>.

References to these two perceptions of authenticity can also be found among the criteria our interviewees have used to assess whether given cultural element is a “real/authentic Buryat” one. They were trying in different ways to figure out, first, where an element comes from and second, what feelings it can evoke. In the interviews appear, therefore, four criteria used to assess the authenticity of cultural elements:

1. the dissimilarity criterion – something is authentic if it distinguishes Western Buryats from other ethnic groups;
2. the local knowledge criterion – something is authentic if the elders can remember it from childhood or from stories told by their ancestors;
3. the supernatural criterion – something is authentic if spirits of the ancestors talk about it during shamanistic rituals or communicate it in the dreams;

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<sup>4</sup> An understanding of authenticity in terms of moral imperatives a person accepts and fidelity to oneself (cf. Taylor 1992) can also be included here.

<sup>5</sup> Lindholm emphasizes that these criteria are applied not only to elements of culture, but also to entire groups or individuals. This can be seen also among Western Buryats. People are wondering who can be considered a “real” Buryat. This is an issue closely related to the structure of society and ancestral ways of understanding the ethnic belonging. This issue, however, will not be analysed here.

4. the authority of science criterion – something is authentic if it has been described in the ethnographic and/or historical works (although for some persons only the oldest works and the first ethnographic and historical accounts of Buryats should be considered, while for others the age of the given work does not matter – contemporary works are also reliable, if they were written by “recognized experts”).

The application of these criteria is based on two groups of practices of acquiring knowledge – the traditional ones, which are rooted in the Buryat tradition, that is in the contact with the spirits of ancestors and with elders, and the modern ones, relating to modern methods of searching for information or reading scientific papers and other texts and to research conducted on one’s own. Each group of these practices uses other methods and a different language. They are also used for different purpose and are managed by different groups of people that confirm authenticity of cultural elements (that is, by *authenticators*, to borrow the term from Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, 2013: 399). A comparison of both groups of practices of acquiring knowledge about the past, of confirming the authenticity of various cultural elements (customs, rituals, material objects) and of the origin of the people and their cultural competence is shown in the table below.

	<b>Traditional ways</b>	<b>Modern ways</b>
Methods	Communication with the spirits of the ancestors and with the elders	Historical, ethnographic and linguistic research
Authenticators	Buryat shamans, the elders	Russian and Buryat researchers educated in Russian schools and universities
Language	Buryat and old Buryat	Russian
Main purpose	Success in individual life, family matters, health, identity and the search for a proper way of life	Public rituals, discussions on Buryats’ place in the society (state and regional), family matters

According to Buryat tradition, only the transmission of tradition and religion based on personal contact is authentic and effective. However, in modern times, when due to the collapse of intergenerational communication the efforts to revive culture are largely based on ethnographic and historical books, the question of the authenticity of tradition and religion has become so important to Western Buryats that they begin to combine both types of practices – the traditional one, based on the patterns of their own culture, and the modern one, based on scientific methods of researching the past. This applies not only to ideological disputes about the nature of what it means to be a nation or about a place of Buryats in socio-political life, but also the daily life problems relevant for individuals.

The complementary character of those two types of practices is traceable in the actions taken to gain happiness in personal life. A person’s happiness depends on the attitude of his or her ancestors, which was explained by one of the interlocutors: *“Every man is strong because of his clan, because of his ancestors, and, indeed, of the family. Ancestors can pray for him and open all the routes in his life, he does not even*

*need to pray to his ongon<sup>6</sup> – so strong he is, so powerful. I was told about one man. In his family there are three of them. And his grandmother loved him so much, so idolized him since childhood, even though she had three grandchildren, three boys. And now he lives very well, he has all of his own, he comes to any rite and he has all of his own, his own spoon, for example, his own cup. He did not take away things from people, he has all of his own. And he has it without any effort. One day he told a shaman: “I have problems, I would...” and the shaman told him: “It is impossible that you have problems, everything is fine in your life, the road is open in front of you. Why? Because your grandmother had prayed enough for you, she prayed to all of caregivers, everything is provided for you, everything, everything, you are just perfect.” They told him that “you are just perfect, so much she cares about you.” Of course, he wanted his daughters to get married, he asked [for this] during the ceremony, one after the other daughters were getting married, after one year they gave birth to children, you see, he has grandchildren. “All is as I ask, God has given me everything.” He is very grateful to his grandmother. Two other brothers, they live differently, it turns out that it can happen like this. That depends, however, on our ancestors, how they are interested in their descendants”.*

Thus, a Buryat who wants to have a happy life must do the following:

- know the names of his ancestors and the course of their lives, and honour them during *shamanistic* rituals,
- know the spirits of his place of origin and worship them,
- seek the assistance of the shaman from his own ancestral territory, and only those who have the real power (and are therefore “true”) and the knowledge that not only allows them to contact the spirits, but also not to offend them (for example, by praying to the spirits whom only the shamans of the highest degree of initiation may address).

If these elements are forgotten, one has to work to find them again. Methods derived from Buryat culture as well as “modern” methods can both be used in this process: Problem 1. Ancestors have been forgotten → the shaman must perform a ritual of recalling the forgotten ancestors to know their names and facts of their lives → then one should read the chronicles and historical works to find further information about them.

Problem 2. A rite should be performed to honour the spirits of a place, but they are unknown → it is necessary to find people who remember the names of the spirits that live in a particular location and/or find an ethnographic work describing this specific area.

Problem 3. A person wants to become a shaman/it is necessary to determine whether a person is a “real” shaman → he/she can find a vocation in a dream and learn from other, known and respected, shamans and/or he/she can graduate from the Ulan-Bator Mongolian Academy of Astrology, from the Department of Shamanism, under the care of an individual teacher/guardian spirit.

Traditional and modern practices can therefore be used interchangeably or as complementary. It is important, however, that one always needs to establish close

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<sup>6</sup> *Ongon* – the guardian spirit of the clan, one of the ancestors.

contact with the representatives of one's own ethnic group and to gain knowledge about it. The knowledge of Buryat language is also important, because only in that language can people speak to the spirits of ancestors and the spirits of a place. If a person does not know the Buryat language, he/she needs to use an interpreter when talking to the spirits of ancestors. One of the women said: *"In June we performed our ancestral ritual (...), this young shaman was also there and he was recalling our ongon, our ancestor. Our ancestor began to talk: 'I was very rich, I was very strong, hardworking, I fought with Cossacks', that he was a military man, but we do not know who he was, that in general such an ancestor existed, [that he] was with us. He came, spoke his name. I said that we must now examine everything. He was a darhan – a blacksmith, he was a hunter, so he could do a lot, he was rich, and when he came, he even cried. He cries and says that there are few of you, you do not raise a lot of cattle, you have stopped dancing johar<sup>7</sup>, have ceased to speak Buryat language, when you speak to me, you speak Russian. This is because, as someone said... Such was the situation. (...) All was told in Buryat language, you know, in the old Buryat language, many words, even I as a linguist, I even... and there was a translator, who explained it all".* Although the aim of such rites is to ensure the happiness of the given family, they are also a pretext for searching for information about the past in a variety of sources and for becoming aware of the contemporary situation of the ethnic group, which also raises the willingness to act on its behalf; this was the case of the woman who said the above.

#### THE PROBLEMS OF AUTHENTICITY

The search for "authentic" traditions and "real" knowledge of the past is not unproblematic. The first problem is the competition between the authorities, that is, the question of what to choose if pieces of information derived from two different sources and obtained with two different methods are not compatible with each other. The second problem arises from the fact that building a sense of belonging and reviving a culture are political actions, and therefore are linked with the issues of power (cf. Lewellen 2003: 191–196). That is why they lie within the sphere of interest not only of Buryats, but also of representatives of the ruling majority, the Russians. In turn, Buryat national ideologists and local activists have to answer the question of what is more important: authenticity (understood as a fixed duration of elements from the past, including the clan and local divisions) or the Buryat national unity.

#### Competition between the authorities – local knowledge and ethnography

The problem of competition between the different authorities can be traced in the example of the difficulties that one of our interviewees had with assessing whether the shaman from her village was a "real Buryat shaman" or not. In her village there

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<sup>7</sup> *Johar* – a Buryat traditional dance. People dance in a circle and sing, often improvised, songs that all dancers repeat after the chanter.

was a shaman who healed people and people turned to him for help in disease. One day, one of the residents of the village, a teacher, was in an ethnographic museum and looked at an exhibition devoted to shamanism. She saw there that one of the main attributes of a shaman was a drum; but the shaman of her village never used such a drum, so she began to doubt his shamanistic skills. People's faith and the fact that he was a well-known shaman for many years were not been sufficient. More important was the vision of professional ethnographers presented at the museum exhibition. Other people we spoke to, however, tried to explain this discrepancy. They pointed out that in Soviet times, shamans had to hide and to celebrate rituals in secret, so the use of a drum was impossible and shamans were forced to abandon drums. They did not return to using them after the collapse of the Soviet Union, because, according to one version, they forgot how to use a drum or, according to the second opinion, they knew that people were not accustomed to a drum and preferred not to introduce new elements.

However, if we return again to the explanation provided by ethnography, we can see that there is another possible interpretation. Buryat shamans very rarely used drums during the healing procedure; they made use of them during other rites, which required falling into a trance. Thus, a shaman who is not using the drum during healing need not be false. But some people do not trust any ethnographic literature, saying that shamans never revealed the secrets of their practices, so ethnographers (mainly non-Buryats) could only guess what the shamans were truly doing, or derived knowledge about it from other people, who were not always reliable.

The story reveals a problem of trusting in authority (an in-depth description of the relationship between local knowledge about shamanism and research on this topic can be found in: Połec 2013). The dominant idea in the social discourse is that the cultural transmission was broken and nowadays nobody knows which elements of the past and the tradition are true and which are not. People hesitate and change their point of view several times. Some even believe that this knowledge was lost forever and cannot be recovered. Even ethnographic research done in the times of Tsarist Russia must be treated with caution. One example could be the ceremonies to honour the spirits of a place. Each territory requires specific shamanistic rituals and a referral to different spirits. When using ethnographic literature in order to find information on this topic, one has to be careful to choose a work referring to relevant sites (and to hope that the researcher did not make a mistake; if so, it may make the rite ineffective).

#### **The "authenticity" versus the Buryat national unity**

Buryat national ideologists must decide whether the division between Eastern and Western Buryats threatens national unity or whether it is a legacy that they are obliged to protect. Religion is an important element of this division. Most of Buryats are Eastern Buryats, i.e. Buddhists. The centre of national life, the republic and its capital, is situated on the Buddhist territory (and after the autonomy status

of two Buryat districts was recalled in 2008, the Republic of Buryatia is the only Buryat territory which is autonomous). Buryats are associated mainly with Buddhism and are widely perceived by the people of Russia as Buddhists. However, shamanism is an older religion; therefore Western Buryats are, in their own eyes, those who have preserved the ancestral religion. They did not accept Buddhism coming from Tibet (i.e. did not abandon the religion of their ancestors for another one). In terms of “primordality”, therefore, their religion is more “genuinely Buryat” than Buddhism, but taking other criteria (e.g. the distinction from other groups, number of believers) into account, it is Buddhism that is more “really Buryat”. Shamanism, in contrast to Buddhism, has never been and still is not officially recognized in the Russian Federation as a religion. Today it is considered only as a practice of “folk medicine”. Hence Buddhism has higher social status; it is on a par with the Orthodox Church and other religions recognized by the state (cf. Abaeva, Zhukovskaia 2005; Bogdanov 2008). Besides, as a more centralized, hierarchical and codified religion than shamanism, it is perceived as “better suited” to the role of the religion which unifies a national group and gives an organizational structure to it (see Zapašnik, Morochojewa 2000). However, as some researchers suggest, shamanism is not only older, but in fact also more prevalent than Buddhism, as many shamanistic practices survived also among Eastern Buryats and there are also some shamans among them – even though the lamas are trying to fight these practices as “pagan” and would like to promote Buddhism in the area west of Lake Baikal (a process which *de facto* is already slowly taking place).

Debates on the nature of “Buryat-ness” focus on shamanistic religion, because in other aspects Western Buryats lose to Eastern Buryats in terms of the “conservation of culture”. They have to a large extent lost their language, while Eastern Buryats, especially those living in the Aginsk district, have retained it. The issue of language is also not clear to everyone. Although the literary language taught at schools is one of the eastern dialects, some local Buryat activists do not want to lose their western language (also called the Irkutsk dialect), as it is an important value to them (more on this topic in: Nowicka 2013). They are aware that preserving this dialect will be extremely difficult – even teaching the Buryat literary language to the younger generation is difficult, so teaching another dialect would not meet with a favourable reception, because it would mean an additional element in a school curriculum. Moreover, by showing young people that the knowledge of Buryat language may be useful in professional work, they inevitably must indicate opportunities created by the Republic of Buryatia, because it is the only place where the Buryat language has the status of an official language. However, it is not the western dialect, but the eastern one.

Western Buryats must face not only the aspirations of Buryat national ideologists coming from their eastern compatriots, who want to integrate them into a unified national group, but also the Russian interpretations that may question their identity and position in the local social system. Paradoxically, in some points, these interpretations may overlap, but they serve different purposes. For Eastern Buryats,

questioning distinctiveness of their western compatriots is a method of building national unity; for the local Russian authorities, it is a method of reducing their importance in the region.

Various interpretations which weaken the importance of Western Buryats in the local social system are based on three assumptions:

- Western Buryats are not a separate group; they are simply a collection of clans of varying ethnic backgrounds (including, to a large extent, Evenky roots), living next to each other in the taiga, who over time began to use the Buryat language to communicate with each other;
- Western Buryats are simply one group among many residents of the area surrounding Lake Baikal; even if they are the largest group, multiculturalism of Siberia is still the highest value and it has to be protected, among others, by not giving a special position to any of the groups;
- Western Buryats lost their culture to a large extent; therefore if they have not preserved it, they have no right to argue for its protection or restoration now.

According to the interpretations emphasizing the importance of Buryats in the local social system, in turn,

- Western Buryats are an old ethnic group, a part of the Buryat nation,
- Western Buryats are the indigenous people, landlords of the areas of southern Siberia; these territories (extending much farther to the west, up to the Yenisei river) are the cradle of Buryats, from which they have gradually, over the centuries, migrated under pressure of the Russians and that is why now most of them live on the east side of Lake Baikal;
- Western Buryat culture survived, but pressure of the Russian state did not allow it to develop;
- Buryat culture is an important tourist attraction of the region (more than any other of the local cultures) and therefore it is worth protecting.

The vision of the “real” past is therefore a problem of power (cf. Szacka 2006). The policy which is currently being carried out depends on the adoption of a particular vision of the past. For the state and local authorities, the Russian interpretation saying that “Western Buryats” is a collective name for a variety of mixed ethnic groups is more convenient. For Buryats, in turn, it is important to prove that they are an old, distinct group, native to the areas of southern Siberia. They can prove it by presenting their traditions as being closely linked to the territory inhabited by them and by showing that these traditions are “authentic” and therefore not prepared in order to cater to the needs of the modern national ideology.

In such a social situation, it is important for Buryats to know their own culture and to be able to convincingly demonstrate that it is still alive. However, most of the available sources are in Russian and were created by Russian chroniclers, historians and ethnographers. It is becoming increasingly common, therefore, to look for contacts with Eastern Buryats, among whom traditions are preserved to a greater extent, and with Buryats from China and Mongolia, who were not under the influence of

Russian culture. Buryat historians also seek information in the sources in the Chinese and Mongolian languages and in the works of local historians, in order to find an alternative to Russian sources and scientific studies prepared in Russia.

Sometimes, however, the “authenticity” of a cultural element is consciously sacrificed for the unity of the group, which is required, as it is believed, by the socio-political conditions of the modern world. A good example are the efforts to unite the shamans (cf. Połec 2013). The number of shamans is increasing, and a few years ago they established the Association of Shamanists. In addition, many ceremonies are organized by many shamans together. In June 2010, a solemn shamanistic ritual organized by the local authorities took place in order to ensure the prosperity of the Bohan region. This ritual was performed by a hundred shamans. For local authorities and residents, this fact was a reason for pride and was read as a good sign. In the general opinion, the fact that they were able to gather so many shamans in one place would bring much happiness to the whole region. This way of thinking, however, is incompatible with the Buryat tradition. According to traditional beliefs, two shamans cannot even stay close to each other, as their inner powers will repulse them from each other. The oldest residents argued, therefore, that the rituals and ceremonies which involve a large number of shamans are a sign of their weakness. Truly strong shamans would not be able to even stand next to one another. If the inner powers of these hundred shamans did not repulse one from another, it meant that they did not have any power. Moreover, in a given area rites should be celebrated by the local shaman, i.e. the only one who has the right to contact the spirits of the place. Traditionally, shamans fought each other – the power of a local shaman and his ability to communicate with local spirits were a guarantee that a territory would be kept by for his ancestral group, an assurance that it would not be occupied by others. Thus, the rites protected the clan of a given shaman from uniting with other clans. Now, however, the situation has changed and Western Buryats’ shamans are aware that changes are in opposition to the tradition but that they are indispensable in the current situation. This opinion was expressed by the President of the Association of Shamanists: *There was no such thing as the Association before. Because Buryats lived in clans, tribes. Each tribe had its shaman. Each clan had its territory of residence. Most borders passed through the mountains, watersheds. (...) Each clan defended its territory as it could – by military force and by using shamanistic prayers. They placed their deities there and believed that the territory was protected. (...) Each clan also had its territory, pasture land, areas in the taiga, hunting grounds. (...) Today, young people and the rest, and me personally – I am different from my ancestors. The environment has changed. Buryats reside everywhere in the world: in Australia, Canada, USA, Mongolia, China. They no longer want to conquer anybody’s territory. There is the process of globalisation – people get good education, they travel to Europe. These circumstances have forced us to create this Association – just to unite our nation. We do not divide people, we unite them. The shamans of various clans and tribes... We have a regional association – of which I am a chairman. (...) We also try to form associations to unite people. To make them feel their uniqueness. We do not want them to dissolve in this big*

*world, like a man without a name, without a clan, without a tribe. Like a man who is only what is written in a passport.*

Today, a part of the shamanistic rites have exactly opposite functions than in the past. They unite Buryats by showing them the power of their culture and religion and the size and strength of their group. The image of a strong united nation corresponds with the vision of the youngest generation, which sees no inconsistency between contemporary ritual ceremonies and tradition. Rituals performed by many shamans together may be seen also as an adjustment to the tradition of other local groups, who are familiar with ceremonies celebrated collectively by many lamas or priests.

#### SUMMARY – THE “AUTHENTIC CULTURE” AS THE BASIS FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CAPITAL

In the case of Western Buryats, just as with other ethnic and national groups, the problem arises when we wish to determine what their “tradition” is like and what is happening to it – whether it is disappearing, persisting, or perhaps being reborn. Such attempts always entail a temptation to decide which elements of contemporary Buryat culture are “authentic” (i.e. dating from the distant past) and which have appeared as a result of the actions undertaken by modern Buryats and Russians. However, tradition may be understood as a set of cultural elements viewed as originating from the past or even just referring to it (although it does not matter how far back in time this past is located). Our interviewees spoke about *uligers* – songs that are recited from memory or improvised – as examples of Buryat traditions. These can be *uligers* from *Geser*, the thousand-years-old national epos (see Chagdurov 1991; Nowicka, Wyszynski 1996), as well as *uligers* about working in the collective farms, buying a tractor or winning the class struggle. During the festivals dedicated to the celebration of Buryat tradition, the “Miss Buryatia”<sup>8</sup> contests are conducted. Candidates for the title of “Miss Buryatia” must demonstrate that they possess the traditional qualities of a good Buryat girl. The girls show off their grace in the Buryat national costume, present the Buryat dances and songs, recount their pedigree and give traditional greetings speech to the guests in the Buryat language... and in English. But, both in the case of the *uligers* and of the presentation of candidates for the title of “Miss Buryatia”, the people have a sense of continuity of tradition<sup>9</sup>. The boundary between elements

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<sup>8</sup> It is a term used for the tourists. The winner does not receive a title of “Miss”, but “Dangyna” (beauty).

<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the rationalization is being offered that “Miss Buryatia” contest is not, as it might seem, an element of the global mass culture, but an element of the Buryat tradition. The organizers indicate, therefore, that the regular meetings of many Buryat clans were always a chance to find a candidate for marriage, so the Buryat girls were trying to present their beauty to potential husbands there, and the boys assessed the girls. In doing this, they were taking into account not only the dress, grace and beauty, but also the skills (such as dancing and singing) and knowledge of the Buryat traditions (for example, the exact knowledge of their own lineages and familiarity with the procedures of receiving guests in the

coming from the past and contemporary ones (i.e. between tradition and modernity) is not closed – it is penetrable. On the one hand, we are dealing with the phenomenon of “traditionalisation” (cf. Lubaś 2008), when the modern elements are transferred to “tradition”, that is ascribed to a set of elements from the past. On the other hand, there is the opposite phenomenon, when we talk about adjusting “traditional” cultural elements or behavioural frameworks to contemporary conditions. These two phenomena are accompanied by two kinds of experts: those who are specialists in the past (ethnographers, historians, as well as representatives of the elders) and those who specialize in adapting patterns from the past to contemporary needs. The scope of their activities is very wide – from preparing contemporary costumes modelled on ancient ones and tourist souvenirs referring to the Buryat traditions (e.g. a mobile phone case with traditional Buryat ornaments) to designing the national flag, composing songs referring to the Buryat tradition and organizing feasts adapted to the requirements of the present day (e.g. those emphasizing the unity of the Buryat nation).

In the face of unification arising from the policies of the state and from the processes of globalization, the search for the difference often refers to the times when this difference existed (or is believed to have existed). Therefore, tradition and collective memory are particularly important to the social position of the minority. In the conditions of contemporary Siberia, it is easier to preserve some elements of tradition and collective memory than it is to preserve the language (because, in the case of a minority group, preserving the language always entails the necessity of speaking two languages) or the traditional way of life (which may vary due to the processes of modernization and depends on the social and institutional conditions in which people currently live).

Debates regarding authenticity focus on problems of searching for identity and of the revival of culture in the face of the broken cultural transmission. It is also a problem of power expressed in the question: who can determine what is authentic and what is not? The problem of authenticity is not purely theoretical; not only anthropologists, ethnographers and historians are interested in it. This is a problem of everyday life. It determines personal health: in order to be able to get healed, one must know which shaman is a true one. It also determines the success in life and after death: one must know which rituals are authentic and what one’s ancestral spirits really want from them (to find out, a person must know his or her ancestors, speak the Buryat language and find a real shaman). The issue of authenticity reflects on the territory rights; in order to obtain the status of an indigenous group, the group’s historical presence in the given territory must be demonstrated. In this context, the interpretation which the state authorities find the most convenient is that Buryats are a collection of various peoples living west of Lake Baikal, while for Buryats it is better to emphasize that these areas are extremely important because they were shaping

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traditional manner). All of these elements are also found in modern Buryat beauty contests. Some even claim that in the past, the girl who was most beautiful and the closest to the ideal of a “good Buryat girl” would have actually been chosen during such meetings.

the Buryat culture and identity for centuries (or even, as some argue, for millennia), and Lake Baikal is sacred to the Buryats. For the local Russian authorities, it is more convenient to insist that Western Buryats have not preserved their culture. Those authorities question the authenticity of the individual identity and of the elements of traditional culture by pointing at the lack of correspondence between the ethnic identity ascribed to a person or group and their knowledge of an ethnic culture. In this way, the right to make demands in the sphere of social policy is denied – if the group does not know its culture, it has no right to protect and develop it. This constitutes a serious problem for Buryats. They realize that they have lost many of their traditions and that they have to use the ethnographic and historical literature to revive them. However, this means that the Russians and members of other nationalities have the same access to the knowledge of Buryat culture as Buryats themselves – through Russian ethnographic literature. It is possible, therefore, that non-Buryats could know traditional Buryat culture better than Buryats.

The way out of this difficult situation is to adopt not the criterion of knowledge, but that of participation as a tool for assessing the authenticity of “Buryat-ness”. The questions regarding a given person’s belonging to the Buryat community and that assessment of his or her activities are answered during shamanistic rituals. In the face of a deep Russification and close ties with the Russian society, the following questions can be put forward: Who can participate in shamanistic rituals – a person who knows Buryat tradition very well, but has no Buryat roots, or a person who is of Buryat origin, but does not know the traditions of his or her group? The criterion of origin turns out to be crucial here and is emphasised not only by the social powers, but also by the supernatural ones. Spirits of the ancestors accept only those who are of Buryat origin, and are favourably disposed only towards those who can name his or her ancestors at least seven generations back.

This leads to an other way of understanding authenticity. The authentic Buryat culture is a set of such elements that are not fully available to members of other groups. What matters is the right to participate in culture (for example, in the rites), and not knowledge about it. This way of thinking comes from the Buryat traditions. Thus, ultimately, it may be said that the ancestors decide about the survival of Western Buryats as a group – both through mechanisms of the social recognition of identity and through the exercise of supernatural care, which forces the transfer of knowledge about them. The social memory of ancestors and of clan membership is crucial to the revival of the Western Buryats’ culture, because it is seen as authentic element coming from the past and affecting the contemporary life of individuals and the group.

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THE AUTHENTICITY OF CULTURE AS A PROBLEM OF EVERYDAY LIFE.  
ACTIONS AIMED AT THE REVIVAL OF WESTERN BURYAT CULTURE

**Key words:** Authenticity, Buryats, Ethnicity, Intergenerational transmission,  
Politics of culture revival, Shamanism, Tradition

In the paper, the author addresses the issue of different ways of understanding the authenticity of the various elements of culture of Western Buryats living in Irkutsk Oblast. Social conditions in which the question of authenticity exist are determined by Western Buryats' double minority status (compared to the Russian majority and to Eastern Buryats). The problems result from the interruption of the intergenerational transmission as a result of Stalin's repressions and the process of building a unified communist society. In the policy of ethnic culture revival which Buryat activists and intelligentsia pursue problems of authenticity of tradition appear constantly. The question of authenticity is not only a problem for anthropologists, historians and social activists. First, it is a question of power: who determines how the Buryats' past looks like determines also their socio-political status in the modern world. Secondly, it is a problem of everyday life, as it determines health and success in this life and after death. However, in situations where the intergenerational transmission has been broken, there is a competition between the authorities that speak about the past – between local knowledge and the ethnographic and historical data.

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