



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Name: Justine Buck Quijada

Title: PhD Candidate

University: Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago

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Country of Research: Russia

Title of Research Proposal: The Identity of Religion: Practice, Belief and Nationality in Post-Soviet Buryatia

Topic of Research:

My research objective was to examine the way in which religious identity intersects with national identity in the Buryat Republic in order to better theorize the relationship between religion and national identity in the post-Soviet context. By mapping the field of discourse about religion in Buryatia I sought to understand what role religion plays in defining a Post-Soviet sense of self, nation and locality. After a year in the field, I feel that the relationship between nationality and religion is only one of the questions that needs to be addressed and that the role of religion in Post-Soviet Buryatia is much more complicated than merely a question of religious nationalism.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

Most current research on religion in Post-Soviet Russia focuses on the rise of New Age cults or on the nationalist rhetoric of the Russian Orthodox church. Research on post-Soviet nationalities tends to focus on the USSR's successor states, instead of on the

many national minorities still residing within Russia. Despite the role that religious nationalism has played in post-Soviet successor state conflicts (the Balkans and the Caucasus) the two literatures, on post-Soviet religious revival and post-Soviet nationalities, rarely intersect. My project contributes to the field of anthropology and post-Soviet studies in two ways. First, there are only a handful of English-language texts about Buryatia, and so my work will contribute in the most basic way to an under-researched area. Secondly, I seek to answer the questions 'what does religion and religious revival mean to a national minority in a post-Soviet context?' and 'What does it mean, in practice, for a place to be 'multi-confessional?' both of which are relevant far beyond the immediate boundaries of Buryatia.

Approach and research methodology; list of research sites

My approach attempted to combine archival research and current fieldwork to trace how religious discourse in the present developed historically from the Soviet period into the present. Archival research focused on anti-religious propaganda in the Soviet period (files relating to the Buryat chapter of the League of Militant Atheists and anti-religious newspaper articles) in order to understand what the local Soviet discourse on religion was, so that I would be able to compare it to how people were talking about religion in the present.

In terms of present ethnographic research, I quickly realized that there was no way to follow everything 'religious' happening in a city, even one the size of Ulan-Ude. Therefore I focused on particular sites that seemed to illustrate the overall discourse about religion in the city: the Itgilov phenomenon, the local organization of shamans Tengeri, and the process of collection and return of religious artifacts held in the Hogdritia Cathedral.

Itgilov was the 12th Xhombo Lama, the leader of Russian Buddhists immediately prior to the 1917 revolution. His miraculously undecayed body was exhumed in 2002, and has become an object of popular devotion and pilgrimage, and is open to the public six times a year on Buddhist holidays at the Ivoginsky datsan. I collected all the materials published by the Itgilov Institute and in the local press on the subject, interviewed the director of the Institute and members of the local Buddhist clergy, attended all the viewings of Itgilov and spoke to people both at these events and in daily life about Itgilov. Itgilov is the center of arguments about the role of the institution of the Xhombo Lama in Russian Buddhism, the position of Buryatia in relation to world Buddhism, the relationship between science and faith, and a symbolic means of healing by reconnecting to the pre-revolutionary past.

The local organization of shamans, Tengeri, is a group of shamans devoted to the revival of traditional Buryat shamanism, through the creation of an institutional form for a religion which never had one before. I attended shamanic rituals, interviewed members of the organization, and spent time in the offices observing how a shamanic organization takes form and talking to people who turn to the shamans for help with problems.

During the 1930's nearly all the houses of worship in Buryatia were closed. Religious objects, predominantly Buddhist and Orthodox, were confiscated and stored in the central Orthodox Hogdritia Cathedral, which operated as an anti-religious

museum from 1937 to 1947. In the 1990's many of these objects were returned to religious institutions, and the Cathedral was returned to the Orthodox church. I reviewed archival records of the original collections, interviewed a local scholar whose mother was the director of the anti-religious museum, reviewed newspaper articles about the campaign to return the cathedral in the 1990's and spoke to both museum professionals and members of the clergy about the practical aspects of returning objects.

These points represent a Buddhist, an Orthodox Christian and a shamanist site, one for each 'traditional' faith of Buryatia, but I have been constantly trying to look for continuities and similarities between these three sites and across religious practice in general, in order to address the question of whether or not there is an overall religious 'culture' in Ulan-Ude.

Research findings and preliminary conclusions

Please note that these findings are very preliminary. There is a great deal of research about religion in Buryatia written in Russian and published in Buryatia that is not available outside of the republic. During my stay I collected published sources, archival material and newspaper articles, which still need to be worked through.

When I first went to the field I expected to find that years of Soviet anti-religious policy had eradicated religious practice. What I found instead was that in Buryatia, a considerable portion of the population continued to practice out of habit, but did so secretly. Instead of eradicating religion, Soviet anti-religious policies disconnected religious practice from discourse about religion, and severely weakened institutional control over religious practice. Public discourse about religion was dominated by the Soviet anti-religious propaganda, which argued that all religions are versions of the same social poison, demanding economic support without providing direct benefits to believers. In the post-Soviet period, while the valence of religion shifted from negative to positive, much of the Soviet discourse about religion remained, in a re-figured form.

My preliminary findings are that there is a considerable gap between elite intellectual discourse about religion and everyday religious practices of the majority of the population. Both Russian and Buryat intellectuals posit a direct relationship between religion and national identity: Russian = Orthodox and Buryat = Buddhist. Many studies of Buddhism and Shamanism are primarily concerned with the potential of each religion to impart a sense of unified Buryat national identity. While national identity and religion are intimately intertwined, there is no simple relationship between the two.

Religious institutions, after years of Soviet persecution, are primarily engaged in attempts to rebuild the institutional forms of religious practice. The two most obvious forms of this kind of reconstruction are the actual physical reconstruction of religious structures, and attempts to enforce institutional boundaries and normative practices (for example, discouraging believers from visiting other institutions, or trying to enforce particular forms of behavior in sacred spaces). The attempt to rebuild institutional forms tends to reinforce the identification between national identity and religion. Their attempts are limited, however, by the effects of Soviet anti-religious propaganda and policies. Although religion is generally perceived positively, there is a tendency to equate all religions, to argue that 'God is one', and to consider religion to be fee-for-service and to provide immediate benefits. In all three traditional denominations, a

considerable aspect of practice involves reconnection to the pre-Soviet past. I theorize that the immediate growth of religion in the post-Soviet period can, in part, be explained by the way that religious practice allows people to address their conflicted relationship to the pre-Soviet and Soviet past in symbolic ways. The versions of the past constructed through religious practice reflect the different perspectives of Buryats and Russians, but there are so many histories that these practices do not construct two opposing stories that bring Buryats and Russians into explicit conflict. One of the tasks of the dissertation will be to trace these different histories.

Future research agendas:

My current research agenda is to process all the data collected and produce a dissertation, a task that I expect will take several years. I have no doubt that other future research agendas will develop out of that process. One idea for future research would be to write a history of shamanism in the Soviet period. Such a study would necessarily require a theoretical methodology of how to trace the history of practices which were illegal and therefore, by necessity hidden from official view.

Policy recommendations

I do not have concrete policy recommendations, but I would like to highlight two issues that I believe are crucial for the future of the Baikal region: first, relative lack of religious nationalism in Buryatia and its relationship to the administrative status of the Buryat Republic, and secondly, the question of sustainable development in the region.

At present there is almost no overt antagonism, religious or otherwise, between Russians and Buryats in Buryatia. This is due to a multitude of factors. Although the Buryat population is only around 35% of the overall population of the republic, Buryats dominate the political and cultural elite. TransBaikalia was an area of Tsarist internal exile and was heavily settled by Russians in the pre-Soviet period. The 'Russian' population is far more likely to identify themselves as Semeiskie (Old Believer Orthodox), Cossack, or a mix of exiled nationalities (especially Polish and Tartar) than as 'Russian' and the long-resident Russian population often has stronger loyalty to the area than to a sense of European Russian identity. There are very high levels of intermarriage in Buryatia stretching back several centuries, and an explicit public discourse about Buryatia as having a history of religious tolerance and syncretism. However, this discourse presents Buryatia as a safe haven within a field of dangerous Russian nationalism, and many Buryats are afraid to travel to Moscow and other parts of Russia because of the presence of 'skinheads'.

At present, the Russian government has dissolved three national okrugs (a smaller administrative category than republic) into the oblasts that surround them. Although there are no concrete plans to merge Buryatia with Chita or Irkutsk oblasts, there is a general policy to 'simplify' the administrative structures of Siberia by merging smaller administrative units into larger oblasts. The lack of concrete official plans to dissolve the Buryat Republic heightens local anxiety about this possibility. The most popular argument is that merging with Irkutsk oblast will enhance economic development, but that Buryats will lose the ability to protect their national traditions

afforded by national republic status. If asked to choose, most Buryats would choose to protect their national boundary and traditions over economic reform. However, there is no obvious reason why unification will improve the economic situation (in fact, the city of Ulan-Ude, which will lose its status as a capital, is more likely suffer economically) nor an obvious reason why the republic's boundaries will protect Buryat national culture (which was suppressed quite effectively within the republic during the Soviet period). Economic reform in Buryatia is desperately needed. The area has considerable economic potential as an agricultural producer, a tourist area and as a gateway for goods traveling from China to Russia, which was the area's traditional source of wealth in the pre-Soviet period. The Buryat population is highly educated, and any reforms or development will not be possible without their participation. Any reforms which make the Buryats feel vulnerable, such as dissolving the Republic, risk alienating the Buryat population. Whether the situation in Buryatia is similar to that of other national republics deserves further study, but I suspect that the current policy of dissolving national administrative areas, instead of encouraging integration, will be generally perceived as threatening to national minorities. The questionable benefits of administrative simplicity do not seem to me to be worth the potential risk of alienating national minorities.

As mentioned above, economic reform in the Baikal area is desperately needed, and due to the fragile ecosystem of Siberia and Lake Baikal, the largest source of fresh water in the world, and the status of Buryatia as a national republic, any economic development must be ecologically and culturally sustainable. While 'sustainable development' is a much-used catchword there is no clear definition of what exactly sustainable development would mean. Soviet traditions of central planning and complete disregard of environmental and cultural consequences of development mean that there is little local experience to draw on. Religious involvement in ecological conservation programs would, I believe, be a good way to change local environmental ethics, but at present there is, as far as I am aware, absolutely no dialogue between anyone on this question. Although this was not at all the focus of my research, the gap between international interest in the ecological status of Baikal and the local use of international funding is glaring and deserves a great deal of further research.