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THE BURYAT CASE AND BEYOND: AN INTRODUCTION

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The presented volume comprises a follow-up endeavor to the conference “Facing the Challenge of Identification: New Approaches to Buryat Identities and Their Cross-Border Dynamics” that took place at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales,” University of Warsaw, in June 2016. The conference was a joint venture of a few institutions and a number of people. Firstly, it resulted from two projects that were ongoing at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” at that time: the international PhD Program “Searching for Identity: Global Challenges, Local Traditions,” headed by Jan Kieniewicz, and the so-called East European School in the Humanities – a long-lasting program directed by Robert Sucharski, intended to foster cooperation between many academic institutions across Central and Eastern Europe. Secondly, the conference was instigated by a group of scholars from the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, University of

Cambridge, including its head, Caroline Humphrey. Finally, it was also organized by Ivan Peshkov from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, who was behind the idea of the conference and, along with Jan Kieniewicz, Sayana Namsaraeva and Kamil M. Wielecki, formed the organizing committee of the event.

Even though the conference was a successful event, this volume aims at being something more than merely documentation of the conference proceedings. Granted, it consists of papers by some of the conference participants but we also invited other scholars who wished to contribute to the discussion of dynamically changing identities among Buryats and other nations of Eastern Siberia and Inner Asia. As a result, the volume includes a wide range of articles on various dimensions of identity across the region. Some of the papers present anthropological empirical research of particular groups, while other adopt a perspective of literary or ecological studies. The volume tries thus to link the diverse phenomena under investigation and different ways of research, and show them in a bigger context of historical and transnational processes. Lastly, it aims at bringing some theoretical contributions to studies of nations and peoples of broadly understood Inner Asia.

In the vein of the last remark, let us comment on the title of the volume. Combining *challenges of identification* with *investigating identities* may seem redundant. Moreover, for some time now, the very term *identity* has been subject to criticism and some scholars have even called for its abandonment (perhaps most notably Brubaker and Cooper 2000, but many others as well, e.g. Handler 1994 or Rouse 1995). Rogers Brubaker and

Fredrick Cooper's critique of the term is twofold.¹ Firstly, they point out, *identity* reifies social phenomena that are in fact social constructions. Secondly, it is used to describe diverse and only loosely connected phenomena. In other words, the second criticism questions the holistic pretensions of *identity*: a term which was intended to grasp the totality of human self-construction, in the practice of some researchers was reduced to merely one of its aspects. For instance, one's ethnic or religious identity was asserted to dominate over other aspects of one's self-perception and sense of belonging – be it gender, family, race or any other social qualities and roles of an individual. That is why Brubaker and Cooper prefer to use the notion of *identification*, since it avoids the trap of reification and refers to actual social processes. As for the notion of identity, they argue for breaking it into three different analytical clusters: identification and categorization; self-understanding and social location; and commonality, connectedness, and groupness (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 14–21).

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In our view, the term *identification* does address the aforementioned doubts to some extent. Indeed, it points more accurately to historically conditioned choices of individuals concerning their sense of community – choices that may seem to be made once for all, even though in reality they might change several times over one's lifespan. Yet, obviously enough, *identification* is still derivatively related to *identity*. More importantly, the affinity of the terms goes beyond merely linguistic one and is

¹ For the sake of concision, we follow Brian Donahoe with co-authors (Donahoe et al. 2009) in summarizing Brubaker and Cooper's argument as well as in responding to their critique of the term *identity*.

rooted in ontological assumptions: perhaps there are no identifications without identities, seeing that identification as a process is only possible in relation to more or less fixed identities. Therefore, both terms seem indispensable.

12 Answering the first objection of Brubaker and Cooper, Brian Donahoe with co-authors (Donahoe et al. 2009) contend that researching social constructions – such as nations, races or genders – does not have to, and even should not, entail endorsing essentialist understandings. If you study *nationalism*, you have to take *nation* into account. However, even if some Buryats, Russians or Poles believe that their nations truly exist, you do not have to share their ontologies. As for the second objection, one can notice that identity is indeed a vague and usually too-broadly-applied term and thus a researcher should specify what they mean if they use it. At the same time, however, we must not overlook the fact that different dimensions of one's self-understanding and group connectedness usually overlap and consequently it might prove impossible to analytically separate them (cf. Donahoe et al. 2009: 5–7). We can add here that perhaps from its very beginning, anthropology – the study of the human being – was holistically oriented. A discipline which studies humans within the entirety of their environment, willingly or not has to use some umbrella concepts; this makes even research practice itself prone to overgeneralizations.

The challenge, therefore, lies in coining an operational definition of *identity* and *identification*. Speaking of collective identity, Donahoe et al. propose defining it as “a representation containing – or seeming to contain – a normative appeal to

potential respondents and providing them with the means of understanding themselves, or being understood, as members of a larger category of persons or as participants in a larger assemblage.” Identification, in turn, “refers most generally to the ways in which actors respond to or engage with collective identities” (Donahoe et al. 2009: 1–2). In other words, collective identities have to do with how people are and should be related to one another. Identifications or identification processes, in turn, are the ways in which people react to (accept, reject, reproduce, redefine, etc.) those normative appeals.

We follow these definitions, as they bring into dialogue several bipolar oppositions that have been hitched to identity discussions: primordial vs constructivist, individual vs collective, psychological vs social, structural vs dynamic, etc. We think that *identity* and *identification* – terms that in practice should get operationalized in every particular case – can still legitimately describe dynamic individual and social processes in different cultural settings. Moreover, such understanding of *identity* as always linked with *identification* renders its different dimensions and instances comparable.

The aim of the presented volume is to sketch an analytical framework for comparative analysis of diverse case studies of Buryats, an ethnic group living in a region divided by the borders of three states – Russia, China and Mongolia. The proposed perspective connects issues of border studies with the question of how ethnolinguistic identity is renegotiated through multi-level cultural politics. The volume refers to a long tradition of exploring Siberia and Mongolia in a broader Inner Asian

context. Heightened interest in Inner Asia has led to research of local versions of biopolitics (Bernstein 2013), loyalty (Peshkov 2017), collaborative models of nationalism (Bulag 2010), and the difficult past of border areas (Quijada 2019). Also, we should have in mind the works that emphasize ontological pluralism in the politics of the body and the experience of public history. The link between challenges of identification and the border regime was presented in the volumes *Frontier Encounters: Knowledge and Practice at the Russian, Chinese and Mongolian Border* (Billé et al. 2012) and *Northeast Asian Borders: History, Politics and Local Societies* (Konagava and Shaglanova 2016). In this perspective, how the borders work in Inner Asia is directly related to the issues of language policy, religious diversity and different memory models.

Both theoretically and historically, borders have never been fixed categories, their conceptualizations as well as locations have varied depending on time and space. Border conceptualization constitutes an integral part of a society's identity, as it determines, to a considerable extent, processes and rituals of social integration. State versions of history are also strongly determined by processes of borders defense and legitimization.

One case in point are relationships between nomadic cultures and modern states, marked by a seeming contradiction between visions of threat from nomads created by official discourses and real practices of limiting the autonomy of nomadic or post-nomadic communities. Borderline location makes the situation even more dramatic, adding new fears connected with frontier disloyalty and the mutual influence, limited as it may

be, between its nomads and their diasporas living outside the border. This connection of the official version of history with today's politics is not accidental, since it forms a perspective of the nomads' adaptation, legitimized as it is by official versions of the past. Such a perspective not only makes nomads assume a viewpoint on their history that is not their own, but also limits the agency of nomadic communities, suggesting to them that they should take on certain responsibilities in exchange for the gift of modernity and of – invented – tradition.

The content of the volume is divided into three thematic parts. The first one, "Ethnicity and Nation-Building Processes," opens with an article by Jan Kieniewicz, who adopts a bird's-eye view and addresses the colonial and postcolonial practices of naming local peoples and territories in Central Asia. In this perspective, identification and classification exerted by dominant Others remain an effective tool for blocking the path of the region's societies toward establishing a new identity that would not be a subordinated one. Despite these obstacles, many Inner Asian peoples have managed to establish themselves as nations.

The historical context is also important for Bair Nanzatov and Marina Sodnompilova, whose papers describe the development of Buryat ethnic identity. They analyze ethnic process in a *longue durée* perspective, from the ethnogenetic myths of the early Middle Ages up to the post-Soviet period, when Buryat tribal unions get reconstructed and undergo a self-organization that is not based on the principle of territoriality but draws on common ideologems and mythologems. The authors investigate those processes in their relation to state policy and historical discourses.

The next paper of the section – by Ayur Zhanaev – is somewhat polemical to those of Nanzatov and Sodnompilova. Zhanaev argues that while Buryat genealogies may or may not constitute evidence of the general organization of society along kinship lines, they are certainly a powerful source for the creation of alternative social histories of the area. He focuses on Buryat genealogies as carriers of historical memory and of the ways of understanding the world, and, based on his fieldwork research, presents motives of creators and curators of local genealogies.

In the last paper of the section, Kamil M. Wielecki investigates the uses of the myth of Manas in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Wielecki discusses disputes over the content of *The Epic of Manas* and analyzes the institutionalization of the cult of Manas. In this context, he describes the national policies of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan's first president Askar Akaev and comments on the crucial role of native anthropology in the construction of national ideology in contemporary Kyrgyzstan.

The next part – “Buddhist Identities” – consists of two articles. In the first one, Darima Amogolonova examines interactions between Buddhism and Orthodoxy in the context of Russian imperial policies. She argues that the secular authorities faced a dilemma that consisted in the necessity to conduct Russification of the Empire's ethnic groups and simultaneously to strengthen the borders of the Empire in the East. Like other national minorities, the Buddhist population of the Russian Empire had to cope with practices of top-down institutionalization of their religious tradition (Lamaism) and of forced Christianization.

The paper by Bato Dondukov explores, in turn, more current phenomena of the 2010s. He analyzes the encounters of the Russian Buddhist authorities with new, virtual models of integration. Dondukov argues that the popularization of such Internet tools as online petitions fosters a dialogue between different Buddhist communities throughout Russia, while distancing believers from religious institutions.

The third section – “Landscape and Indigenization” – opens with an article which ties in with the previous one, in as far as its author, Zbigniew Szmyt, also touches upon religious issues in today’s Buryatia, namely the presence of shamanism. In his article about the indigenization of urban landscape in Ulan-Ude, he investigates the practices and discourses of the local politics of urban memory. His research on the post-colonial forms of urban place-making alerts us to the importance of holistic approaches towards new religious, spatial and economic activities.

The topics of landscape, indigenization and religion are continued also in the next paper, written by Darima Bajko. She argues that religious beliefs (Buddhism and shamanism), along with the attitudes to Nature that they imply, should be considered an important source of ecological ethics.

The articles of Nikolai Baikalov and Daria Burnasheva take us to the north of Siberia. Baikalov’s article discusses the BAMers (the Baikal-Amur Mainline Railway builders) and their perception of the last Soviet modernization project as a big victory over nature and meaningful transformation of Siberian landscape. This “project of the century” had to do not only with infrastructure but also had a powerful potential for cultural

formation. Burnasheva's article, in turn, focuses on practices and discourses of region-building in Sakha based on a global vision of Arctic identity. The spatial dimension has been a strong uniting factor for this multi-ethnic and multi-confessional area.

Lastly, Galina Dondukova's article discusses the famous poem *The Nomad's Star* by Bair Dugarov. She argues that the poem, in which Dugarov appeals to his contemporaries not to forget the nomadic principles of their ancestors, became a guiding light for Buryats in the critical time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. It comprised a powerful symbolic resource that urged Buryats to an ethnic revival.

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In closing, we would like to express our gratitude to all of the Authors and everyone who contributed to the publication of this volume. We would also like to thank the University of Warsaw and the University's Faculty of "Artes Liberales" for funding this work.

All in all, the volume offers a broad array of approaches to the issues of identities and social identifications among Buryats and other peoples and nations of Siberia and Central and Inner Asia. We are happy to be able to present it to the Reader.

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