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IDENTIFYING LOCAL PEOPLE: COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL PRACTICES IN CENTRAL ASIA*

ABSTRACT

The article addresses the influence on Central Asian reality exerted by naming and the practice of identifying the peoples inhabiting this area by dominant Others. I note that the identification of those human communities was always an act of aggression that led to establishing a relation between rulers and those subordinate to them. I submit that what joins various epochs in the history of the human communities of Central Asia is not imperialism but rather colonialism, and propose describing those processes by means of a systemic concept of colonialism.

Imperial practice in Central Asia was based on subordinating tribal communities and non-national states without deeper interference into their inner structures. Up until the 20th century the three great powers jockeyed above all to block one another. The change following the collapse of the USSR did not lead to the creation of regional independence. Rather, the national identities of the new states are a product of the modernization compelled by Soviet policies.

This especially concerns small communities that, always valuing their autonomy, did not strike observers-explorers as material for nations. The preponderance of the external point of view along with the influence of images arisen in the dominant surrounding (including that of science) maintain these

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local communities in a state of backwardness. Identification and classification remain an effective tool for blocking their path toward establishing a new identity.

Keywords: identity, colonialism, Central Asia, Great Game, ethnicity, nation-building processes, postcolonial theory

Locals always have problems with their identity, but particularly so when they accept their identity as place-related localness. That does not mean they lack awareness of these problems; they can give expression of that – including when they describe themselves as locals because they want to or must hide something vis-à-vis the newcomer-observer (Łatyszonek 1998). This happens independently of the distance dividing the observer from the observed. Newcomers, explorers and conquerors, colonizers and researchers, regardless of their intentions, have always had their ideas about locals. They observe and enquire, then form opinions which become embedded in the consciousness of people somewhere far away, people who will never meet these locals. It is then us, not those devoting direct attention to locals, who enshrine beliefs which compose our binding view of the world. By strength of domination, this view becomes universal, and circles back to the locals through the media and education. And the locals thereby forever remain, for example, Indians. Such is the case with the inhabitants of Central Asia, as they build their identity following models developed far away from them (Abashin 2015).

Let us pause over the term “Central Asia.” This is required by the dualistic optics of the debate over the identity of Buryatia

as conducted in Warsaw. I am convinced that this name fulfills a crucial role in positioning people in the postcolonial and at the same time postcommunist sphere (Łukawski 1996). Central Asia is a modern European concept that anchors a view of people living somewhere at a great distance. After all, the indeterminate geographical scope of Central Asia results from the premises accepted by the namers without the agreement of the named. At the same time, it is assumed that this is the neutral name and that its meaning is bestowed on it by its inhabitants and is only adopted by the outsiders after the inhabitants accept it. Science and politics consolidate this belief. An impression is made of things having always been this way.

What is more important, this belief is not at variance with our knowledge about the long history of these lands. Sogdiana, Bactria, or Gandhara were once the centers of the world and not the borderland between the Maurya and Achaemenid Empires. The steppe has always been the abode of people undertaking endless migration and expansion. Here the empires of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane emerged, here began the expansion that created the Mughal Empire – and it was in confrontation with the Steppe that imperial China and tsarist Russia developed (Khodarkovsky 2002; Gorshenina 2012). Between the Steppe, deserts and mountain ranges snaked the Silk Road, connecting all the great centers of civilization (Boulnois 1963; Hansen 2012). Between the 12th and the 15th centuries, this ecumene gave the final impulse to the first World-System (Abu-Lughod 1989). Mawarannahr, the ancient Transoxiana, created the core of this world when its peoples accepted Islam

(Barthold 1963). Throughout the centuries, migrations, conquests, the building of cities and temples, the magnificence of art and science filled the space between the Caspian Sea and the Pacific Ocean, between Siberia and the Himalayas. 13th century Europe learned about this world thanks to Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, Benedict of Poland, William of Rubruck, and later Marco Polo. However, in later history, the ongoing confrontation of the Chinese, Persian, Russian, and Turkish empires performed a work of destruction (Saray 2003; Rieber 2014). One of the consequences was the conference of the name Central Asia. In lieu of the inhabitants' ethnic or state terms, a new division of the continent from the conquerors' perspective was accepted.

In this context, Central Asia is an element of ordering the world according to the dominant people's view (Gorshenina 2014). The term is ambiguous and altogether mutable, depending on the time to which it is related, but primarily on the political orientation of the author. Therefore, we have at least three variants of Central Asia (sometimes called "Inner Asia"): the British (Indian), Russian (Soviet), and Chinese one. Perhaps we should include a fourth one – namely, Turkish? The politics of the world powers, despite the changes which have come about in the last two or three centuries, remains in the spotlight. My interest, however, runs in a different direction: I wish to examine the influence that the expansion of the world powers had on the identity of the inhabitants of this great region. I wish to pay attention to the defense of identity characteristic of colonial times and to the identity-seeking processes connected with

the postcolonial era. This quite arbitrary division will have to be verified.

Thus, Central or Inner Asia had a mutable image, depending on which imperial perspective was adopted. 19th century British governments included within Central Asia Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti, Kumaon and Garhwal, Nepal and Sikkim, Bhutan and Assam. And, of course, the Chinese and Russian Turkestan. Defending the "Pearl of the Empire," Englishmen sent their agents-explorers to the "roof of the world," in order that they paralyze the encroachments of competitors, as far as that was possible. Dubbing these efforts a "great game" effectively shrouded the essence of events, ones which have had further continuations and consequences up until today (Hopkirk 1990). Above all, those agents-explorers gave their undertakings the hue of romantic adventure, as symbolized by the names Marc Aurel Stein and Sven Hedin.

Russians eagerly took advantage of the nomenclature that allowed them to include their expansion within the European convention. With their term "Inner Asia" they embraced the territories of the conquered Khanates (Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand), but they also stretched the term to include Cashmere and Afghanistan. At the end of the 19th century, the land between the two world powers was relatively small, thinly inhabited, and without economic meaning. This was a sort of "middle land," the valleys of Alay and Hunza, Pamir, and the Tarim Basin. In the 19th century, England and Russia were unsure whether or not to include Tibet within the term. This was not a precaution resulting from a recognition of Chinese pretensions.

It was about gaining control without provoking conflict, a policy which was successful also in the 20th century (Laruelle 2008).

China has always had a different vision of its presence in relation to the world of nomads and all "non-Han" peoples (Perdue 2005). For the Qing dynasty, this part of the continent was to be not only a military buffer and a territory for fiscal exploitation, but also a region of potential colonization (Yasin 1984, 112). We can also claim that the Chinese concept of the world did not match the game conducted by the European powers. However, the expansion in the Qing era led to a clash of interests and intensified contact, primarily with regard to Russia's aspirations of expansion. Turkey was also present in this configuration; however, Turkey was itself an object of colonial domination by the European powers in the 19th century. In the 21st century, Turkey has intensively taken advantage of the Turkic identification of some of Central Asian peoples. Finally, the entire region, from the Caucasus to Manchuria, became a space of very intense orientalization in the century of European domination.

These ideas did not fundamentally change after the Chinese and Russian revolutions, nor after the British withdrawal. Only superficially did communism, nationalism, and *tiers-mondisme* (Gallié 2012) create an opportunity for the peoples of former colonies to autonomously develop. In reality, slide they did into deepening dependence. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a new situation in which to lands occupied predominantly by Turkic and Tajik communities was added Kazakhstan, geographically resting in a different sphere.

In the last quarter century, the Soviet Republics turned states – Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan – have been subsumed under the term "Central Asia." Sometimes Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and Afghanistan are also included. Other countries on the borders of China or India were not. The context of today's state of affairs is the global information which has reached even the "roof of the world"; however, an equally strong influence is wielded by the radicalization of conflicts in the directly neighboring Muslim countries and by the "war on terrorism." The world powers are still conducting their game: today, it is not only the United States, but also Iran and Israel (Menashri 1998). Universities still actively take part in this game, too.

The colonial practice in the countries of the region relied on subordinating tribal communities or states lacking a national character, without deeper interference in their inner structures. Up until the 20th century, one could say that the three world powers acted primarily to block competitors in their pushes to absorb those lands within their sphere of influence. The changes that occurred after World War II, the subsequent decolonization, and the collapse of the USSR did of course entail abandoning old stereotypes, but those changes did not lead to regional self-reliance. The proposals to grant Central Asia a key role in humanity's further fate is yet another form of domination, perhaps ultimately Chinese (Roy 2007). What is crucial for me here, however, is not the geostrategic, but the human dimension.

This does not at all mean neglecting geostrategic factors. Mountain ranges remain in place, although their ecological

reality began to undergo changes already a long time ago, as is revealed to us by the variability of the hydrographic system. In many cases, the conflict between the needs of agriculture and the interests of energy production has acquired a political character (Baker Brit 2016). Some of Central Asian states are affected by ecological disasters, and this compels dramatic decisions. Political conflicts, internal fighting, and the migrations related to them occur practically in all of these countries. And as for centuries the Silk Road favored the inhabitants of these lands, so now the consequences of the inevitable attempts to politically control them cannot be forgotten, either. For this reason, I focus my attention on Pamir, a relatively small land at the rub of the powers' interests. During the late 19th century, borders were delineated here, and over a century later they still divide a country that was exotic then, but has since become rather prosaic – or at least accessible to tourists. The identity of its inhabitants is still defined by ethnic and religious distinctions (Kraudzun 2012; Middleton 2016). At the same time, Pamir remains a part of Tajikistan, a post-Soviet state entity that builds its identity on a divergent ethnic and religious tradition (Bliss 2006).

What I wish to say about Central Asia should be situated in a broader context, not only colonial, but postcolonial as well. For it may seem that the oppression experienced by the people in this part of the world at the hands of the great political powers was incomparable with the fate of, for example, the peoples of Southern Asia that were directly subjected to colonial rule. In the 20th century, they liberated themselves from European reign,

only to become dependent from the new Asian countries. I have in mind not only the revolutions and civil wars accompanying this process. Part of the postcolonial peoples' heritage is, of course, namely the oppression experienced at the hands of the independent countries that arose in the decolonization process (Croissant and Trinn 2009). Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Cashmere, Mindanao, Sri Lanka, Timor are only some ready examples of repressive processes and genocide directed ultimately against the aspirations of various peoples to establish their own identity. This experience cannot be ignored when reflecting on Central Asia (Gunaratna 2002).

As I mentioned in the introduction, I propose to ponder the influence that is wielded by the dominant milieu on the smaller community's identity. I understand identity as the capacity of a social system to exist, but this also means the ability to be identified by Others (Mazur 1966; Kieniewicz 2005, 24). The milieu of a community is composed of different social systems, in this case primarily mediating the world powers' influence on the behavior of the dependent community. My thoughts concern the kind of practices of the dominant subject – first recognition, then naming – that can impact the identity processes of the subordinate subject, including when it is initially still trying to undertake independent behaviors but primarily when it gains the feeling of its ability to autonomously develop its own identity. These practices play an especially substantial role in the case of national communities, or communities seeking national identification – even despite anyone's opinion of the legitimacy of such ambitions. In the case discussed here, what

has the greatest meaning is the belief in the national character of communities gaining state sovereignty subsequent to the collapse of the dominant organism – the Soviet Union (Fedorenko 2012). It is also important that this happened in consequence of an automatic, shared acceptance of naming conventions. The Soviet Republics, carved out arbitrarily and in circumstances of repression towards national aspirations, became recognized as state entities and *ipso facto* as nation states (Bingöl 2004; Serra Massansalvador 2010). This gave rise to many conflicts and civil wars. In the 1990s, the people of Pamir defended their ethnic and religious distinction from the dominant Tajiks. At the same time, they sought support in both Russian and Islamic traditions. The idea of Badakhshan as an independent political subject had no greater chance of realization than in 1895, when the English together with the Russians agreed the division between the emirs of Afghanistan and Bukhara. In my opinion, it is crucial to notice in this respect how deeply entangled identity aspirations are with opinions of outside provenance (Kurzman 1999).

This problem has interested me for a long time, especially in the circumstances created by borderlands (Kieniewicz 2011a; 2013) – and in particular civilizational borderlands, ones shaped by the encounters of diverse worlds (Kieniewicz 2001; 2014; 2017). My attention was attracted by the case of Poles, a national community with a colonial or hypothetically quasi-colonial past. Lately, I presented two crucial aspects of this matter – namely, the association of identity with the processes of transformation during pivotal moments in history, and the dynamic relation