

Somewhere in Between: Social Ties on the Borderland Between Taiga and Steppe to the West of Lake Baikal

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Introduction

There are deep historical roots to the interethnic determination of identity in Siberia and Russia. We cannot ignore such influences in those regions, where even today traditional social values play an important role in the life of people.¹ In my opinion, it is not a matter of choice, although the way tradition serves as ideology in the practice of everyday life may now be stratified somewhat differently. Different values may also play determining roles in the lives of individuals. In this paper we will take descriptions and analyses of interethnic identification and use them to look at the ideas and life of the people (the steppe and taiga Buryats, as well as the Evenki in a different context) who live to the west of Lake Baikal. This area encompasses the northern part of the Ust'-Orda Buryat autonomous territory as well as the southern part of the Kachug district of the Irkutsk region (*raion*), which is where the Khuda river originates. The study is based on material collected during nine months of fieldwork among the Ekhirit-Buryats in the year 2000. As a matter of course, the research was eventually extended to include the study of the local Russian population as well.

Designations and self-designations

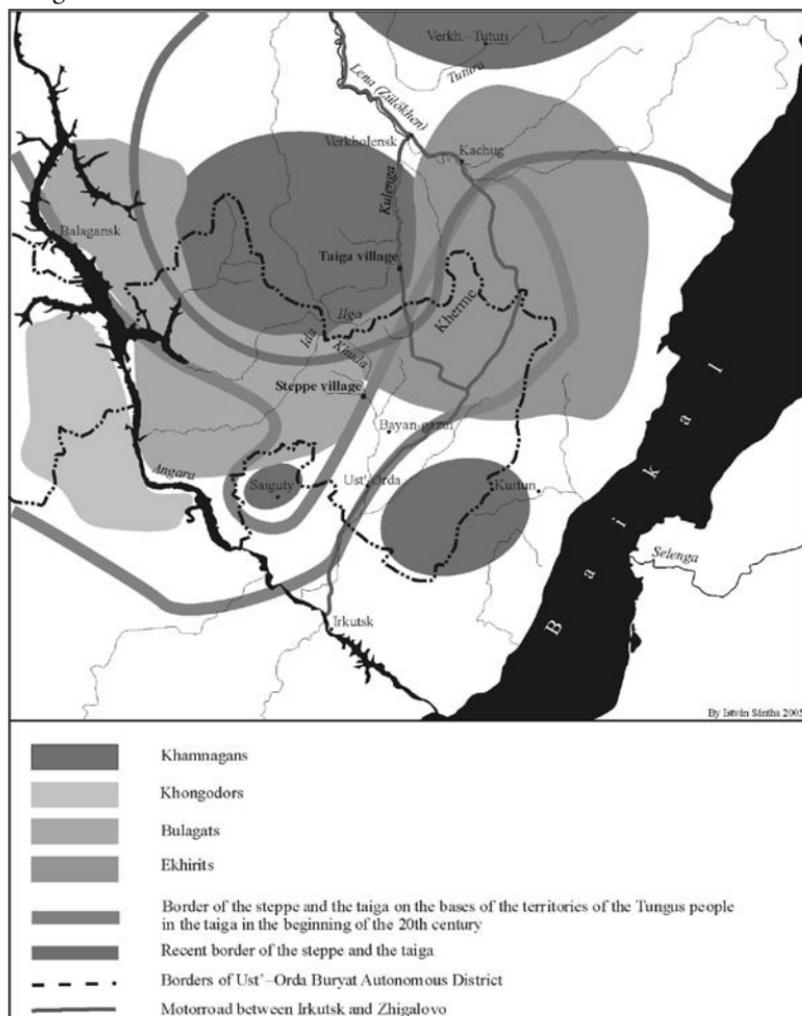
Even though the following denominations are rather simplified and general, their enumeration at the beginning of this paper may help in understanding references in the text.

Ekhirit: self-denomination of a northern and western Buryat tribe that lives adjacent to the Tungus people.

Bulagat: self-denomination of a western Buryat tribe that lives toward the south and not near the Tungus.

Tungus: In this case and context, it is the self-denomination of the Evenki groups that live to the west of Lake Baikal near the western Buryats, as used in earlier times before the coming of the Soviet system. On the other hand, it is also the more general term applied prior to the October revolution to those groups identified as Evenkis under the Soviet regime. The third meaning of this term is connected mainly to ecological zones and certain historical aspects. In some regions, Evenki groups that currently live together in every way nevertheless fall into separate denominations. These are mainly based on their place of origin, that is according

to whether they originally came from the direction of the steppe or the taiga, in some cases, it depends on whether they are by tradition horse breeders or reindeer herders. I did not find traces of this particular distinction still being made with reference to one of the subject groups of this study, the Evenki who live to the west of Lake Baikal. The distinction still exists, however, among the Tungokochen Evenkis, who live in the southern Chita region along the Karenga river, a huge tributary that flows into the upper reaches of the Vitim river. In that area, horse breeders are called Tungus and reindeer herders are called Orochons.



Orochon: On the one hand, this is the self-denomination of the Evenki groups who live to the east of Lake Baikal; on the other, the term (meaning “reindeer herder”) refers to the occupation of the reindeer herding Evenkis.

Evenki: This term used to be the self-denomination of certain Evenki groups who did not live near Lake Baikal. However, the term was also used during and after the Soviet period for those groups (and people)² who were officially called Tungus by the Russians before the October revolution. Thus, after 1917 it also became the general term for Orochons, as well as for groups that define themselves as Tungus and Evenki.

Khamnagan: A Buryat and Mongolian term referring generally to all Tungus and Evenki groups.

The framework of the approach

I kept running into a particular problem while writing a chapter on the interethnic connections of western Buryats in my Ph.D. thesis about their social organization. While my thesis focuses in general on the western Buryats, this particular chapter dealt mainly with the (local) Evenki people. I also had to be sensitive in distinguishing who I was writing about, the Ekhirits (a western Buryat tribe) or the (local) Tungus (in this case, meaning the Evenki people who live west of Lake Baikal). While in the ideological context the distinction between the two ethnic groups seems clear cut, in everyday practice the situation is more problematic. On the one hand, we dare not ignore the fact that the following descriptions about Evenkis are “only” Ekhirit interpretations that apply to my Ph.D. thesis and are aimed at helping to understand of the Ekhirit people. On the other hand, step by step through fieldwork experience, we may begin to discern a multiethnic picture in which there are no clear ethnicities, so in this sense it is not only about the Ekhirits. We can get better and more detailed results by separating systematically the Tungus and Ekhirit sources according to the ethnic background of the informants, and also according to their ecological zones. It is also essential to analyze the kind of role the local Tungus (people) play in the life of the steppe or taiga Buryat village. There are other social distinctions, aside from the way of life, in the lives of the Tungus and Ekhirit people. Nevertheless, it is crucial to know what roles the Tungus people play in the identification (and for us, in the understanding) of the Ekhirits.

In addition to outlining the historical background, in this paper I shall analyze: the ideas and practices of mixed interethnic marriages, questions of lineage and descent, the use of language, the extent and impact of nomadism, the region’s main and subsidiary economic activities, the role

of shamanism, and the extent to which the various ecological zones are traversable. Following those sections, I shall deal with certain practical or ideological considerations, such as: how someone may switch from one ethnic group to another, the roles of theft and *kalim* (bridewealth), and the lingering Soviet stereotypes of interethnic marriages. In my conclusion, I briefly sketch the current system of Buryat-Tungus-Russian interethnic relations as they relate to the western Buryats. My analysis is framed in terms of this model.

Historical background

Where historical data are concerned, the rather rich and detailed Buryat sources record that Evenkis lived along the upper Lena river at the time when Russians settled the area (Baldaev 1970, 230). Russian sources show that the Tungus quickly understood the new power relationships and accepted that the Russians were about to take their lands, yet they refused the same aspirations on the part of the Buryats. The Evenkis offered to serve as guides for the Russians when the latter made trips into the lands of the Buryats to collect fur-taxes; the Evenkis even offered to collect the fur-tax from Buryat territory themselves (Dolgikh 1960). From administrative documents and descriptions by Gmelin and other 18th century travelers, it appears that some of the chiefs and elders of the Tungus clans acted as Buryat-Mongol administrators. This can be interpreted as a holdover from the pre-Russian Mongolian regime (Gmelin II 1752, 123–30).

Russian administrative data and records from the 19th century provide information about the hay fields kept by Tungus hunters. Other sources tell us that there were nomadic Tungus who engaged in mining. In a Buryat source, we can also find a case in which a Tungus was employed as a hunter by a Buryat (Zalkind 1970, 211, 345, 362). All of this shows that aside from territorial differences there were differences in social prestige as well. In light of these facts, the book by the Bulagat-Buryat folklorist Baldaev, who in the mid-20th century actively dealt with the western Buryats' own genealogies and histories of origin, should be seen as a most basic source (Baldaev 1970). In accordance with our previous assumptions, this book provides very few data on the Bulagat-Buryats, who apparently did not live in close proximity to the Tungus; the Ekhirits, for their part, did live as neighbors of the Tungus, and there are many detailed descriptions of the Tungus (Evenkis), especially concerning their everyday practices.³ As we shall see below, the Ekhirits have retained stories not only about legends and ancestors, but also about their recent past, which includes involvement [or interaction] with the Tungus as well.

Even in the information collected by Baldaev, we can see that there was tension between the Buryats and Tungus. This is characteristic not only of the Buryats who lived to the west of Lake Baikal but also of Buryat clans (and subclans) that migrated from west to the east at the time the Russians appeared in the region. The following example may apply equally well to all Buryat groups that lived in close proximity to the Tungus: "They [the Tungus] were a numerically large group that permanently endangered the [western Buryat] Yangut clan: they robbed them, drove their cattle away and carried off their young women. The Buryats could do nothing, because they were small in numbers. It was the Buryats who moved away." (Baldaev 1970, 154) Other examples can also be found, according to which the Evenkis moved away as a result of continuous conflicts between western Buryats and Evenkis.⁴

The following examples of hostility involve differences in the groups' ways of life. Eastern Buryat herdsmen built long fences surrounding their fields to defend their large herds. And the Buryats saw the local rivers as divided into segments according to ethnicity: the upper reaches belonged to the Evenkis, the lower reaches to the Buryats. This is one of the most basic forms of western Buryat dual classification. Another Buryat source refers to a further interethnic split that divided Evenki and Buryat territories according to differences in their ways of life and economic interests: "The taiga belongs to the Evenkis, and the steppe belongs to the Buryats." (Baldaev 1961, 121; 1970, 196, 203). The century-old interethnic conflict still exists as a living tradition in the life of Buryats and Evenkis living to the west of the Lake Baikal, and it is manifested when, for example, members of these different ethnic groups meet during their military service in the Russian army.

Marriage

In recent times the most obvious manifestation of interethnic relations has been the mixed marriage. Members of three different ethnic groups live in the region under discussion. They pretty well share the same principles concerning marriage (to be detailed below). Yet the question arises as to why Evenkis generally do not marry Buryats according to steppe Buryat customs and interpretations of propriety.

When marriages take place between Buryats and Evenkis, they are not symmetrical. In practice, they tend to be controlled by the Buryats through the institution of the *kalim* (or bridewealth). Yet because of differences in social prestige between the groups, neither the value nor the amount of the bridewealth are even close to comparable in the long run. Thus, the marriage does not help to maintain a power balance or durable relations.

As the Buryats see it, a Buryat man can marry an Evenki woman only as a last possible resort. Yet, once the couple has children, no objections will be made by outsiders. The children born to such low prestige families are named after their mothers and considered to belong to the mother's lineage. In this way, cultural differences and the separation between groups are preserved.



Family of mixed Evenki (Tungus) and Russian background, Timoshinsk 2000.

photo: I. Sántha

The Buryats don't give their daughters to Evenkis. I have heard only once of a legendary marriage linking a Buryat girl and an Evenki boy (see below for the legend of *ezi-ongon*). This legend retains its occasional relevance as a motif that characterizes relations between the Buryats and Evenkis very well: the idea of a low-prestige Evenki wife suits the Buryat ideology (stereotypes of relative rank) perfectly.

The everyday practice of Evenki-Russian mixed marriages shows that a Tungus man can marry a Russian woman even in the Buryat community. Nor do the Tungus mind if their daughters marry Russians, although this latter situation is less common. In both cases, the Russian side loses prestige, but almost invariably the Russian husband is a man of relatively low prestige among other Russians to begin with. And so, Russian-Evenki intermarriages and family relations help to maintain a certain symmetry. This kind of intermarriage in the taiga does not draw down such extended kinships as when it occurs in the steppe. It may be asked, Where are the

Russians situated in such communities? In general they exist on the fringes of the community, yet when they enter into a mixed marriage, they are not as severely judged by their own kin as a Buryat is, for example, when entering a Buryat-Evenki mixed marriage. Where Russian-Buryat inter-ethnic marriages are concerned, Russians very seldom give their daughters to Buryats. Such mixed marriages do exist, but they are not considered normal.



Khamnagan woman,
steppe village 2000.
photo: I. Sántha

In the Buryat view of things, children who are born to the marriage of a Buryat man and a Russian woman inherit their mother's culture and ethnicity. This assumption may reflect stereotypes derived from the Soviet regime that emphasized the progressive role played by local women (Slezkine 1994, and see below for the ideologies of the Soviet regime concerning Siberian peoples). At the same time, the above idea is also an example that represents Soviet or Russian dominance. Certain data also allow us to consider whether the aforementioned norms mentioned apply to sexual life as well.

Interethnic relations are characterized not only by the conflicts that arise from the increasingly close coexistence of different groups, but by the possibility of interethnic adoptions as well. A number of Buryat clans originated with the adopted child of an intermarriage in the remote past between a Buryat man and an Evenki woman. Among Buryats, adopting the children of relatives or neighbors is still a widely accepted practice. Such adoptions are hardly known among the Evenkis, or at least are not common among them. From the Buryat point of view, the interethnic adoption of a child of Russian origin is acceptable, but adopting a child of Evenki origin is not.

Lineage

Among the ancestors of western Buryats living in the steppe we can often find Russians. Biological traits tend to be emphasized and are considered valuable. “Russian blood means strength,” say Buryats who can identify Russian ancestors in their lineage. (That is, the chances of the child’s survival is good, which is the most highly valued thing in situations of adoption.) And to the contrary, those who do *not* have Russian ancestors (or do not know about them) will declare that “blond, blue-eyed Buryats are the most dangerous kind.” Yet, in this judgement by Buryats, the emphasis is not on the child’s ethnicity but on the reincarnation of its descendants. Thus, even individuals with the most “clearly” Buryat ancestors generally make such statements only on the level of ideology.

The *Ekhirits* consider practically everyone to be Tungus who has Tungus ancestors, at least insofar as living relatives are concerned. The blood lines are rather short, and do not extend to the recent limits of exogamy, that is to say, not as far back as seven generations. The only contrary example is the taiga Buryat village, where the lineages are more extended. The reason for this is that a special system of Tungus cults protects the norms of the taiga Buryats (see, for example, the section below on theft). At the same time, who marries whom and the kind of ancestors they have – for example, Are they from the mother’s side or the father’s? What features do they carry with them? And what kind of relations with shamans? – still plays an important role at a certain level, that of an ethnic point of view that lies close to ideological norms and does not reflect everyday life.

The Buryats in the taiga are tied most significantly to the local Tungus through their ancestors. In most cases, these ancestors are women, because they are the ones by the means of whom values can be most readily adopted. The names of the Tungus forefathers and foremothers – like the Buryat ones as well – become Tungus names that are mentioned in prayers.

Later, the memory of who is Tungus among the “Ekhirit” ancestors fades away. The only thing that remains known for certain is that there were some Tungus among the ancestors. These norms remain prevalent in the Ekhirit viewpoint. How they prevail is the main question to be answered by my research.

The following examples are of Buryat origin. There is a Buryat shaman from the taiga who defines himself as having Tungus ancestors in his father’s lineage. He told me that he could not name any specific Tungus families living in the Buryat village in the taiga, but he said it was generally true that all families have Tungus ancestors. Tungus people generally mention only very close kin when citing their genealogies. Tungus women tend to have closer family ties, and their rights are not so strictly distinguished from the rights of Tungus men. That is, differing gender roles among the Tungus are not emphasized all that strongly. The Tungus participate at times in almost all spheres of the life of the Ekhirits. Tungus shamans are sometimes included in the lineage of Buryat ancestors, yet they can not be reincarnated as either a simple Ekhirit man or Ekhirit women. Thus, generally the principles that apply to Buryat women also function in relationship to the Tungus. The assimilation of the Tungus has succeeded totally; nowadays no one considers his or herself first and foremost to be Tungus.

Nomadism

Where the way of life is concerned, I must point out that Buryats and Tungus never lived on territories belonging to the same ecological zones. Ekhirit stories never refer to Tungus living in the steppe. (However, some stories, along with the traditions based on them and the rites connected to them, mention “Mongols,” whom the Tungus tend to identify as the ancestors of the Buryats by the Tungus. And this despite the fact that Buryats consider “Mongols” to be strangers.) This lack of territorial overlap is significant, because it contradicts the ethnic and scientific stereotype that Buryats expelled the Tungus from their original territories. This false assumption can only be understood with reference to the taiga, and only if we rely on local Buryat stories. In this case, however, it would be relevant only to Tungus groups that live in a southern strip of the taiga adjacent to the Buryats. In support of this, one sometimes hears as a generalization that Ekhirits cannot live without pasture. For me, this immediately raises the question of whether the Buryats living in the taiga have other occupations – even if only occasional ones, such as hunting – aside from breeding animals. The conflicts between these groups – while Buryats occasionally hunted on Tungus territories, Tungus used to steal from Buryats – can be

understood not merely on the basis of differences in their ways of life but as a kind of interest in, or type of communication between, neighbors.

Just as knowing how intermarriage works helps to orientate us in the region, so does understanding the details of nomadism. Evenki and Buryat nomadism are different. In addition to their summer and winter quarters, the Buryats also had autumn camps where they used to cut and gather hay. The Evenkis used to wander all the year in their part of the taiga. Tungus people along the Ilga and Kulenga rivers traditionally had their winter settlements, however these were deep within the taiga forest and not close to any Buryat villages. Later, after the Second World War, more and more Evenkis tended to settle in Buryat villages. In Buryat villages in the taiga, any local Evenki shaman who performed rites to Buryats would follow the Buryats when they moved from their winter to summer quarters, but only after earlier inhabitants of the old Tungus quarters had moved away⁵ from there.

The nomadism of the Buryats and the Tungus

The chart below summarizes the patterns followed by these two peoples. Whereas the Khamnagans primarily specialize in fur hunting, the Buryats are more involved in hunting for meat. In the Ekhirit tradition, hunting is associated with being Tungus. One hears the following kinds of statements: “The Khamnagans are allowed to hunt because they have nothing.” “The Tungus have no households.” “Buryats who breed domestic animals are forbidden to hunt, [because] wild animals are believed to be their own children.” (Thus, hunting would endanger them.) The Khamnagans have to hunt to ward off hunger, whereas the Buryats kill countless wild animals just for sport. Nowadays, with one exception, all valleys in the taiga have Buryat owners – and these are real, living owners, not spirits – who hunt. The exception is that used to be inhabited by the Tungus and is named still after them. The aboriginal right to hunt has still not yet been acknowledged by the dominant Russian society. In practice, this means that local Buryats are forced to endure the presence both of hunters who have permission from the Russians and of numerous illegal hunters. While official hunting associations occupy larger and larger territories and lease them to Russian companies (for example, recently to the Railway Technical School in Irkutsk), the local Buryat inhabitants are more and more excluded from their own territories and relegated to the margins.

With regard to their need for a local orientation, or lack of it, the Evenkis who live among the Tungus enjoy greater freedom in a foreign environment (far away from their homeland) than they do in their original places

of abode. Although in an Evenki environment they would not be discriminated, and moreover could retain their ethnic identities, they have settled down in the foreign environment of Buryat villages located close to their own ancient territories. Most of the men no longer hunt, yet the close proximity of the ancient homeland is still essential for them. Thus, when a strong need to settle arose, most of the Tungus of Khuda chose to move to the northern Ekhirit-Buryat villages close to the taiga instead of the distant but ethnic Evenki center (Verkhnie-Tuturi). Only in this way could they stay close to their ancient hunting lands and retain opportunities for everyday contact.

nomadism	Buryats	Tungus people
summer	moving towards the inner area of the steppe (to the South)	visiting the steppe (to the South)
way of life in summer	increasing intensity of the work more mobility (in space), tension, lack of time for other activities	life is slower they wander long distances
winter	moving toward the taiga (to the North)	Moving toward the inner area of the taiga (to the North)
way of life in winter	engaging in a settled way of life, making preparations for survival	increasing intensity of work, more mobility (in space), tension, lack of time for other activities
living in one place	from September until the beginning of July	only for a few weeks during the time of the worst biggest freezes (in January)

Use of languages

In an interethnic environment, habits of language use signify real and current social trends. For the Tungus, we can only discuss short term patterns and tendencies. Although education is essential, we cannot say that it is the critical determining factor in all respects. An individual's language use (or ability) is influenced by his/her personal life story. Following the Second World War and especially after the latter half of the 1950s, the Tungus began to exhibit increasingly individualistic patterns of language use. The same can be said for the Ekhirits, but whereas in their case the traditional environment did not change in essential ways, for the Tungus this period witnessed the final phase in the dismantling of their traditional society.

From the mid-20th century on, the Tungus have spoken both Russian and Buryat well, but they have preferred to establish and maintain public ties with the Russians. Nowadays most Tungus can no longer speak Buryat; they speak only Russian. Only those Buryat-Khamnagans whose fathers were Buryat now understand and speak their own Buryat language, and in most cases it is only a passive understanding rather than an active spoken fluency.

Let's look, for example, at a Tungus named Khamnaev. He lives, because of his wife's rights, in the steppe Buryat village and is separated from the birth lineage of the sons he has had with that wife. His name clearly displays his foreign origin, as interpreted locally. Andrei, the shaman of the steppe Ekhirit village, explained the name as follows: "Don't you know that the Khamnaev family name means Khamnagan [Tungus/Evenki]?" Andrei represents authority in this kind of case, and as such he is the one to interpret these incomprehensible things. Khamnaev is the only one in the village who retains a Buryat identity, yet he does not speak Buryat. According to his wife, Khamnaev's father used to be a shaman. (Citing the existence of foreign, as opposed to local, shaman ancestors is one of the most significant signs of a person's foreignness.) So the question arises: What sort of strategy does a foreigner have to adopt and follow to become accepted by the local Buryat community? Or, in other words, what does it mean for a Buryat community to accept a foreigner? The emphasis in both cases is on coming to a reconciliation in the relationship between the individual and the local society. The latter is tied to patrilinear descent and is based on consanguineous relationship, which in practice among the Western-Buryat Ekhirits means, above all, territorial kinship.

Shamanism

The shamanism of the Ekhirits is similar in many ways to that of the Tungus. It plays an important role mainly in the Buryat dual system of classification. Khangalov, the Balagan (Balagat) Buryat folklore researcher drew attention to this already back at the end of the 19th century. The enduring and distinctive feature of Tungus shamans, he said, is that they are black. This attribute refers to a further characteristic of theirs, namely that the Balagat black *utkhas* originate from the Tungus (Baldaev 1970, 58). It is also confirmed by the Buryat shamans' story of origin, according to which the first Buryat shaman, Bokholi-khara, was born as the male child of a Tungus woman who escaped from her husband and an eagle sent by the Burkhans (deities). Buryats soon forgot this legend, because the elders did not consider it worth remembering (Khangalov 1959/II, 142–3). Buryats

connect several of their *ongons*, even aside from the *ezi-ongon* (or female *ongon*) with the Tungus (Khangelov 1958/I, 347).

Even today, it is still a common assumption among the steppe Buryats that Khamnagans sacrifice deer during their rites. (This was not confirmed by the Tungus, however.) This assumption helps to maintain the view that the Tungus are “wild” (uncivilized). According to the accounts of Tungus who live among the Buryats, the local Tungus shamans did not have shaman drums. The shamans we have encountered always perform shamanic practices according to the Buryat way. They sacrifice vodka and recite their prayers in Buryat, and only occasionally in the Evenki language as well.

The explanation for why the Evenki shaman (mainly among the taiga Buryats) practices Buryat rites is as follows. Life in the taiga and the reconciliation of local Tungus spirits is assisted by a system of cults that are related to the honor of a shaman woman of Tungus origin who once was active in this region. Local Tungus shamans were allowed to take part as the leaders of the rite only on the occasion of a large-scale annual rite of subclans among the taiga Buryats. To emphasize the female principle, the steppe Ekhirits assert that among the Tungus only women may perform a sacrifice using vodka. Their curses are associated with neighbors, strangers, women and the Tungus.

Stereotypes

The view of a prevalent Tungus “wildness” of Tungus has strong links to other assumptions. When the Ekhirits speak about the blood of the Khamnagans, they mean first of all their allegedly inscrutable nature. Usually this serves as an explanation for the frequent tragedies involving the Khamnagans (Tungus). This may be largely due to the fact that the Tungus seem to get drunk quite readily, which medical science explains as owing to their lack of the alcohol-dehydrogenizing enzyme. Experience from my fieldwork shows that science has not yet offered a satisfactory explanation for this question. We may assume that this is yet another of the stereotypes that help in the classification and interpretation of everyday life in general, and thereby keep such ideologies (stereotypes) alive. When a Buryat drinks too much, others say that he is spending all his savings, “drinking everything just as the Khamnagans do.” The connection between alcohol and this ideology of “not saving anything” (as a general attitude in the economy) needs to be further elaborated. When considering the situation of Tungus in recent times, along with accounts of their low prestige (relative to the Buryats) we must take into account the poverty culture that prevails among small nations throughout Russia.



Two brothers, whose father was a steppe Buryat and mother of Tungus background from Ilga river. Steppe village 2000. photo: I. Sántha

While the value system of the taiga Ekhirits is very similar in many respects to that of the Tungus, the closer one gets to the steppe the more obvious it becomes that different behavioral patterns are at work. For example, it is highly valued among the Tungus and the taiga Buryats not to lose one's way in the taiga. In the traditions of the Buryats of the steppe, it is forbidden to disperse and to leave the road.

The Evenkis, like the Russians, do not construct long, extended genealogies. This shorter memory expresses the fact that they have no need to invoke long lines of ancestors to bolster their identity. The place of the individual among the Ekhirits on their territories is defined in the first place by the group of relatives (the subclan) to which he or she belongs. Today the individual's personal attributes have more importance for the Evenkis than his or her place in society. We can no longer speak of Tungus society, only of Tungus individuals who may be relatives.

The society of western Buryats living in the steppe is different from that of their northern neighbors, the taiga Evenkis, mainly in the sense that it is able to accept a set of foreign ideas in a way that allows its own "essence" to endure without being modified thereby. The system of Buryat beliefs is not eroded by the adoption of new ideas. It appears that there is always an openness in the Buryat way of thinking to thoughts of foreign origin. This can still be sensed when one is among them, even if the Buryats do not necessarily mention it. Evenki society, by contrast, is much more dominated by distinctly Evenki ideas and characteristics. Accepting foreign ideas is a real challenge for the Evenkis. In their everyday life, these foreign ideas

do not cause problems for the Buryats, and in their rituals they deal with foreign elements by making them into something special. Buryat culture is readily capable of surviving in the melting pot of post-Soviet peoples. The Evenkis, on the other hand, find themselves engaged in an everyday struggle to preserve their identities.

Change of ethnic identity

I now want to discuss a few practical and ideological themes that should provide greater detail for the above-mentioned patterns. The first relates to the practical question of how a Tungus becomes a Buryat? First, according to the norms of the steppe Buryat, no Tungus can ever become a Buryat. Buryats continue to regard all Tungus children of mixed marriages (among Buryat *Khamnagans*) as Tungus, regardless of whether their Tungus ancestors are part of the father's or mother's lineage. I would argue that individuals born to mixed marriages (with a Tungus parent on one side) are forced to assert identities that Buryat society never accepts automatically. The situation of women is simpler to define, because Buryat men see women as strangers regardless of whether they are of Buryat or Evenki origin. In their husband's village, even female members of Buryat society find opportunities to stigmatize and exclude wives of Tungus origin.

When excluding Tungus people, Buryats refer to the "Tungus blood" (*Khamnagan shuban*). Buryats do not allow their children to associate with children who have Tungus ancestry, which makes friendships impossible. This appears to be the most effective means of exclusion short of the near-total ban on marriage. In the case of men, exclusion is handled in a more sophisticated way, since a man from a mixed marriage has the right to take part in rituals if he has Buryat ancestors. He can nevertheless still be excluded from the everyday life of the village. The extent to which an individual contributes to the society is an important consideration. Even today, demonstrating knowledge of rituals to the Buryats is essential for the success of men from mixed Tungus and Buryat marriages. This norm is true not only to the level of exogamy. No Tungus or women can be among the ancestors. The rule is strictly applied in everyday life.

Exclusion is not quite so simple among the taiga Buryats. Ethnicity is not as central a question for them as it is for the steppe Buryats. In the taiga, it can even be an advantage to have Tungus ancestors. For example, it may lead to legal recognition that confirms an individual's identity within an environment of foreign ethnicity. (This is similar to Humphrey's theory that demonstrating the existence of shaman ancestors may serve as compensation for being a foreigner (Humphrey 1979, 249–50; 1996, 138).

The ethnic assumptions about personal characteristics are similar in the cases of both steppe and taiga Buryats.

One can be adopted into a Buryat community by having a Buryat father and Tungus mother or through a marriage between a Tungus wife and Buryat husband. The latter is not judged as negatively in the taiga environment as in the steppe. Fluency in the Buryat language is an important ability in the taiga, but it is insufficient for acceptance in the steppe. The distinction, I believe, is as follows. In the taiga, Tungus people, including males, can become members with full rights of the local taiga Buryat community (with the exception of the Buryat *tayilgan*⁶ of patrilinear clans or subclans and the Buryat “secret society”⁷). On the steppe, perhaps simply because the ecological zone itself is foreign to the Tungus, we find no such adoptions. In the taiga environment the Tungus enjoy a special prestige among the ancestors that even extends beyond the level of exogamy. Such positive features, not only of men of Tungus origin but of women as well, are preserved in the lineages that trace the local Buryat ancestors.

The parallel question must next be posed: how can Buryats become Tungus? Among the Buryats, having a Tungus ancestor is clear and sufficient evidence of Tungus identity. For the Buryats of the taiga, however, this loses its relevance after seven generations. Aside from matters of marriage and lineage, there is another significant phenomenon that must be mentioned in this regard. When a Buryat woman is brought from far away to become a wife, she is frequently stigmatized as a Tungus, and her future children will be seen as having foreignness among their most important characteristics. (A similar thing happens in the exceptional case in which a husband from a place far beyond the area of his local wife’s rights joins a patrilocal Buryat village.)

Soviet ideas, post-Soviet practice

Fourteen years after the collapse of the Soviet empire, one hears ever more frequently of Siberian women living for extended periods with Russian/Slavic men, or marrying them and bearing children with them. This raises a question that pertains to all indigenous people in Siberia: why did such affinal relations, and the characteristics gained by virtue of them, enjoy preference in the Soviet times? The results of my research indicate that these values, which were encouraged by the Soviet authorities, continue to prevail today both among the smaller nations (such as, for example, the Evenkis) and the larger indigenous peoples of Siberia (for example, the Buryats).

I believe that another result of these preferred Soviet norms is the fact that a son-in-law may be able to gain social prestige through the connec-

tion to his father-in-law. The Ekhirits, at least, claim that this is true, and western anthropological interpretations of these situations provide confirmation. (Humphrey 1983, [2002], 347–52) Nevertheless, the emphasis on the relationship between a son-in-law and father-in-law coincides with contrasting Buryat marriage norms according to which the guarantee of a good marriage is the wife's high social standing (the *kalim* is meant to compensate for any difference in social rank). Whereas a woman is expected to marry "lower," a man must have a wife of higher prestige if he is to move up the social ladder.

Finally, the *kalim* itself poses further questions about how Soviet-era ideas impacted on the Buryats. The western Buryat dual classification system finds its meaning in the asymmetrical system of wife-givers and wife-keepers. Without drawing far-reaching conclusions, we can nevertheless state that (given the different ecological zones) it was impossible in the Soviet situation to reconcile the values (qualities) of the steppe and the taiga, either over time (the preservation of values) or in the extent (quantities). There have been examples of both Buryat and Evenki non-ethnic marriages in which the *kalim* and the dowry were equal. Following the lead of Slezkine, Ssorin-Chaikov has suggested that the Soviets objected to the *kalim* before the Second World War on the grounds that it was seen as humiliating to a Soviet woman (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003, 180). Buryat and Evenki materials show that those defending the *kalim* as an institution claimed that it was not humiliating to the bride, because the *kalim* was equal to the dowry, and in this sense it could be seen as part of an exchange. On this point, one could still argue that such statements were meant simply as responses to objections to patrilineal values that were made in the framework of Soviet ideology.

Next, I want to present a few examples of how Soviet ideas interpreted the situations mentioned above. Before dealing with Soviet stereotypes relating to interethnic marriages, let us have a look at the tactical approach taken by the Russian Tsarist system in dealing with the Buryats. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Russian system had a special preference for inter-ethnic marriages. Specifically, once they were baptized (into the Eastern Orthodox religion – Baldaev 1970, 60), Buryat men could marry widowed Russian women. The children of these marriages were seen as *kharim-s*⁸ (strangers). (This is how the *kharim* used to designate this special ethnic group; Baldaev 1961, 123.) Furthermore, the baptized Buryats were not required to pay taxes for three years. In practice, this meant that Buryats who did not want to, or could not, pay taxes often chose to be baptized. Not surprisingly, after the first three years were up, some of them went back to the priests and had themselves baptized again (Mikhailov

1987, 189). The process described above served the ideology of settlement, especially since the Buryat side had to fulfill several requirements. There was an additional motivation to get baptized. The only marriages that were acknowledged were those carried out within the Eastern Orthodox Church; it did not count if a Buryat man was already married to a Buryat woman.

In contrast to the norms of the earlier tsarist system, the Soviet system established new ideas and enforced them across the Tsar's former empire, and thus among the people of Siberia as well. In what follows, I will deal with the stereotypes imposed by the Soviets to distinguish between those who were seen as enemies of the Soviet system (*kulaks*, shamans, and the male members of Siberian ethnic communities) and its friends. "In fact, to be primitive was the opposite of being a Communist, and to be nomadic was incompatible with being truly collectivized" (in Slezkine 1994, 188⁹). Siberian peoples were renamed by the new Soviet state. [Already] "in the spring of 1928 the Central Executive Committee expanded the Criminal Code of the RSFSR to include a new chapter, 'Crimes That Constitute Survivals of Tribalism.' Highest on the list were various forms of blood feud and those aspects of family organization that struck the legislators as based on inequality, particularly bridewealth and polygamy. A year later the Supreme Court recommended in a special decree that the criminality of survivals be judged from a class point of view. Both bridewealth and polygamy became a matter of *kulak* exploitation pure and simple" (in Slezkine 1994, 226¹⁰).

In the course of the movement against *kulaks*, the economic aspect was emphasized, because the confiscated fortunes of the *kulaks* (and the genuinely wealthy) provided the economic and financial bases for the first *kolkhozes* (and the state itself). "The *kulaks* were obviously responsible for most of the economic and social problems, but who was blame for the overall cultural backwardness, ignorance, and "darkness?" The answer came easily: the shamans were to blame. They were the immediately identifiable and self-confessed guardians of tradition, the intermediaries between their communities and a world that the officials considered both nonexistent and powerfully pernicious. Just as obviously, they were the northern equivalents of that old and familiar enemy – the priest (in: Slezkine 1994, 226¹¹). [While] "... native women would become the proletarians of the North, and the native shamans would become priests (Slezkine 1994, 192)." By 1930 it became clear that "the real and most authentic proletarians of the north were women. [...] The idea was first introduced by Central Asian activists, who pointed out that the main instruments of oppression in the north (bridewealth, polygamy, and segregation) were the same as those in Muslim areas" (in Slezkine 1994, 231¹²).

Thus, from the early days of Soviet society, there was no doubt about what was viewed as conservatism and who was seen as its representatives. In addition to the *kulaks* and the shamans, men and old people in general were the ones seen as underpinning the patriarchal society. Once the bad elements were named, the good ones had to be identified as well. They were women and the young. I should note that this gender-specific concept of Soviet society was never meant to pertain to old women, only to young ones and to unmarried women. The exclusion of the old was much stronger than the inclusion of women. A positive gender approach was emphasized only when old men and women were compared. Young men were judged more severely. So, while a positive image was applied to only one quarter of the society, in the case of the Siberian nations three quarters of their society was thereby stigmatized.

Whereas indigenous women were seen as playing progressive roles in Soviet society, indigenous boys remained only boys, sons of “nature” (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003, 140–54). They could not become adult men in the eyes of the Soviet (and possibly even post-Soviet, Russian) society. That is, according to Soviet (and perhaps post-Soviet, Russian ones as well) descriptions the Siberian nations seemed to be populated only by the young and the old.

Theft

Finally I want to place some norms concerning theft into a framework of interethnic identity and coexistence as determined by the differing ecological zones. When steppe Buryats talk about taiga Buryat territory, they sometimes describe it as “*khatuu gazar*” (difficult land). This means that “whatever is stolen from there will never be taken back.” Or, “it is not good to go after anything that is stolen from there.” Theoretically, this norm may seem to apply only on an individual level and within the taiga Buryat territory, but when people from taiga Buryat villages find themselves in a foreign land among strangers, they still consider it relevant. “We cannot steal,” they say. “What would others say?” This approach is then passed along to their children and grandchildren.

A good example of how this norm works involves a Tungus shaman woman who was not of local origin. She had married a Tungus living in the area, but she came from the Baikal region to that of the taiga Buryat village. Her son visited the Buryat regional center (formerly called Kharaga, today Ust'-Orda). While returning home, he was killed by steppe Buryats who wanted his horse and saddle. His mother put a curse on the murderers' clans. She foretold that they would die, and also that the son

of anyone who steals something on this land (formerly Tungus, but today steppe Buryat territory) will experience the same fate as that of the shaman woman's own son. Among the taiga Buryats, the system of cults applying to theft, which is of Tungus origin, has become part of local rituals that are now considered compulsory both for themselves and visitors. According to the local Buryat narratives, the female Tungus ancestor will protect those who present sacrifices on her behalf. As the saying goes, "a helping hand protects from tragedy those who perform a sacrifice for her, but she takes revenge on those who forget the sacrifice." The center of the cult is *Khamnagsaad yalalga*, opposite the former dwelling place called *Yomoon töödei bar'sa*.



A taiga Buryat man, facing toward a camp where local Tungus once lived, making a sacrifice to a Tungus female ancestor. Taiga village 2000. photo: I. Sántha

One is prohibited from taking photos of the hitching post of the Tungus ancestor-woman, the *Yomoon töödei bar'sa*, which I think is related to the general prohibition against taking anything away from the taiga Buryat village. According to the local Buryat interpretation, the Tungus shaman woman forbade the Buryat ancestors of this land to take anyone else's *bar'sa*, that is the earthly essence. Seen in this way, photography is a form of theft.

Theft was severely punished. The expression *khatuu-gazar* is connected to the local Tungus of the taiga Buryat village. When stealing from Kherme or Bayandai, people escaped by crossing the village. Legend has it that the trail of evidence was followed to the taiga Buryat village where they disappeared. People in the taiga Buryat village felt solidarity with the *töödei* (ancestor woman), and through her with the local Tungus people. Hence, they did not hand over the thieves (that is, the ancestors of those

who used to live on their own former territory on the taiga) to the steppe Buryats. In this case, local interethnic solidarity was stronger than the need for good intraethnic relations.

Examples can also be found of the ideology of local interethnic alliances on a cultic level. The practiced norm shows that in the narratives of the Tungus from the Ilga and Kulenga rivers, theft is a relatively common theme. The philosophy of theft in the taiga refers to a series of interactions in time and space that leads from the Buryats who do not live with direct links to the Tungus, through the Tungus-like Buryats and the Buryat-like Tungus, and finally to the Evenkis. The taiga Buryats have always been tolerant of, and willing to cooperate with, the Tungus.

Nevertheless, one should not forget that the normative system of ideas about theft is maintained by the people of the taiga Buryat village. This regional phenomenon serves mainly for their protection and is related mainly to the Kherme Buryats (who also belong to the Ekhirits) nearby. They retain a relationship to the Evenkis through their ancestors, legends and way of life. The two approaches (relating to the Evenkis and the Buryats of the taiga village) are not contradictory. I have even found that the roles of the Buryats and Tungus are interchangeable and correspond to each other, which all fits quite well with the taiga norms described above.

Conclusion

I would like to close by summarizing Buryat views on the Buryat-Evenki-Russian system of interethnic relations in the Angara-Lena region. The approach taken in my research mainly reflects the Buryat point of view, and this serves as the framework for my interethnic interpretations as well.

Among the upper social circles of the region's center, ethnic identity and origin continue to play important roles in communications with the Russian state. This means that the Buryats are always presented in a favorable light. In opposition to this, however, ethnic identity has lost much of its importance in everyday life on the individual level. The multiethnic identity of the regional center is seen as being the normal situation. There is nothing special about people with different ethnicities living together.

One's origins and ancestors play more important roles on the fringes of the steppe. There is the opportunity at the individual level of shifting identity over the course of time. On an ideological level, ethnic norms are strict and continue to function, yet their importance in everyday practice is less.

On the edges of the taiga and the steppe (the southern part of the taiga) ethnic borders fade away. There is a high level of overlap in matters

of practical life between Evenki and Buryat values and norms. Thus ideologies cannot necessarily be linked to specific different ethnic identities (although some of them are exclusive). In everyday practice, local solidarity, coexistence, understanding and the acceptance of others are the most significant values.

Notes

- 1 In this paper, I will present the original non-Latin (Cyrillic) foreign words in Latin characters and will denote them with italics. When transliterating the Russian and Buryat (Cyrillic-alphabet) texts I used the following characters:

ч : ch	ж : zh	й : in the end of syllable i; otherwise: y	ы : y
с : s	щ : shch	ь : ‘	«е» at the beginning of a word and following a vowel: ye
ш : sh	х : kh	ъ : ”	«е» not at the beginning of a word and not following a vowel: e

The Hungarian version of this paper was published in a volume dedicated to Mihály Sárkány for his 60th birthday (Sántha 2004). I would like to thank my friends Judit Acsády and László Bánszegi for helping me with English translation of this paper. The present study is based on the following periods of fieldwork among the western Buryats (1993, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000) and among various Evenki groups from the Baikal region (1995, 1999 and 2000, 2003; These were supported by Soros Foundation, OTKA-, Peregrinatio II- (ELTE), Eötvös-grants and the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. So was the section on the Evenkis in one of the chapters of my Ph.D. thesis (Sántha 2003b) that analyzes the interethnic social relations of the Western Buryats. The paper was also first presented in May 2003 at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in the Siberian Studies Center. See also in: *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Report 2002-2003*: Günther Schlee: Three Dyads Compared: Nuer/Anywaa (Ethiopia), Maasai/Kamba (Kenya), Evenki/Buryat (Siberia): 53–71; Siberian Studies Center: Introduction: 315–20, and Buryat-Evenki Interethnic Relation: 330–3, 335–7.

- 2 Along with the Evenkis, the Evens (earlier referred to as Lamuts) were also considered to be Tungus under the Soviet regime.
- 3 In terms of shamanism, the chapter about the Bulagats provides more detailed data. This may be related to the fact that (in terms of the *khatuu gazar* imagination), among the more withdrawn Ekhirits, it is considered taboo to speak about this subject; it is also possible that the Ekhirits, who lived in more isolated circumstances, had no need to preserve a great number of stories and legends about shamans.
- 4 Members of the large and powerful *irkhit* clan attacked the *Tunka* Buryats. Evenkis and Buryats belonging to the *Zangin* and *Terte* clans moved from the coast of Lake Baikal to *Zakhamnai* to gain access to new hunting territories. The local principality for the Tungus in *Armanck* was set up in 1824. (Local) Buryats and

Evenkis have never had disputes between themselves (Baldaev 1970, 165).

- 5 Right after the Second World War, five or six families (separate households) became involved in a matter concerning the theft of horses. The adult Tungus were sent to prison; some of them died there, and some were amnestied in 1953 after Stalin's death. When they got home they found the settlement abandoned; the young men had been drafted into the army and never returned to their homelands.
- 6 Classical Mongolian, meaning a community ritual involving animal sacrifice. *Tailgan*: from the word "*tailga-kh*:" "to sacrifice," which more precisely means "*tailga(n)*:" "sacrifice with animal." See also: Cheremisov 1973: *tailga-kha*, *tailga(n)* 410, *takhil*, *takhilgan*, *takhikha* 418; and Kara 1998: *takhil* 420, *takhilga*, *takhikh* 430.
- 7 Neither Tungus people (in general) nor (Buryat) women can be among the ancestors in the "Meeting of the dead people," not even the Tungus shamans formerly practiced for the local Buryats.
- 8 *Kharin* (Buryat)
- 9 *Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (former Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Oktiabr'skoi Revoliutsii)*, f. 3977, op. 1, d. 391, II: 60–9.
- 10 *Sobranie zakononii i rasporiazhenii raboche-krest'anskogo pravitel'stva RSFSR*, no. 47, st. 356, In Russian Historical sources 1928 (microfilm collection, New York Readex Microprint Corp.), box 15, part 1, pp. 608–11; S. Akopov, "*Bor'ba s bytovymi prestupleniiami*," *Revoliutsiia i Natsional'nosti* 1930(4-5): 58–63.
- 11 Iv. M. Suslov "*Shamanstvo i bor'ba s nim*." *Sovetskii Sever* 1931(3-4): 90. See also: *Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (former Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Oktiabr'skoi Revoliutsii)*, f. 3977, op. 1, d.:392, I.:105; d 394, I.:25; V.G. Bogoraz(-Tan), "*Religiia, kak tormoz sotsstroitel'stva sredi malykh narodnosti Severa*," *Sovetskii Sever* 1932 (1-2): 144.
- 12 *Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (former Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Oktiabr'skoi Revoliutsii)*, Moscow, f. 3977, op. 1, d. 391, II. 2-7, and d. 397, II. 61–5. Cf. Massel, *Surrogate Proletariat!*

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