Neotraditionalism in Contemporary Soyot and Buryat Cultures: The Okinsky District Case Study

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Abstract

The Okinsky district of the Republic of Buryatia is a distant, hard-to-reach mountainous region in the Sayans. The local inhabitants preserve their identity, traditional way of life, highland nomadic type of herding. The Soyots regained their legal status of an ethnic minority in 2000 and the status of the traditional territory of local indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Russian Far East in December 2015. The local Buryats highlight their identity by large-scale projects like erecting the stela of the Khongodors, celebration of King Gesar’s myth in the Oka basin, etc. Neotraditionalism come out as a basis for the revival of Tibetan Buddhism introduced into the Oka region in the late XIX – early XX century. New rituals and myths are created to protect sacred territories, local vulnerable nature, archeological sites in the Oka basin. The neotraditionalistic trend appears to be useful also for promoting regional projects on ecological and religious tourism.

Keywords: Neotraditionalism, Buryatia, Oka basin, Soyot, Buryat, status, culture, religion, Buddhism.

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The Republic of Buryatia is located in the south of Eastern Siberia. The distant Okinsky district (26012 sq. km) is situated in the far west of Buryatia, in the Sayans, on the border with Mongolia. The Great Sayan ranges surround the plateau in the heart of Asia, at an altitude of 1600-2100 meters above sea level. Mountain ranges comprise 23 peaks with heights of more than 3000 meter. Academician V.A. Obruchev called this region «Tibet in miniature».

Since 1927 the administrative center of the Okinsky district is the village of Orlik, some 770 km from Ulan-Ude – the capital of Buryatia. It is situated on the right bank of the river Oka (Buryat. «Akha-gol»; Soyot. «Oak khem» – «boom-river», «fast as an arrow»). In 1985-86 started the construction of the road connecting the Oka valley with the Tunkinsky District of Buryatia; nowadays it is the main transport artery to the area.

In 1991 the Okinsky Region received the status of the Far North region. This remote area is inhabited by the Buryats and the Soyots. The Soyots are descendants of the ancient Samoyedic population (who spoke some Uralic language). They underwent many cultural influences – Turkization, later Mongolization, which resulted in the repeated change of language. Russian Cossack guards came to the Oka basin after 1727 with the establishment of the border with the Qing Empire and were very small. The first Buryats (speaking a central Mongolic language) settled in the Oka basin in 1740-1750, after the outcome from the Baikal region through the Sayans into Mongolia. The Soyots now speak both Buryat and Russian languages which are taught at school. The population of the Okinsky District has increased during the last 20 years to 6000. The birth rate in the area now exceeds mortality 2.5 times. The local people have largely retained their ethnic and cultural identity. In the XXI century neotraditionalistic trends significantly intensified in their life. The author of this paper witnessed the process in July, 2016.

The Soyots were registered in the Unified List of Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation, approved by the Decree № 255 of the Government of the Russian Federation of March 24, 2000. The Soyots had disappeared from the population census of 1897, but in the 2002 census they were recorded again as a separate nation. Now there are about 3500 Soyots in Buryatia. They are an independent ethnic group, related to Tuvinians (Todzhins). The Soyot written language is based on the Cyrillic alphabet, textbooks for primary school are published.

Anthropological field research and scientific publications by Dr. Larisa R. Pavlinskaya (MAE (Kunstkamera) RAS) and Prof. Natalia L. Zhukovskaya (Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology RAS) contributed to the restoration of the Soyots’ status. As a part of an innovative project to create a natural and anthropological reserve (or to secure ethnic territory zone) Dr. Larisa R. Pavlinskaya had worked out «A program of development of the ethnic territory Oka (ethno-cultural aspect)» (1999). The program is being realized now. The Buryats married the Soyot women quite often. The patrilineal kinship system dominated, but women have retained their awareness of belonging to the Soyot ethnicity. In 1999 many of them could indicate in the documents the ethnicity of their ancestors (mother, father, etc.) as Sayan Soyot. The rise of the prestige of the Soyot nationality became obvious [Pavlinskaya, 67]. A prominent contemporary figure of Tibetan Buddhism, Lama Danzan Khaibzun Samaev (1954-2005), a Soyot himself, promoted the process. The local population is rather closed and reserved towards strangers, unpretentious to the material well-being. Identity is retained in the mountainous areas to the level of consciousness [Pavlinskaya, 55].

Since 2005, after the Vth Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East the problems of legal status, rights and lawful interests, preferences and privileges of the small communities have been consistently solved, since 2007 – the problems of protection of
original habitat, traditional ways of life, land use, access to resources, etc. In December 2015
the new status of the Okinsky District was accepted.
Difficult climatic conditions do not allow the development of agriculture. The main
occupation of the indigenous population is traditional nomadic herding (highland type) and
hunting. The Oka basin is the southernmost region in Siberia where reindeer breeding is
practiced and the most northern one where yaks are bred, as well as cows, sheep, horses,
sarlyks (Mongolian yak), khainags (a cross between Mongolian yaks and cows). Hey is a real
green gold in these high wooded mountains. Here in abundance grow herbs and wild berries.
The former nomads now live in stationary houses. The Internet, cellular network and TV are
available in their villages. Heavy rains often hamper the traffic: rivers overflow, erode roads,
cause landslides and rockfalls. In 1999, 15 km downstream from the village of Orlik, the first
bridge across the rough river Oka was constructed near the village Khara-Khujir. In the area
there is no production, but the «Khujir Enterprise Co.» since 2010 plans to develop the
Konevskoe gold ore deposit.
Rare tourists coming to the gorge to the Okinsky District learn from the new information
board that «the territory of traditional nature use of local indigenous peoples of the North,
Siberia and Far East of the Russian Federation – the Soyots – is established December 24,
2015, registered 12 January, 2016. The purpose of creation is preservation and protection of
original habitat and traditional way of life, livelihoods and crafts of this indigenous people of
Siberia and the Far East – the Soyots, preservation and development of indigenous culture,
preservation of biological diversity in the territory of traditional nature use.»
In the region miraculously united religious ideas of shamanistic beliefs, Shamanism and
Buddhism. Origins of river Oka – the watershed of the Eastern Sayan – is considered a sacred
center of the world. Since ancient times, the Buryats and the Soyots believe that all localities
(caves, mountains, streams) have their patrons (spirits, deities) that provide a quiet life and
influence the future of peaceful coexistence in the same territory. The Eastern Sayan is
considered the seat of the heavenly gods (like the Greek Olympus), the deities of the
mountains – «masters of the soil» and supporters of people. The mountain Rinchin-Khumb
(2831 m) is the most revered one by the Soyots. The mountain Munku-Sardyk (3491 m) is a
historic and sacred center of the Sayan-Baikal region, focus of ancient myths and legends,
abode of heavenly patrons of the peoples of Central Asia. In 2001 Lama D. K. Samaev
erected at the foot of the Munku-Sardyk above the river White Irkut (Sagaan erhu) a complex
of ritual structures to perform the ritual worship honoring the guardians of this sacred
territory. The rituals aim to attract public attention to the preservation of the unique nature and
culture of the inhabitants of the region. A fire is made and springs of juniper are burned. Local
worship of mountain shrines is made according the regulations recorded in the ancient book
«Solchid» preserved now in the datsan «Puntsogmandollin» in the village of Orlik.
Traditional beliefs represent a complex set of different representations of magic, superstitions
and taboos, mostly associated with the cult of the mountains and the worship of the Earth.
Mountain is considered a symbol of the center of the Universe, an intermediary between the
Heaven and the Earth. At the foot of each sacred mountain there are some remarkable trees,
and all passing by travelers should leave something as a donation.
Now official plaques with the inscription «Holy Place» mark such sites, car parking and a
seating area are provided nearby. All vehicles passing by make a stop, the driver and all
passengers bring a sacrifice to the spirits by «splashing» some milk tea or vodka, leaving
some food, money, buttons, tobacco, matches, asking local spirits for help and protection in
the way.
The Buryats introduced the Tibetan Buddhism into Baikal region in the XVII century. By 1741 Buddhism became one of the official religions in Russia. By 1917 there were 44 *datsans* and about 150 small temples in Buryatia. Next to each of them *suburghans* (stupas), wooden frames and stone mounds were built. In the early XX century the new faith was approved by the Soyots at the household level. Tibetan medicine practiced by the Lamas became popular. In the Oka region several free-standing Buddhist temples (*dugans*) and monastic complexes (*datsans*) were erected, first in wood, then – in stone. In Oka basin on the sides of the roads *suburghans* coexist with conical huts made of young fir trees as a place to which one can bind a colored cloth. Ritual conical tents are common to the taiga hunters in northern Siberia as the image of the Universe and a symbol of a World Mountain. Inside there may be found a stone with the words of prayer, cult utensils, image of a deity. Strips of silk or any other textile (*khata*) are tied to the trees in the sacred places as a symbol of respect to spirits of ancestors and good intentions. Ceremonial scarf (*khadag*) is presented as a sign of respect to any person (usually the elder, guest of honor). Blue (the color of Eternal Blue Sky) *khadag* is a symbol of longevity; white is a symbol of water, purity, kindness; yellow is a symbol of the Sun, fire; red is a symbol of metal; green is a symbol of Earth.

In recent years a new practice to make ritual *oboo* – a pile of stones as a place for prayers – entered into the Oka region.

The local Buryats established at the plain Sentsyn-Tala, not far from the village of Sayan, the Khongodor place of worship. Here the Buryats hold mass events, festivals, horse racing, etc. They are aware of their relationship with the Khongodor ethnic group who came out of Western Mongolia in the XVI century. A painted wooden statue of a male ancestor who caught a Virgin-Swan wife is erected. It is surrounded by four generic poles established in honor of four Khongodor clans and two extra poles for the visitors. A hitching post is the image of the Sacred World Axis. Next to the statue a white stone slab from Mongolia is mounted vertically on two pillars. According to beliefs of the Khongodors, anyone who touches this Power Stone enters into relationship with cosmos and receives its positive energy.

An ancient totem sign of the Soyots is a soaring eagle that represents rebirth and aspirations for the future. Wooden sculpture of an eagle is mounted on the central square of the village of Sorok.

The geological structure of the Eastern Sayan bears traces of violent tectonic activity, there are young volcanic formations (yet frozen). It gives grounds for interpreting the myth on the King Gesar, the son of a heavenly deity, approving on Earth goodness and justice in harmony with nature and cosmos. The epic of King Gesar emerged in the XVI-XVII centuries in Tibet, Mongolia, Buryatia. Thanks to an extremely archaic oral tradition the most ancient features of this Central Asian myth seem preserved in the Buryat version. In 1995, the celebration of 1000 anniversary of the «Gesar» was widely celebrated in Buryatia. It is on these grounds in Oka basin that Gesar was fighting with his opponent, the Gul Dulme Khan (Khan of a «Fiery Realm»), the personification of volcanic activity. The blackened lava flows that filled the ancient glacial valley of the river Zhom-Bolok (120 sq. km) are considered as ruins of Gal Dulme Khan’s palace molten by Gesar. In the region there are many natural objects associated with the myth: a single large rock Turaga-Shuluun («Giant stone») is «Gesar’s saddle»; a sleek 20-meter stone at the top of the sacred mountain Khan-Uula («King Mountain») is called a petrified «Gesar’s sword»; «Gesar’s stirrups» are at the mountain Zun-Ara-Hada; under the sacred peaks of Ulaan Shuluun Khairkhan («Red Stone») is a well visible red spot – «Gesar’s petrified blood stain», allegedly spilled during his battle with the Gal Dulme Khan;
in the vicinity of the Shasnur village lies a huge rock, a Tegne-Shuluun («Pack-stone») that Gesar strapped to his saddle bow as a counterweight to his trophy – the head of the mythical monster mangadkhai; in the north-western outskirts of the village of Sayan, at the foot of the Khan-Uula mountain, is a «Gesar's Arrow» – a stone laying out about 20 m long; on the right bank of the river Sentsy, in front of the settlement Shasnur lies the lake Huhe Nuur («Blue Lake»), where the enemy struck by the Gesar’s arrow fell and turned into a giant fish (taimen); by the arrow Gesar struck a huge through arch Nukhen-Dabaan («Hole-pass») in the limestone peak near the mountain Munku-Sardyk, at the confluence of rivers White Irkut and Black Irkut. The «Gesar’s Headquaters» slope is near the village of Khujir. A wooden structure in traditional style with a fireplace – «Gesar’s temple» – was built there in 1995.

In 1999, under the Federal Act, three «local religious organizations to reflect the historical past» in the area were re-registered by the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Buryatia: datsan «Tushita» in Kyren (the oldest one), Khoymorsky datsan «Bodhidharma» in Arshan, and Okinsky datsan «Puntsognamdollin» in Orlik. Together they comprise a centralized Buddhist organization «Maidar» as an independent religious association of the Republic of Buryatia intended to address challenges common to all datsans in Okinsky and Tunkinsky Districts, to represent their interests in state structures, including preparation of spiritual training and legal consolidation of all holy places subordinated to historical datsans in Sayan highlands, as well as creation of new working places for indigenous people by using religious pilgrimage routes and growing interest of people in religious tourism [Shaglakhaev]. Tibetan Buddhism is represented by the school Gelugpa.

The «Bodhidharma» datsan was founded in 1897 by Agvan Dorjiev, an outstanding Buryat religious figure, in Arshan village near the sacred place «The Throne of Genghis Khan». Now old wooden structures used by Aghvan Dorzhiev (parts of his house and a dugan) are carefully preserved in Arshan and Orlik.

Since 2004 every two years the «Dorzhiev readings» scientific conferences are held in different places of Buryatia. International scientific-practical conference «Samaev readings» was started in Orlik, where Lama D. Kh. Samaev was born.

The artist Andrei Savchenko painted thangkas representing the «Gesar Khan» scenes on the walls of the datsan «Puntsognamdolling» in Orlik. Norbu Lama V. G. Ayusheev was elected the Chairman of the Association of the Okinsky District Soyots. Not far from the datsan there is a cave where the Buddhist monks can occasionally retire and hold deep meditation sessions. In the early XX century three Mongolian-Tibetan Lamas visited the Oka valley for the first time and committed ritual consecration of the Mongolzhon area. On the slope of a mountain here the mantra «Om mani padme hum» (in Cyrillic) is laid of white stones.

Under the authority of the Okinskiy datsan are the famous Shumak springs, known for its healing power. Local amchi lamas (healers) had developed a unique method for determining the useful power of mineral springs [Sambyalova].

In modern datsans many rituals are converted. For example, instead of alcohol, milk or tea is presented to local guardian spirits. In datsans long structures for hanging ritual prayer flags and scraps of fabric are built. Every year with the change of the old year cycle these flags lose their purpose and are burnt.

The Buddhist Traditional Sangha established in 2003 in Orlik a new datsan «Lamazhabdoylin» («Temple of worship of the Great Teachers»). This local religious community stared the project «Landscaping self-manifestation of the face of the goddess Green Tara». Actually, Tara is the generic name for a set of Buddhas or female bodhisattvas in Tibetan Buddhism. White Tara is known for compassion, long life, healing and serenity;
and Green Tara is known as the Buddha of enlightened activity. For the local population they are goddesses, protectors of family and home, who grant childbirth and acquisition of a spouse.

Face of a White Tara was carved out by Aghvan Dorokhin in the late XIXth century of the rock in Harahan area, on the mountain near the village of Sayan; thus this Lama, the famous healer, sanctified the place.

In 2010 Je Khenpo Rinpoche, the personal oracle of the Supreme Lama of Bhutan, after the meditation predicted that a Green Tara will appear in Oka at a special place where mountains on both sides of the river are similar to each other. It turned out that the mountains across the river Oka are alike. Not far from the White Tara, at the mountain Khara Khoshuun a natural face of Nogoon Dara Ehe (Green Tara) was discovered. Local people did not visit this place due to the taboo in force there. In 2011 the group of Lamas held a series of prayer services in the area and stripped of the earlier ban on visits to the place of worship of Green Tara. In the small cave there now a donation case is placed where the pilgrims can put images, pictures, so called «pictures of happiness», and write their wishes in a notebook. They believe that the goddess helps them [Ivanova].

The Shamanism still exists among the Soyots. The identity of the Soyots is preserved more at the level of tribal consciousness and historical memory. The system is supported by the benefits provided to the Soyots as a community.

The Buddhist rituals are revived in the Oka valley as a tradition of honoring the local deities and the ancestors. Buddhist Lamas has done a lot to preserve the environment and to promote the region's identity. They have won respect and support of the population. Okinsky datsan «Puntsognamdolling», Federation of Sport Tourism of the Republic of Buryatia, Regional Social and Environmental NGO «Munko-Saridak» developed a «Snow Leopard Trail» project. The information board explains to the tourists the significance of this sacred territory, symbolism of the mountains Munku-Sardyk and Big Sayan. In 2015 the «Foundation for the Study, Conservation of the Snow Leopard (Irbis) and Rare Species of Mountain Fauna» was established by East-Siberian scientists, businessmen and residents of the Oka area. The image of irbis is captured on the coat-of-arms of the Okinsky District. The information on the events in the region is placed in Internet and social networks, both in Russian and in local languages.

Neotraditionalism is a contemporary means that small communities can use to preserve their special economic and cultural status. It also provides promotion of local Soyot and Buryat identity that attracts tourists to this remote part of Eastern Siberia. Neotraditionalism even influenced some Buddhist rituals and activities started by the local datsans. At the same time neotraditionalism appears to be a component of ecological thought and mythology of the peoples in the Oka basin.
References


