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Religious Diversity for the Sake of Ethnic Unity? Shamanism and Buddhism in Creating Buryat Ethnic Identity

Abstract: Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, religious revival has played an important role in the changes taking place in the lives of peoples who inhabit Siberia. Religion has been regarded as one of the most important factors shaping national consciousness and, at the same time, one of the primary means through which national identity can be expressed. Nonetheless, religious diversity can affect this process of forging national bonds. Buryats are a culturally diverse people, divided along religious lines, thus engendering problems when a religious system is implemented for the purposes of modern nation building. Some Buryats advocate for the universal adoption of Buddhism, while others advocate shamanistic beliefs. Tensions arise from the fact that shamanism is prevalent throughout the lands occupied by ethnic Buryats while Buddhism is in fact territorially limited; the latter, however, is still institutionally and territorially more significant.

Keywords: Buryats, shamanism, Buddhism, ethnic identity, religious diversity, Siberian peoples

Introduction

The relationship between religion and ethnicity is a common phenomenon that develops in response to social conflict, foreign domination, or clash of political wills. This issue has been widely researched in sociological and anthropological studies (Kłoskowska 2001; Nowicka 1972; Smith 1999; Turner 1975). Religious diversity has also been examined in the context of ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969) or cultural memory (Assmann 1995). Previous studies, however, have usually focused on the relationship between religion and ethnicity by mainly looking at a single religion and its association with a single ethnicity, while not paying sufficient attention to cases where a particular ethnicity is associated with more than one religion, which is a common phenomenon in many cultures all over the world. In Asia, for example, there are Shinto and Buddhism in Japan; Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism in China; Muism, Christianity and Buddhism in Korea; etc. The present-day situation among the Buryats is another such example, where one can speak of two religions that are both defined by them to be “ethnic”—shamanism and Buddhism. There are actually three main religious systems in the area of ethnic Buryatia:¹ Buddhism, shamanism

¹ The term “ethnic Buryatia” is generally used by modern Buryat scholars to emphasize the fact that Buryat people live not only in the Republic of Buryatia, but also in two other districts: Ust-Orda Buryat Okrug in the Irkutsk

and Christianity, though the latter is not regarded as a “Buryat” religion. All the while, Buddhism and shamanism variously coexist in different Buryat regions; such regional attitudes towards Buddhists and shamanists deserve special attention in this article. All these factors mentioned above are observable in the changes that have occurred the last few decades in Buryat culture and in the Buryats’ ethnic development.

The contemporary religious situation of the Buryats was strongly shaped by the period of Communist rule with its programmatic atheism, which was at its height during the 1930s and brought about the persecution of shamans, the Buddhist clergy and followers of every other religion. The influence of communist ideology (especially that of atheism) persisted with varying intensity throughout the period of the Soviet Union (Belyaeva 2009). However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the ideology associated with it, the most important influence on modern Buryat shamanism and Buddhism has been a “religious revival,” i.e. the process of returning to traditional customs and beliefs. This process is of course not merely a return to “pre-revolutionary” beliefs and ideas, but one of creating new structures in significantly altered social, economic, and political conditions (Balzer 2011).

Religious revival, more commonly referred to as “cultural” or “national” revival, has been an important feature of the changes happening in the lives of Siberian peoples after the fall of the Soviet Union (Nowicka, Smyrski, and Trzciński 2000). We have already discussed this theoretical framework in our earlier works (Głowacka-Grajper et al. 2013, 2016; Nowicka 2016; Połeć 2018). In the context of national revival, religion is regarded as one of the most important facets of national consciousness, and at the same time, one of the primary means through which national identity can be expressed.

This paper is based on material from fieldwork conducted in 2000, 2010, 2012, 2013, and 2014 over an area which covered the majority of the Buryat territories in the Russian Federation. This entailed the Republic of Buryatia, the two autonomous (until 2008) Buryat regions of Ust-Orda and Aginsk, as well as the neighboring territories of the Irkutsk and Chita oblasts in the Baikal region. Each fieldwork lasted over a month. We gathered two kinds of data: observations and interviews with shamans and the Buddhist clergy, as well as interviews with followers of shamanism and Buddhism, but also Buryats who do not consider themselves shamanists or Buddhists yet hold opinions about many aspects of the Buryat culture “revival.” All interviews were conducted in Russian.

In this article we intend to consider how the Buryats themselves perceive and present the development of contemporary Buryat shamanism and the Buryat version of Buddhism. We would like to note the dual role taken on by people who took part in our study. Research on Buryat belief systems was conducted not only with (by) anthropologists from distant countries (Jastrzębski 2014; Wierucka 2013), but also by Buryat scholars for whom studies of shamanism (Gomboev 2006), Buddhism, and descriptions thereof are part of their professional and religious activity (Amogolonova 2014). In many cases, the religious orientation of respondents who identified themselves as shamanists, Buddhists, or atheists did influence their vocabulary and interpretations of the same phenomena.

Oblast, located to the west of Lake Baikal, and the Aga Buryat Okrug in Zabaikalski Krai on the Russian-Mongolian-Chinese border. The term also refers to autonomous Buryat areas in Irkutsk Oblast and Zabajkalski Krai.

Regional Diversification in Preferences for Shamanism and Buddhism

In many statements given by Buryat intellectuals of all generations, religion (both shamanism and Buddhism) appears as the basis for a nation. Interviewees recall that presently Buryats can enjoy religious freedom, noting that “*the Dalai Lama recommends that people should not change their religion. He does not approve of such behavior exhibited by young Russians who want to become Buddhists. Everyone should pray in his own temple*” [Interview in 2013]. In this formulation, religion is inextricably tied to one’s ethnicity; moreover, those who fail to follow their ethnic religion could be perceived negatively.

Shamanism, understood as a local traditional belief system, could be seen as an ethnic religion if it had been recognized by all Buryats (Hamayon R. N. 1990); Buddhism, in contrast, is a religion beyond ethnicity which has been propagated among the Buryats over several centuries.² Nonetheless, Buryat Buddhism took on specific local characteristics, merging as an inseparable part of Buryat culture. In fact, within the Russian Federation, Buddhism is associated primarily with Buryats and the areas historically and contemporarily inhabited by them.

The relationship between Buryat “Lamaism” (as Buryat Buddhism is often called) and shamanism is complex, as is the relationship between the followers of the two religions. On the one hand, there is a nominal division separating the shamanist Buryats living to the west of Lake Baikal and the Buryat Buddhists who live east of the lake. Shamanism and Buddhism are widely recognized as being part of Buryat cultural heritage, but how they are perceived, or how much they are seen as contributing to Buryat heritage, tends to vary deeply. Moreover, one can observe significant heterogeneity when it comes to religious practices.

When we talk about the division of the western Buryats who are shamanists, and the eastern Buryats who are Buddhists, it is necessary to emphasize that the Buddhists do not necessarily dissociate themselves from shamanism. Even though they are Buddhists, they can still potentially resort to the help of shamans, as shamanism is a part of their traditional culture and is, above all, a key element in their traditional ancestral worship (see: Gerasi-mova 2006; Humphrey 1998; Abaev 2014). However, shamanism looks different among the western Buryats (in Irkutskaya Oblast) and different among the eastern Buryats who consider themselves and are considered to be Buddhists. In the latter case, shamanism often does not occur in isolation, but as one of the “layers” of traditional beliefs, mixing with Buddhism, contributing to Buddhism at times, or otherwise competing with it. For the western Buryats, the situation is cut and dry: they are shamanists and the eastern Buryats are Buddhists. For the eastern Buryats, the situation is more complicated. It is primarily among the latter that dilemmas and discussions surface as to which religion should be treated as the national religion of the Buryats.

Everywhere in the Republic of Buryatia and in Buryat Aga Okrug, we frequently encountered shamans in Buryat villages—in addition to *stupas*, *datsans* (Buddhist monasteries), and *lamas*. On a more local scale, we should emphasize the strong influence of

² The spread of Buddhism among Mongolic peoples (including the Buryats) is said to have passed through several stages and forms. Apart from the early introductions of Buddhism, it was adopted in the 14th century by the Yuan dynasty and then again in the 16th–17th centuries.

cults associated with specific localities: holy places could include mountains, streams, and places of ancestral worship connected to places of placenta burial—*toonto*.

The collapse of the Soviet Union not only resulted in an ideological vacuum, but also feelings of insecurity and fears about the future. Such a situation was conducive for reviving traditional beliefs (Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Humphrey 1998; Gerasimova 2006). During our earlier visits back in 2000, some participants used to mention changes in spiritual life:

*Here now, here everything has changed somehow and somehow more people have become religious—they weren't before, which is very interesting. They began to believe more, go to fortune tellers, sprinkle offerings and began to practice shamanism more frequently.*³ *My peers suddenly began to practice shamanism, which was very interesting [...] I'd never have thought that they could be shamans. It would never have occurred to me [...] In our village, we used to have only one person, one elderly man, who would practice shamanism* [Interview from 2000].

Difficult life circumstances serve as the main reason for returning to belief in a supernatural power, which is, in fact, tantamount to exploring new forms of psychological support: *we now have such a hard time, and every Buryat is turning to the spirit world; before they would never sprinkle offerings* [Interview from 2000]. This search for psychological support involves not only shamanism.

Currently, Buddhism is growing in strength, and one can even say that it is prospering (Bernstein 2013): Buddhist *datsans* are being rebuilt from the ruins, and a new generation of lamas and believers is being raised. A youth activist from Ulan-Ude comments thus on the religious revival: *In 2000, beautiful public spaces were created, a vast number of monasteries was built, there are stupas and suburgans everywhere.*⁴ *Now we expect that there will be a new wave of Buddhist philosophy* [Interview from 2013]. According to those we interviewed in all the areas of ethnic Buryatia that we researched, Buddhism works to preserve Buryat traditions and national identity. The Buryat language is also spoken every day in the *datsans*. Familiarity with the language among *dastan*-members is accompanied by learning and retaining the ability to use classic Mongol script. In the popular perception, Buddhism is growing, and the various elements of Buddhism express, or at least reinforce Buryat national identity.

A parallel discussion can be observed among Buryat scholars. Gerasimova, for example, absolutely supports Buddhism's potential in nation-building, thus demoting shamanism. She sharply criticizes those who want to make shamanism the Buryat national religion, "because shamans continue to think in terms of which ancestors they should give their offerings to and which they should not" (Gerasimova 2006: 26). Shamanism, according to her, is not suitable for purposes of nation-building due to its ancestral character, which "could not ensure an inclusive Buryat community. It could not neutralize ancestral conflicts occurring in the process of consolidating territory and politically unrelated ethnic groups" (Gerasimova 2006: 27) Gerasimova stresses that the basis for constructing foundations of this national identity lies in Buddhism.

Supporters of shamanism, however, are convinced that their belief system is the most closely tied to Buryat culture. Buryat historian Nikolai Abaev (2014), for example, assumes that the religiosity of the Sayan-Altai peoples is composed of three layers: the totemic,

³ The participant used the word *shamanit'*—"shamanize."

⁴ *Suburgan* or *subarga* is the Buryat term for a stupa.

shamanistic, and *tengrian* belief systems. Tengrianism is understood as the cult of the sky (i.e. *Tengeri*). Abaev argues that the emergence of Buddhism and the mutual influence between the various “layers of beliefs” are to serve the formation of a “tengrian-shamanistic-Buddhist syncretism.” He also emphasizes that,

[a]s the dogmas and canons of Buddhism were initially incomprehensible to the common people, lamas used many of the indigenous rituals and cults which were modified in accordance with the religion preached by them. Following the spread of some Buddhist conceptions [...] through the clergy and the laity, there began an elusive and spontaneous process of integration and syncretization of religious systems. This resulted in rethinking some pre-Buddhist shamanic cults and integrating them with Buddhist cults (Abaev 2014: 7).

Nonetheless, Abaev seems to favor shamanism as the core of Buryat culture. It is not a coincidence that on the back cover of his book there is his photo with a drum in his hands. In similar fashion, the renowned shaman Valentin Khagdaev emphasizes the relationship between shamanism and Buryatness (Khagdaev 1998). He states that shamanism developed together with Buryat culture. In another instance, a leader of a shamanic organizations says the following about the organization’s foundational aim:

We established the Shamanists’ Community Council, and I believe we will do a lot for the nation, so that we don’t lose ourselves in this vast world, so that we don’t forget our language, culture, religion, lands, deities. [...] In the past, the heads of slaves would be wrapped with bull bladder. Then as the bladder dried, the slave would forget his name, his own name. It used to be like that. Bull bladder, while drying, squeezed the slave’s head so that he forgot his name, his origin—everything. [...] So that we don’t suffer a similar fate. [...] So that we don’t lose ourselves in this vast world. [...] Indeed, we are for the nation. We defend our interests to the extent that we can [Interview from 2010].

The preceding statement draws attention not so much to the religious aspects of shamanism, but to its national, cultural ones. Thus, the shamanist organization here is not so religious as it is nationalistic. Its aim is primarily to protect Buryat culture, promoting the interests of the Buryat population within the Russian Federation.

Shamanism-Buddhism as the Core Element of Buryat Culture

Shamanism and Buddhism within Buryat culture are not accompanied by a stress on the categories of inclusion and exclusion among Buryats and non-Buryats. Religion is presented as an integral part of Buryat culture, while religious tolerance across the diverse ethnic population is emphasized. One veritable proof of religious tolerance among some of our respondents was their participation in the practices of other religions. One of our respondents, a western Buryat, said this about her relation to shamanism:

The relation is one of loyalty; here there are people of different backgrounds. For example, in case of misfortune, regardless of background, Russians also sprinkle offerings like the shamanists. As a historian, I know that shamanism is the religion of the pagans, and it is the oldest religion of the pagans. But all of it is coming back, because presently even young people have begun paying more attention. Earlier it didn’t concern them [...]. A rite is now a rite. You have to go because it’s necessary. The attitude is one of loyalty to shamanism, we have many different religions in our district and very good relations with them. We accept every religion. There is no negative attitude to anyone that... and these are all shamanists. For example, Orthodox people will visit a shaman to ask what to do in this or that situation. Shamanists in turn will go to a church and light a candle [Interview from 2010].

Statements like “religion of the pagans” are clearly echoes of earlier ideologies regarding shamanism. One should note that the person cited above is at once an “outsider” as

a historian and a person educated according to the Russian model, as well as an “insider” who belongs to the Buryat community. Her personal position is twofold in much the same way as that of the entire Buryat community, which is a part of the Russian Federation, itself composed of ethnically diverse groups. It is through this prism that one can read the “compatibility” of shamanistic and Orthodox Christian practices which appears in the last line of the quote above.

Let us further cite the opinion of a Buryat from the east (from the Republic of Buryatia) regarding the place of shamanism among the Buryats:

Shamanism has remained with them [the western Buryats]. Modern shamans are different from shamans of the past in that the latter were much more prominent, just as lamas were much more prominent than today. Shamans in the past prayed to Tengeri (the gods of the sky). Contemporary shamans pray to the spirits of ancestors. It's completely different. It's completely different when praying to the power of heaven and when praying to the spirits of ancestors. They exist on different plans. The standing of shamans was once much, much more prominent, but there are shamans still who can see the past life of a person. However, from the point of view of Buddhist philosophy, shamanism does not help resolve a basic problem, namely the problem of suffering. It only helps to offset the effects of suffering, but not their cause. Shamanism resolves certain everyday problems: for the purchase to be successful, for business to grow; Buddhism does the same, but goes a step further. Buddhism possesses a philosophy that's profound and operates on a kind of logic that's almost analytical... Shamanism doesn't have that, there is no such logic in it. Buddhism goes further because it preaches about the human spirit, the one who studies Buddhism studies himself above all since Buddhist philosophy is aimed at uncovering human consciousness and investigating the human mind [Interview from 2013].

There appear two important issues in the statement above. The first of these is the consideration that shamanism is an “inferior” religion to Buddhism. Buddhist Buryats clearly highlight the sense of superiority of their religion over shamanism. In the quote cited above, we see typical arguments for the superiority of Buddhism over shamanism which draw attention to the well-developed system of ethics in Buddhism, as well as the contrast in how the two belief systems pose and resolve problems. The second issue is the difference between the status of shamanism (but also of Buddhism) past and present. Both religions, according to our respondents, are in a state of “decline,” i.e. both shamanism and Buddhism used to wield more influence in the past, although such an assessment rather serves to argue for the superiority of Buddhism.

Even more interesting is what the same respondent subsequently mentioned concerning the role of Buddhism in the culture of the Buryats. We noted similar opinions in other interviews talking about the role of shamanism in Buryat culture as well. The respondent argued:

Buddhism has a very well developed system of ethics, which Buryats have in their blood. Every Buryat, who grew up in a traditional Buryat family knows that one shouldn't break branches, puncture stones, contaminate water; urinate, spit, throw or put any sharp objects in water; the same things are not allowed while treating fire: one shouldn't spit ... it was forbidden, we know it from the childhood... it is in our blood. Why? Because of karma ... and karma entails responsibility. Buryats have it in their blood, this responsibility is in their blood. This responsibility is not only intended for the Self, but for the next generation. If you commit a sin, it will not only affect you, but your children. And responsibility for their own children forces Buryats to behave in an appropriate way which doesn't negatively affect their karma [Interview from 2013].

Respondents from western areas also refer to respecting fire, earth, and water in shamanism, mentioning it in the same terms as the eastern Buryat respondent does regarding Buddhism: *On the subject of religion, Buryats are shamanists to the point that it's in their blood [Interview from 2010].*

The boundary here between the demands of Buddhism, shamanism, and traditional Buryat culture is fluid, difficult to demarcate if at all possible. The tenets assigned by some Buddhist respondents to Buddhism could equally be attributed to shamanism by shamans. Depending on region and circumstance, shamanism or Buddhism take on the role of being the Buryats' native religion, understood as an integral part of Buryat culture. One example is the Buryat ethno-festival *Altargana* which was held in the Mongolian settlement of Dadal in 2014 (Nowicka 2016). The festival included a competition called "A day in the life of Buryats," during which folk groups staged various rituals such as those associated with marriage, celebrating the birth of a child, or greeting guests. For this contest, a local team from Dadal presented the ritual of collective worship at a holy site, generally named *oboo* and common in the traditions of all Mongol people. The team from Dadal presented an example of *oboo* worship dedicated to Genghis Khan—their settlement, after all, is declared to be the birthplace of the Great Khan. The ritual stone cairn, a copy of that from the birthplace of Genghis Khan, was constructed in the middle of the stage. The element that was interpreted as being unusual by a large part of the audience was that the ceremony was led by a shaman. The issue is that *oboo* rituals are commonly regarded (especially by eastern Buryats) as a Buddhist ritual led by lamas, and shamans do not participate in them. Buryat researchers indeed agree that *oboo* was originally associated with shamanic cults (cf. Abaev 2014; Gomboev 2006; Gerasimova 2006), but in its present form, it is primarily a Buddhist ceremony. Members of the team preparing the staging explained to us later that in the case of the *oboo* ritual dedicated to Genghis Khan, a shaman should be given the leading role: in the days of Genghis Khan, "there was no Buddhism" and thus the *oboo* used to be shamanistic, not Buddhist. In that vein, a female shaman from Dadal explained that the ancestral spirits who visited her during her state of trance are nervous and unsatisfied when the *oboo* ceremony is led by lamas for the aforementioned reason.

Unambiguous statements for or against either Buddhism or shamanism were made only on a declarative level during interviews. Otherwise, everything observably intertwined during public events, performances, or festivities. At the culmination of the *Altargana* festival, the *Yokhor* circle dance was performed as a sign of brotherhood uniting all Buryats, though nobody mentioned the shamanist origin of the dance.

In the Aga Buryat District and the Republic of Buryatia, people define Buddhism as a Buryat religion associated with Buryat ethnicity. They emphasize the importance of reviving Buddhism, multifaceted as it is (Quijada 2012), in order to strengthen the Buryat nation. A young lama answered thus to the question whether there was a connection between Lamaism and the development of the Buryat nation: *Yes. These links always existed. Starting from Kublai Khan, who introduced Buddhism as the state religion in United Mongolia. We, the Buryats, are Mongol tribes that were once a part of the great Mongol state. Starting from the nineteenth century, we've practiced Buddhism. We've understood that it is indeed a true and noble science* [Interview from 2013]. Buddhism also has made major contributions to the creation of national symbols. Many people stress that the flags of the Republic and Aga Okrug have deep Buddhist connotations. Both flags have the same colors of blue, yellow and white, from left to right. They both make references to Buddhism and to the culture of the nomadic Buryats.

Another important issue is the conscious use of both belief systems. Many shamanistic rituals are commonly practiced by those who declare themselves to be Buddhists. People will resort to both lamas and shamans to consult on various clan-related issues, the choice of spouse and other important life matters. This merging and integration of the two belief systems in everyday life is widespread and noticeable both in the Republic of Buryatia and in Aga Okrug. Representatives of the local intelligentsia are clearly aware of it and by no means criticize such an arrangement. The attitude is in fact reinforced by both shamanism and Buddhism. It is associated closely with the attitude towards tradition:

We take care of our traditions. We respect our ancestors, we look after our culture and greatly develop it. [...] During Altargana, you could see elements of shamanism in the marching columns of the western Buryats. But I cannot say that we do not accept it. It is impossible to ignore what exists. You just have to respectfully refer to shamanism, and to what we are doing. But first of all, of course, as Buddhists, we rely on our datsans. All our doubts are consulted there. But that does not mean that we've all been influenced by religion, that is not the case... We are not religious, but we respect the traditions and all the traditions, of course, they are associated with our religion—Buddhism. We have a certain symbiosis in this way [Interview from 2012].

The acceptance of both Buddhism and shamanism is therefore understandable, on the one hand, in the context of generally weak religiosity, and on the other, as respect for a tradition in which both Buddhism and shamanism hold important places.

In this respect, a conversation with a Buryat teacher proved interesting when she was asked about shamanism in her village (from field work in 2014). She stated that she was a shaman, stressing all the while that she became one when she was encouraged by a lama who told her that shamanism was the only way to solve her health problems. Shamanism was thus somehow sanctioned by Buddhism, or at least did not contradict it.

In addition to tolerant attitudes towards shamanism, we were also met with opposing declarations which considered Buddhism as the only indigenous religion of the Buryats. An Ivolga datsan⁵ member, whom we directly asked about the potential role of shamanism in the development of the Buryat nation, stated unequivocally: *I personally think, it is my subjective opinion, that shamanism is a step backwards. Why go back to the rotten bones? You have to go forward. Buddhism is our future, our tomorrow. So what is the sense of procrastinating? Even things we've had in the morning are never to return. We are close to noontime now. Why go back? Later in the speech, the respondent did not protest against Buryat Buddhists resorting to shamanistic beliefs: "You just have to take what is positive and leave and forget the rest."* At the same time, he was not happy with the current growth of shamanism, which in his opinion was totally inadequate for meeting the needs of people today: *Shamans revert to the past all over again—someone had such an ancestor in the seventeenth century for example. No one's interested. We know that we did not fall from the moon. We have our own history, and we have to take from it what is best [Interview from 2013].*

Another issue is the attitude of lamas and Buddhist clergy towards shamanism. The Khambo Lama has clearly criticized some traditions which have their source in pre-Buddhist beliefs, which includes the renaissance of the aforementioned Buryat circle dance, *Yokhor*, and its prominence as a national dance bringing all Buryats together. Sometimes,

⁵ Ivolga datsan or *Ivalgiin Datsan* is the main residence of the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia.

the apologetics promoting Buddhism as the only acceptable national religion takes on aggressive forms. In this vein, the Khambo Lama once called western Buryats “shamanist cavemen and communists,” referring to the fact that the Buryat communist elites were mainly from western, shamanistic Buryat areas. According to this method of reasoning, eastern Buryats are civilized due to Buddhism, a world religion which has raised their level of morality. They have been brought up by the literature of India and Tibet; they are endowed with ideals and spirituality. All this, according to Buddhists, is lacking in Buryats in the west, whose shamanism is evidence of their backwardness.

Summary

In areas where shamanism has a “monopoly” on traditional religiosity, the shaman is the person to whom people resort concerning a wide range of issues secular and religious. In those areas where shamanism coexists with Buddhism, or has even been formally absorbed by Buddhism, the strength and scope of its impact is more limited or specialized. While observing the behavior of the inhabitants of all the surveyed districts of the Republic, Aga and Ust-Orda Okrug, we can more or less conclude that, at the level of daily life, both forms of religion often mix—both shamanistic and Buddhist rituals combine to create a specific local and ethnic practice. Sacred springs, holy places, spirits of this or any other place, host places, mountains, territories and Buddhist stupas with holy (often Tibetan) books—everything fuses into a non-contradictory wholeness.

The revival of Buddhism and shamanism among Buryats is taking place in an entirely new context, not only socially and culturally, but also politically and internationally. Interpersonal communication has increased in intensity and scope due to modern media, leading to a situation where no one, no political and cultural center has a monopoly on ideological propaganda.

The degree of attention Buryats give to Buddhism and shamanism against the backdrop of forging a modern national identity varies. When you talk with Buryats from the Republic, one sees differences of opinion concerning the validity of shamanism and Buddhism. Buddhism, for instance, is treated as a primary force in this process, while shamanism is less often mentioned. External observation, however, suggests that institutionalized Buddhism and shamanism (which has been in the process of being institutionalized over the last few decades) are comparably relevant.

Buddhist beliefs and practices are treated similarly or identically to shamanistic practices. Visiting a lama for advice is accompanied by the same feelings/emotions as during a visit to the shaman. The difference lies only in the fact that the source of knowledge for the lama are the holy books, while for the shaman, knowledge comes from the spirit and ancestral worlds.

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