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Siberian Circle Dances: the New and the Old *Communitas*

Abstract: The article explores the link between the circle dance and its cultural and political environment, its situational context. I analyze this phenomenon using the notion of *communitas*, created by Victor Turner, which relates to the state of a group when the unity, uniformity, and communality become more important than the internal diversity and social structure. The article is based on various material including interviews, records of observation, and visual documentation that I have gathered during fieldwork in ethnic Buryatia in 2000, 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2014, and in Yakutia in 2013. Presently in both republics circle dances often accompany ceremonies, celebrations, or cultural festivals organized by the authorities (state or local administrations, or non-governmental organizations).

Keywords: circle dance; Burytats; Yakuts; *communitas*; Siberian native nationalities

Introduction

Circle dances are danced in various parts of the world. Usually associated with rural folk culture, they appear in disparate, undoubtedly modern, contemporary societies. Circle dances often accompany ceremonies, celebrations, or cultural festivals organized by the authorities (state or local administrations, or non-governmental organizations); dance is considered part of the cultural identity. We also know of historical cases where circle dances were danced in situations of vital threat to the group.

This article explores the link between the circle dance and its cultural and political environment—its situational context, which is different in each of the selected cases. I am specifically looking for sources of the surprising similarities in the circle dances of remote areas of eastern and northern Siberia—Yakutia and Buryatia—and the social, psychological, and cultural meaning of these dances. The article is based on various material including interviews, records of observation, and visual documentation that I have gathered during fieldwork in ethnic Buryatia in 2000, 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2014, and in Yakutia in 2013.¹

I analyze this phenomenon using the notion of *communitas*, created by Victor Turner. It relates to the state of a group when the unity, uniformity, and communality become more important than the internal diversity and social structure. In such situations, according to Turner, the ‘anti-structure’ is activated. I argue that it is during circle dances that Turner’s anti-structure appears: when physical proximity, identical body movements, and sometimes common singing produce a psychological and social state that could be interpreted by the

¹ In 1999 I visited Yakutia thanks to subsidy from the Foundation on Polish Science.

concept of *communitas*. Using such a complex, indefinite—and inspiring—theoretical orientation, I attempt to interpret this type of behavioral and socio-political phenomenon as well as to show the specific situations and conditions in which circle dances appear. All the cases analyzed have common characteristics at both the behavioral and social level, and provide the psychological experience of ‘being together’ during a ritual dance. Dance as a therapeutic method has attracted a certain amount of interest in psychology and psychiatry. The present article falls within the anthropology-of-the-body field (Blacking 1977), though in considering two examples of contemporary circle dances, it leaves out many aspects of that conception. I limit my work to aspects of ritual or ritualized circle dances as a form of communal activity. Therefore, I do not discuss issues of the dances’ origin or the socio-cultural importance, referring the reader instead to the extensive literature on both the theoretical and descriptive aspects of this topic.

The *yokhor*—a Communal Dance of the Buryats

While considering the Buryat dance known as the *yokhor*—originally a western Buryat dance, which today is considered one of the most typical Buryat dances—I trace how the traditional form of the dance is ‘consumed’ in the modern society. The promotion of the dance is part of deliberate activities by Buryat elites to strengthen the national community. The ‘revival’ of the *yokhor* takes place in a contemporary economic, social, and political context; the *yokhor* strengthens the Buryat nation by being part of public events. It has become the central element of the ‘Yokhor Night’ festival, which asserts two kinds of ideology: 1) the *yokhor* unites all the Buryats, including even those whose ancestors a hundred years ago had no idea about the dance; 2) it seeks to preserve or restore lost or dying traditions, which are treated as national ones.

The *yokhor* dance has different versions, showing regional and tribal differences within the Buryat nation. Yokhor Night is a modern form of older elements in the Buryat tradition, which was persecuted during Soviet times and is currently disappearing under the influence of globalization processes. In 2008, the Buryat Song and Dance Theatre ‘Baikal’ and the authorities of the Republic of Buryatia established an annual festival called ‘Yokhor Night’; it takes place in July in Ulan-Ude, capital of the republic (see Nowicka 2012). In 2012, the fifth all-Buryat folk festival focused on the Buryats’ traditional circle dance. The festival was first held in the grounds of an ethnographic museum located in the suburbs, and was later moved to the Central Stadium of Ulan-Ude, where I observed it on 13–14 July 2012 and 13–14 July 2013 for the purposes of my research. In 2013, the event was attended by approximately 5,000 participants and spectators. The circle dance was the central element of the festival. In the past, it was danced at important moments of change for the society, and symbolically reproduced the process of revival. The circle built during the *yokhor* symbolizes the unity and welfare of the community. Along with other profound changes that have occurred in the society, the meaning and symbolism of the dance has also been subjected to essential transformations—the dance once associated with a clan community, has now been turned into a national symbol through the deliberate undertakings of Buryat intellectual elites (Nowicka 2012: 123). No one denies that the dance is of western Buryat origin

and is strongly associated with the shamanistic traditions of the area; presently it is being spread as a pan-Buryat tradition. It reproduces sequences to create a cultural canon from diverse elements which originally had limited range (see Edensor 2002). Today it is danced in the territory of the western Buryats during shamanic rites forming part of the worship of ancestors and local spirits. This is one of the elements of the more archaic shamanic traditions preserved on the western shore of Lake Baikal. The *yokhor* dance of Yord Mountain is the culmination of a festival called ‘Yord Games’ taking place to the west of Lake Baikal in the Buryat Ust-Orda Okrug. The festival has been held at irregular intervals since the year 2000 (field observations were carried out in 2000 and 2010). The meaning and importance of the dance for the Buryats was explained to me by a Buryat woman, the chief of the local administration in a Buryat village: ‘There is a great mountain called Yord where a number of people gather in a circle ... sometimes even three or four circles. If, for example, we create four tight circles and manage to join hands, it would be a symbol that ... everything will be fine. And if in some areas people cannot join, this is a minus’ (interview 2010).

Thanks to the efforts of the Buryat intellectuals, the *yokhor* takes on the supra-local sense of a nationwide dance, which is reflected in the Yokhor Night festival. Wherever Buryats live—in the Republic of Buryatia, in both Buryat Okrugs (Ust-Orda and Aga), in Mongolia and China (Inner Mongolia), or in immigration in European countries or the US—they dance the *yokhor* at important occasions and festivals as a symbol of their national unity (Nowicka 2012). They have even performed the *yokhor* on Fifth Avenue in New York City. They also dance to celebrate the most important Buryat event—the Buddhist New Year, Sagaalgan. In Ulan-Ude, despite the cold temperatures (the holiday falls consistently in the middle of winter) masses of people gather in the streets to dance the *yokhor* then.

The first academic description of the dance, made by Buryat ethnographer Matvei Khangalov (1858–1918), contains the essential features of today’s *yokhor*: “The folk dance *khatarkha* is divided into three parts: the first, when dancers form a circle holding hands, move slowly in the direction of the sun, and sing long songs. The second stage involves dancers moving closer to each other, clasping hands and shaking them up and down. The dance is accompanied by a song which at this time is more sustained and louder than in the first phase. In the third stage, the dancers stand very close together, with elbows at right angles, and all jump. They dance this way until they become exhausted” (Khangalov 2004; after Dashieva 2009: 25). Modern Buryat intellectuals are aware of the origin of the dance and its functions. It used to be danced before the hunt, but its former economic associations have been left in the past and the dance has acquired a different symbolic meaning. Today, two forms of the *yokhor* can be indicated: the first involves the collective singing and is practically devoid of instrumental accompaniment. In this form, the *yokhor* has very large local variations. The sense of rituals in the dance comes from a combination of fun, singing, and magic rituals (Dashieva, 2009: 31). Today the dance is also associated with shamanistic rites: offerings and pleadings for happiness and welfare. However, this form appears only among the western Buryats, who have kept the most archaic elements of the shamanic cults, reflecting the ancestral structure of the community (Dashieva 2009). Among western Buryats, dancing the *yokhor* is associated with the *tailgan*, a shamanic rite now revived, along with the entirety of shamanism, in areas west of Lake Baikal. The *yokhor* is danced

at the end of the *tailgan* ceremony, which brings good luck, prosperity, and fertility to the kin group. In contrast, the Yokhor Night festival is deliberately organized as a modern form of ethnic Buryat unity. During Yokhor Night, the most prominent Buryat performers from the Baikal Theatre demonstrate not only the *yokhor*, but also other kinds of dances from different regions of ethnic Buryatia. In addition to being passive recipients of the artistic performances, the participants in the festival also present their own versions of the dance. The important part of the festival is devoted to instruction in dancing the *yokhor*—the steps, hand movements, and posture at specific moments of the dance. In addition to announcing the date, a poster for Yokhor Night also advises women to come in flat-heeled shoes for the convenience of dancing. According to the online description of the festival, *yokhor* strengthens a person's vital powers; when the participants dance holding hands and moving around the circle with the sun, they are 'united by a feeling of solidarity and friendship.' There are also incentives for achieving world records: 'The organizers want to establish a world record in the size of the *yokhor* circle.'² The poster for the festival announces that 'Yokhor as a dance, a live action, a hobby, and a specific form of recreation, enters our daily lives. From the depths of centuries *yokhor* brings magical power. Once having learned the dance, one can never forget its rhythmic movement' (www.infpol.ru).

References appear to the antiquity of the dance, confirming both its magical power and its character of pure entertainment. From the stage, members of the Baikal Theatre, the most outstanding folk theatre of the Republic, show the audience how to dance, encourage the forming of three concentric circles, explain the steps, and demonstrate how to hold hands and perform movements with the arms and the whole body. They show people how to converge in a circle, raise and clasp hands while dancing, and move according to the movement of the sun. The actors also declare the words of the rhythmic songs to which the dancers are moving. The whole action takes place on the artificial grass of a stadium. The circles include professional dancers, who instruct the other dancing people and show them the appropriate steps and movements. People can learn the steps and movements once described by ethnographers. This is an example of how academic knowledge can purposefully be used to restore and de facto create a new tradition. Some of the participants know the steps, others committedly learn them. The general atmosphere is very relaxed and friendly, while the actual perfection of the steps and movements is less important than the simple willingness to learn and the fact of joining together in an effort to signify the cultural identity. At the end of the festival, the festival attendees shout triumphantly, repeatedly, with their hands raised: 'Onward Buryats!'

An interesting element of the festival program is the demonstration by various tribal and territorial groups of different steps, rhythms, melodies, and tempos. In July 2012, the *yokhors* of the Zakamna Buryats, Irkutsk Buryats, Khori and Selenge Buryats were shown, as well as those of the Shenekheen (Inner Mongolia, China), etc. All the steps of the *yokhor* are relatively easy to repeat, but the frequency, types of movements, and musical accompaniments identified with certain territorial groups may vary considerably. The quick and vigorous *yokhor* of the Ekhirits (one of the western Buryat tribes) is followed by the jumping, hopping *yokhor* of the Barguzin Buryats; the Zakamna *yokhor* is the fastest—with

² Perhaps it was the Buryat reaction to the achievement of the Yakuts, who beat the Guinness record in 2012 by gathering about 15,000 people during the *ohuokhai* circle dance.

almost running steps; and finally there is the slow, calm, phlegmatic Khori Buryat dance, accompanied by a long song. In 2012, a man and a woman dressed in the national outfit made the announcements on stage in Buryat and Russian interchangeably, and in the following year almost exclusively in Buryat. They announced the regional representatives and describe the territorial and tribal origin of the various forms of dance and the different versions of the *yokhor* steps. The participants, who themselves are from different territorial and tribal groups, engage in the various territorial and tribal versions of the dance with the same commitment and verve.

The fact that people dance all styles of the *yokhor* regardless of its territorial and tribal origin, should be understood as indicating the profound importance of dance in social life and its projection onto the sense of nationhood. This is a deliberate, controlled process and not a spontaneously occurring phenomenon, although the acceptance, understanding, and emotional involvement of a large number of Buryats in Yokhor Night prove that the intentions and actions of the Buryat national elite were well targeted. Tribal divisions, though present in everyday life, are no longer relevant and—I would argue—are no longer the most important identifying feature. Currently, a person may be an Ekhirit or Khori, but above all he or she is a Buryat. At present, it is the Buryat element that is most prominent element in the ethnic identity. It is to building such a pan-Buryat identity, with a sense of community and unity, that the actions and policies of the Buryat national elites are contributing.

In 2012, around 1,000 persons attended the festival (which usually lasts a couple of days); in 2013, there were about 5,000, since guests were attracted by famous singers invited to perform on the second day. A jubilee Yokhor Night took place in 2012 within the framework of a project entitled ‘Buryatia—the Territory of Impressions’ of the Ministry of Culture of Buryatia. Information leaflets about the festival underline its national character: ‘The festival is a living event, attracting attention mainly because of its national specificity.’ No emphasis is placed on the ancestral, tribal, local, or religious (shamanistic) characteristics of the dance. The genres and styles of the songs performed at the festival, both that of the *yokhor* and those not related directly with it, can be very diverse—and sometimes very modern. In particular, performers from Mongolia offer the most modern interpretations of Buryat folklore. An advertisement for Yokhor Night announces that ‘They performed a remix of Buryat national songs—“Хатарьши” (Khatarysh). The remix was created by the funkiest arranger, Bajarchuu, from Mongolia. (www.minkulturb.ru).’ The atmosphere at the festival is cheerful, friendly, and characterized by features I would call, after Michael Herzfeld, ‘cultural intimacy’ (Herzfeld 2014).

The *Ohuokhai*—a Sakha (Yakut) Dance

The *ohuokhai* (*osuokhai*) is a circle dance of the Yakuts people and is considered to be the oldest ritual of this ancient Turkic people, the sun worshipers of Central Asia (Petrov 2006: 8–10). After 1991, it became one of the symbols of Yakut culture and developed as the national dance of the Sakha (Yakut). It is performed mainly during the largest Yakut feast, Yhykh, which is celebrated in the last days of June at the culmination of the solar year. The feast was once connected with the cycles of the pastoral economy. Yhykh used to be the first

ceremony in a line of fertility rituals beginning in mid-May—when the meadows are becoming green—and lasting till haymaking time, the most important period in terms of the survival of the cattle. Along with its substantial economic importance—that is, promoting fertility and welfare—the original functions of the *ohuokhai* in traditional social life were to provide opportunities for dispersed groups of people to meet, to come together from scattered *alases* (glades with a lake in the taiga), to allow young people to get to know each other, to arrange marriages, and to provide opportunities for the cultural exchanges necessary for the development of every community. A.G. Lukin, the most prominent researcher of the *ohuokhai* points to three types of dances among the Sakha: ritual, imitative, and for entertainment (1998). Today, the *ohuokhai* is danced both for ritual and social events: weddings, meetings of friends, and the weekly meetings of members of the association of *ohuokhai* dancers, which was founded in Yakutsk in 1987 and is still expanding.

The *ohuokhai* is the culminating element of the Yhykh, the main festival of the Yakuts, for worshipping the sun on the longest day of the year (in June). It is celebrated in all larger and smaller administrative units, with the main Yhykh in Yakutsk lasting two days. Apart from dancing the *ohuokhai*, the festival includes other ritual performances (from field observations in 1999 in Yakutsk, in 2013 in Yakutsk, Verkhnevilyuysk, and in the village of Ust'-Maya). During the celebration, people in different places simultaneously form dancing circles, led by various 'directing singers' (Russian 'zapievala'). There are contests for directing singers, who compete in the content and form of their musical improvisations and reproduction of traditional styles. The perfection of a singing style called *toyuk*—produced by a specific voice technique—is important. The focus (Yefimov 2006) is on the links between movements, action, and fun in the *osuokhaj* and *yokhor*, which according to Buryat scholar D. S. Dugarowa (1991) are rooted in the same Cisbaikalian tradition, due to ancient contacts with Indo-European communities. In scholarly opinion, the specific manner in which the circle dances and their musical accompaniments are performed by the Buryats and Yakuts indicates a common historical background (Dugarow 1969 1991). The *ohuokhai*, like the *yokhor*, takes place in a closed circle, which moves according to the movement of the sun. The steps are very simple and involve sliding the left leg forward and pulling the right to the same level. The dancers hold hands, often with clasped fingers, and are close enough to feel their elbows touch (there is even a Yakut term that can be translated as 'feeling the elbow'). Dancing can last for a few minutes or sometimes for hours, acquiring the nature of a trance. Doing a simple dance of a very specific kind, accompanied by songs, enhances the sense of community. According to a Yakut researcher into Sakha folklore the songs associated with circle dances are 'the only elements of Yakut folklore that are not ageing but developing' (Yefimov 2006: 3). The directing singer delivers an improvised text, which is divided into small portions and repeated by all the participants of the dance. All such songs are stories about what has happened in recent days in the history of the Yakuts, but sometimes they are a wider expression of ideological or programmatic texts of a religious character. The dancers follow the rhythm with the steps.

Huge importance is attributed to the *ohuokhai* on varied social levels. The founder of the association of *ohuokhai* dancers, N.E. Petrov, wrote that 'The *ohuokhai* has the mission to develop culture, but it is also of great medicinal and educational importance.' In his view, the dance formerly served as a means to maintain a healthy lifestyle and the spir-

itual and moral level of the community. The descriptions easily adopt a modern alternative health discourse: it provides bio-energy, improves the function of the heart and brain, and strengthens the bio-field (*kut-sur*, *kurute*, which is a prerequisite for a healthy human body). The *ohuokhai*, with its singing accompaniment, serves as a gymnastics of the respiratory organs and improves the cardiovascular and respiratory system, and cures arthritis, joint disease, tonsillitis, bronchitis, and other diseases. (Petrov 2006: 9–10).

The issue of ‘energy’ and the ‘bio-field’ was emphasized by virtually all the interviewees of my study in 2013 who took part in the dance. According to the participants, the communal dance transfers and strengthens energy during the holding of hands.

The informants strongly emphasized the importance of the *ohuokhai* and the songs performed during the dance for the stability and development of Sakha culture. Petrov glorifies the dance in this spirit:

The *ohuokhai* is a school for teaching youth the native language and poetic alliterative speech, a forge for educating future poets, improvisers, and *toyuk* singers. The *osuochoj* in general, and especially during *Yhykh*, develops love for the native culture and nature, and evokes feelings of communality, collectivism, equality, and national pride (Petrov 2006: 10).

In this respect, the importance of the *ohuokhai* lies in contributing to the vitality and the overall development of Yakut culture.

Academic studies exploring various aspects of the *ohuokhai* are very advanced in Yakutia and are accompanied by a belief in its significance for the entire Yakut culture. The research deals, for example, with the connection between alliteration (the repetition of the same sound in every line of a song) and rhythm, between rhythm and the dance step, the meaning of individual gestures, and the recitation of texts.

The *ohuokhai* is tightly linked with the spiritual layer of the Yakut religion—the whole religious outlook (Petrov 1990). It reflects the traditional idea of the Turkic people of Central Asia about the three levels of the universe: heaven (the upper world), earth (the middle world) and the underworld (the lower world). The upper world is bright and clean, inhabited by celestial beings, divinities, and is always considered to be a higher and better world. The middle world is inhabited by people, who come here for a limited time. It is a restless place, full of contradictions and disorder. The lower world—incorrectly compared with the Christian idea of hell—is associated with evil, with evil spirits, and danger. The circle of the *ohuokhai* is a spatial representation of these three levels of existence. It refers to the idea of the world’s axis being located at the central point of the circle, allowing it to connect the three worlds. The dance thus expresses the belief system of the Yakuts. In the *ohuokhai*, myth and art constitute an indivisible whole. In addition, the dance can be seen as a ritual that is a repetition of the myth, as it is understood by Eliade (1969), who is widely cited in Yakut research into the *osuochoj*. The close relation of the levels in this tripartite vision of the world is evoked by the idea of birds flying upward during the celebration of the dance, as it is these creatures that can dwell on earth (the middle world), rise to the sky (the upper world), and be intermediaries between all the three levels.

The *ohuokhai*, both in the past and today, is a ritual dance meant to serve for communication with the upper world and travel between the worlds. In current dance practices, the desire to move closer to the upper world of power and divine beings and to contact

them is clear (my informants expressed the desire explicitly). ‘The religious procession of Yhykh and the symbols create a link with the heavenly beings and good spirits of the earth’ (Petrov 2006: 16).

The contemporary functions of the *ohuokhai* should be interpreted both in emic and etic terms as strengthening the communal spirit and manifesting the power of tradition and the existence of the Sakha identity. In 2012, the central Yhykh in Yakutsk beat the Guinness record when it gathered some 15,000 participants to dance together in the streets. Photos of at least six circles are shown as proof of the success of the communal spirit among the Yakuts. In this way, the Sakha have become a model of solidarity and efficiency among the indigenous peoples of Siberia, above all among the Buryats, who are numerically a bigger nation than the Sakha. The latter provide the model for regenerating and developing tradition in the world of modern civilization.

The Category of *Communitas* in Analyzing Circle Dances

Victor Turner’s concept of ‘*communitas*’ turns out to be an extremely useful category for studying both the sense and the sociological mechanisms of circle dances, which are common in traditional and contemporary societies. Turner himself explicitly considered dances, with their collective and rhythmic nature, to contribute to maintaining *communitas*. According to Turner, *communitas* is also the psychological state of individuals involved in social action and a social state characterized by equality and fraternity—therefore, *communitas* is both a state of society and a state of mind (Turner 1967; Szyjewski 2006: XVI). In some of his publications, Turner tends to lean toward stronger social interpretations. *Communitas* is ‘a kind of social relations’ (Turner 2004: 242), which is not (or not primarily) the inner experience of human individuals—sensations, feelings, or state of the psyche—but that what happens between individuals. *Communitas* provides psychological and social effects: it minimizes needs, reducing competition between individuals and groups, which can threaten the unity of the whole community. Nevertheless, the analysis of circle dances requires to penetrate the psychological aspects of physical proximity during the dance. Participants hold hands and during some dances the fingers of their hands are tightly intertwined and their elbows touch (in the *ohuokhai* and in some steps of the *yokhor*). In this situation, a person not only feels the touch and movement of other hands but also the touch of entire arms. Moreover, the hips and whole bodies of the persons on either side are felt, and even their scent, breath, and facial expressions are palpable. Everybody in the circle is observed and observable, perceiving the whole group as joined and united. This physical proximity fosters the experience of overcoming the isolation of being an individual and provides a feeling of communality and group strength. Yakuts say that in the past, young men and women could give signs of favor during the dance, touching hips and making physical contact in ritually organized and socially acceptable circumstances. In addition to the physical dimension, two psychological functions of the dance can be mentioned: the introduction of a sense of harmony with the world and a sense of normality—as well as departure from the state considered regular and normal. Therefore, dance can serve as a tool to manipulate the mental states of individuals and entire groups (Kowal-

ska 1991: 38). Dynamic phenomena taking place in society are conceived to correspond to biological processes of the human body (further: Turner, 2005: 16). Jolanta Kowalska draws attention to an important psychological element of ritual dances, which is 'belief in the ability of dance to enforce the desired trend of future events' (Kowalska, 1991: 50). *Communitas* implies a certain mental state in individuals who are not separated or isolated. The state of *communitas* requires the presence of a public. This observation is reminiscent of Durkheim's understanding of religion, in which the origins of Turner's thinking can be found. I think the phenomenon of *communitas* can be discussed in terms of closeness and spontaneity but also in terms of the physical contact between individuals during these circle dances. The *communitas* produced during this type of collective dance is often associated with an experience of the *sacrum*. I want to emphasize the importance of physicality in the above-mentioned interpersonal contact during circle dances, as well as the biophysical sources of *communitas*, which is produced by such contact. According to Turner, *communitas* involves some elements of the work of the mind, or more precisely—the brain. In other words, we can surmise that the possibility of forming *communitas* is based on the social nature of the human species. Any community has deep roots there, including in its *communitas* aspect, and would not be possible without it. *Communitas* is, as mentioned, both a state of society and a state of mind, because the human disposition to communality is revealed when a person finds himself in a larger collection of people, and particularly when the group is physically close. Such a sense of communality is reported by participants in the above-mentioned circle dances. The interest of psychotherapists in communal dancing probably arises from this feature.

Communitas always has a destabilizing effect on the structure—it can be compared with mysticism, which presents a threat to religious doctrine and institutions. *Communitas* is spontaneous and appears in opposition to power structures. In the process of creating *communitas*, there is a tendency to expand ties and the feeling of community, which is important for the construction of bonds at a higher level (ethnic, national). This phenomenon can be noticed in the above circle dances, which are communal dances in the 'here and now'; the common experience breaks all boundaries, ignoring regional differences and tribal history. Differences are accepted or tolerated rather than emphasized in antagonistic terms. According to Turner, important social circumstances such as liminality, marginalization, and subordination (low status, the lowest in society) give rise to the development of *communitas* in any society. This is particularly likely to happen during liminal situations. There could be a suspension in the usual standards, rules, and social divisions and as a result a state of *communitas* could result. Then a direct, immediate, and total confrontation with human identity is produced, which means that individuals feel themselves to be members of the community by suspending their current identity, but are also strengthened in the identity that comes through participation in a community where unity replaces the social structure.

Communitas is characterized by an element of immediacy, which is absent where structure prevails—structure is able to organize, but does not have a creative power. Turner's *communitas* is not the result of a biological instinct but is the product of human communication. *Communitas* is a kind of inversion of structure, order, or established institutions. At the same time, it cannot exist independently and is just as dangerous as an excess of struc-

ture, which can lead to petrification and despotism. Turner notes that the state of *communitas* appears during periods of transition (in the sense of Van Genep 1969): in particular, at the transition from one point to another of a cycle. It is the product of a certain state of the individual and community, which tend to unify oppositions and bring harmony to social and cosmic orders. A careful analysis of the above circle dances reveals major, even drastic, transformations in the societies where they are danced. The *ohuokhai* and *yokhor* are signs of a struggle to retain a threatened identity.

Turner's concept is a useful tool for understanding the phenomena at the level of the relationship between the individual and the cosmos. 'The social structure separates heaven from earth, the people from the gods; the social anti-structure occasionally, but very strongly, reunites them' (Szyjewski 1997). *Communitas* has its origins in changes of consciousness.³ In the cases I have described, the sense of *communitas* is triggered only when the intensity of the experience and emotional involvement reach a certain level. The enthusiasm and the joy of the (mostly young) Buryats dancing the *yokhor* or of Yakuts dancing the *ohuokhai* creates the common experience of sharing an important moment. It seems significant due to the clasped hands and general physical proximity.⁴ Circle dances, as a source of *communitas*, reveal processes that Turner would call liminal: the *communitas* created is not deep enough to change the structure. Such liminal events include assemblies, public events (for example, concerts), sports events and even theater. It is assumed that in these cases the experience of communality is not large and the events are associated with the social structure. The degree and durability of the experience is also important; the impression could be either strong or ephemeral. This would primarily depend on the duration of the experience, and its psychological and social effects, as with pilgrimage, for instance, which was examined by Turner (1975: 139–193). The showmanship of *Yokhor Night* and *Yhyakh* produce momentary entertainment, which is even more pleasant because it happens in an ethnically closed group in an atmosphere of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2014). However, these events can leave deep impressions and change people's way of thinking about the world. Finally, they can have a significant impact on people's sense of identity and behavior in matters of concern for the ethnic community and can change their beliefs about its structure. Turner, in terms of his concept of *communitas*, reflects on the profound changes occurring in contemporary society. In his opinion, modern individualism can be contrasted with all the elements constituting community in tribal societies. In the days of hunting and shepherding, circle dances served to mobilize faith in the effectiveness of joined action. In modern industrial societies, the events described as involving liminality are associated rather with entertainment and are no longer connected with the biological survival of societies.

³ Turner's deliberations on the biological (brain) aspects of *communitas* do not seem useful for this analysis. The ideas about the importance of the left hemisphere, which is supposedly responsible for any structure, and the right, which is produced by *communitas*, are intuitive and interesting, involving Jung's idea of archetypes and continuations in modern neuropsychology. There is no space to discuss the topic here.

⁴ Deborah Durham and James Fernandez indicate analogies between Turner's theory of symbolic systems generated by the state of *communitas* and Lakoff-Johnson's concept of primary experiential gestalts.

Conclusion: From the Local to the Ethnic/National Community

The transformations occurring through the above-mentioned circle dances show how the state of *communitas* in societies with local (tribal, territorially isolated) ties can turn into modern models of creating *communitas* in the contemporary social and cultural context. Moreover, references to the old forms, which are sometimes remembered and sometimes only learned from ethnographic works, are deliberately used by the social and cultural elites. In this manner, the mastery of the cultural forms allows the cultural content to be manipulated, as Michael Herzfeld showed in his study of Greek society (2014: 14). The societies harking back to the ‘tradition’ of circle dances are associated with differing degrees of cultural extinction. It is not without reason that the context creates and strengthens nationwide bonds and the sense of supra-local/regional communality—building a national culture by showing the community in diversity. Society, the nation, and ethnic unity are achieved through references to the still-extant ritual circle dance, which is nevertheless a means of building community relations, despite all the differences associated with the variety of old and new forms of social structure. Without it, society would become an aggregate of individuals ‘stacked’ in the social structure, in their systemic roles, losing the dimension of cultural community. Thus looking at Yakut and Buryat society, it can be concluded that they have managed or at least are striving to achieve a state of *communitas*, to penetrate the former social structure and rebuild a new one along with the institutions, symbols, myths, and other attributes of a modern nation.

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