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The Image of Genghis Khan in Contemporary Buryat Nation Building¹

Abstract: Genghis Khan is highly valued among peoples of Central Asia, a radical departure from Russia, and other nations across Europe, where he is regarded as the embodiment of savagery, barbarism, destruction and ruthlessness. Yet, another image exists among the Buryats, who accept their Mongolian origin and find support for their ethnos in it. The article concerns the functioning of Genghis Khan's image in popular culture and the everyday lives of Buryats living in the ethnic Buryatia. We are, therefore, interested in how the nation's elite succeeds in constructing a vision of the past, its golden age, to guarantee cultural and political entity in the modern time.

Keywords: Genghis Khan, Buryats, ethnic Buryatia, national integration, mass culture, elites

Introduction

War chiefs in all known societies are seen as winners and heroes, bringing honor to themselves and their group. They tend to be treated as absolute authorities that direct the group's activities and determine the events of history. In the course of time, these characters are turning into objects of worship. The Macedonian Alexander, Napoleon and even Stalin tend to be perceived as characters of a great importance to humanity due to actions and decisions they undertook. Additionally, groups assign them the crucial role in civilizational or cultural change and portray the characters as distinguished legislators, and creators of new progressive ideas significant to the particular area or even the whole world. Their ethnicity and origin become an occasion of disputes between nations, for their fame glorifies the reputation of a whole nation. With this said, the origin of Alexander the Great triggers controversy between the Greeks and Aromanians (Vlachs) (Nowicka 2011; Nowicka 2012), as Napoleon is portrayed as a Frenchman, but sometimes also as a Corsican—a representative of an ethnic group distinct from that of French. Stalin is admitted as either Georgian or Ossetian, but according to our observations made in the 1990s, various individuals

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from the Russian Federation sometimes express a sense of pride for this person and emphasize his countrywide importance (Nowicka, Wyszynski 1996). The same goes for Genghis Khan, who undoubtedly came from one or more Mongolian tribes, even though there is no absolute evidence for any version of his origin. Moreover, various groups living in Mongolia, China and the Russian Federation, especially in the area of the so-called Ethnic Buryatia² are disputing his tribe identity and the right to represent themselves as his descendants.

The Buryat people are an ethnic group living in Southeastern Siberia, on the shores of Lake Baikal. Culturally and linguistically Mongol, they have been part of the Russian state since the mid 17th to 18th century. Although they have preserved their traditions, language and religious practices, as seen in many parts of the world, processes of assimilation and globalization have been affecting them as well, in a context where the image of Genghis Khan is playing a crucial role in national identity construction. This article explores the functioning of Genghis Khan's image among Buryats living in the ethnic Buryatia. We are, therefore interested in how the nation's elite succeeds in constructing an image of its past in order to present it to the members of its community as well as individuals abroad (Smith 2009: 323). The scope of our research includes areas of the Buryat Republic, Buryat Aga and Buryat Ust-Orda Okrugs. The latter area is often described as poorly connected with the genealogy of Genghis Khan, but Buryat scholars from the most western part of the Buryat population are convinced of their close relationships with the distant history of the Mongol empire and its ruler. Among them, exactly the same way as among the Eastern Buryats, there is the opinion that their tribal origin is closest to the lineage of Genghis Khan. Western Buryats emphasize that due to their location—on the outskirts of ethnic Buryatia and the whole Mongol world—they managed to keep an authentic, archaic culture inherent to the times of Genghis Khan. It should be noted that other peoples of Siberia and Central Asia also believe Genghis Khan to be their national hero: apart from Mongolic Kalmyks they are Turkic Kazakhs, Yakuts, Khakasess, Tuwinians, Altai.

Different Images—Different Viewpoints. Genghis Khan in Popular Culture

Genghis Khan is a well known figure all over the world. His military campaigns became part of wide descriptions in history textbooks, which has made many individuals throughout the world familiar with his name. The image of Genghis Khan is different in China, where the leader is highly valued, this being a radical departure from Russia (and other nations across Europe), where he is regarded as the embodiment of savagery, barbarism, destruction, murder and ruthlessness. Yet another image of this

² This term is generally used by modern Buryat scholars emphasizing the fact that Buryat people live not only in the Republic of Buryatia, but also in two districts: Buryat Ust-Orda Okrug, located to the west of Lake Baikal, and the Buryat Aga Okrug in the southeast from Chita on the Russian-Mongolian-Chinese border; The term also refers to the Buryat areas of autonomy in Irkutsk Oblast and Zabajkalski Krai (Хилханова 2007, Хилханов 2005).

figure exists among the Buryats, who accept their Mongolian origin and find a support for their ethnos in it. The widely known Empire ruler, regardless of some moral issues, arouses admiration and constitutes the important center of attention and pride of peoples who have difficulties maintaining their cultural continuity and identity. In 1978, back in the Soviet time of Buryatia, Isai Kalashnikov published a famous book entitled, *Cruel Age*. A great interest in the work, as well as its numerous publications in contemporary times, are all evidence that the figure of Genghis Khan was of a great importance to the Buryats despite years of Soviet propaganda. Beginning in the 1990s, an enormous number of publications appeared, as well as theatre projects and conferences dedicated to the ruler. In 2002 the play under the title “Chingiskhan” opened on the Buryat Drama theatre stage which was enjoyed with immense popularity, portraying the importance of this figure in Buryat society. Interest in Genghis Khan is also reflected in the book publishing industry. Along with numerous publications of the “Secret History of the Mongols,” a number of novels and short stories also appear. A three-volume edition of *Chingisiada* published in Aginsk (2009) that includes the “Secret history of the Mongols” can also be mentioned here, *Cruel Age* (1978) by Kalashnikov and other historical works dedicated to the Khan.

In recent decades, the personality of the Mongol chief has also attracted interest in popular culture. Mass culture today is becoming a carrier of national contents that often contribute to the consolidation of elites and to the formation of distinct positions, viewpoints and opinions. The events happening at the global level are reflective in the activities of strictly local, regional or national scale. The same scheme works with the image of the Mongol ruler in popular culture (Edensor 2004: 191).

The interest in the character of Genghis Khan and the historical events connected with his life are being externalized in various fields of world popular culture. This topic deserves a more profound analysis which cannot be fulfilled in the limited scope of this article. Here we will introduce only some facts connected with the contemporary manifestation of ethnic consciousness among one of the Mongolic nations, specifically in Buryats. The world’s interest in this person has doubtlessly had a certain impact on the perception of his image and its functioning among Buryats as well as in the way they think of themselves. The presence of abundant products of popular culture (films, TV series, songs and bands) centered around the personality of Genghis Khan constitutes a significant factor affecting the reputation of the Mongol leader and the growth of his popularity in the Buryat ethnic ideology. Even though those images reflect the distant past, they are portraying in reality the contemporary ideological issues, problems as well as recent modern debates in Buryat society. (q.v. Edensor 2004: 12).

Among the films dedicated to the life story of Genghis Chan, those that have adventurous, clear Hollywood entertainment styles, starring well-known actors, are distinguished. The second type of film aims to glorify the ruler and his life in association with the Golden period of Mongol history and the significance of Mongol people. More often than not, Mongolian peoples fund the latter, with actors and artists coming from the Mongol world, including Buryats.

From 1950’s, a number of movies inspired by the extraordinary steppe ruler appear. In 1950, the first Asian film of Philippine production was shot about the Mongolian

ruler, then in 1957 another of Indian production was shot, and in 1958 one from Pakistan. In the western world, the interest in the image of Genghis Khan was initiated by the American film titled, "Conqueror" (1956), starring John Wayne and Susan Hayward. In 1965, another adventure film of Yugoslav-American-British-German production appears (directed by Henry Levin), with Omar Sharif acting as the Mongol ruler. A number of prominent American and French actors were involved in this film. In 1989 a fun Hollywood adventure film called "Bill & Ted's excellent adventure" was produced, starring Keanu Reeves, as well as Al Leong in the role of Genghis Khan.

In 1990, the first Mongolian film devoted to the ruler came out, entitled "Under the Eternal Blue Sky," directed by Baljinnyam. Then, in 1992, the Hollywood film "Genghis Khan" appeared, starring Charlton Heston in the leading role. In 1998, the film "Genghis Khan—the Proud Son of Heaven" was shot in Mongolia. The year 2007 was marked by a movie of Japanese-Mongolian production, "Genghis Khan: to the End of the Earth and Sea," which is also known under the title, "The Descendant of the Grey Wolf." Also in 2007, a film of German-Kazakh-Mongolian-Russian production, entitled "Mongol" (in Russia known as "Mongol;" in Poland it was displayed under the title "Genghis Khan") was screened. It was directed by a well-known Russian film producer, Sergei Bodrov, and received an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. The production designer of the film was a Buryat artist named Dashi Namdakov. This was to be the first part of the film trilogy devoted to Genghis Khan. The production of the film took place mainly in Mongolia, China (Inner Mongolia) and Kazakhstan with the participation of some Mongolian actors (among them Khulan Chuluun in the role of Borte, and Bayertseg Erdenbat as young Borte). From the very beginning, the film became the subject of heated discussions and received both positive and negative reviews. The negative ones were mainly stated on behalf of Mongolian world representatives due to the factual errors and inaccuracies, along with the fact that the lead role was given to an actor of Japanese origin. The critical response also considered the "unfit" appearance of Khan as was presented in the film. Bodrov defended his position with a reference to the works of Lev Gumilev, a famous Soviet historian, ethnologist and anthropologist. In 2008, an important Mongolian film entitled, "No right to die—Chinggis Khaan" was produced. In 2009 the first Yakut film of international importance, entitled "By the Will of Genghis Khan," appeared, which enjoyed success among the Buryats, Yakuts and other native peoples of Siberia.

Among the forms of popular culture referring to the person of Genghis Khan, a number of television series could also be mentioned. In 1987, two television series in Hong Kong simultaneously appeared: the first was produced by TVB (starring Alex Man), and the second was produced by ATV (starring Tony Liu). Also in 2004, a popular Chinese television series called, "Genghis Khan" was screened. It should be emphasized that Genghis Khan as a figure is extremely popular in China and the interest in this personality is also reflected in film production. In the opinion of some representatives of the Buryat intellectuals, they perceive Chinese movies devoted to Genghis Khan (mainly released by Inner Mongols) as the most truthful. One of the extensive TV series produced in China was translated into Buryat and was much sought after.

The Unity of the Buryats: the Referendum and the Film, “The First Henchman of Genghis Khan”

It is also worth mentioning another film dedicated to the life story of the Mongolian ruler, produced in Buryatia (2006) under the title, “The First Henchman of Genghis Khan” (Первый нукер Чингисхана). The film was shot in the Buryat language with the off-screen announcer reading the text in Russian. It presents a unique vision of the modern Buryat elite, concerning the story of the Mongolian ruler, who comes back from the past with a seemingly new continuity in the discourse of contemporary Buryat national identity. The film, produced mainly by enthusiasts and contemporary Buryat ideologues, constitutes one of the aspects of the struggle for Buryat integration by trying to provoke pride of the Buryat identity, traditions and affiliation to the all-Mongol world. The film shows the period of the 13th century when Mongolian peoples did not represent a united political organism but existed as several tribes and confederations fulfilling mutual random raids and attacks. Genghis Khan’s mission in this context was to unite and integrate the warring tribes.

The film appeared in a very specific historical context when of the future of two autonomous Buryat districts were shaped, and had far-reaching consequences for the whole Buryat nation. The “Ukrupnyeniye” policy—the consolidation of the administrative subdivisions, introduced by Vladimir Putin—led to the abolition of financial autonomy of many ethnic units, mainly the okrugs. According to the democratic regulations, a referendum was planned among the residents of the autonomous Buryat districts, which was later considered a counterfeit procedure. The film spoke of the consolidation of Mongolian tribes under the rule of Genghis Khan coincided with the referendum date in the Ust-Orda region which resulted in the liquidation of economic autonomy and receiving a special status after its inclusion to the Irkutsk oblast. Some Buryat intellectuals also proposed the possible inclusion of the district in the Buryat Republic instead of Irkutsk oblast.

The film producers offered screenings at all of the territories of ethnic Buryatia. However, this was met with disfavor on the behalf of some authorities of the Republic and Ust-Orda okrug, which banned the screening of the film, warning the negative reaction from the principal authorities of Russia. Local authorities of Ust-Orda Okrug fearing the reactions of the central government prohibited the screening of the film in villages and small towns. On some Buryat webpages, one can see a number of discussions about the events related to the screening of the film in the Ust-Orda Okrug. One of the initiators of the screening, Radzana Dugarowa, a specialist in the Buryat ethnography, writes in a defensive manner, which clearly indicates the direction of the attack met by the initiators of the film-project: “We came here with other intentions, but not to oppose the referendum. My visit is related to a different purpose, which is cultural and educational.” Radzhana Dugarova is a member of the Buryat Regional Young Scholars’ Group, which stood against the referendum.³

³ http://vtinform.ru/vti/138/38441.php?SECTION_ID=138&ID=38441&print=Y (access date 24.12.2012).

Radzhana Dugarova says, “If we do not receive any reply (from the local authorities—EN), for our part we will apply to the court. People should not suffer because of the fact that local officials see danger where there is none.”

The issue of the Buryat movie about Genghis Khan has raised a debate in the Aga Okrug as well. The film producer, Piotr Shablin, talked of the screening of this movie in the Aga Buryat Autonomous (at that point of time) Okrug: “We hope that the head of the Aga Okrug, Bair Zhamsuev will not mind that the first Buryat film will be shown for our countrymen (zyemliaki).” He also encouraged Buryat businessmen to offer financial support.⁴ In the Buryat Republic, the film screening was not met without obstacles caused by the same concerns. Buryat activists wrote an open letter in which they expressed their opinion about the prohibition of “The First Henchman of Genghis Khan” in the Republic: “We are worried about the unhealthy situation around the first (Buryat—E. N., A. Zh.) film, broken out in the press and continued up by the prosecution of Buryatia <...> We are confident that the film should be brought back to the cinemas of the city (Ulan-Ude—E. N., A. Zh.) and the whole Republic. Due to the growing global interest in ethnic cinema, we believe that we should fully support and contribute to the growth of the Buryat filmmaking”.⁵

The widow of Isai Kalashnikov Ekaterina Kalashnikova, who inherited the rights to the book, *Cruel Age*, provided additional complications. Filmmakers were accused of copyright infringement as the film script was said to be taken from Kalashnikov’s book. The activists denied that the copyright laws were broken, but expressed concerns that the film career would be short and “The First Henchman of Genghis Khan” may turn to be the last.⁶ The story of the first Buryat film of Genghis Khan illustrates well the contemporary importance of this character and shows how he can influence the events taking place in the contemporary Buryatia back from hundred years.

The Context of the Interest in Genghis Khan

The Buryat nation consists of several tribal groups: Khori, Khongodor, Ekhirit-Bulagat, Sartul-Tsongol and others. In the recent past, all these communities led a nomadic lifestyle, associated with the pastoral economy. The mobility of these groups meant that neither of them were able to precisely determine the territory that could be considered their *homeland*. The structure of the ancestral population of the occupied territory is culturally and ideologically less relevant than is usually thought. The territorial relationship, imposing on tribal and sometimes towering over it, developed under the influence of the tsarist government, then the Soviet policy. In terms of Northern Mongols—Buryats are the representatives of a society based on the pastoral economy, and while the typical nomadic pastoralism had disappeared since Soviet times, it was deeply rooted in the social consciousness of typical pastoral cultures and societies. It is important to emphasize that while there exist a strong in-

⁴ <http://pressa.irk.ru/number1/2006/11/005002.html> (access date 24.12.2012).

⁵ <http://www.predistoria.org/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=281> (access date 24.12.2012).

⁶ <http://pressa.irk.ru/number1/2006/11/005002.html> (access date 24.12.2012).

dividualism among contemporary Buryat, this individualism is associated in a specific way with strong clan ties, the pursuit of high social position, a high level of ambition and a sense of personal dignity. These features are noticeable in all pastoral societies around the world (Moszyński 1996; Opler 1945). Among the contemporary Buryats who have definitely furthered themselves from nomadic pastoralism, these features are manifested in the quest to occupy professional positions that give autonomy and freedom of choice. It is significant that very few Buryats became part of the industrial working class—they preferred highly qualified professions, such as clerical and teaching jobs, as well as leadership positions at all levels that allowed them to avoid having superiors of any kind. This can be explained by the presence of a very high proportion of people with higher education and receiving one, which is one of the highest levels within the Russian Federation, greatly exceeding the percentage of such nationalities in the Federation as Polish and Russian. Such systems promote an easy acceptance and even glorification of such figures as even Genghis Khan.

The Buryats are still divided into four basic tribes, and being considered a modern ethnic nation is relatively new. To a large extent the consolidation was caused by the unfavorable situation of the ethnic culture under political, social, demographic and cultural domination of Russians staying within the Russian state. Buryat intellectuals began to emerge as a result of the Russian education system in Tsarist times, as early as the end of the nineteenth century. At the beginning of Soviet history, the central policy strongly supported the development of ethnic cultures, which meant that in the 1920s, Buryat culture began to flourish. Unfortunately, the period of the thirties ended with repressions in 1937 and resulted in total annihilation and extermination of Buryat intellectuals. As a result, Buryats are now struggling to construct a new Buryat culture, as well as in building a modern national identity and social life model. We can admit that Buryat is a nation consolidating in recent decades struggling with tribal and territorial divisions. We can observe it *instatu nascendi*. As part of the consolidation, it is necessary to work out some integrative factors, one of which is precisely constituted by the personality Genghis Khan. A process can be seen that can be called a “privatization” of the ancient ruler by Buryat ideologists. It is expressed on the one hand in research works and projects, and on the other hand, in artistic creations, such as in plastics, filmmaking, theater, and music.

The Image of Genghis Khan: the History and Ideology

The biography of the Mongol ruler is using the historical document *Secret History of the Mongols*, which is the oldest known document in Mongolian literature. It was written in the thirteenth century and is known now in the version written in transcription used Chinese characters. The document focuses on the biography and history of the great nomadic empire and the events related to the life of Genghis Khan, his ancestors and descendants. No reliable evidence in terms of the authorship and origin has been discovered as of today. The *Secret History of the Mongols* is written not in praise of the Great Khan but on the contrary, as Lev Gumilev claims, the authors should have

belonged to the opponents of the ruler rather than to his supporters, which is apparent due to some unflattering remarks on his personality.

The work, *Secret History of the Mongols* thoroughly follows Khan's ancestral genealogy. It is known that Temudzhin (the earlier name of Genghis Khan) came from the Borjigin tribe lineage. His great-grandmother was, according to the *Secret History of the Mongols*, a woman named Alan Goa, which was in turn the daughter of a woman named Bargujin Goa and a man named Korilartai Mergen. Both parents belonged to the Kori-Tumat tribe (descendants of the Tumat tribe living in Inner Mongolia, the today China). Alan Goa is a symbol of unanimity embodied in the image of a mother, which is also connected to the mother's special genealogical position, superior to that of the father's. This is inherent both to the ancient and contemporary Mongol peoples.

Genghis Khan's birthplace still remains unknown but all historical evidence points to the Onon river, which flows through the territory of Mongolia, Russia—on the borderlands of ethnic Buryatia. Other than this, Genghis Khan's birth date has also become the object of ideological disputes, where various versions differ by more than ten years. August 25, 1226 is the exact date of the Khan's death, so researchers deduct 72 years (his approximate age at his death) to get the year 1154, which also became a matter of debate because during these times, life age was not accurately counted. Born Temujin, he had been proclaimed Genghis Khan in 1186 or a little later, after the turbulent years of coming to power by uniting various nomadic tribes and founding the Mongol Empire. The title Genghis Khan means *ocean* or *sea* and originates from the Turkic word *tengis*, with an identical meaning. In 1206 during a great assembly of Mongol tribes under his leadership, the Great Mongol Empire was proclaimed, which then became a dominating power on the largest territory of Eurasia.

It is recognized now that one of the great achievements of Genghis Khan is the code of steppe law, known as Yassa, which regulated rights and proper standards of behavior. Also emphasized on the one hand is the religious tolerance that prevailed at the court of Genghis Khan, and on the other hand, the obligation to remain with the religion of ancestors, who were under the chief's sons.

The museums of Aga Buryat Okrug show alleged images of Genghis Khan on horseback (which is consistent with the traditional image of a warrior) and the chin beard (which is not common among the Buryats and Mongolian peoples in general). For the Buryats (who still maintain categories of tribal relationships) the genealogical line of Genghis Khan seems to be of great importance, as well as the names of his ancestors and descendants in connection with all cultural associations representing ideals of greatness, beauty, sharpness and wisdom.⁷

Genghis Khan is a character of great consequence in the Mongol world, representing the embodiment of strength, greatness and all positive qualities. Our informants usually tell us about his physical strength, hardiness and the endurance of his horses, which despite their small size, could overcome any difficulty they were presented with. As my Buryat informants claim it was thanks to these horses that Khan managed to

⁷ The data was collected during our field research in summer of 2012 in Aga Buryat Okrug.

cross such vast territories, conquer and subjugate culturally and linguistically different peoples. Buddhism along with old-Mongolian writing appeared among the Buryats living to the east of Lake Baikal since the times of Genghis Khan and gained wide popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Buryats see the unification of culturally and spatially scattered Mongol tribes, among the most important achievements of Khan, due to his great organizational skills, and creation of codes and laws of tolerance among the multi-ethnic army. This constitutes an important part of Genghis Khan's contemporary image.

It is therefore not surprising that there is a quiet *contestation* (sometimes gaining more visible forms) between different Mongol peoples about possessing the historical myth (a kind of Smith's "ethnic core") of Genghis Khan, including his tribal affiliation, origin, birth and burial places. Khori Buryats identify themselves with the Kori tribe, which is one of the ancestral tribes of Genghis Khan. Back in the 1990s, I used to come up with statements that the Khori Buryat tribe was a part of the ancestral tribe of Genghis Khan. Understanding the nature of the tribal thinking seems to be necessary in explaining such types of behaviors.

Human societies usually follow principles that are beyond the control of individuals, defined by Stanislaw Ossowski as substantial (1966), and on the other hand there are other principles, which depend on the choice of an individual and the group (Ossowski 1966; Nowicka 1990). The first kinds of principles deal with everything that is associated with birth, blood relationships, etc. Until recently, the Buryat society was built largely on substantial criteria centered on the principle of clan affiliation, tribal relationship and origin. We can also say that even today, clan affiliation determines the place of the individual in the Buryat society. Therefore, the Buryats devote great attention to the knowledge of family genealogy, especially among children who usually have school tasks to design a family tree. A man who does not know his clan genealogy is considered to be a person without a clear, understandable, specific place in the world. One can hear the following statements very often from Buryat scholars: "After all, the Mongols descended from one ancestor" (14 July, a conference in Ulan-Ude, Buryatia, Russia). Some people at the same conference debated the origin of the word "Buryat" and there were scholars who emphasized the novelty of the term. There were also some discussions about whether the Bargu are a part of the Buryats or not and other discusses the divisions and the separatism between different Buryat groups. Such debates show that tribal categories are still of great importance in the society.

Genghis Khan is widely regarded as a hero and ancestor of all Buryats, despite the fact that this character could have become the next separating factor because, according to historical literature, he has more ties with the particular eastern Buryat tribe than with that of the west. However, it does not seem to be relevant and the ruler is announced rather as the ancestor of all Buryats (Shirab Chimitdorzhiev).

The consolidation process is the inseparable part of the formation of the modern Buryat nation, a process that we can currently observe: modern nation-building incorporates all regional or ethnic differences making it a part of a nation. The local differences are absorbed within the "code of wider significance" (Edensor 2004: 91). An idea by Sopher (1979: 158), used by Edensor, is also used in the analysis of this

process, which is taking place in the Buryat society in recent years. The same longing for commonness in diversity can be observed in the post-Soviet reality of Buryatia.

Symbols and Associations

In most Buryat museums, there is a section dedicated to Genghis Chan exhibiting the areas connected with his life story and conquered territories. The Buryats believe that some objects of great symbolic importance should be kept in every home, such as a bow and a knife—symbols of strength, referring to weapons of ancient times, the times of the great leader. Some symbolic places connected to the life of Genghis Khan are also of particular importance. The website for the biggest festival of Buryat culture, “Altargana,” recommends viewers to visit the places associated with Genghis Khan. One of them is Yusun tug—a kind of tourist station located on an attractive landscape near the Onon River, to the west of the village of Togchin. Guests are welcomed in a Buryat yurt with a traditional meal and then are invited to take a tour to some historic sites, among which there are gravestones associated with the era of the Huns. The local people also note the birthplace of Genghis Khan, and other areas connected with his life as places of high importance for Buryat culture. The narrations accompanying the excursion over the vast rocky steppe often appeal to the theory of nation’s vital energy and power (Gumilev 1980).

On the pages of one of the most important Buryat newspaper, *Ugai Zam*—The Route of Ancestors (34, 10.2012)—one can read an article entitled: “The old civilizations” in which the author referring to Gumilev’s theory claims that Genghis Khan was the incarnation of peoples’ “passionarity,” which means potential energy and power. Gumilev argues that every nation has its own spheres of interest and directions of development. For example, in their history, the Chinese have achieved completely different results than pastoral, nomadic people of Central Asia, including the Mongols. The purpose and meaning of the latter was the conquest of the world. The particular period of “the energy intensity of Mongols” occurred when all forces were aimed at achieving a common goal. The outstanding contribution of Genghis Khan is that he concentrated the “energy of nation” and synchronized the power of patriotic warriors towards a common goal and action. This energy was focused by military power, favored with natural conditions of the steppe, and the nomadic lifestyle of the Mongols. According to Gumilev, these spiritual powers are expressed in the human actions of entire nations and civilizations (Андреев 2012: 15). The conquests are seen as his merits in many newspapers’ articles. It is also mentioned that “Genghis’s Stone,” with the earliest records in the Old Mongol alphabet and language, testifying that back to the thirteenth century, Mongol peoples had formed the literary language and literature in their own alphabet, was found on the territory of ethnic Buryatia.

In today’s Buryatia a great number of people emphasize the commonality of Buryats and Mongols (from today’s state of Mongolia). Genghis Khan also connects these two related peoples. Moreover, sentences such as, “Buryats are a Mongols” are proclaimed, which even 20 years ago were hardly heard. It seems that the emphasis

of this pan-Mongolian content gives a sense of strength and maintenance for the Buryats, who, regardless of population growth, still remain a relatively small minority of the Russian Federation.

The Birthplace of Genghis Khan as an Object of Controversy Mongolic Nations

Genghis Khan's birthplace, Deluun Boldog, remains a contentious issue for all Mongol peoples. Only Khalkha Mongols have no doubt that the great Khan was born on the territory of their state. In 1992, the Mongolian government announced its intention to build a mausoleum in every village of the Khentii province to celebrate the 830th anniversary of Genghis Khan's birth (Bulag 1998: 24). This project was seen as a sign of Mongolian expression of national revival, unity and state solidarity. Khalkha is one of the largest and most important Mongolian ethnic groups having an independent country. Genghis Khan as a figure is being intensively used to build modern Mongol nationalism.

However, the determination of the ruler's birthplace still remains to be an ambiguous issue: a place called Deluun Boldog has also been found in the modern Aga Buryat okrug, which is within the limits of the Russian Federation. In the eyes of the Buryats, this fact legitimizes calling Genghis Khan their "own."

Searching for Genghis Khan's tomb is also an important issue for all ethnic Mongol peoples, the Mongols of the Mongolian state however, see it as an extremely important ideological project. The search for the grave automatically excluded areas not occupied by the Khalkha Mongols, focusing on the territory of today's Mongolia with the exclusion of Inner Mongolia and the remaining areas within Russia. In addition, the Buryats also argue that Khan was buried on the territory of contemporary ethnic Buryatia. This in turn shows another aspect of the Khalkha-Buryat dispute.

The importance and even the romantic sense of the project are also connected with diverging interests of Mongolia and Buryatia, reflecting the contest for Genghis Khan's affiliation, which also constitutes a conflict within the Buryat national discourse.

Genghis Khan and Pan-Mongolian Contents

Despite internal disputes, Genghis Khan is seen as a hero connecting all Mongol peoples. His name carries the idea of unity of all tribes living within different state bodies. It is suitable to apply the idea of "Pan-Mongolism"⁸ describing the contemporary significance of Genghis Khan. From another perspective, it also has profound negative associations connected with some former political movements and serious interstate conflicts. We will therefore try to avoid usage of the term in this sense.

The presence of Pan-Mongolian ideas is rooted in history, which in 1937 resulted in the campaign conducted against the "enemies of the people," "nationalists,"

⁸ Панмонголизм.

“pan-mongolists” and “Japanese spies.” These concepts had been identified with Pan-Mongolism, and their meaning is clear for the Buryats who still carefully avoid using some of them. Eleven thousand files are kept in the archives of the Security Ministry of Buryatia, containing information of persecuted people. People were arrested under wrongful accusation; 569 peoples were convicted as spies. Almost the whole governmental community of the former Buryat-Mongolia was arrested and persecuted under suspicion of Pan-Mongolian coup preparing. All the members of the local Komsomol Committee were eliminated as well. All the officers of the Buryat Brigade, belonging to the Red Army, were arrested. The whole creative Buryat intelligentsia⁹ (including Rinchino, Zhamtsarano, Baradiin) and Buddhist clergy, were totally annihilated. The memory of those events is still alive and essentially shaped the attitude toward all associations with the term “Pan-Mongolism” (Елаев 2000).

However, the relationships between Buryat culture, history and the fortunes of other Mongol peoples are obvious. Modern Buryat intellectuals consciously refer to these ties resorting to the work of Buryat national ideologues in the late 19 and early 20 century. The figure of Genghis Khan, despite being an object of various disputes, still remains a common symbol to the whole Mongol world, containing high associations with Pan-Mongolism. It is no wonder that in ethnic Buryatia in the last 20 years one of the key topics of cultural and political discourse is linked with the history of the Mongol empire and its founder, Genghis Khan.

Today’s Pan-Mongolian idea can be understood in two aspects. In the first case, the term “Mongols” refers to the Mongol people living in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia (China) and Russia’s Buryatia and Kalmykia. In the second aspect, the term Mongol or “true” Mongol belongs only to the most important contemporary Mongol ethnic group, Khalkha Mongols, for whom the character of Genghis Khan becomes more and more necessary for integration of the nation-state against increasing “threat” represented by China. In this context, the revival of historical memory becomes an important factor. Mongolia sees it as extremely important to establish the direct “historical succession” with the figure of Genghis Khan who united the Mongols and created their identity (Bulag 1998: 70). This is why Khalkha deny that Buryats have an equal place in the Mongolian community and the rights to the name of the great ruler. Buryats are accused of being in cooperation with the Russian state and of betraying the interests of Mongol peoples in the Soviet era. An identical attitude is applied in relation to Mongols from Inner Mongolia in China. According to modern Inner Mongolia’s ideologues, Khalkha Mongol have strayed far from Mongolian traditions as well as have failed to keep the cult of Genghis Khan and traditional writing. Indeed, the cult of Genghis Khan in Ordos has a continuous tradition, as well as vertical writing, which is considered to be one of Khan’s inventions. It is preserved in Inner Mongolia and considered to be a significant symbol of the Mongol authenticity. The figure of Genghis Khan is of major cultural value for all Mongol peoples, which in different political and social contexts

⁹ Elites—representatives of Academia, Buddhist clergy.

absorb different senses. However, these senses provide the idea of a heroic vision of the past, its golden age to guarantee cultural and political entity in the modern time.

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