

The cultures of knowledge in Buryatia

My main point of departure is the assumption that apart from the European notion of science there are other non-European forms of knowledge which, due to the recent historical events, lost their legitimacy in a different degree. The knowledge labeled as “Western science”, or simply “science”, does not imply that science, techniques, industry or medicine did not exist outside the Western context. This, for instance, regards many domains of knowledge culture of the Buryat-Mongols, whose historical, philosophical, social, etc. thoughts serve merely as objects of scientific research, not as independent interpretational grids. Meanwhile, many ideas born within these cultures of knowledge were not destined to disappear in clash with modernity, but still are significant factors in cultural processes in contemporary times [Eisenstadt, 2000]. This is the reason why they should be articulated and explored.

In order to distinguish this sphere of knowledge, I apply the term “culture of knowledge” or “epistemic culture” which I borrow from the works of Kollmar-Paulenz [Kollmar-Paulenz, 2014: 139]. I attach it to the interpretativist heuristic context of meaning production and Giddens’s understanding of reflexivity of ongoing social life [Giddens, 1993: 90]. It is quite common procedure in the social sciences.⁵ Nevertheless, the emancipation of local forms of knowledge is often limited to the victimized “imperialist–indigenous” relation. The term “indigenous”, in turn, covers the whole range of differentiated traditions of thought, as well as many domains of these thoughts. This brings

⁵ So-called “Indigenous Science” [<http://www.wisn.org/what-is-indigenous-science.html>] (access date: 30.01.2017).

a certain dissatisfaction due to which I would like to separate the knowledge that could be obtained from the literary sources and the one obtained from the fieldwork and direct encounters with people. I am aware that the two levels are not necessarily compulsory, that they do not have to be in a hierarchical relation to each other, or in any relation at all, but this is one of the main questions I would like to find the answer to during my research. I prefer not to dichotomize and not to attribute knowledge to a specific world vision, but to consider its different levels, layers and configurations. This also leads to the methodological importance of the multiple perspectives of interpretations and reflexivity of this culture through the history.

In this chapter, I would like to provide a brief history of the “epistemic culture” in Buryatia that was shaped in close contacts with other Asian cultures and quite recently was influenced by the European intellectual thought. I want to present different spheres of history, institutions as the embodiment of the cultures of knowledge, the reflexivity of the community. I argue that the dominant, “legitimate” narrations are rooted deeply in the historical experience of the West, which, due to the recent colonial relations, are shaping the contemporary imaginary on culture. I am introducing the chapter because I want to understand the epistemic background of the Buryat social thought – the way who, what and how produced knowledge of the world [Roepstorff, 2003: 117].

1.1. The emergence of “Asia” and “Siberia” in European intellectual thought

“Asia”⁶ is an idea invented by and for the European culture. The idea was produced from early contacts of ancient Greeks and Romans with the Middle East to the military threat of Asian powers. Many Christian missions to the East by Jesuit society left numerous letters and records about Asia and largely formed the image and idea of Asia in

⁶ The word Asia appears as far back as in the ancient Greek mythology [Hay, 1968: 3]. Discussion of civilization terminology was one of the central points of the workshops in the project *Searching for Identity* held by professor Jan Kieniewicz.

Europe. This image of the East Asians (primarily Chinese and Japanese) regarded the high cultural and technological capacity which meant they were considered equal, if not even superior, to the Europeans until the 18th century, when the idea of race emerged [Kowner, Demel, 2014: 10–11]. Furthermore, Asian history and identity changed much from the times of European expansion in the 16th century when the Asian landmass gradually transformed from a trade partner to a space of rivalry of Western powers, a territory to discover and colonize.

All that experience contributed to the image and idea of Asia both in common and high-intellectual thoughts. It was quite definite and unified through the recent history: “In the eyes of Europe, the image of Asia was changing in detail, while remaining surprisingly constant in general outline” [Lach, 1965: 822]. However, the term Asia still lacks precision and, if previously it referred to the modern Middle East, which developed in close contacts with the European continent, currently it more commonly implies the East Asia. Indeed, the cultures of the huge continent, which is Asia in fact, are even more diverse inside and “there is no such thing as one ‘Orient’” [Bingham et al., 1964: 3; Clyde, Beers, 1971: 4]: “In what historic and cultural sense, for instance, do Lebanon and Japan belong together?” [Riasanovsky, 1972: 3]. The differentiation, which resulted even in communal hatred in Asia, was often used by Western colonial powers to rule by playing them against one another [Wilber, 1966: 29]. One hardly can speak about common Asian identity before the European colonialism, and even now it is likely to remain merely a geographical term rather than a symbol of more or less coherent cultural unity.

Such broad practices of “modernization” and “Westernization” of Asian history produced numerous terms and categories that are not precise in their meaning and can convey different concepts. The assumption that “Oriental” cultures can be known and understood through the medium of European mores and values constitute a persistent obstacle [Clyde, Beers, 1971: 7–8], while the idea of Europe itself is the result of a long historical process shaped by multiple circumstances. Even today, it is complicated univocally to assert the unity of Europe, as it falls into various cultural, national and geographical regions. The frontiers of Europe could not be ultimately determined either, as it is

still problematic to embrace Turkey and even Russia within this unity, as well as other certainly European places outside the European continent. All this confirms that Europe is hardly only a geographical region, but rather an idea with its history and still transforming in the modern time.

The problem of Russia's inclusion in Europe appeared as soon as the idea of Europe acquired symbolic features of a lifestyle and values, apart from being a geographic name on a map. Only after the reforms of Peter the Great, Russia "advanced" from being "Europeans by origin" and "Asiatic by inclination" to a civilized European country. Montesquieu said about Peter the Great that he had "given the manner of Europe to a European nation" [Hay, 1968]. However, Russia still was not lacking the Asiatic odour for its "Oriental despotism" as against the European nations striving for "freedom". Nevertheless, Russia was still too important to be ignored and not be embraced, which created further difficulties in demarcation of the geographical-*cum*-cultural frontiers of Europe. Europe's previous eastern border on Don, present as far back as in the Renaissance geography, was moved eastwards to the Urals. It is proven that Europe was merely the idea developing through the history: "Of course many devotees of European union are far from wishing to embrace Russia, even 'Russia-in-Europe', within their program. But, this only goes to show how awkward Europe is as a rallying cry. Western Europe may have coherence. Europe as a whole cannot avoid being the name for the 'western extension of Asiatic land mass'" [Hay, 1968: xvii]. On the other side of Europe's border, on Ural, therefore, emerged an extensive geographical and cultural region of the Russian Orient.

Russian view on Asia was largely associated with extreme hostility inherited from the traumatic memory of the Mongolian conquest (1237–1241) and the control of Golden Horde state (1240–1380). After this period, it shifts gradually its orientation towards Europe-centrism also in the context of being the eastern flank of Christendom. It strives to become a true member of "European" family of nations after Peter the Great's reforms. Russian intellectuals paid little attention to Asia, until Pyotr Chaadaev in his *Philosophical Letter* asserted shockingly Russia did not belong to Europe – thus, breaking up the debate between the Westernizers and Slavophiles. However, Chaadaev did not believe Russia had ever been part of Asia, and the Slavophiles in anti-Western statements did

not readily imply the inclusion of “Asiatic” values either [Riasanovsky, 1972: 8–9]. Russia considered to have distinct from Western principles, though in opposition to Asia, it definitely identified itself with Europe and the West [Riasanovsky, 1972: 17]. The position of the “white” Russian Empire was later the manifestation of a European civilizational choice and the opposition to the “yellow” rivals in Asia – Japan and China [Bukh, 2014: 178].

Consequently, the growth of Empire and accelerating economic and military contacts in the East reoriented its policy towards Asia. There were organized institutes of the Oriental Studies, which, in fact, was related to the colonial extensions and *mission civilisatrice* of Russia: “As the Russians expanded eastwards, they absorbed, subjugated, or made contact in one form or another with many Asian peoples, and in the process transmitted to them not only much of their own culture, but strong elements of general European culture as well” [Vucinich, 1972: ix]. In the first half of the 20th century, there appeared the Eurasianism, proclaiming the turn to the Asian heritage in the Russian culture and harmonic integration with the related Asian cultures of the crushing Empire [Riasanovsky, 1972: 29]. Eurasianism was not deprived of imperialistic character, proclaiming the Russian culture and the Orthodox Church as the core of the new ideology. Nevertheless, it remains an actual tool for the integration of various cultures of Russia’s political orbit, up to the contemporary time.

The idea of Siberia (the same as the “Orient”) emerged, thus, as a product of colonial activity of the Russian state in the northern part of Asia since the 17th century. It was a long, painful process of turning the northern Asia with nomadic communities into the agro-nomadic space with cultural, economic and confessional dominance of Slavic people. Siberia objectified two European discourses – the discourse of discovering of the North and the discourse of the “dozing” East [Peshkov, 2013: 338–339]. The frontiers of Siberia were far from being stable, including in the recent past the north-east Kazakhstan and northern borderland of China. Russian historian Pavel Nebolsin (1817–1893) wrote:

With the conquest of Siberia wherever Russian population moved northeastwards from Muscovy – everything was Siberia, and if we had had time, that

is, if we had wanted to extend further to occupy Beijing, Beijing would also had become Siberia [Nebolsin⁷].

Thus, in historical categories, Siberia is quite a recently invented idea. It will not be a mistake to argue that the whole literal heritage of the imperialist period is now the main and, if not the only, source for forming the image of Siberian people and Siberia. The Buryat culture is often restricted in analytical categories, like: “minority”, “native people”, “Siberia”, which close the culture in terms of “locality” and “indignity”. However, whether these colonial ideas mapped on that of native Siberians and whether they perceived themselves as “Siberians” or “Asians” are the matters for further considerations. The elements of ancient cults, like Zoroastrianism, close cultural and economic contacts with China are evidence of intensive cultural connections of Siberia with other regions of Asia.

The territories of current Buryatia were within the geography of numerous ancient states, such as: the Xiongnu Empire (209 BCE–93 CE), Xianbei state (93–234), Rouran Khaganate (330–555), Khitans states/Liao (907–1125), Mongol Empire (1206–1368), Yuan (1271–1368) and Northern Yuan (1368–1691). By the time of Russian colonization, the huge territories of contemporary Buryat Republic, Irkutsk Oblast and Zabaikalski krai were within the aimags/duchies of Tusheetu, Zasagtu and Setsen khans. After the gradual fall of the Mongol states in the 17th century, the Mongolian lands were included in the Qing and Russian Empires. Thus, the territory of Siberia was not closed within contemporary boundaries, but it was an integral part of historical and cultural formations of the continent. After the incorporation of Siberia into the Russian state in the 17th–18th century, there began a long process of cutting off Siberia from the rest of Asia [Peshkov, 2013: 340] (which, however, was not performed completely), reflected in describing Siberia as an empty landmass with a bunch of feeble tribes “discovered” and “explored” (*osvaivat*) by Cossack pioneers, which had no history before this date in the contemporary popular discourse. This could be compared to the British concept of *terra nullius* – the land of nobody,

⁷ This quote I borrowed from the documentary *Osvoenie Sibiri*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLtCMPmZrUI> (access date: 03.11.2015).

the uninhabited land or inhabited in improper way, which justifies and sanctifies its colonial expansion [Etkind, 2011: 94].

The time of numerous treaties fixing the eastern frontiers of the Russian Empire was a long and painful process changing the ethnic and cultural mosaics of the borderlands.⁸ It is certainly impossible to trace and create the modernistic project of a common history for Buryats because their ancestors were scattered in different Mongolian communities of Inner Asia and hardly could identify themselves in the categories, like: ethnicity, nation, religion, etc. Instead, it is worth considering the history as a sequence of narrations closely connected with the ideological background contemporary to them. This could also be applied in considering and reconsidering the academic, historical narrations, which enjoy a privileged position and consider local views on history in terms of legends, myths, or historic artefacts. The professional history in its status as a science, in contrast, represents itself as searching for the truth about the past without any practical use of it [White, 2010: 14⁹], however,

[...] there is no such thing as a “history” against which we could measure and assess the validity of any “antihistory” or “mythifications” intended to cover over and obscure the “truths” of the past [White, 2010: 12].

The multiple examples show how professional history, despite the proclaimed objectiveness, could depend on the general political and

⁸ See more on: https://www.academia.edu/38465560/Tsongol_B.Natsagdorj_Behind_the_Treaty_of_Nerchinsk_The_Foregone_Fate_of_a_Mongol_Noble_Family_Saksaha_15_2018.

⁹ Now, the professionalization of historical studies required, in principle at least, that the past be studied, as it was said: “for itself alone”, or as: “a thing in itself”, without any ulterior motive other than a desire of the truth (of fact, to be sure, rather than a doctrine) about the past and without any inclination to draw lessons from the study of the past and import them into the present in order to justify actions and programs for the future. In other words, the history in its status, as a science for the study of the past, had to purge itself of any interest in the practical past – except, of course, as the kind of an error or mistake characteristic of memory, to be corrected by a chaste historical consciousness which dealt only with “things as they are” or had been, never with what had served as desire’s “might have been” [White, 2010: 14].

cultural context. The idea that professional history developed, in fact, is parallel with the advancement of colonial powers and epistemic culture, which need to “discover” the newly acquired geographical and cultural areas.

1.2. Producing colonial knowledge about Siberia

The first scholars who made important notes on the Siberia (including the Buryat culture) in the 18th–19th centuries were as a rule citizens of the Russian Empire of German origin¹⁰ (also Moldavian, Swedish) who performed research work according to their academic position in Empire or noting the regions specificity in their travelogues. Ethnographic description of the region was rather a secondary task compared with the diplomatic missions to China, exploration of new territories and routes, as it was in case of the second Kamchatka expedition, or the Great Northern Expedition (1733–1743). The scholars in the 18th-century Siberia were as a rule: botanists, zoologists and natural historians, like: Johann Georg Gmelin (1709–1755), Peter Simon Pallas (1741–1811), Johann Gottlieb Georgi (1729–1802). Thus, naturalist and Darwinist metaphors were widely used in the reconstruction of the history and culture of non-European people. It was then that a professor of history and geography, Gerhard Friedrich Müller (1705–1783), developed the concept of ethnography as a separate discipline during the second Kamchatka expedition. Their reports were written in the typical manner of their epoch through the prisms of evolutionism, naturalism and general European enlightenment ideology [Demel, 2014; Girchenko, 1939: 77].

The racial theory widespread in the period from 18th century until World War II conditioned greatly the view on cultural differences. History and social development were perceived as a natural history and biological process respectively. They paid a lot of attention to physical

¹⁰ The role of German scholars was diminished and concealed due to the complication of political relations between Russia and Germany at the end of the 19th century, as well as in the post-World-War-II Soviet Union. Due to the common critiques of the “German dominance” (*niemetskoe zasylie*), many of the German scholars were named Russians and their names were popularized in a Russified form [Krongardt, 1999: 5].

characteristics as important indicators of classification of human beings apart from language and culture which, perhaps, contributed to the formation of an almost “biological” division of groups as “Mongols”, “Tatars”, “Manhcu”, etc. They paid much attention to the comparison between these and other groups which often was backed up with Darwinist assumption on better and worse formed races, hierarchies between them and gradation of beauty, civility, intellect and culture. Interesting was also that Japanese and Chinese “race” were ranked higher than the Mongol “race”, and the term Mongoloid was used not only as a term for a human “race”, but also as genetic defect, a kind of “degeneration” [Demel, 2014: 85]. The relation between the racial theory and racism in the academic discourse was quite evident. All in all, the view on culture was an aspect of natural history.

The early notes of the Buryats, though shedding light on their history, were still fragmental. A different quality of the researches and travelogues was brought by Eastern European researchers, like Poles, whose large part of population after Polish partitions found themselves in the Russian state. As the result of Polish uprisings in the 19th century, many of them were exiled to these lands as political criminals, many of them settled voluntarily. A very important fact is that different social and educational background, political and ideological orientation of the Polish researchers influenced greatly the wide range of approaches to the research subject and their quality and objectivity [Takasaeva, 2017: 83]. Both Siberian people and Poles found themselves in the position of a colonized population, which created the opportunity to capture the nuances of that reality, which were undistinguishable for the researcher of the West European countries, or the metropolises [Takasaeva, 2017: 65]. Their position, though formed by a dominating superiority discourse, was often empathetic to their researched people, as to the victims of Tsarism and potential allies in a potential battle with the Empire.¹¹ The image of Siberian people, apart from their

¹¹ The content of their research was very different. Apart from their undoubted contribution to the knowledge of the region, I want to mention that many of them were full of racist attitude towards the local population (for example, the diaries of Agaton Giller (1867) *Opisanie zabajkalskiej krainy w Syberyji*); though, it was a norm during this historical period.

representation in Russian colonial discourse, was used as an instrument for criticism of political refugees against the Russian state.

Nevertheless, they were also presented not only as exiles and peasant settlers, but also in the administrative, military and diplomatic apparatus of the Empire. A Polish scholar, Waław Forajter, even used the term “colonized colonizer” [Forajter, 2014] for them, because being themselves the victims of Russian colonialism, they produced a rich amount of knowledge of the Siberian region which, in turn, in a large measure was used by the Empire to expand its power. This concerns geographic and mineralogical exploration of the colonized territories, military service and anthropological notes often used in management of the local population. The character of the produced knowledge, as I have mentioned, was ambivalent, ranging from the empathic vic-timized view on the “natives” to the narrations of Western superiority.

Also interesting is the case of the Decembrists, who were sent to Buryatia after the Decembrist Revolt and, according to the Soviet narrations, contributed to the enlightenment and civilizing of the local population, as the forefathers of the Russian revolution. This is also what I could read in the literature and hear in the Museum of the Decembrists in Novoselenginsk, Buryatia. However, in fact, they left scarce notes on the Buryat life, while the Buryat chronicle of Dambi-Zhaltsan Lombotsyrenov in 1868 writes about them as those who “with bad plans initiated the adverse actions against the imperial government”. The Decembrists are denoted as “criminals” (*gemte khünüüd, yalatan*) [Lombotsyrenov, 1992: 143] and though the author does not express hostility towards them, there is definitely no devotion towards them on his side. In this context, it is important to give voice to the “locals” who never were passive recipients of such contacts.

Thus, one could see that the academic tradition of ethnography was tightly connected with major European intellectual trends through invited scholars from Western Europe. Russia, in this respect, borrowed many ideas of the colonial ideology and, to some degree, became itself the victim of these ideologies. In the 19th century, Russian intellectuals accused the Enlightenment in Russia of having “colonial character” and the colonial language was widely used in criticism of its own culture [Etkind, 2011: 70].