

Is there Nationalism among post soviet Siberian Ethnic Minorities?

(Buryats in looking for National Idea)

As a preliminary mark I's say that during my staying in US and in Berkeley in particular I have become more confident that all "post soviet nationalisms" in Russia are neither post soviet nor nationalism. I do not apply for final answering this question, still I think that systematic knowledge of the situation in Siberia allows to make a conclusion that all the processes of this kind are, first, similar and, second, can be brought to unified classification and typology.

Studies in post soviet ethnonationalisms are on the one hand numerous and topical but on the other hand they all are describing the political revival in more or less similar way though some of them concern mainly the practices of ethnonationalist displays (Koliev, Kara-Murza) and the others are focusing on theoretical approaches to the problem (Zdravomyslov, Tsutsyev, Sokolov).

At present even in the conditions of the expressed and strong tendencies to depoliticize the ethnopolitical practices in Russia (that is obviously shown both in strategic planning of the authorities and in mass consciousness) the national identity still plays an important role in choosing the identification preferences. Therefore every ethnocultural revival in Russia though in many cases having no explicit political features testifies to reproduction of profound ideas about inborn differences between different ethnic groups because of genetically inherited biological attributes and cultural features.

In many cases present-day ethnicity whatever we understand under this term is more often studied from the point of its political mobilization (Juviler, Richmond, Smith et al., Todorova). For the anthropologists nevertheless it's getting clear that theoretical basis for research must be found rather in the sphere of collective myths

(tradition) then in the current political sphere, the latter being a reflection of more constant and deeper ideas, though foggy enough, about common interest and supposed equality. This brings us to the classical works on correlation between ethnic and national consciousness (E. Renan) and common goals, which unite a state and its citizens into a nation unlike an archaic ethnic group (M. Weber). But ethnicity remains topical even in the modern society thanks to deep emotional context of the supposed kinship which strengthens solidarity more than state belonging (N Glazer, D.P. Moynihan). This point of view was also distinctively shown in the works written by R. F. Benedict and M. Mead who built the basis for the interdisciplinary approach in cultural and social anthropology having shown and analyzed a variety of cultures for proving the role of culture (traditions) in formation of social motivations and behavior.

Anthropological research in ethnicity, nations, and nationalism can be productive if culture is considered as a system of symbols or as Yuri Lotman proposed to name this, the semiosphere. Functioning ethnicity is one of manifestations of the synchronic semiotic space, which possesses the ability to keep or remember its previous conditions and represents itself as a semiotic mechanism in the social processes. Similarly the social functions of cultural memory have been studied by R. Barth in his works on mythologies (including modern myth-creation) who argued that the myth possessed ability to adapt for changing external conditions and in turn was the most effective way to ordering the ideas about the world and best means of social regulation.

Insufficiency of strict political or sociological approach to the problem of ethnicity was well shown by H. H. Bash. Arguing on crisis of the American sociology and necessity to include the sociological researches into wider social-anthropological space, he marked that the ideas about inevitable assimilation of ethnic groups in the USA by means of merging into national integrity have come to grief because all previously dominant ideas were too rigid and didn't take into consideration the important concomitant factors of cultural character. The new

universal methodology, which is now actively applied in nearly every sphere of humanities, is constructivism-relativism (externalism) that is strongly opposed by primordialists-objectivists (internalists). The constructivist paradigm appears to be the most relevant to the research of ethnonational practices; simultaneously this scientific methodology faced strong resistance on the side of both scholars (especially ethnographers) and practitioners.

Constructivist extremism which brings the whole variety of social and practical displays of ethnicity to vulgar instrumentalism appears to be hopeless in researching complex practices, which are not limited to political interests or manipulation with public consciousness. Instead it appears more productive to combine the core of constructivist paradigm with the semiological structuralism in appliance to cultural sphere and phenomena. Thus every element of culture can be studied separately with simultaneous recognition that in social practices such a division is absolutely speculative.

Now about the problem I'm working on at present. Having researched the all principal and many secondary ethno-political developments in Russia, I've come to a conclusion that nationalist ideology among Siberian ethnic minorities and Buryats among them didn't bring to any wide scale nationalist movement – which is understand in B. Andersen's terms as aspiration to build up a sovereign state of *our own*. Then the question arises whether this movement can be named nationalism in strict scientific sense that implies political essence of constructing either ethno-nation or state-nation. For this reason it becomes topical to give distinct term for national or nationalist feelings that in many respects define social climate in Russia.

The period of Perestroika and disintegration of the USSR inspired the ethnic elites for looking for national idea, which of course could be found in the glorious past only. Millenarist ideas among Buryats were rather strong especially in connection with the theme of political repressions, less concerning men and women who were subjected to repressions, and more the nation in total as a political victim of

Stalinism. All-Mongolian past especially the Mongol Empire became for a certain period a central motif in the ideology of national revival alongside with proclaiming the sovereignty and Buryat citizenship. It was time when some Buryats for example mongolized their names and supported the idea of returning to the republic of Buryatia its former name Buryat-Mongolia. Thus this first period of ethnic revival really had nationalist features at least because contained calls to political unification with Mongolia. Simultaneously majority of Buryats with their rather negative then optimistic attitude to Mongols never spoke seriously about this scenario placing in the most cases the Russian identity higher then all-Mongolian. The elites nevertheless made their best to divide the population of the Republic; in the Constitution that was passes in 1994 one of the articles directly points at ethnic differences: “the borders of the Republic can be revised only at approval of the referendum, and the decision is regarded as the approved one only in the case if <...> more then half of the citizens of the Buryat nationality who took part in voting gave their voices for it [Constitution of the republic of Buryatia, 1994, Article 60]. Thus the boundary between ethnic groups in the Republic has been outlined legally and special rights and privileges of the Buryats in political and administrative sphere have been fixed in the main Law. Yes, this short period from the end of 1980-es up to middle of 1990-es can be named a period of political mobilization of ethnic feelings with a principal ideogem of inborn right.

The next period when all the power resources have been already redistributed the national agitation of elites focused on preserving and reproduction of cultural heritage, first of all concerning the Buryat language and ethnic religious traditions.

The third period which in my mind began with the time of Vladimir Putin is very special. For elites it became unprofitable to play a national card. With prohibition to use ethnic markers in the names of political parties all they collapsed imperceptibly for the public. The most rationally thinking representatives of elites joined Edinaya Rossiya and have completely kept separate from their previous nationalist slogans. Currently on the distinct nationalist positions stands a group of

intellectuals (humanities for the most) who organize meetings, pickets, round tables and conferences and publish newspapers.

Simultaneously the current period in Buryatia is characterized with seemingly late but strong feedback with the former ideology. This response has cultural filling for the most but still is stable and active. Artistic culture gives numerous examples of ethnic identity manifestations concerning historical and political memory, returning back the names of great ancestors and revival of traditions. I call this all as popular re-ethnization, which has high and low forms of manifestations, that are artistic and everyday ones, high cultural and boorish. A question inevitably arises: whether this was and is nationalism? Or may be post soviet realities gave birth to something else, which has never before existed in the world history, I mean nationalism beyond political activity for creation a national state? If we use such terms as *ethnicism* or *cultural nationalism* or *defending nationalism*, we will just substitute one term with other obscure one and will never find answer to the question.

At least to myself I have answered this question. Postsoviet ethnonationalism in Russia is a process of looking for national identity and not political sovereignty. This is fed from different sources and not the last of them is mutual distrust and intolerance that is aggravated less by racism and more by incredible indifference on the side of both state and public to ever continuing ethnic disintegration of Russia – the process which I would not name the bloodless civil war but which in some respects really reminds unrest with compulsory mass r.

Horizontal solidarity though imaginary is becoming the only social tie that alike in the primitive community provides security of ethnocultural borders also imaginary but still giving some kind of stability in the unstable country.

Symbolical capital of ethnicity can give and gives real dividends though not to all. In reality people understand it well that alongside with the borders which separate the group from the others there are not less strong borders inside the ethnic group

(western and eastern, rural and urban, educated and non-educated). The romantic political national idea failed to unite people for many reasons and became senseless in the new conditions. But there still exists a sphere which maintains the idea of horizontal solidarity, and this is religion. It is not by occasion that at present all the Buryats independently of faith and traditional religious belonging ascribe themselves to the Buddhist Sangha.

Having supported with enthusiasm the appeals on the side of elites to reethnization, the Buryat population was rather indifferent to its practical realization. The number of those who would like to know the ethnic language is high and simultaneously the number of those who name it as their native language or as second to Russian is reducing though at present it's not a problem to learn Buryat as a foreign language.

The only sphere, which is still fulfilling an ethno-integrating function, is religion – the Shamanism and Buddhism both. Methodologically, the principal or core questions that characterize the religious situation in Siberia are the following: 1. having become the only indisputable nation-consolidating factor religion has *substituted* and *transformed* the nationalism of late-soviet and Perestroika period, and 2. as a matter of fact, desecularization appears to be not a challenge on the side on clerical or political elites; most probably this is a spontaneously manifesting feeling of ethnic solidarity among commoners (though this feeling has been of course aggravated primarily by ethnic elites). Religion at present is the only sphere in which elites can count on adequate response and feedback with the public at least because this doesn't contradict to the principal psychological and social functions of religion – that of compensation and regulation. And thus we can see that the national religious complex fulfills besides purely spiritual functions also numerous other ones including absolutely secular.

It would be very interesting to make typological and classification comparisons between Buryat religious renovation and that among other Siberian natives. Say, in the Sakha-Yakutia republic in the beginning of the 1990-es one could see strong

attempts to “rehabilitate and revive” shamanic cult of Aiygy (or Tangra) that has been represented as a monotheistic religion (!) compatible to Christian Orthodoxy. Neo-paganism has been declared to be a national religion of Yakuts and found rather deep sympathy among intellectuals. But the state authorities of Yakutia who have chosen namely Orthodoxy as an object of support paid special attention to strengthening of this religion. In full mutual understanding between the state and church the archbishop Herman has undertaken the attempts to introduce divine services in Yakut (compare with the initiative on the side of some Buryat clerics to change the Tibetan language of preaching into Buryat). The examples of this kind are numerous and they need special research which will be the topic of my further investigation.

To summarize the above-said: though political nationalism has not become a characteristic feature of Buryat political ideology in secessionist and irredentist sense, still the sphere of manifestation of ethnic loyalty is not reducing. Typologically we can see analogies in other ethnic groups and similar processes. Of course, cultural essence of ethnosphere doesn't mean that it is completely depoliticized. Any of its elements serves first of all as a marker of ethnicity and can be used for political purposes. Moreover, political context in this or that degree is meant in every ethno-national manifestation which explicitly differentiates the group from others in the multi-cultural and political communality with overwhelming majority of one ethnos as it is in Russia.

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