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Narratives of Social Change in Rural Buryatia, Russia

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NARRATIVES OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN RURAL BURYATIA, RUSSIA

by

LUIS RAIMUNDO JESÚS ORTIZ ECHEVARRÍA

Under the Direction of Jennifer Patico

ABSTRACT

This study explores postsocialist representations of modernity and identity through narratives of social change collected from individuals in rural communities of Buryatia, Russia. I begin with an examination of local conceptualizations of the past, present, and future and how they are imagined in places and spaces. Drawing on 65 days of fieldwork, in-depth interviews, informal discussion, and participant-observation, I elaborate on what I am calling a *confrontation* with physical triggers of self in connection to place, including imaginations of the countryside and village, sacred and ritual spaces, landscapes, and the environment. I also explore how the anxieties embedded in narratives of change are connected to aspiration for the future and nostalgia for the past.

INDEX WORDS: Modernity, Identity, Social change, Rural, Urban, Buryatia, Buryat, Russia, Siberia, Post-socialism

NARRATIVES OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN RURAL BURYATIA, RUSSIA

by

LUIS RAIMUNDO JESÚS ORTIZ ECHEVARRÍA

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Republic of Buryatia - an administrative subject of Russian Federation.
Capital city: Ulan Ude.
Population: 960 thousand.
Area: 351 300 sq. km.

PREFACE

Locating the Beginning

In my childhood, I spent countless hours looking over my family's atlas staring into the pages of distant lands with unfamiliar names and in the most remote corners of the world. I was particularly mesmerized by the geographic enormity that was the Soviet Union. Territory names like Yakutsk, Irkutsk, and Kamchatka not only evoked awe by their foreignness, but also evoked memories of playing RISK in Puerto Rico with my grandmother and sister until the wee hours of the night. So when the Soviet Union collapsed in August 1991, this mysterious place of personal intrigue was suddenly the center of global attention.

Many years later, I took my first look at the Buryat landscape from a slow moving Trans-Siberian train from Irkutsk headed to Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatia. From that day on, all things "Russia" whether its language, position on a map, or board game, or simply in conversation were no longer about a mysterious place, but were indexed by a defined place, Buryatia. Going to Buryatia for the first time in 2000, was of course, a seminal moment in my life, in that it built upon years of Russian language and area studies and Soviet and post-communist course-work, research, and reading. The experiences I lived through, the stories that I heard and later told and retold, the sacred practices that evoked curiosities, and the wilderness I came to revere all became a significant part of my own personal narrative. Siberia became, in the eyes of my friends and family, a place mysteriously connected with notions of me as a son, brother, friend, person, and student. It was this realization that led me back to Buryatia for this project.

In mid-June 2009, I took my first steps in Ulan-Ude and I knew there was one place I was obliged to visit before I started my research. Passing immense infrastructural changes in the ur-

ban landscape, as well as familiar streets and architectural beauty, I hastily walked to the central square, Soviet Square, to see the famous sculpture of Lenin's head. Built in 1970 for the centennial of Lenin's birth, this bronze sculpture is the largest in the world standing at 7.7 meters (25 feet) high and weighing 42 tons. Across the former Soviet Union, the narratives and symbols of the Soviet period have been largely re-written and reassessed. The statues of Lenin in the center of hundreds of thousands of villages across Eurasia are either silently revered or dismantled and replaced with new symbols often from pre-Soviet times. Despite these changes and the dismantling and restructuring of Soviet power, the dream of Soviet modernity remains extremely meaningful across the former Soviet Union and encapsulated in street names and plazas show continuities amidst transition and change. Located in the heart of Ulan-Ude, the sculpture of Lenin's head is by far the most prominent of these symbolic remnants. The monument was described to me as the uniting and harmonizing architectural force of the plaza and the core of the city. One academic said to me that without the monument nothing would bring together the beauty of the plaza. To most, it is an easy meeting place for friends. Yet, to others, the sculpture is embarrassing and meaningless. What no one said to me explicitly was that the symbol of Lenin communicates a particular vision of the past and future that was indeed meaningful. Although there have been instances when removing the bust was seriously discussed ultimately it was decided that the bust was too important for tourism and thus perhaps also for understanding the present. Without the sculpture, I heard a traveling American ask, why would a foreigner get off the Trans-Siberia Railway in a provincial town like Ulan-Ude?

The plaza where the bust is located is a bustling but quaint city center of pedestrians, museums, cafés, music, buses, cars, and trams – it is a place of movement. The newly opened opera house glistens beside a new fountain where young people congregate and timid couples hold

hands. The newly renovated Baikal Plaza Hotel boasts a large banner announcing an international economic development conference in Ulan-Ude - part of larger national and regional discourses of rapid economic development. Men and women come in an out of street-level restaurants and cafés chatting on Megafon or MTS cell phones. Along the entire length of the plaza kiosks sell everything from Georgian *khachapuria* bread to ice cream, soda, newspapers, and cigarettes. The bust, in a sense, watches over this culturally, socially, politically, and economically charged space. While the bust has different personal, historic, and symbolic values to different individuals, it represents continuity amongst discourses of transition and becomes an interesting location in which to contemplate the intersections of the past, present, and future.

That I started my fieldwork by visiting the bust of Lenin was somewhat accidental, but quite prescient. The themes that emerged during my research mirrored these intersections in time and place: change, nostalgia, and dreams. The narratives of change I will explore below will illustrate the emotive power of place and practice in framing identities and survival repertoires and their relation to modernity, economic development, cultural and ecological preservation, and notions of self. As I walked around the square staring at the bust and the plaza, I realized that I too am an element and instrument in this research; this research was defined largely by my own personal biography and connection to place. Even on that first day, just hours after my plane landed in Buryatia from Moscow, I noticed how this place was already laden with my memories. The *pochtamt* from where I sent post-cards. The hotel where Vanya worked. The movie theater where I saw a dubbed version of *Gladiator*. The plaza where I drank beer on my 21st birthday and toasted *za zamu,* or *to winter*, to the great confusion and amusement of my friends. Staring at the monument I wondered what I would see, hear, experience, and learn while

in Buryatia. I pondered how I myself have changed in the past nine years since I last walked across this plaza and what continuities I bring from my own life experiences.

Now, with an eye to ethnography, the city awakened in me curiosities grounded in years of academic interest in Russia, the Soviet Union, and post-socialism. In full recognition of the time restraints of my study, I focused my research on the minutest of everyday social practices; I hypothesized that the mundane and ordinary, especially embedded within narratives, would lead me to a better understanding of the daily outlooks and concerns of my informants[1] – a daily life that for a brief period of time we shared. As will be discussed subsequently, narratives of change in post-socialist Buryatia are more complex and nuanced than simply an examination of a shared experience *after* socialism. In the first two chapters, I will situate Buryatia and my methodology in socio-historical time and place. In Chapter II, I will explore the multiplicity of voices and perceptions of social change that I heard and collected. I will show how personal conceptualiza-tions of modernity, tradition, past, present, and future are intricately connected to imaginations of place and space, particularly in the construction of Kurumkan countryside and the capital city, Ulan-Ude. In Chapter III, I examine how social change and gender expectations are situated and informed by gendered places, spaces, and practices. I show how expected gender behaviors are connected to different discourses of *Buryatness* and personal imaginings of the past and future. Lastly, in Chapter IV, I will use landscapes to describe what I call a confrontation with physical determinants or triggers of self in connection to place. What follows is an exploration and an attempt to organize what I heard, saw, and felt in that particular time and place.

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[1] See Ortner (1984) for a genealogy of theory from the 1960s to the mid-1980s that traces the evolution and emer-gence of practice approaches in anthropology.

I.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Constructing (Soviet) Nations

Early Soviet authorities found themselves with a vast and multi-ethnic empire stretching across the Carpathian Mountains of Eastern Europe to the volcanic landscapes of Kamchatka. In the early years after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent Russian Civil War, Soviet policies first prioritized the consolidation of the country and legitimization of Soviet power, only later to place greater attention to the indoctrination of communist ideology (Hirsch 2000, Slezkine 1994a, Grant 1995). The consolidation of power took many forms, but of particular concern in this study was the concerted effort to order and value, and thus shape, identities. The Soviet state placed special emphasis on the categorization and institutionalization of indigenous identities in a strategic effort to co-opt indigenous groups into the rhetoric of a pan-civic identity (Brubaker 1994:50, Grant 1995, Balzer 1999b, Slezkine 1994a, Hirsch 1997, 2000). To do this, the state systematically institutionalized a political-administrative structure where citizens were classified according to a biological heritage connected to an ethno-territorial unit (Slezkine 1994a, Balzer 1999b, Sokolovski 1999). The designation of collective physical spaces gave individuals sites from where they could experience and participate in the socialist endeavor.

Brubaker (1994) notes that ethnic nationality (Rus. *natsional'nost'*) transcended being a mere statistical category to become an obligatory legal category that was key to an individual's political and society-endorsed identity (53). Recognized and normalized identities were privileged by legal protections, capital investments, and the attainment of a higher rank in a social hierarchy of nations and identities. Brubaker also explains an ideological incongruence in Soviet nationalities policy: definitions of nationhood could be territorial and political or personal and ethno-cultural (55). This conceptual tension meant that although individuals were under the full

jurisdiction of national territories, their personal nationality was in fact based on biological ethnic and cultural descent. This meant that some individuals found themselves living outside of their homelands. In the context of Buryatia, with the dissolution of the Buryat-Mongol Republic, some Buryats found themselves living outside of the newly created Republic of Buryatia, while Evenki, another indigenous group in northern Buryatia, found themselves living within the Buryat homeland, rather than in their homeland, the Evenki autonomous region. Whether individuals found themselves within or outside of their homelands, this paradigm created a deep connection between identity, place, and boundaries. Slezkine describes this in terms of "forces of gravity" that, although someone's name or place of residence could change, the nationality inscribed on their passports, pulled them to a specific homeland, which could not be changed (1994a:444). In contrast, the regions dominated by ethnic-Russians were free of any designation. Thus for ethnic minorities, their officially endorsed, territorially bound identities became a fundamental unit of social and personal vindication.

The implementation of Soviet nationalities policy was an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of state-sponsored nation-building efforts (Brubaker 1994, Slezkine 1994, Kotkin 2007:522-523, others would perhaps argue that capitalism and industrialization played a greater role Wolf 1982:7-9). Across an expanse spanning one-fifth of the world, the Soviet state sponsored, codified, institutionalized, and invented nationhood. Officially, these policies were enacted to erase the hegemonic colonial and bourgeois practices of the Russian Empire before the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, but as implied above they were explicit strategies for integrating large expanses of land and indigenous peoples into a highly centralized economic and political entity (Hirsch 2000, Brubaker 1994, Slezkine 1994a, Sokolovski 1999). In so doing, the Soviet state altered the Russian imperial relationship with traditional peoples, yielding a decidedly dif-

ferent colonial relationship between the colonizers and the colonized (Abramson 2000). However, social theorists like Michel Foucault ask us to pay critical attention to the structures that regulate human behavior. He revealed the central role that social norms, in conjunction with state coercion, play in influencing individual notions of freedom, agency, and self. While it is important to note the political dimensions of Soviet nationalities policy and the promise of Soviet modernity to indigenous minorities, more importantly, the dispositions of local agents also helped to shape social memory and identities.

Grant (1995) helps to demystify the specific historical and macro-level processes described above by grounding them in the experiences of the Nivkhi people in Sakhalin Island. His ethnographic work shows how Soviet identity-forming strategies came to shift the social norms of indigenous groups. Through a Foucauldian lens, I analyzed his work by highlighting three elements of social regulation intrinsically embedded in nationalities policy. First, he describes elements of cultural regulation like the objectification and commoditization of cultural goods and practices, especially the codification of local languages and the establishment of local literary traditions. Through a combination of ideology, ethnographic investigation, universal education and literacy the state helped to incentivize local and even union-wide consumption of these cultural goods. Secondly, geography, place, and the spaces between were regulated by the consolidation of villages, collectivization, industrialization, and urbanization. Standardizing space led to monitoring and verifying conformity that fundamentally shifted an individual's relationship and interaction with the environment and their communities. Anderson (2000a) notes that amongst the Evenki of Taimyr that the Soviet imagination of landscapes as bounded spaces that fits beside other bounded spaces was largely at odds with indigenous flexible ways of conceptualizing spaces (15). Lastly, Grant describes elements of bodily regulation like the valuation of

certain behaviors, hygiene, cleanliness, and dress, that in a sense redefined local dispositions of mind and body (also see Foucault in Rabinow 1984:54). The state also appropriated the language of women's emancipation and challenged locally defined gender roles and traditional structures (Hemment 2007:8). Through these Foucauldian discourses of conformity and compliances, individual and group behavior is regulated and internalized, in turn circulating through the social body and becoming inscribed into personal outlook. These domains of social regulation fundamentally altered social norms across the Soviet Union, redefining normal subjects, practices, and expectations.

As seen above, the institutionalization of nationalistic categories and the redefinition of cultural, spatial, and bodily elements were motivated by a political desire to redefine national divisions across the Soviet Union. This relationship between the state and indigenous communities has traditionally been described as one of power imbalances. However, Grant affirms that historically oppressed groups within the former Soviet Union were not passive consumers of nationalities policy, but active shapers, resisters, and owners of that legacy (also see Balzer 1999a, Beyer 2007, Safonova & Sántha 2007). Grant shows how local actors, in fact, also positioned their specific interests vis-à-vis state mechanisms of power based on their particular social, political, and economic context. Yet, in order to further legitimize the Soviet system, the Soviet model needed to demonstrate how authentically savage "others" could in fact become modern (Abramson 2000). Stated differently, the state's primary focus was the creation of proper, objectified subjects. The cultivation of national elites who could champion the new institutionalized cultures was a vital factor in the success of nationalities policy. Soviet policies of assigning certain groups with territory over others and the process of *korenizatsiia* or "nativization" during the 1920s and 1930s provided certain ethnically defined populations with preferential placement in

government appointed posts within the national territories (Brubaker 1994, Slezkine 1994a:415, Sokolovksi 1999). In fact, Brubaker notes how in Soviet and post-Soviet discourses that nationalist struggle is bettered characterized as the struggle of institutionally defined national elites rather than nations (48-49). While national elites were politically and economically invested in nationalities policy, an emotional attachment to national homelands should not be underestimated. Foucault reminds us that identity comes into being through historically specific discourses. As such, when evaluating Soviet nationalities policy as a process that defined essentialized ethnic identity categories, we can reflect on the rather fluid and changeable nature of Soviet discourse and see how despite concerted efforts, identification was embraced rather quickly.

In the above literature, we see a dual legacy inherited by minorities across the former Soviet space. On the one hand, nationhood is institutionalized within territory and on the other hand, nationhood is also institutionalized as a deeply personal sense of rational identity. However, there is a third legacy, that although nationalities discourse remained strong even in the late Soviet era, already by the late 1930s, it was clear that the Soviet Union was asserting itself more as *Russian* (Slezkine 1994a:443, Hirsch 2000). Not only were local languages switched to the Cyrillic alphabet (after first using the Latin alphabet), but also Russian was the language of political discourse. While nationhood was institutionalized at the local and personal levels, the process itself was creating greater political, economic, and behavioral similarities across the union than differentiation. Kotkin reminds us that part and parcel of nationalities policy was that the "nations were decidedly *Soviet* nations" (2007:525) and that the dream of modernity to be achieved through nationhood was one situated within European and Russian ideologies and behaviors. More directly, nationhood was simultaneously codified and undermined; the repercussions of which factor significantly in post-socialist ethnic and cultural revitalization movements

in that institutionalized culture and local narratives and practices of culture perhaps do not always seamlessly align.

With this backdrop, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 set into motion a dramatic shift in how indigenous peoples across the Soviet Union viewed themselves, their experience within the Soviet system, and their relationship to authority and ideology. Communities and individuals who once were integral actors in shaping the Soviet narrative suddenly felt powerless to respond to their changing social conditions, which have had a dramatic influence in their lives ranging from decisions within the household, employment, and migration. Underpinning dramatic changes in social and human conditions, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a reconfiguration of power relations between the center and periphery, majority and minority (see Burawoy & Verdery 1999, Humphrey 1999a, Wolfe 2000, Moore 2001, Buckler 2009). The oppositional identities of *me*, *us*, and *them,* took on new forms of meaning that needed to be critically reevaluated in the post-socialist context.

1.2   Constructing (Modern) Capital Cities

Parallel to these institutionalized forms of nationhood was the symbolic role that the capital cities of the national republics and autonomous regions came to embody. Capital cities are emotionally laden spaces where people, practices, political, economic, and cultural ideologies converge and intermingle in often-contentious ways. Cities are a particular space for "emplacement… where distinctions between citizen and subject could be marked, where the mobility of native ideas, bodies, and economies could be controlled and where the signs of modernity could be inscribed" (Simone & Boudreau 2009:990). In the context of the Soviet Union's ethno-territorial structure, the capital cities of its national republics and autonomous regions came to

represent pathways to modernity; gateways through which indigenous backwardness could be eliminated and nations could "catch up" to their former oppressors in distant imperial cities (Slezkine 1994a). Soviet authorities deployed ethnographers, linguists, and statisticians to support the cultural development of these capitals and helped to establish national theaters, libraries, museums, and scientific, cultural, and linguistic centers. Capital cities played the politico-economic role of decentralized points across the union where cultural products and identity could be organized and regulated within territorially defined nations. For ethnic minorities in the former Soviet Union, cities played an important social function, whereby the city became the embodiment of a unified and orderly national space and idea. The city and its institutions came to represent institutionalized sociality and normativity (Lianos 2003: 413). In a sense, the very idea of an ethnic community was situated in a place that individuals could either participate in, aspire to participate in, or see from an emotional distance. The commoditization of culture into normative and authentic products, although local in form, synchronized with Western and Russian notions of culture, giving rise to particular constructed spaces, products, and identities as vehicles of meaning within Soviet modernity. Despite some contentions, the symbols that were institutionalized in capital cities came to represent ideal cultural models in that they represented deliberate enactments of practices that are observable in specific contexts and timeframes, encapsulated in events and festivals or commemorative speeches and structures, and which are sanctioned and valued over other practices. This more dynamic conceptualization of cities makes it possible to imagine capital cities as systems of overlapping networks populated with objects whether buildings, monuments, or flags where people shape their personal imaginations of self through the consumption of these products. The consumption of these products made individuals *kul'turnii* or cultured.

Drawing on anthropological debates on nation-making processes (Foster 1991, Appadurai 1990, 2006, Elden 2005), the significance of capitals and symbols can be characterized as a form of "naturalization of the arbitrary" that function by state invention, regulation, commoditization, and diffusion of symbols and narratives of a cultural heritage (Foster 1991). Foster delineates the tools used by national governments and regulating institutions and ideologies in the deliberate creation and reproduction of culture, calling into questions the free will of its subjects. Yet to assume that these spaces were not actively created and shaped by local actors – that is by indigenous peoples – is an oversimplification. In the context of Buryatia, Amogolonova (2008) reminds us that ethnic resurgence is a process of cultural identification and, therefore is part of a "homogenizing, differentiating or classifying discourse appealing to people who are supposedly associated with each other (8). Other social theorists describe these processes of creating official and normalized categories as a nuanced exercise of power that functions through the social bodies of its subjects, in its bureaucratic and interpersonal networks and their daily practices (Kotkin 1995, Foucault in Rabinow 1984:61). The significance of these national territories and their capitals were jointly informed and manipulated by local and national agents, institutions, and ideologies.

While these discussions of identity focus on the complex political and historical determinants of self in the former Soviet space, they miss the deep, personal, and psychological embrace of the Soviet Union's ideals to ethnic minorities. Grant states that when the ideals of Soviet modernity collapsed indigenous groups began to question why they had to sacrifice so much of their heritage for that now obsolete socialist goal. Buck Quijada observes that in Buryatia, the ironic sentiment amongst ethnic-Buryats that the "ideals of the Soviet period had been traded in for the promised benefits of capitalism and democracy, most of which had proven illusory"

(2008:16). Identity and identity politics in the former Soviet Union must be explored with an understanding of its political, social, and historical factors and the overlapping national, civic, and regional elements that played into emotional constructions to self. It is also important to recognize identity as something that is not static but which is in contextual flux through the different stages of an individual's life. Individuals are not passive recipients of identity but agents that negotiate, embrace, redefine, and even reject various elements through which national cultures are constructed. Place is a salient feature in these constructed identities; with place and boundaries eventually becoming the most important defining feature of that nationality. In the national territories identities were embodied in grounded structures: the buildings, monuments, and theaters. One was intimately connected with the land. Again, Slezkine's description of "forces of gravity" is useful in that identities are inscribed not only into someone's passport, but also into the space they occupy. This institutionalized sense of identity and territory had political implications, of course, but as Brubaker alludes to and as I will argue, it also fostered an interconnected relationship between self and place. While elite discourses attempted to define culture in terms of an organic whole with centralized and standardized cultural products, the experience in rural communities was of intersection, decentralization, and resistance. Rural communities, I argue, resisted elite discourses of culture through persistent, if at sometimes hidden, kinship structures, regional identities, adherence to spiritual practices, and non-standard linguistic modes. Abstract and officially endorsed identities were instead adaptive practices serving particular social functions.

In this study, I identified the way in which place was evoked as an important determinant of self. Instead of an imagined community floating in space, in this study the physical landscape and movement between spaces is approached as a trigger that grounds otherwise abstracted no-

tions of self. I treat place as something that is not just physical or passive, but as an active element in the organization of the social world and the construction of self. I do this by paying particular attention to the routes people travel to connect to other spaces and other people. In a sense place emerged as an object through which my informants talked about social change and resistance.

For the reasons stated above, capital cities in post-socialist Russia are ideally situated for cultural revitalization movements. Ulan-Ude, founded in 1666, was transformed by Soviet nationalities policy from a provincial Russian trading center in Siberia to the capital of the Buryat nation[2]. As with the description of capital cities above, Ulan-Ude became the center of Buryat culture, science, education, and politics. In her book, *The Modern Buryat Ethnosphere* (2008) Amogolonova states that the city embodies the achievements of Buryat socialist modernization and urbanization in the Soviet and post-Soviet period and is vital in the transformation and consolidation of *Buryatness* (243-244). She elaborates that as the center of the Buryat ethnos, Ulan-Ude is perceived as a guarantor for the future of the Buryat people (*гарантии будущего для этноса*) (251). Amogolonova explains how images of cultural and historical memory are interwoven in contemporary art and poetry, constructing notions of the city, some with recognizable physical features, while some clearly discursive (220). What Amogolonova calls *ethnic nationalism*, one not dependent on geo-political independence, is a phenomenon tied largely to the strengthening of a Buryat cultural sphere, that includes revitalization and attention to local language, customs, religion, history, education, and folk art. The population shift in Buryatia occurring now can be attributed to popular reaction and interaction with these discourses of Buryat nation at a very personal level. The draw of modernity and its formation through discourses of

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[2] Zhimbiev 2001 argues that the pre-Ulan-Ude landscape was not, in fact, an empty space, but a landscape that held culturally specific meanings for nomadic Buryats.

city and countryside is the angle in from which I attempt to understand social change as something that is experienced in place. While I acknowledge that nation building is a top-down phenomenon experienced simultaneously at different levels, I seek to take the analysis of social change a step further by imagining social change through my informants' connection to and in between places. Thus social change, which I originally attempted to understand in terms of a linear progression, is more of an active embodied process, on a continuum that informs both ends of the spectrum through movement. Through this analytical frame, I came to see the narratives of change as indeed political. The narratives of social change that I collected, I will argue, not only identify, value, and organize change, but also create and embody change.

1.3 Background

The border between Russia and China demarcates two distinct cultural, economic, and demographic landscapes. To the north, Russian Siberia is a resource-rich yet under-populated expanse. To the south, China is a resource-poor, economic powerhouse with the largest population in the world. The ethnic minorities along this border, including the Buryat people[3], have long been influenced by the competing powers surrounding them[4]. The Republic of Buryatia is a relatively small region in the southern part of Eastern Siberia, situated to the east of Lake Baikal. Buryatia stretches over an area of 351,300 square kilometers (135,640 square miles) and is inhabited by a population of 969,000 people. Despite over three centuries of affiliation with Rus-

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[3] The establishment of the border between the Russian Empire and Qing China in 1727 is considered a beginning of the formation of an independent Buryat ethnicity. For an in depth analysis of Buryat society and structure refer to Humphrey (1998).

[4] Berdahl (1999) shows how being situated on the border between East and West Germany during the Cold War shaped people's daily lives as they moved through a variety of contexts. More generally shows how a sense of self and other is co-created on either side of a border. In a comparative investigation of border identities, Durschmidt and Matthiesen (2002) show how communities along a Polish-German border maintain mental borders despite the removal of official boundaries. See also Hirsch for border formation in the early USSR (2000).

sia, Buryatia shares historical, cultural, and linguistic ties with Mongolia. Although there are more than 100 different ethnic groups living in Buryatia, Russians (about 65%) are the dominating majority. However, the region is named after the Buryats, a people of Mongolian descent, who are the titular nation of Buryatia although they amount to only about 30% of the population. Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatia, has almost 400,000 inhabitants, 35% of whom are Buryats. The settlement structure is heterogeneous through the republic. While increasingly more Buryats live in the capital, in the countryside many villages are occupied exclusively by either ethnic-Buryats or ethnic-Russians with larger villages having more mixed populations. Once considered the 'gateway to the East', Buryatia quickly became a rural backwater with the completion of the trans-Siberian railway and the subsequent fall of the trading town Kyakhta, on the border with Mongolia, as a major commercial center. In terms of economic development, Buryatia has a higher rate of poverty and unemployment than the Russian national average. Nearly half of the republic's budget (46.8% in 2005) consists of federal subsidies.

The lands of the Buryats came under Russian imperial protectorate rule in response to the rise of Qing China in the eighteenth century. It was not until after the Bolshevik Revolution in the early twentieth century that the area around Lake Baikal was officially incorporated into the Soviet Union as the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Republic. From that moment, creating a "Buryat" ethnic identity, separate from that of Mongolia, was official policy and practice (Balzer 1999, Amogolonova 2008). The strategies to achieve this goal were deliberate and diverse, including the selection of a non-standard dialect furthest away from standard Mongolian as the official Buryat language and then in 1958 and the removal of "Mongol" from the official name of the republic. Buryatia was also designated a restricted area within the Soviet Union and access was permitted only with special permission. These politically motivated policies for nation

building or separating, characterize Soviet policy and are representative of policies across the former Soviet space as mentioned above in greater detail. In the early twenty-first century, the Russian government dissolved two national Buryat *okrugs*[5] into the oblasts that surrounded them—a move that immediately spurred speculation of the dissolution of Buryatia and incorporation into a larger Lake Baikal economic region with neighboring and predominantly ethnic-Russian Irkutsk and Chita oblasts. Despite the lack of concrete incorporation plans, central government decision-making processes eerily mirror those of almost 60 years ago.

By the 1980s, Buryats like many other indigenous peoples in the former Soviet Union felt estranged from their culture, language, and religion (Balzer 1999:142). My informants, largely having spent their formative years during the 1980s, often referred to themselves as the "lost generation." It was from this realization, along with the fall of the Soviet Union, that local elites appropriated the cause of revitalizing Buryat culture and overseeing and administration of the republic more independently from Moscow. Post-socialist discourses of culture have largely remained elite, urban discourses with a focus on the institutionalization of cultural, linguistic, and religious products. The considerable body of literature generated on Buryat culture, language, religion, and identity through these endeavors, is mostly in Russian and largely not available outside of the republic. The focus on urban-led institutional forms of cultural representations and practices elicited my interest in an exploration of rural narratives of change, culture, and self and how they intersect with urban elite discourses and broader post-socialist discourses.

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[5] In the federal hierarchy of the Russian Federation there are: 1) national republics like Buryatia, Tatarstan, Chechnya with some autonomy, their own president, and local language; 2) oblasts, or regions; and 3) okrugs, a smaller predominantly ethnic administrative category than a republic.

1.4   Kurumkan Region

In additional to Ulan-Ude, my research focused primarily on three villages in the Kurumkan region (Kurumkan, Sarankhur, and Arzgun)[6] although I visited a number of different villages. The Kurumkan region is located in the northern part of Buryatia between the Barguzin region to the south and the Baunovskii and Severo-Baikalskii regions to the north. In sum, it covers 12,450 kilometers and has a population of 15,984; over 64% of the population is ethnic-Buryat. The villages in Kurumkan region are very similar with populations ranging between 800 and 12,000. Most villages are almost entirely either Buryat or Russian with some ethnic-Evenki in the northern part of the republic. Each village consists of at least one main road that is partially paved; unpaved side roads were lined by homes, gardens, and animal sheds. Irrigation streams crisscross the villages and cows and goats roam about freely. Every village has at least one general store where a limited selection of vegetables, bread, canned goods, candies, chips, cigarettes, beer and vodka among other household items are available for purchase. The general store is generally located in the center of the village where a statue of Lenin, a bus stop, school, and House of Culture converge. Several of the villages visited have sizeable primary schools that serve their village and surrounding smaller villages. Kurumkan, as the administrative center of the region, is significantly larger and has a factory, a hospital, several schools, a bank, government buildings, a *datsan*[7] and *dugan*[8], and Café Maxim—the only semi-Western style café. I also visited the Irkutsk oblast to the west of Buryatia to visit a village on Olkhon Island, Khuzhir, and the capital city, Irkutsk. The village Khuzhir on Olkhon Island is very similar to those in Kurumkan, but has services for tourists including souvenir shops, a couple bars, and cabins for rent.

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[6] I have used pseudonyms for both the people and most of the places I discuss.
[7] A Buddhist temple.
[8] A smaller Buddhist temple.

Although I did not conduct formal research in Khuzhir, I include it as a comparison to the more isolated and less developed villages of the Kurumkan region.

The ethnography is, admittedly, situated in a context quite unlike my own in the United States and for this reason a brief cautionary note is warranted. The ethnographic details I provide below are not meant to be interpreted as static notions of Buryat culture or ethnic identity or experience, but of a set of complex and dynamic processes informed by political ideology and personal emotions. The narratives that I collected represent the ways in which my informants made sense of their world. My ethnographic depiction and analysis is thus the mechanism for representing those voices and placing them in broader socio-historical context. My overarching intent is to provide a detailed and human account of the context in which I conducted this study.

1.5   Methods and Methodology

In the year prior to fieldwork, I drew from an extensive literature review of post-socialism and research in Buryatia to conceptualize my study and develop a robust research strategy to guide my investigation. I reengaged past acquaintances and developed new strategic relationships to facilitate my entry into Russia and introduction to other social scientists in the region. While I originally proposed a comparative case study on nation building in urban and rural settings, early theoretical considerations led me to focus the study on discourses of identity in rural communities, which I identified as a considerable gap in the literature available to me.

Once in the field, it became immediately evident to me that "rural" and "urban" were in fact indivisible concepts. Imaginations of *what is rural* were informed and shaped by *what is not rural* or what is considered *urban* and vice versa. Likewise, concepts like *nation building*, *cultural revitalization*, and *identity politics* while familiar to my informants in the countryside, were

vague, abstract, and thus largely meaningless. Although these concepts factored in their lives, they were experienced discursively, but rather they were embodied and experienced in the social changes of their daily lives. After minor reconsiderations, *social change* became the ethnographic object of my study.

The study was conducted from June 2009 to August 2009. I spent approximately 65 days in rural villages and the capital city, Ulan-Ude, of the Republic of Buryatia in southeastern Siberia, Russia. I also spent countless hours, like many of my informants, in transportation between rural and urban spaces. Whether in an urban, rural, or in-between space, I was immersed and largely independent in a social, cultural, historical, political, and economic context quite unlike my own in the United States. The methods I employed primarily consisted of in-depth interviews, informal discussions, and participant observation, which are discussed in greater detail below.

The dispositions and narratives of social change collected from my informants are at the very heart of this ethnographic study. I chose narratives of social change as an entry point for my study because I, as others, believe that how and what individuals talk about is integral to understanding how they construct and organize meaning in their social world (Reis 1997, Pesmen 2000). From a Foucauldian perspective, although the narratives collected acknowledge, identify, categorize, and value social change, they also create and embody change. In this sense, the narratives I present below, although not explicitly political, are implicitly so. I also recognized that the counterpart of narrative is silence. Thus in my interviews and subsequent analysis, I remained keenly aware of what remained unsaid, unacknowledged, or assumed (see Humphrey 1993:68).

Rather than describe my study in terms of what happened to the countryside after socialism, the overarching aim was to collect a multiplicity of personal narratives of social change for a context-dependent analysis from which to theorize the intersections of individual experiences across rural and urban landscapes. Ultimately, this is an ethnography about social change which is narrated by particular individuals in time and place. What follows is an overview of my methodology in practice.

1.6   In Search of Teachers

In order to systematically identify and engage an appropriate group of villagers for the open-ended, in-depth interviews necessary for the study, I employed a method of purposeful snowball sampling. By purposeful, I mean that although informants were identified through other informants, I also found possible informants through the local newspaper, *Ogni Kurumkana*. Once an individual was identified in an article, I requested an introduction through my acquaintances in the region. I specifically searched for English language teachers in the Kurumkan region. English language teachers were an ideal target population for my research for several reasons. First, their summer schedules were more flexible than other groups because of the school calendar. Secondly, while other groups were hesitant to dedicate so much time "chatting" and "hanging out" with an anthropologist, English language teachers welcomed the opportunity to practice English with a native English speaker. They also were enthusiastic to introduce me to other English language teachers and their best students, sometimes from other villages, which widened the geographic scope of my research to include more rural villages. Targeting this particular group, I could conduct the interview in English, Russian, or both. The interviews conducted in English did not always require audio recording because I could take hand written notes

more easily. For this reason, targeting English language teachers had a significant methodological implication.

Narrowing the overall sample to ethnic-Buryat women somehow connected to education enabled me to make parallels across a more cohesive group willing to be engaged in conversations about change in their personal, family, and community lives. Teachers were also more enthusiastic to impart knowledge about their communities to an interested outsider, perhaps viewing me as one of their students. Patico (2005:481) describes her rationale to target teachers in her ethnographic work on social change and cultural transformation "by virtue of their professional roles as providers of public services." As one teacher told me straightforwardly, revealing the social role of teachers as well as social expectations more broadly:

> *You know that schools are the center of our cultural life here, especially in [the] villages. That is why teachers have a great influence on our cultural life. Everybody has children, so [people] respect teachers. Teachers… are considered the moving force of society.*

The teachers I engaged, indeed prided themselves on the wealth of information they had in regards to Buryat culture, language, traditions, and history and were delighted to entertain my questions about traditions, participation, identification, and social change.

1.7   Methods in Practice

My methodological approach to this study consisted primarily of in-depth interviews, informal interviews and discussions, participant-observation, and library research. By using a multitude of methods, I intended to triangulate the data to increase the reliability of the results (Creswell 2009). Interviews, whether in-depth or informal, allowed me to collect information about the day-to-day issues important to individuals in a community. In-depth interviews consume a lot of time, so my research strategy focused on quality rather than the quantity of inter-

views. Instead of seeking a large number of interviews from many villages, I conducted multiple interviews with the same individuals in order to build rapport and trust (see O'Reilly 2005:112-114, Trotter & Schensul 1998:704). The multiple interviews had a reflective and cathartic quality for both me as researcher and also to my informants by enabling us to revisit and contextualized previous conversations, in a sense creating greater ownership between the informant (a person) and the data (their personal story). Multiple engagements with informants allowed me to participate in my informants' lives in other ways, like attending family and community events, visiting sacred places and temples, and simply hanging out. I did not compensate my informants for the interviews, although I stayed in their homes, met their friends and family, practiced English with them and their children, and participated in events ranging from visiting sacred places, temples, and attending family events, like a birthday party or anniversary. For their hospitality I presented my hosts with wine, vodka, boxes of chocolates, cheese, or fresh fruit from the city market as is customary.

The in-depth interview, however, helped create a space for one-on-one conversation and reflection and was particularly useful for my more complicated and nuanced questions (see Bernard 2005:256). As Cook and Crang (1995) describe, given that so much of daily life is taken for granted and "buried in practical consciousness" making good use of interview time was important for the success of this project (52). Building trust was an important consideration. Rather than beginning with an in-depth interview, I left the in-depth interview for second meetings or when I felt an appropriate rapport had been achieved.

Prior to beginning any interviews, I gave a brief presentation detailing my research goals and strategy, academic affiliations, and other relevant information, including informed consent. As approved by Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board, I obtained verbal consent

from all informants that volunteered to participate in the study. Interviews began with biographical information, followed by a pre-designed questionnaire with questions regarding the general topics of the research. The protocol was translated, reviewed, and tested on two native Russian-speaking volunteers (one in Atlanta and one in Moscow). I also attempted to incorporate collaborative elements into the interviews. As a foreign researcher, I was aware that my very presence influenced my informants' responses in a fundamental and emotional way. For this reason I invited my informants to engage in the interview process itself. I asked them whether the questions were relevant to them, whether they were difficult to answer, or how they should be modified. I also invited my informants to interview me afterwards with the audio recorder still on. These collaborative elements contributed several important dimensions to my research by nurturing trust, fostering a comfortable setting for the interview, demystifying the interview process itself, helping to further refine my inquiries, and by including additional commentary to the data collected. The interviews of myself by informants have been useful as a reflective practice.

I conducted 14 in-depth interviews and 10 informal interviews. The informants were asked a series of questions regarding local politics, cultural events, city and village life, and personal perceptions of change in their lives, family, community, and Buryatia more broadly. In-depth interviews lasted one to two hours, although several were conducted over a period of several days or encounters. I also had informal discussions with local social scientists at the Buryat National Scientific Center[9], at a Buddhist center in Ulan-Ude, and while on the *mikrik*, or minibus.

Although I interviewed ethnic-Russians and ethnic-Buryat men, the majority of my interviewees were ethnic-Buryat women ranging in age from 25 to 60, who currently live in or had

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[9] Officially Бурятский Научный Центр or БНЦ.

recently moved from the Kurumkan region. All of my ethnic-Buryat informants self-identified themselves as *Buryat (бурят)*, while my Russian informants self-identified themselves as *russkii/russkaia* (Rus. *русский/русская*). By using the term *Buryat* or *ethnic-Buryat* throughout my study, I do not imply a static identity shared by my informants, but rather I use it because my informants referred to themselves as *Buryat*. As explored in greater detail below, the meaning of *Buryat*, was in fact, not collectively shared or experienced by the individuals included in this study. None of my informants self-identified themselves as *rossiisskii/rossiisskaya* (Rus. *российсский/российсская*)[10]. All of my Buryat informants self-identified themselves as Buddhist[11], with only two mentioning the role of shamanism in their spirituality. My informants, in general, perceived themselves as poor, but not destitute. They acknowledged that they are comparatively well off, highly educated, with improved living conditions, amplified consumption possibilities, and are optimistic about the future prospects and choices available for their children. These improvements are attributed to a stabilization of Russia in the course of the past ten years under the leadership of Putin (see Reis 2009 for comments on the *Putin Myth*). Yet, to most of my informants, the socialist period remains a key reference point in their lives, not in an abstracted ideological sense, but more in how the socialist period overlaps with experiences of collective work, full employment, free education and health care – a distinction that I believe is significant[12].

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[10] In Russian, there is a linguistic distinction between *russkii/русский* (ethnic-Russian) and *rossiisskii/российский* (of the Russian state), the latter signifying the multiethnic composition of the state.

[11] Lamaism is the regional form of Buddhism in Buryatia. Lamaism is characterized by the veneration of earth, mountain, river, and forest spirits (see Humphrey 1998:418-432, Abaeva 2001). In Buryatia, the distinction between Lamaism and Buddhism is contested. My informants said they are *Buddhist*, and most did not see the rigid separation of Buddhist, Lamaist, or shamanic rituals. Several informants admitted they are fearful of shamans, because they can cast spells through black magic, yet in some circumstances black magic is useful.

[12] See Kleinman and Fitz-Henry (2007) for a perspective on the important social function of events in social consolidation.

During my fieldwork, the global economic crisis (or *kriziz*)[13] was in the news and talked about widely. Despite not having been immune to the global economic crisis, Buryatia, like other poorer areas of the former Soviet Union, fared relatively well. The economic crisis, largely attributed to the United States by my informants, was reported in the local newspapers with a call to invest in and develop the villages and rural regions more broadly. The media, along with the political and business communities, heralded the development of Buryatia's agricultural and tourist industries and to position Buryatia as a major trade and transportation hub between China and Russia.

Interviews were conducted either in Russian, English, or both; an audio-recorder was used when appropriate. Subsequently, all interview notes, transcriptions, and other field notes were translated into English (if applicable) to be analyzed using a thematic content analysis[14] method to code common themes within the open-ended responses. The thematic content analysis was conducted in February and March 2010 to find commonalities across interviews and to interpret meaning. Through coding, sorting, and interpreting themes, I distilled themes like changing cultural institutions, nostalgia, urban and rural tensions, and gendered expectations, which ultimately led to the organization of this thesis and which are discussed in further detail in the ethnographic chapters that follow.

Participant-observation, the time-honored anthropological method, was essential to this study in that it provided a different angle from which to triangulate the themes mentioned above. Participant-observation recognizes that researcher, inquiry, and data exist within a specific social context. In addition to building trust and friendship between communities and researcher, the participation and observation of how a social world and context is constructed and embodied at

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[13] Coincidentally, when I first came to Buryatia in 2000, it was just after the economic collapse of 1998-1999, which was also widely talked about.

[14] See Anderson (2007) unpublished manuscript.

the local level, is truly the functional art of participant-observation (O'Reilly 2005:101-104, De Munck & Sobo 1998:41). Bernard (2005) notes that the immersion in a social context is what allows the researcher to intellectualize and put into perspective what he or she is seeing and hearing (342-344). This last point is particularly important in that my role as researcher is not simply to describe the social world I saw and heard, but to intellectually and justly triangulate what I observed to theorize meaning.

In my time in the field, I participated and paid particular attention to activities where people either seemed to be doing things related to my study or were willing to talk about my research questions. These included family events, festivals, rituals at sacred places, and daily activities from milking cows, preparing food, chopping wood, and taking the *mikrik*, or minibus, from city to countryside. An unexpected space for rich participant-observation in fact was the *mikrik* that took me on the long trips from city to countryside and back. My trips on the *mikrik* and the narratives my informants recounted about the *mikrik*, proved an interesting space for observation and reflection. I came to see the *mikrik* as a mechanism and symbolic representation of the urbanization process I witnessed in Buryatia. In fact, urbanization as a social phenomenon is occurring across Siberia and the Russian Far East[15]. But to call this process *urbanization* can be misleading—a semantic detail which is explored in greater detail in Chapter IV. As such, the *mikrik* became an important site for experiencing, observing, and theorizing change in Buryatia. In the ethnographic chapters that follow, I triangulate the in-depth interviews, informal discussions, and participant-observation I compiled to illustrate how social change is conceptualized in rural Buryatia.

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[15] In fact, the process is worldwide. The United Nations Population predicts that by 2050 the world urban population will increase by 3.1 billion and that most of the growth will come from a relocation of individuals from rural areas to urban areas (UNP 2007).

II. NARRATIVES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

2.1   Introduction

Before arriving to Russia to conduct a research project centered on social change and identity, I reflected and considered my own specific preconceptions of identity, progress, and change. I firmly believe in subjectivities that are in constant flux, contradiction, and construction and co-dependent on social, historical, political, and economic contexts. However, I also recognize my deeply personal and political attachment to identities shaped by emotional experiences, sociality, and political ideology. So when I was conducting my fieldwork, I expected to hear nationalistically heated narratives of unwelcomed changes, loss of culture, and encroaching modernity. I assumed that these narratives would not only be emotionally charged, but would be inherently political in nature. I wondered how cultural products were consciously used to effect change and advocate for minority rights. I factored this tension between discourses of constructivism and authenticity into my research strategy and analysis, all the while recognizing that these ideas shaped the discussions I engaged in and the data I validated.

While a critique of authenticity is important, perhaps particularly in the context of post-Soviet Russia, my own experience draws attention to how emotional attachment to identities is an important consideration in the study undertaken. Acknowledging that discourses of culture and identity are historic, contextual, and contested allows us to avoid deconstructing culture and identity so far that we fail to understand these concepts as experiential continuities that influence perspectives and practices. Using myself as an entry point[16] for discussing and reflecting on au-

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[16] See Rosaldo (1989:1-21) for a discussion of his personal experiences with anger and rage as a tool to describe rage in Ilongot grief processes (7-14). Handler states that in fact our attempts to anthropologically explain the social world tells us more about ourselves than others (1986:2-4). Also see Mauer (2000) for a rich discussion on politicized sexual identities.

thenticity, change, and continuities in a sense tempers the discourse of authenticity and Soviet nationalities policies and practices.

As I shall explore below, during my fieldwork in Buryatia, conversations about social change awakened diverse emotional reactions and responses from my informants. My informants talked about social change in countless ways: from the loss of educational and economic opportunities and loss of community life, friends, relatives, and population-determined revenue due to migration, to an increase in consumption and material wealth opportunities and mobility. Through dialogue and dispositions, all of my informants shared a seemingly contradictory perspective of social change as both desired and ideal (pro-modern) and yet not ideal (pro-tradition). I posit that in the context of my study, the double-edged sword of tradition and modernity is actually a result of competing urban and rural constructions of self. Changes in Buryat society were often framed as adaptive practices to a transforming social context largely connected with personal imaginations of the city/future and countryside/past as will be explored below. Continuities of Buryat culture were instead framed as a phenomenon in the process of being re-negotiated and embodied in the next generation of educated, mobile, and urban Buryat young people. In fact, my informants were not interested in speaking about change or transition directly, instead choosing to frame change in terms of achieving their life goals and dreams. Instead of anxieties that processes like urbanization and economic development would lead to the widespread loss of Buryat culture and language, there was an overwhelming outlook that as much as things would change, that *Buryatness* would remain. Identity and cultural products that were allegedly essential to Buryat selfhood and which were highly political in the waning years of the Soviet Union and in the immediate aftermath have arguably lost their political value (Amogolonova 2008, Leisse & Leisse 2007, Dyrkheeva 2003). Rejecting the assumption that traditional cultures do

not want to change, in fact, my informants envisioned change in a developed and modern Buryatia that was also a culturally rich Buryatia.

My informants did not perceive social change as a culprit for cultural loss nor did they envision the future as one of social anomie. While acknowledging the political, geographic, and even emotional parameters in which *Buryatness* is defined, my informants expanded their notions of self and personal direction outside of those parameters. Implicitly, they rejected ideologies of authenticity relegating cultural products, like the Buryat language and certain traditions, as largely ornamental. They were more concerned with what Koester (2005) describes amongst the Itelmen in Kamchatka, as issues of autonomy, equality, and justice (654). The contradiction I mention above, between tradition and modernity is perhaps only discursive.

What follows are examples that illustrate how nostalgia and aspirations for a modern life are embodied in the narratives and lived experiences of my informants in Buryatia. As mentioned above, I will elaborate on what I am calling a *confrontation* with physical triggers of self in connection to imaginations of place. Some of these include imaginations of the countryside and village, sacred and ritual spaces, landscapes, and the environment. I also explore how many of the anxieties embedded in narratives of change are connected to the decision to move to the capital city, Ulan-Ude.

While we can assume that people are deliberately aware of the decisions they are making, I came to understand my informants' practices and narratives of change and progress as incremental affirmations of self in resistance to the dominant identity politics inherited from the socialist era. Through this idiographic exploration I attempt to show how everyday narratives of social change represent alternatives to dominant ideologies of change and transition.

2.2 Thinking About the City and Remembering the Countryside

The narratives of change that I heard will be presented through a serious of vignettes from the city and countryside. In the following vignettes, I will describe and analyze how social change is conceptualized, how my informants talk about the city, how they remember the countryside, simultaneously imagining the past and the future in representations of places.

Sarankhur

Early morning, my first Friday in Buryatia, I clumsily take the #4 tram toward the central train station in Ulan-Ude, where a collection of buses wait for passengers to trickle in for long trips to the countryside or other cities in the region. As I came closer to the train station, I remember how in my first trip to Buryatia, I arrived via train from Irkutsk and was collected by a very quiet Buryat man for a grueling 450-kilometer ride to the Kurumkan region. Several years later, mounting the *mikrik*, or minibus, for the trip back to the countryside, I knew what to expect. Seven hours later, I enter the Kurumkan region with the realization that the countless hours of improving my Russian language abilities, seeking research funding, and developing theoretical frames and tools for this ethnographic study finally had come together within the *mikrik*.

It was around six in the evening when I arrive to Sarankhur to attend a jubilee for my host Vadim Dugarov. Most of the attendees were from the Dugarov family and their family tree was displayed on a mural above the stage with photographs of the family children prominently featured. Vadim's wife, Darima, escorted me to one of the three large tables elaborately decorated with small bowls and plates of Russian and Buryat foods like dumplings, salads, sausages, cheeses, and breads. At each end of the table, there are collections of bottles of vodka with

brand names like *Geser*[17]*, Baikal*, and *Buryatia*. Much of the jubilee took place in the Buryat language, which was translated to me by one of Vadim's cousins, Sergei, who was rather inebriated. The celebration was peppered with dances, songs, speeches, and many toasts to the guest of honor. Before each toast with vodka it is typical for Buryats[18] to dip the tip of their finger into their drink sprinkle a vodka libations in deference to local spirits[19].

The Dugarov family lives in a modest wooden home in a small village, inhabited entirely by ethnic-Buryats. The house has electricity, but no indoor plumbing or running water; the latrine is located outdoors away from the house overlooking a garden of potatoes. They once had a lush garden of cucumbers, tomatoes, carrots, and other vegetables, herbs, and flowers, which now has been left fallow, except for a small section dedicated to potatoes – an important symbol of continuity and security across Russia (see Reis 2009:200-204). Darima explained to that with both she and Vadim working full time jobs outside of the home, maintaining their garden and farm animals became too burdensome. Because of this, the Dugarovs are largely dependent on vegetables sold in the general grocery store in Kurumkan about 20 minutes away by car.

In the past nine years, the Dugarovs renovated the kitchen in the summerhouse where they now live year round with their nine-year-old daughter, Dasha. The winter house is now the home of Vadim's elderly mother. In her home, Vadim has a hidden stash of *arkhi* (Rus. *архи),* a semi-clear fermented drink made from cow's milk, which is also referred to as *milk vodka* (Rus. *молочная водка*). *Arkhi* is consumed at most cultural events in the countryside and for welcoming guests and was characterized by ethnic-Russians as quite unappealing[20]. In addition to a

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[17] *Geser* is the Buryat national epic, dating back 1,000 years.

[18] In her travelogue, Hudgins (2003) describes how she and her husband witnessed this not only amongst ethnic-Buryats but ethnic-Russians in Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude (131).

[19] Long (2008) explores libations and ritual offerings amongst the Western Buryats stating that these and other collective practices pervading ritual events and everyday practices are fundamental assertions of reciprocity, kinship, and belonging (83-101).

[20] In retrospect, I realized that I never asked my Buryat informants directly just how much they actually liked *arkhi*.

permanent move to the summerhouse, the Dugarovs now have a number of modern conveniences including a car, two television sets, and a computer all of which have been purchased due to a federal loan reform program started a few years back.

Vadim, 42, is tall, handsome, and has a sing-songy way of speaking and an unforgettable laugh. He used to work on what remained of the local collective farm but now works in construction in a town further north. He builds the wooden home frames ubiquitously scattered across the Buryat landscape and that increasingly dot the outskirts of Ulan-Ude. He told me with pride that they have a similar structure in the outskirts of Ulan-Ude. When I asked why, he mentioned that they would eventually be moving to Ulan-Ude permanently. Darima, 44, is a school-teacher at the local primary school. She is soft spoken, but a force to reckon with in the home, especially when it came to Vadim and alcohol. She is from another village across the valley, so she is largely subordinate to her husband in their social context. She, however, manages the home, finances, and the family's social interactions, including liaising with her husband's family on various resources like milk, sour cream, and meat. When she and I spoke about the eventual move to Ulan-Ude, she shared with great enthusiasm the prospect of moving, which is explored further below.

In the slow moving days I spent in Sarankhur, I walked around their property, watching the snow-capped mountains lose more snow as August approached. Unaccustomed to the outdoors, I asked about everything from the garden plants, irrigation streams, to the thick forests at the base of the mountains, where I was told many bears live. Walking through the village, I got a sense of timelessness, as villages like this one are scattered across the former Soviet Union. Despite material changes within the households, the village itself looks unchanged. The same unpaved road with the same streams and puddles amidst it. Small children still yelled out "hello!"

in heavily accented English. Many of the same families live in the same homes. However, there is an obvious reduction in the population, with some homes standing empty. Noticeably absent are young adults and people my age (see Humphrey 1998:38-47). When I asked Vadim about this, he stated that according to the last census, there were now only about 800 people opposed to the 1,500 I recorded nine years ago – a clear sign of population reduction. This combined with the Dugarovs' decision to move to the city was an early indication of changes in the countryside that people wanted to talk about.

Despite the material changes and comforts in their home, throughout the summer, Vadim and Darima traveled to Ulan-Ude to take care of their other home in the outskirts of the city. The wooden frame was created by Vadim and his brothers and transported to Ulan-Ude about a year ago. Darima, however, travels to this other home with more frequency. After breakfast one morning, Vadim and Dasha quickly disappeared to play and Darima and I had a chance to talk about the move in greater depth.   She said that when in the city that she tended to stay to herself, focusing on getting the home ready. A friend of hers, Maria in Ulan-Ude, complained that Darima is actually too focused on the home and did not even call her to tell her she was in town. Darima is eager to move to the city, stating "there are more opportunities [in the city] now… there is more available [as in market and other material goods]." She said that she is tired of the village life and that growing potatoes is difficult. Additionally, with fewer children in the primary school there was less income – a point repeated by several other teachers in my study. Darima said that she and Vadim decided to move their animals to another village where there is a man who takes care of them for a monthly fee because they have no time. With her and Vadim's schedules, she said it is not possible to tend animals. Towards the end of the conversations she hastily added that the "city is not so dirty! The spring here is very muddy."

As her garden lie fallow, Darima mostly keeps to herself, entertaining herself by playing solitaire on their computer, when she is not attentive to Vadim and Dasha's needs. As I watched her play solitaire into the wee hours of the night, I wondered how Darima interpreted the ease with which I travel across the world and even come to visit Buryatia again. I wondered whether my interest in rural narratives of social change, in some way, enhanced Darima's desire to leave the countryside and participate in modern life – a life that I perhaps represented.

My conversations with Vadim, on the other hand, were more vague. Vadim was less enthusiastic about moving to the city. He enjoys his work and lamented the thought of being away from his extended family and the place he has always lived. He admitted that it would be a good opportunity for Dasha, his daughter, but also said that she is still young and that they could wait until she is older, perhaps ready to go to college. Although I did not get to ask him why they are planning to move while Dasha is still so young, from other accounts, I presume that it would take some time to firmly establish a life in Ulan-Ude. That said, Vadim's brother Andrei, in a rare moment of sobriety, revealed to me another possible factor to consider. Because Vadim has only one child, the decision to move is perhaps easier. Andrei explained how his family could not make that choice. With two daughters and two sons and several grandchildren, it is not logistically feasible, but also not entirely wanted. Nevertheless, an option he entertained from time to time. Andrei's comments resonated with me that the urbanization narrative was not in fact universally desired.

I begin with the Dugarovs because they exemplify a few interesting themes I observed early on. They embodied the urbanization narrative in their different conceptualizations of the future. As I examined their, and others, different levels of engagement at sacred places, cultural events, daily chores, or perceptions of the past and future, Darima and Vadim together represent

the gulf of narratives that I encountered in the field. This gulf, like that between urban and rural narratives, is not a divide, but a space that is straddled, negotiated, and continually redefined.

Ulan-Ude

The theme of moving to the city came up several times throughout my interviews across my informants. I first met Maria, 45, nine years ago in the Kurumkan countryside and I remember she had an assertive, almost rebellious air to her uncommon in the women I engaged. In the mid-1990s, Maria had the opportunity to travel to the United States with a non-government organization and since that time had been saving money to move to Ulan-Ude. After the economic crisis of 1998-1999, she lost a great deal of those savings. Fortunately, as an excellent English language instructor, she did not lose her employment and was able to recover her financial losses. A few years ago, she moved to an apartment in Ulan-Ude and found a job at the local university.

Having reconnected through a mutual acquaintance, we agreed to meet in a garden café off Ulan-Ude's main square. She met me after her work at the university and approached the café wearing a form fitting white business suit, with high heels – neither fashion decisions being quite practical in Ulan-Ude with its dust and uneven sidewalks and potholed roads. She was dressed professionally, but also with a cosmopolitan flare, which I unfairly did not expect in Buryatia. As we sip on a glass of beer, I mentioned that I brought old photographs of us from my previous trip. As we thumbed through them, she laughed in embarrassment at a photograph of herself in the Barguzin valley. Aghast at her frizzy hair blowing in the wind, she remarked on her flannel shirt and that she was not even wearing makeup.

I spoke to Maria several times throughout my stay in Buryatia. On one particular day, she invited me and another woman, Dulma, over for dinner to remember stories together and have some *arkhi* that she brought from her last trip to the countryside. Dulma, 52, today lives in Kurumkan as an English language teacher, and like the Dugarovs, Dulma is in the process of op-erationalizing a new home in Ulan-Ude. She has a jovial manner to her, always joking, laughing, and perpetually rosy-cheeked. Her husband, whom I never met, works in Kurumkan while Dulma traveled from Kurumkan to Ulan-Ude by *mikrik* to oversee construction and renovation efforts. When I asked how many times she had made the trip this summer, she sighed and said "too many!" She went on to state that she must oversee the workers since her husband cannot make the trips needed to oversee construction. Dulma said that even when the house is done and they move, that she would like to spend some time in the countryside. Maria, who already lives in Ulan-Ude, travels to the Kurumkan region to take care of her mother, but immediately added, "but not [for] very long. Moving to Ulan-Ude… was a great step in my life." Dulma agreed, and throughout the conversation, referred back to Maria having been able to buy an apartment in the city as a benchmark for positive social change and a step she was prepared to make herself.

Both Maria and Dulma agreed that in the past nine years there have been significant changes in their lives. "Material changes, of course, are better. We work more… We have more opportunities now. More material opportunities," Dulma stated and continued, "I think things are better." Both attributed these successes to the strong leadership of former President Vladimir Putin; a point, as mentioned above, which was made by several of my informants. Maria nod-ding as Dulma spoke and later added that although she is not an economist, "our economy [is stable] now. That is [because] people have more opportunities. Maybe [it is because] salary, wages, and pensions, [have] grown. And banks gave [loans] to citizens. Many people could get

loans." Dulma mentioned that with these loans she was able to buy the things she needed for their city home, like kitchen appliances and a washing machine.

Moving was a major theme in our dinnertime discussion, as well as subsequent meetings with each individually. When speaking of why people are moving, Dulma stated directly, "People are moving now to the capital for jobs and opportunities. There is no, how to say, there is no future [in the village]." They elaborated that it is not just that there are no jobs in the countryside, but that a better life can be achieved in the city. Maria also added that there is a problem with drugs and alcohol in the village and that especially for young people there is nothing to do in the villages but drink alcohol. Their portrayal of city youth was however drastically different. Dulma stated that young people in the city are interested in learning Buryat traditions and attending cultural events. Maria mentioned how there is a whole cadre of young, educated Buryat people who are interested in local politics. However, Maria also claimed that with more "freedoms… [that] young people use this freedom…not in the best way" and when asked to elaborate, she said "alcohol, drugs." Despite the fact that the problems of alcohol and drug abuse were recounted in both urban and rural settings, in rural settings, it was characterized as inevitable.

Alcohol in the village is in fact another theme that emerged from my discussions in the field. To my female informants, it was clear that alcoholism in the villages could not be controlled. In the city, alcohol consumption was markedly different than in rural landscapes. For instance, in the city I witnessed police officers stop pedestrians who had bottles of beer in their hands because it is illegal to do so. I was once myself stopped and questioned about the contents of my odd looking stainless steal water bottle. Even when drinking in public is allowable, for instance on the military day when cadets gather at plazas and fountains to drink with their units, alcohol consumption is regulated in time and space. In the countryside, while ritual drinking

does take place in sacred sites, there is also hidden and unregulated drinking especially amongst men. Although my informants did not directly postulate that drinking played a factor in their desire to move to the city, both urban and rural informants referred to drunken village men as a serious problem in the countryside.

Throughout our conversations, the changes Dulma and Maria were experiencing in their lives were overwhelmingly positive. Like the Dugarovs in Sarankhur, the availability and ability to acquire more material goods and technologies was a highly valued and visible change in their lives and it is connected to the city and to modernity. As expected, Dulma and Maria acknowledged that there are certain cultural products, like language, festivals, events, that are deemed essential to Buryat culture, but unlike my expectations, Dulma and Maria's narratives of change did not focus on cultural loss, but on the acceptance of change and how it fits into the incremental steps they have or are taking to achieve a dream. By far Dulma and Maria's primary concerns were the maintenance of that life trajectory for themselves and their families. What they admitted did bring them unease was the global economic crisis, which they jokingly blamed on me: "Because of you! Americans… we are blaming! Yes, it is your fault" followed by laughter.

Kurumkan

One afternoon, I was invited by an acquaintance in Ulan-Ude to visit a Buddhist center that she visits regularly. The Buddhist center occupies a small two-room space on the ground floor of a modest building. The lama overseeing the center is from Tibet and has lived in Buryatia for many years. After pleasantries and an explanation of my research, I was invited to stay for a lecture that he was going to give on Buddhism. During my time in Buryatia, I visited this

Buddhist center frequently, spent several dinners with the lama, and chatted with the center's enthusiastic regulars, who were mainly Buryat women interested in learning proper Buddhist conduct. The lecture that particular night focused on the philosophical question of how ideas, objects, and even our selves come into being through the enactment of speech. In retrospect, the conversation that ensued was so focused on semantic details that I only later came to realize how relevant it was to my own research interests and how indeed it was a fascinating intersection of Tibetan, Buryat, Russian, and Soviet ideologies with social theory.

During one of the tea breaks, I met a young woman named Soëlma. Soëlma, 32, is demure and unlike some of the other women I met in Ulan-Ude, did not have a glitzy cell phone or stylish clothing. She mentioned that she was also from the Kurumkan region, but that she came to Ulan-Ude frequently. Unlike Dulma, Maria, and Darima, she was not preparing a home in the city, but instead looking for a job in the city first. Over the following few weeks, she and I met at the Buddhist center several times and then in early August we met in Kurumkan.

After taking a taxi from the center of Kurumkan to the local temple, we sat at a small café for milky tea and bread and a chat about our lives. She told me that she once had a good job at a bank in Kurumkan, but then the company moved her position to a village in another region, Arzgun. In fact, she stated that many jobs have been relocated to larger villages like Arzgun or some times even Ulan-Ude. She worked in Arzgun for a while, but not being from that village, she did not want to live there. Soëlma stated, "My family is in Kurumkan, and my friends too. [Being] in Arzgun so much [of my time], why?" She eventually left the job. Unemployed, she likes waking up late in the day and staying up until late in the evening hanging out with friends, which we did several nights playing cards and chatting. She had been looking for a job but said, "I wanted to take a break for a while. I can receive unemployment for a year, so I thought I would

try to find [a really good job] in Kurumkan." Running out of time and options, she goes back and forth between Kurumkan and Ulan-Ude, hanging out with friends and inquiring about jobs, hoping to find something in the countryside or the city. But this lifestyle will end soon, she said, since she has been on unemployment for almost a year and she will now need to find a job. She said that this is why she had been traveling to Ulan-Ude so often.

She also stated that there are more opportunities in Ulan-Ude and the modern conveniences are welcomed as well. She also mentioned how being in the city she can visit the Buddhist center more often. She stated that there is not much to do in the countryside and that in her opinion "the cultural life in the city is not dull at all!" There is access to culture and modern conveniences and much more to do in the evenings. She said she has the opportunity to learn about her culture in places like museums and at the Buddhist center. Ultimately she felt that life is better in the city because of its plethora of cultural commodities and increased consumption opportunities not available in the village.

Soëlma in a sense is typical of many of the narratives of social change that I heard. She was apologetic for not knowing how to be a proper Buddhist or speaking the Buryat language, but was more frustrated with not finding a job in her village or in the city. Working in a neighboring village, was not an option she wanted to consider. So despite her willingness to accept a job in Kurumkan, any village would not do. Whether for material, emotional, or personal reasons, Soëlma was pursuing what she wanted to do, despite the hardship of unemployment. When I probed further about Buryat culture specifically, she said: "to be honest, I am pretty far removed from culture as I understand it. Maybe [our traditions] are not deep and rich, because we consider ourselves to be *russified*… As you know I don't speak my native language…" Soëlma's disengaged disposition and response is important to note. Fitzpatrick (2000) shows

how this is common across the former Soviet space because of Soviet discourses that promoted the importance of self-fashioning and "perfecting one's identity as a real Soviet citizen" (16). Perhaps speaking to a cultural anthropologist also evoked these sentiments. She also referred to herself as "russified" perhaps implying that to be a modern citizen meant relinquishing non-Russian cultural attributes valued in predominant cultural discourses. Maria in Ulan-Ude also shared a similar sentiment when she said that, "Our culture is very interesting. It is unusual because it is different from European tradition[s]. Even we ourselves don't know deeply our traditions, our history." In fact, the concept of native culture being incompatible to urbanity is not uncommon in postsocialist studies (see Koester 2005:59-62). Her matter-of-fact reference that their traditions "are not deep and rich" and to language, largely seen as an important marker of identity in elite discourses and significantly less by rural informants (Dyrkheeva 2003) and youth (Leisse & Leisse 2007), was common amongst my younger informants. These examples highlight personal tensions between progress and authenticity.

But what is unique about Soëlma's story is that she saw the city as an opportunity to become a better Buryat and Buddhist, to understand proper conduct in temples and how to live properly. She stated to me that before, she used to drink and smoke, but that in the past few years she stopped, in part because she had a better understanding of herself as a Buddhist. While the city is often characterized as a place where morality wanes, in Soëlma's case, she saw it as a place where she can enhance the moral and cultural attributes that she valued.

Ulan-Ude

Early in my time in Buryatia, I met a young woman, Ana, over Facebook. Ana, 25, an ethnic-Buryat, was one of the few people that I met that did not have a direct connection to the

countryside. Her mother moved to Ulan-Ude from Kurumkan when she was small and remembers very little of the countryside. After several weeks of acquaintanceship, it was quite clear to me that Ana was a different kind of Buryat woman. As a young urban woman, she had travelled to Western Europe and parts of European Russia like Moscow and Saint Petersburg. She attempted living in Moscow for some time, but especially missed the sunny summers of Buryatia, relaxing on the shores of Lake Baikal, and celebrating *Sagaalgan*, or New Year, considered the most important Buryat holiday. This summer she worked long hours at the post office's internet center, where she took French courses online between assisting customers. Several times, I sat with her in the post office taking advantage of the free internet and taking shifts at the customer help desk when she needed a break. Working at the post office she saved enough money to purchase a glitzy new cell phone. She insisted on using the phone carrier Bee-Line because it catered mainly to cities. Their logo and company stores are visibly more Western than their counterpart companies serving rural and poorer areas of Russia.

Ana, in her stylish clothing and brand name shoes, switched easily between English, Russian, and German, as she assisted customers, many of whom were foreigners. One day an older Buryat man walked in asking if she could help him send a letter to a congregation in "America" to solicit their prayers for his ailing wife. Ana empathetically searched the internet, found the address, translated its contents to Russian, and wrote down the mailing address and telephone number for the old man, who stood utterly perplexed by what she had done. He asked questions about the internet and how it worked and what he owed her for her help. She said he owed her nothing at that point, but if he needed a letter translated from Russian to English, then she would charge him five rubles a page.

Ana, direct and entrepreneurial, tried to get involved in anything and everything European in Ulan-Ude. When she heard from a friend that a group of Europeans were coming to Ulan-Ude for a human rights workshop, she offered to help by hosting a German woman, Erika, in her home, despite a lack of interest in attending the workshop. I was with Ana when she met up with Erika at the central train station in Ulan-Ude. After pleasantries we decided to have lunch and Erika insisted that we have "typical Buryat food" – three words that Ana despised. Finally agreeing on a place with *buuza* (Buryat dumplings) that Erika read about over the internet and café mochas, we chatted about the ensuing workshop where I witnessed an interesting conversation between the two paraphrased below:

> **Erika** (asking Ana): At this workshop, will there be Russians and Buryats?
> **Ana**: You know… it is quite inappropriate to say Russians and Buryats… we are all Russians.
> **Erika** (apologetic and blushing): I am so sorry, so no one makes these distinctions?
> **Ana**: Well not really, sometimes, but it is considered rude.

The conversation continued for some time, but Ana did not budge on her assertion that Buryat-Russian distinction was inappropriate, in a sense rejecting the traditional designation proffered by Erika. In fact, Ana and I had many conversations about Buryat-Russian distinctions and never had she talked about it with me as vehemently as she did with Erika. Perhaps, she had not because she knew I was a friend, or because I was conducting research and had to entertain such ontological ideas. Or perhaps by rejecting the category *Buryat* she was asserting her modernity and contemporariness.

One day, Ana and I met by Lenin's Head for ice cream. She told me how she was planning to go to Germany soon, but that she often became frustrated when people focused on her Asian facial features and asked about her history and culture. She said that she always begins by telling Russian and Soviet history and that they then probe her about her *real* cultural heritage.

She admitted that she did not know much about Buryat history and did not speak the Buryat language. While she said that Buryat culture is "not her culture" she also said that she does not speak *her native language.* She expressed frustration that although she is a successful young woman with a lucrative job, that she is still judged by a lack of knowledge of her *real* ancestry. In a sense, when Ana is confronted by Western, non-racialized subjects, she is marked as an indigenous person rather than as a modern person and her life choices are seen as a rejection of her real heritage.

Ana's story is unique in that she already lives in the city and is looking outward beyond Ulan-Ude and Buryatia, and yet she feels trapped. Ana's story is closely linked with notions of proper femininity, particularly proper Buryat womanhood, which will be explored in greater detail in Chapter IV.

Arzgun

On one of my trips to the countryside, I met Gerelma, 58, a retired English teacher from the village Arzgun. We met at a jubilee of one of Darima Dugarov's relatives and struck up a conversation while nibbling on cake and cookies. As we departed the raucous event, she invited me to stay with her and her husband for a week in Arzgun. After a few weeks of making arrangements, I found myself again on the *mikrik* headed to the countryside to stay with Gerelma in Arzgun.

Arzgun is a medium sized village with approximately 2,500 to 3,000 inhabitants, predominantly ethnic-Buryat, although I was told there are several Russian and Tatar families. Upon arriving, Gerelma and her husband Viktor met me in the center of town and walked me to their home where they had prepared a tableful of foods from their garden and from their animals,

which we consume with gusto and with wine toasts to friendship and good fortune. Afterwards, Gerelma took me around her property pointing out their cows and pigs and lush garden of vegetables, herbs, berries, and flowers. They also had a greenhouse where tall stalks of cucumbers were bursting out of its corners. She and her husband have separate summer and winter homes, with the winter home used as a kitchen during the summer months so as to keep the summerhouse cool. Gerelma and Viktor are older than my other informants and so my days in Arzgun were calm and slow. I helped Gerelma in the kitchen peeling potatoes, entertained Viktor with my numerous questions about the cows, or chatted with the neighborhood children who were perplexed to see an American. Other times, I walked behind their property to gaze at the spectacular view of the Ikat mountain range.

One morning, I woke up to a household in chaos. One of the cows had leaped over a fence, damaging it and destroying some of their crops in the process of fleeing. Viktor was livid and worked all morning repairing the fence, salvaging crops, and searching for the cow. When found, the cow had damaged its knee and a veterinary was called in to assist, costing them 600 rubles (approximately $25). Gerelma remained focused on preparing breakfast and asked me not to intervene while Viktor was in "such a state."

Cleaning up after the late breakfast, she poured me some milky tea and we began chatting. As a teacher, she was very concerned with education reform in Russia and stated that school curricula should align with economic development objectives. In Buryatia, she feared that the schools would continue to have fewer students and thus fewer resources would be allocated to the villages. She explained that at fault are the regional administrators who "have not done anything so far to expand entertainment and job availability for the next generations." She said that especially those in their late twenties and early thirties, the population that is missing in

the countryside, have no options for a better life in the village. This is why her two sons now live in the city. As a possible solution, she said, "Well, you know we live by Lake Baikal… which is beautiful, but [could be more] profitable considering the tourist business" but that development has been haphazard and focused on the southern parts of the lake.

Gerelma contended that it was not like this before. She stated that cultural life in the village was better before. "Especially during election times, politicians would bring in entertainment, cultural entertainment to persuade us. There were some cultural competitions, like [during] Sagaalgan. Now fewer people participate; [there is] less contact between Buryatia, Mongolia, and Kalmykia, and the House of Culture is less important. They sometimes try to organize events during the holidays, but it [is] more difficult now." When I asked her to explain why it is more difficult now, she explained these issues stem from ignored infrastructure and general apathy amongst villagers. She said that before people in the village were working towards *something*. She recalled with wonder and pride the successes of the collective farm once operational in their village and how it was something that everyone contributed to. Gerelma's narratives of change mirror narratives common in the post-socialist experience where the past is seen as a time when things were better before something was lost (see Grant 1995, Pesmen 2000, Paxson 2005, Patico 2008). Her narratives mirror encounters described by Anderson (2000b) in which he urged his informants in Taimyr to consider whether they actively build their culture or simply expected it to be handed to them by the government. She also reflected on how morality in village life had eroded since the collapse of the Soviet Union. She mentioned reverence, contemplation, spirituality, respect for elders, love for children and the environment in a long list of moral attributes that no longer exists as they did before. When I asked if these features were inherently

Buryat qualities, she stated, "Well of course, but also President Putin has these qualities!" followed by laughter.

Like Pesmen (2000) describes, Gerelma's description of the moral values and attributes are generally common to all humankind, but at the local level serve the function of not only distinguishing groups, but also organizing space and time: authentic, corrupted, Buryat, non-Buryat, and so forth. The degradation of moral values in the present is how my informants justify the lost, authentic past, and in a sense, the need to move away from the villages, that are now considered corrupted spaces trapped in the past. Several of my informants shared sentiments that can be linked to this very idea—that since in the past they worked towards something together and that they do not do this now, then why bother? In Sarankhur, several men I spoke to stated that revitalizing the collective farm would not amount to much, especially with so many people leaving the villages. In Kurumkan, Soëlma shared with me her desire for villagers to take greater interest in their community instead of looking elsewhere and inward. She said to me that she would stay in Kurumkan if there were employment opportunities and if people started to care again about the health of the village. When talking about cultural events (like Suurkharban explored in greater detail in Chapter IV) she also stated that they were better in the past, because people cared and they were better coordinated.

Despite the less than ideal picture of village life, Gerelma said that every year things do get better in her and her husband's lives. She is getting older and is thinking only of the successes of her children and the comforts of modern life in the city. She told me her children grew up well in the village and now are in the city with their families pursuing careers in science and engineering and that they sent her and Viktor money on a regular basis. "[I am] happy for their successes… they help us and we send them food from our garden" she said before continuing

that, "in a few years, we will join them in the city (Rus. *в городе*)." She said that her sons live close to each other in Ulan-Ude and are building a home for her and her husband. Viktor who overheard our conversation jokingly interjected that they are in fact being *forced* to move to the city. Gerelma, glad that Viktor was in better spirits, laughed but says that the village life is just too hard: "[here] we live for our cows!"

In all of these sentiments, there is a sense that life was easier and better in the past, whether stated in terms of cultural health, social interaction, educational resources, and even in terms of less socially alienating behavior, like excessive drinking (see Paxson 2005:88-94). Paxson states that this connection to a *radiant past* is in part because of the coherence of the World War II narrative espoused by the Soviet Union. Soviet discourses focused on the culmination of years of suffering, sacrifice, and hard work with the promise of a radiant future under socialism. Paxson also describes how certain narratives are like "spoken places" where the past is told and retold opening paths to divergent ideas about awe, wonder, anxiety, and fear (149). In the case of Buryatia, although this may be true on a macro-level, at the level of my informants and their personal narratives, they are expressing nostalgia for a common ideal time and place. Unlike the narratives of change that I heard that highlighted cultural, economic, and personal continuities, the narratives of nostalgia focused on sudden interruptions. The reasons attributed to this interruption include community apathy, lack of adequate resources, and little government accountability. However, Gerelma and other narratives testify that nostalgia is not a passive state of being, but rather it informs decisions about the future – a sentiment that I came to see as deeply political.

Kurumkan

One sunny day in Kurumkan, Soëlma and I visit Café Maxim for some much-needed instant coffee in milky tea dominated Buryatia. We played a game of cards, chuckled as our faces became red from the *gorchitsa* (spicy, bitter Russian mustard) that we spread on slices of bread, and chatted about our childhoods. When Soëlma was eight years old, her parents died in an accident. She and her siblings moved in with other relatives and lived a rather quiet life in Kurumkan. She remembered being quite shy and reserved, until she traveled to Saint Petersburg and came to see the beauty of Buryatia in a different way. Pointing at a dilapidated building, she recalled, "there used to be a village sauna there where people got together." She continued, that even with the structures that remain like the House of Culture, library, the *datsan* and *dugan*, and the library, "people [just] don't come here anymore." Even though there is more in Kurumkan now than in her childhood, she said, "I still have those days when I want to live as I used to." When I ask her why, she said that before she did not have to worry about unemployment and there was more political support. From subsequent conversations, and like Gerelma in Arzgun, I came to understand that Soëlma felt that before there was greater unity in the village and indeed across the Soviet Union. Purpose in life was connected to a contribution to social justice and a commitment to community and family. She stated that these qualities, while they still exists and are firmly part of her values, are eroding in the countryside because of lack of economic support to villages and changes in individual mentality. She said:

> *Lately, young people have been encouraged to live in small villages. They were given housing, but this was not effective because of the lack of employment in small villages. So they leave because they are bored by village life. As I said before, young people now can travel and see the world. They prefer to live where life seems more attractive to them. They don't want to come back to a village to take care of cows [laughing]. That's a pity.*

Soëlma clearly expressed that the fate of the village would remain grim unless the lure of the globalized city comes to the village. She like others stated that employment opportunities

alone are not sufficient. Especially young people find village life boring and unglamorous, pre-

ferring to live elsewhere and see a world that is considered more modern and exciting.

Arzgun

On another day in Arzgun, I was invited on an excursion with Tamara's family to visit

their *dugan* located on a mountainside with unusual rock formations some of which, I was told,

are considered sacred. Tamara invited a young woman, Oyuna, to travel with us. Oyuna was

one of Tamara's students who had just completed her university studies in Ulan-Ude in modern

languages focused on English and German. Tamara invited her to come along with us so that she

could practice English with a native speaker. Oyuna, like Soëlma in Kurumkan, is unemployed

and stated that she had no prospects of finding a job in the village despite her impeccable lan-

guage skills. She was particularly adamant that she would not remain in Arzgun for long. An

interesting exchange occurred between the two women:

> **Tamara**: You could become [a] teacher here… in Arzgun.
> **Oyuna** (rolling her eyes): What would I do here? What is here [in the village]?
> **Tamara**: You are right… [as] a single, young, educated girl, there is no opportunity
> here… well, you are young now, with no obligations, you should see the world; [there is]
> nothing anymore in Arzgun… [it is not a] place for seeking a better life.

Later, when Tamara and I were alone, she told me how her own son, Bator, had decided

not to pursue education and to stay in the village. "I think this is all that will remain [in the vil-

lage], old people like me and my son [dispirited and uneducated]." As she began tearing up, she

explained to me that her eldest son passed away several years ago. "After the tragic death, Bator

[her living son] decided he would stay home and help take care of us [her and her husband]. He

has no interest in leaving Arzgun, or getting married." But opportunities, she said, are only in

the city. She mentioned how Gerelma's sons are pursuing careers in Ulan-Ude because "there is

nothing for them in the villages; how Bator will make a living here, I just don't know." She and Gerelma, who are good friends, also mentioned the comforts of city life and juxtaposed them with accounts of the calmness and peacefulness in the countryside. Even with the exchange between Tamara and Oyuna above, a tendency to romanticize the villages and the past, in a sense feeling nostalgic for something lost, ultimately gave way to the city as the location of progress and promise.

Tamara, more so than others, really struggled with the reality that village life is changing and the decision that her son has made although fulfilling to her because he will remain near her, significantly limited his life options. Tamara shifted back and forth between wanting to move to the city and wishing to stay in the village, expressing nostalgia for traditional times and even traditional gender roles. When talking about Arzgun and going about her life, Tamara stated several times that she would miss the village life, but when milking the cows late at night, she mentioned how the hardships of village life were just too much without more economic support. To Oyuna, the choice was obvious.

Yarikto

Reading the local newspaper, *Ogni Kurumkana*, I came across the name of an English language teacher, Erzhena, who was profiled in an article on culture for her role in planning a cultural event in the region. After seeking assistance from my local acquaintances, in less than an hour and after a few telephone calls, I spoke to Erzhena over the phone and explained that I would be in Yarikto for a few days and that I would like to meet her. Later that day, I met Erzhena for lunch.

As we sipped on tea and ate *buuza* (Buryat dumplings), Erzhena surprised me when she shared that her husband found a job in the countryside and they decided to move back from Ulan-Ude. Originally from the Kurumkan region, they lived in the city for a number of years and missed the quiet and calm of village life. Erzhena, 33, is a dynamic young woman who spoke English and German impeccably. She enjoys meeting foreigners and mentioned that when she heard there was a group of Australian men in the region a few weeks back that she immediately volunteered to assist them getting around. Although she spoke of the countryside positively, she condemned local practices of excessive alcohol consumption, drinking river water and *arkhi*, and littering. I was interested in Erzhena's story because although it is a counter-narrative of urbanization, she challenged the idea that certain cosmopolitanisms can only exist in urban settings. Her narrative of social change, while mirroring other narratives that heard, like that of moving to the city and nostalgia, in fact highlighted the important role of individual cosmopolitan practices. Erzhena contended that a better future is one where certain traditional behaviors are challenged and the logic of the city comes to the countryside. When we spoke about revitalizing traditional holidays, she mentioned that, "not everybody understands the real meaning of these holidays. They don't understand why we need them if we didn't celebrate them for so long." In a dynamic discussion about the Buryat language we had with a friend of hers on a subsequent meeting, she forthrightly stated, "We don't need [the] Buryat language in our [lives]!" She continued, "In fact, in a time frame of a hundred years one or two hundred languages will die. It is a tendency… and it will happen [to Buryat presumably]."

I asked Erzhena to explain to me why most people I have spoken to are moving to the city to seek a better life, and yet she has moved to the countryside. She was not surprised by my question but stated, "I think the government [is doing its best] to destroy villages and force peo-

ple to go to cities… because that will be cheaper for the government to have everybody live in the city; this is my opinion and my husband agrees with me." To Erzhena, village life was being compromised due to a lack of government support to develop the countryside, characterizing urbanization as a forced social phenomenon. She continued, "My cousin from Garga which is 50 kilometers from Kurumkan left his parent's house to live in Kurumkan [the regional capital]. I think this is not good for the villages. I have three brothers who are going to do the same, to come to the city, Kurumkan or Ulan-Ude. These changes in the last ten years are not good. They [her relatives] would like to stay in the village. They love the river, the nature, their children, but they have nothing to do there. They have no money and no jobs and have to go to the city to find a job." She admitted, that in general, there are more opportunities in the city, including attaining a better education. Erzhena said that the competition to get a better salary in the city made the quality of education better, and compared this with the quality of education in the United States, although she had never been to the United States. Yet, she reverted to the richness of country life, saying that if I were to visit very distant areas of Buryatia, that I would find a rich life. Erzhena characterized social ills like alcoholism as an inability to "see themselves from [the] outside" meaning that they are perhaps unable to see the poor choices they are making and the rich country life there are forgoing.

In my discussions with Erzhena on revitalized traditions, the Buryat language, urban versus rural life and values, I noted frustration and contradiction. She welcomingly spoke of the inevitability of cosmopolitanism and change, but also warned, even lamented, the richness she said exists in the countryside. I heard similar sentiments from others as recounted throughout my analysis. Despite Erzhena's decision to move to the countryside, her narrative was not fully a counter-narrative. In fact, her narrative of change complements the other narratives I collected.

Her decision to move to the countryside from the city is yet another instance of the un-linear and ebbing nature of social change in Buryatia. In her narratives of change, the countryside was informed by both village and city attributes and did not exist independently. Her narrative brought together individual and collective constructions of the village through the capital city.

2.3   Reflections on the City and the Village

Faier (2009) argues that amongst Filipina migrant women in central Japan migration is not just a means to an end, but is part of a broader process of movement along particular routes that lead people to realize their dreams (82-83). The migrant women that she profiles imagine modernity and progress through global discourses of the Philippines, Japan, and the West in socio-historical, political, and economic context. She reminds us that actions, practices, and choices at the individual, local level are informed by the pressures of globalization and a political economy that stretches over vast historic periods and geographic expanses. In Foucauldian fashion, Faier shows that Filipina/o and Japanese identities come into being and are co-constructed through these discourses. Similarly, the narratives of social change that I heard cannot be simply understood in terms of rural and urban, here and there, the past and the future. The changes described and the emotions attached to those changes are elaborately connected to imaginations of the city and countryside. In the above, I show how these imaginations can be typified as a dynamic system of overlapping and co-constructed values, imaginations, and discourses of place. While each personal narrative is unique, collectively the narratives conceptualize social change within that complex system. In a sense, by thinking about social change as something that is grounded in place, I am attempting to reframe *moving to the city* and *remembering the village*

from a discourse on progress or loss to something more nuanced – as a porous journey where both ends of the journey are implicated and co-constructed.

III.   GENDER, PROGRESS, AND PLACE IN BURYATIA

3.1   Gender in Post-Socialist Perspective

As mentioned above, early Soviet ideology inculcated essentialized notions of ethnic identity connected to territory in order to consolidate and legitimate power. On the other hand, early Soviet engineering processes appropriated the language of women's emancipation in order to bring women into the full-time labor force and challenge the subordination of women by men (Hemment 2007:8). Gal and Kligman (2000) note that after World War II, the standard discursive pattern that associated women with the private and men with the public was reversed under socialism, so that women came to be seen as allied with the state (90).   Other ethnographic works have shown how, in public opinion before and after 1991, that Soviet gender arrangements were a source of dissatisfaction directed at the state (Hemment 2007:75, Patico 2008:152-153, Verdery 1996:14).   But more generally, gender and sexually sanctioned categories and practices create personal and public boundaries of respectability (Stoler 1988, 1995). In fact, proper gender roles are seen as an important factor in maintaining social harmony (Abu-Lughod 1986, Lutz 1988, Kondo 1990, Faier 2009). The combination of gender boundaries and Soviet redefinitions of public versus private spaces, is yet another instance of the importance of place and space in conceptualizing social change in post-socialist Buryatia.

There are limited studies that focus on gender in Buryatia in historical and contemporary contexts. Despite instances of women's active participation in social life, it is fair to generalize

that women in traditional Buryat society were largely marginalized with fewer rights than men in their family and the community more broadly. In fact, a woman's main value was that of serving the social functions of marriage and reproduction (Nikolaeva 2008). Buryat women, more so than men, are believed to retain the purity the Buryat people (Humphrey 1983:35, Amogolonova 2008). The *Gostepriimnaia Buryatia* monument (Rus. *Гостеприимная Бурятия*) in Buryatia is an excellent example. The female statue is dressed in traditional Buryat dress and holds a traditional *khadak*[21] in her arms extending hospitality and friendship. Amogolonova (2000:238) notes that this statue is a gendered marker and physical reminder of Buryat national revitalization and a symbolic reminder of the importance of authenticity.

As argued above, social change is grounded in imaginations of place and space. In my study, I consider how particular gender expectations are situated within in the broader narratives of change I have explored. I will also consider how rural and urban landscapes influence collective expectations grounded in gender and how gender factors into how individuals envision the future. I will explore how gender, place, and progress are intricately connected in the narratives of social change I heard and the spaces I visited and explored.

3.2   *Narratives of Place and Gender*

Sarankhur

In the narratives I collected and the practices I observed, sacred and cultural spaces in Buryatia reinforce particular continuities between the past and the future and factor in local modes of conceptualizing the world. During my fieldwork, I considered how these sacred and cultural spaces trigger and communicate very specific conceptualizations of masculine and femi-

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[21] A traditional scarf given to guests of honor.

nine expectations. I came to see gender and place as part of the same dialogic confrontation between individual and place explored in the previous sections of my analysis. In the section that follows, I draw attention to the link between sacred and cultural spaces and the gender expectations they communicated.

At Ulan-Ude's Buryat National Scientific Center, I met a folklorist named Svetlana who excitedly told me about her recent expedition to the Kurumkan region. She went to Yanzhima, a sacred place where the image of a goddess inexplicably appeared on a rock deep in the forest. Yanzhima is located in the Kurumkan region and the rock-image is of the Hindu goddess Saraswati, goddess of wisdom, arts, patroness of mothers and children. Svetlana advises me to ask my contacts in Kurumkan to take me to see the image and then to come back and tell her what I saw.

In Sarankhur, Darima, unusually animated, told me about the international scientific attention Yanzhima had received and agreed that we must go see it while I am in the region. On the morning of our trip to Yanzhima, I am told how it is prohibited to drink alcohol in this place because it is a women's place. Instead of the usual bottles of vodka and cartons of cigarettes that are prepared for a visit to a sacred place, we instead pack up milk and cream. Driving closer to the rock-image, we are increasingly surrounded by a thick forest of birch trees along a winding and bumpy unpaved road. At some distance from the actual rock-image, the car is stopped and we hike up a slope. As we ascend, I noticed that there are plastic baby dolls hanging from the branches along the path. I remembered having seen these hanging baby dolls in some other sacred places as well, but Darima reminds me that they are for good luck and that this place is sacred because it promotes fertility and healthy pregnancy, delivery, and motherhood. As mentioned previously, Yanzhima is decidedly a feminine space. In fact, although Vadim, Darima's husband, accompanied us, he was uncharacteristically silent as Darima did most of the talking.

Darima directed me to the rock-image while telling me the importance of the rock-image, especially for women. She stated that motherhood is an important quality of Buryat woman-hood. Onlookers usually see one of three images: a dancing goddess, a pregnant goddess, or nothing at all. The last is considered quite ominous, while the image of a pregnant goddess pres-ages fertility. Unable to get more than ten feet from the image itself, I saw the image of a color-ful, but weathered and blurry dancing goddess. Darima was quite relieved that I saw the dancing goddess and assured me that I would not become a father any time soon. Darima explained this all to me in great detail as we circumambulate the rock-image three times and then peruse a small yurt with information on and the history of the rock-image and its discovery. The yurt had close-up photographs and artistic representations of the rock-image, newspaper clippings of its finding, and a media release from the former Buryat president's visit to the site. Darima care-fully read to me every sign in the yurt in a suspenseful whisper as if she herself were uncovering new secrets and mysteries of this place.

As Darima left my side to show deference to the rock-image, I wandered off to find more plastic baby dolls hanging from trees and a blanket with about 15 dolls lying side by side on the ground. We spend a considerable amount of time at Yanzhima to the chagrin of Vadim who pa-tiently waited some distance from us. Men are allowed in Yanzhima, but unlike other sacred spaces, there is no active role for men at Yanzhima. Yanzhima is a unique space in that the so-cial role of women as mothers is reinforced as the proper pathway for Buryat womanhood. Yanzhima's prohibition on alcohol and its mysterious discovery add to the obscurity of this place. Yanzhima, as a feminine space, emphasizes purity, fertility, and in a sense the continuing relevance of the local in post-socialist contexts. By this I mean that Yanzhima's recent discovery underscores how tradition and meaning can be constructed in rural, but also contemporary

spaces. The idea and meaning of Yanzhima does not rely on the past or on urban discourses of culture and tradition. Nor does Yanzhima follow rational thought, in that the rock-image presents itself in a profoundly personal way. However, Yanzhima, deep in the forest, mysterious, magical almost in a sense connects the feminine with notions of authenticity reinforcing gender roles and women's role as child bearers.

So if Yanzhima accentuates the social expectations of women, is there a male equivalent? Is there a male space that underscores ideal masculine attributes? I first considered the sacred place called Buxekhen—a male space that I visited several times. Similar to Yanzhima, Buxekhen is deep in the forest, but unlike Yanzhima where men are permitted, women are strictly forbidden in Buxekhen. Feigning ignorance, I asked a local man visiting the site why women were not allowed. He turned to me with a smile and said, "Because women are not human!" (Rus. *Потому, что женщина не человек*!). In the context, this was surely said lightly, but telling nevertheless.

Buxekhen is a sacred place where drinking and irrational behavior was expected and promoted. Ritual drinking was part of a broader veneration of kinship spirits, forest spirits, and homo-social bonding. After collecting spring water from the *arshan*[22], we walked towards a makeshift roof perched on a hill in the forest. Under the roof there was a small altar and a wooden table with sitting benches. Vadim sat on the bench and unloads his bag of milk, bread, cream, crackers, candies, cigarettes and vodka. Vadim, Andrei, and another older Buryat man began enacting a series of ritual practices. The men started a fire and sprinkled vodka and milk libations for local spirits while creating circles with their hands and arm movements above the fire. Later, hats were placed on everyone's heads and vodka and milk libations were again sprinkled to the forest while mantras in Buryat were repeated. Afterwards a candle was lit before

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[22] A natural spring that is often also considered a sacred place.

the altar and foodstuffs were offered to an image of Buddha. These ritualized practices and liba-

tions are followed by the copious consumption of vodka and lively conversations and debates. In

Buryatia, these ritual practices reaffirm the social value of reciprocity, kinship, and belonging

(Humphrey 1998, 1999a, 1999b, Long 2008). Several hours later, we surfaced from the forest,

jolly and replete with food, spirits, and bonding.

Like Yanzhima, Buxekhen's prohibition of women created a sense of awe as to what oc-

curred in the forest, but unlike Yanzhima, this space was less about collective masculinities, but

a space to reinforce male-centric homo-social bonds across ethnic-Buryats. As Safonova and

Sántha (2007) explore among the Evenki, perhaps the expectation to drink excessively is more

about experiencing Buryat collective autonomy through the collective ecstasy (8). In Pesmen

(2000), she argues that excessive drinking is actually considered natural and that it helps indi-

viduals emerge and speak with truth and passion (187). While it is an important space to con-

sider alongside Yanzhima, I later found the Suurkharban festival as an even more comparable

space for reflecting on the social expectations of masculinity.

In mid-July, the Suurkharban[23] festival is celebrated across Buryatia. Suurkharban is a

Buryat national holiday where traditional sporting events are displayed, including horseback rid-

ing, archery, and wrestling. I often heard Suurkharban spoken about along gendered lines much

more than other rituals or holidays. One man from Kurumkan now living in Ulan-Ude, Bair, ex-

plained to me that he never misses Suurkharban, stating that it is the second most important holi-

day in Buryatia. Vadim excitedly told me about the course of events for Suurkharban and how

he had invited his nephew Dugar, from another village, to come stay with us in the week before

Suurkharban to prepare for the wrestling match. A few days before the event, I spoke to Vladi-

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[23] For an in depth history of Suurkharban, see Humphrey (1998:377-382).

mir, one of the organizers at the local House of Culture who said that they usually begin the day's events by commemorating survivors of war—usually men.

Days before the festival, I started to probe for the deeper significance of this festival. In a neighboring village, I visited a wrestling summer camp where excited young boys practiced their wrestling moves to perform at the festival. As the young boys took a short break, I sat down with their coach, Oleg, to talk about the festival. Oleg, also a wrestler, is an ethnic-Buryat in his late twenties with a rock solid body, who mentioned to me that Suurkharban as a holiday show-cases the different life pathways available to young men in Buryatia. Oleg stated that at the Suurkharban festival young men and boys can see sportsmanship as an alternative to alcoholism. He later told me rather pointedly that there comes a point in a young man's life when he has to make an important decision: whether to be a *sportsmen*[24] (Rus. *спортсмен*) or be a drunkard. This particular theme was one that surfaced time and time again in the narratives that I heard throughout my fieldwork, but especially connected to gender.

In the weeks prior to the festival there was much talk about sportsmanship in general and the local newspaper ran articles on the history of Suurkharban, profiles of local wrestling heroes, and the schedule of different festivals in the region. At the event, I met a local government official Nikolai with whom I chatted about Suurkharban. Nikolai, and ethnic-Russian from Kurum-kan, echoed Oleg's claims that the festival is important for young men. He added that Suurkharban is not just a Buryat tradition, but also one where Russians also participate. He said that although Russians don't usually participate in the wrestling match the incorporation of volleyball and soccer in the Suurkharban events was good for Buryat-Russian relations.

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[24] Anglophone form of sportsman or athlete, implying a well behaved, cultured man, who does not drink excessively.

At the event itself, Vadim eagerly whisked me around to meet different people and see different parts of the festival. He shared with me, proudly watching his 16-year old nephew Dugar compete in the wrestling competition, how the tournament reminded him of his childhood and how he himself was an excellent wrestler. Pointing ahead of us, we started walking towards a traditional Buryat yurt at the far corner of the field away from the event activities. Inside the yurt, I saw familiar faces. Bair from Ulan-Ude kept his promise to attend and was sipping on *arkhi*, while Vadim's sister-in-law invited us to sit for a snack. She served us mutton, broth, and *arkhi*. All that was served inside the yurt was ceremonial. Consuming mutton, broth, and *arkhi* inside of a yurt was a representation of common perceptions of traditional Buryat culture.

But as much as Suurkharban highlighted Buryat culture and manhood, I came to see Suurkharban as a spectacle of ideal masculinities. Suurkharban reinforced community expectations of manhood in masculinities tied to youth and athleticism, which were connected to a heroic warrior past of physical discipline, archery, and horseback riding. While a connection to a shared past, in a sense, the memory of a once great nation, could have a reconciliatory effect in post-socialist Buryatia, the fact is that these masculine qualities are largely invisible in daily village life. In the narratives I collected, the qualities of sobriety, virility, and physicality emphasized by the festival are not ones embodied by most men in the village. While Suurkharban shows young men and boys a righteous path towards sportsmanship, it is widely recognized that these idealized masculinities are often lost after adolescence.

Telling were the ways in which women talked about Suurkharban. Women talked about Suurkharban dismissively, finding it an annoyance or simply something that is not important. Unlike when we were at Yanzhima, Darima was unengaged at the festival, sitting quietly in the shade. Maria mentioned to me in Ulan-Ude rather directly "I don't like Suurkharban [because of

the] crowds of people in the hot day!" In Arzgun, conversations about Suurkharban were largely indifferent, with a greater focus placed on other holidays like Sagaalgan, which was recounted with fond memories and future anticipation. Soëlma in Kurumkan, was critical of Suurkharban stating that, "it is just a symbolic tribute to a tradition that is not interesting and not well organized." While young girls did participate in the cultural program of the festival, their participation was marginal in relation to the attention placed on the main sporting events.

Despite women's general indifference with Suurkharban, Suurkharban like Yanzhima communicated ideal gender qualities that were valued by women. Unlike Yanzhima however, the roles highlighted by the Suurkharban festival are largely absent from the social lives of my informants. Despite a focus on sportsmanship over alcoholism, masculinity is framed as a failed possibility, as a meaningless display, or public fiction, of masculinity that women and men do not actually see operating in their daily lives. In the following section, I will explore how this public fiction is addressed in the imaginations of the past/village and future/city.

3.3.   Narratives of Progress and Gender

Ulan-Ude

One day, Ana and I meet at Ulan-Ude's *Arbat*[25]*,* a pedestrian walkway bisecting the main street, Lenin Street. The closed walkway is lined with shops, internet cafes, fast food restaurants, and even an Irish Pub. It is decorated with fountains lined with colorful flowers and small gardens. Music plays from loud speakers at each end of the pedestrian walkway ranging from Russian pop, classical music, and once I even heard the Spanish classic *Júrame*. It is a space with droves of young people and activity. On sunny days, parents bring their young children to re-

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[25] Arbat Street (Rus. *Арбатская улица*) in Moscow is the historical center of Moscow and an important tourist attraction, lined with artists, souvenir stalls and shops, restaurants, cafés and bars.

fresh in the fountain waters, entrepreneurial musicians play guitar in the shade and scramble for change from passers-by, and red-faced tourists sift through Chinese-made trinkets in the tourist yurts found in the center of the walkway. Meeting on the Arbat is typical amongst younger people in Ulan-Ude; it is a very modern and cool space, and for an urbanite like myself, a welcomed reminder of home.

We go to a local coffee shop called *Silk Road* modeled on Starbucks, although there are no Western business chains in Ulan-Ude. Ana joked with me that her mother berates her for not drinking milky tea as is more culturally acceptable in Buryatia, particularly for women. Her mother warns her about the dangerous health effects associated with consuming coffee. Ana and I formed a special friendship that in a sense transcended that of researcher and informant. While I interviewed several urban women, Ana became my confidant and a regular character in my life in Buryatia.

Ana, single at the time I met her, almost exclusively sought romantic relationships with European men. Unlike my informants in the villages who imagine Ulan-Ude as a space for achieving their dreams, Ana sees Ulan-Ude as a gateway to bigger cities like Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Berlin, and Krakow. When we talk about how Ulan-Ude has changed, she admitted that it is a much more cosmopolitan place than ten years ago. There are more things to do, more established clubs, and more foreigners. She also says that there are more Buryat people. Soëlma in Kurumkan said that she was happy that Ulan-Ude is becoming "more Buryat" – a sentiment shared by some local academics with whom I spoke. But for Ana this was not as important. More important to her was what has not changed. She said there are still very specific expectations and limitations of what women can do in Buryatia. She said that her mother complained

almost daily that she is waiting too long to get married and to start a family. When I asked her what she wanted in life, she smiled and said shyly, "Oh you know, adventure."

One day, as we hung out on the Arbat eating ice cream and admiring a handsome Buryat man that passed us, I asked her if she would ever marry a Buryat man. I was interested especially with the influx of more people into the city. She responded that although she would consider it, that it would probably be as a last resort. When I asked her to explain, she said laughing, "Oh, they are drunk!" She later said to me something I heard several times: *What is worse than one drunken Buryat man? Two drunken Buryat men.* In other instances, men were blamed for not stepping up whether because of alcohol or not. In Yarikto, Erzhena attributed the lack of opportunities for young people as a problem that men have done nothing about. Darima in Sarankhur said to me in private, that "when men drink, that they become [like] children." Ana, on a role, continued to say that drunken men are "stupid and useless." Even amongst other Western social scientists that I met while in the field, the overwhelming sentiment was that what did work in Buryatia was largely because of women and despite men.

Yet during my time in the field, Ana decided to have an affair with a Buryat man who she made very clear to me was not the typical man she usually dated. Ana stated to me rather bashfully that she was embarrassed to tell her friends that she was spending time with a *zaimashnii* person, (literally, from the village/one with a village mentality, from the word *zaimka*[26]). She described him as a "typical Buryat man" that was "uncultured (Rus. *некультурно*), dressed poorly, and [who] likes to drink a lot." Ana admitted that when they are together she made sure to be away from high traffic areas in the city like the Arbat. Because he has a car, they usually

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[26] A farm, far from a village, that historically served as a summer or winter camp for cattle breeders.

hang out in a country house outside of the city with his friends, where they drink, smoke, and play cards. But one day, Ana decided to introduce me to Rolik.

Rolik, 28, is ethnically Buryat and lives in the outskirts of the city across the Uda river in what is considered a less prestigious area of town. He came to the city first for university studies, but eventually dropped out and now lives with his parents and siblings, who moved from the countryside. Rolik works at a cell phone accessory store, which he enjoys very much. He was thrilled to meet an American and even asked Ana for advice on what to wear for the occasion. Ana, exasperated, explained to me that most of her friends would not be excited to meet an American as they have regular contact with foreigners in their urban social circles. She pointed to me teasingly and said, "It is just you!"

Ana realized that Rolik did not move in those same social circles, yet she felt compelled to be with him because he is good natured and made her feel like a woman. She said of her last German boyfriend that he had lost all sense of gentlemanliness. Although she likes European men, she often misses the sense of feeling like a special woman being cared to. She explained further that she may consider marrying Rolik, but that this would mean giving up her lifestyle dreams to instead be a good Buryat woman and mother. Probing further, she said that if that were to happen, she would probably move to a village to have children and where living would be less expensive. Throughout the summer, the incompatibility of a traditional Buryat marriage and a modern, middle-class lifestyle as defined by Ana, never subsided.

Ana's story resonated with me and connects well with other narratives of change that I have presented. Decisions like whom to marry, where to live, and how to live, while seemingly straightforward decisions often evoked self-doubt in my informants. As I heard from Ana, decisions about her future, like social change more broadly, did not necessarily take her in a linear

direction. The changes she experienced circle back, inform, and re-inform both ends of the trajectories she imagined for herself. All along that journey, Ana like others, is confronted with social pressures, contradiction stemming from nostalgia, and dreams. Despite Ana's insistence that her direction in life is clear, from what I have recounted, it clearly is not.

3.4   Reflecting on Gender

In the above vignettes on gender, progress, and place I show how when analyzing the narratives of social change through a gendered lens, that many of the same themes surface. These themes are tensions between the past, present, and future that are imagined through places. Whether imagined in the city or the countryside, proper forms of being in places is a strong undercurrent in the narratives of change that I collected. Whether in sacred places, cultural events, temples, or in the *mikrik* change is understood in terms of where an individual is and where she is going. For Darima and Vadim, incongruence between what is socially expected of men and women and what is experienced in their daily lives, perhaps has influenced their different perspectives on moving to the city. In the above example, Yanzhima reflects femininities largely achieved by women, while Suurkharban largely is a façade of unachieved masculinities. For many of the women I interviewed, perhaps this public fiction has influenced their decisions to move to the city—where they believe, implicitly, things will be better. In the case of Ana, although she recognizes that she has aspirations that deviate from social norms she remains conflicted with what to do: to follow her dreams or become a good Buryat woman. The tension is intimately connected to specific places where particular futures are possible or impossible, but are nevertheless grounded. It was in these conversations, especially with Ana and other urban

women I met, that I was able to get a better grasp of the way traditional gender values and expectations, modernity, and change are embodied and imagined in physical spaces.

IV. THE *MIKRIK*[27] JOURNEY

4.1 *Riding the* Mikrik

In the above, I explore how my informants talked about moving to the city and how they remembered the countryside in terms of how they imagined those places in the past and future. In the next chapter, I will explore these issues more pointedly by theorizing travel within the *mikrik*, or minibus. By this, I mean that I will show how the *mikrik* is a useful tool for experiencing and understanding the narratives of change I collected in Buryatia.

4.2 *Introducing Urbanization*

Almost twenty years after the collapse of state socialism and with the national resurgence of the 1990s a distant memory, the republic of Buryatia in southeastern Siberia is experiencing a population shift across the territory from small villages to the capital city, Ulan-Ude[28]. A large proportion coming from the distant northern regions of the republics, including Kurumkan region, where I conducted my study and which is evident from the narratives explored above. A similar process of urbanization is occurring across most of Siberia and the Russian Far East since the 1980s, however to call this process a systematic process of *urbanization*, can be misleading, since Buryatia is a rural, underdeveloped region of Russia with Ulan-Ude as its only "urban"

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[27] In Russia, the *marshrutka,* a minivan, is a common form of mass transportation, somewhere between a bus and taxi. Although the *mikrik* is also a *marshrutka*, the word *mikrik* was used by my informants as the vehicle that got them from city to countryside and back.

[28] For a history of the settlement, development, and urbanization of Ulan-Ude see Zhimbiev (2001) and Amogolonova (2008, chapter 6).

center. With a population of about 400,000[29] official inhabitants (Russia 2002 census) or about 42% of the republic's population, it ranks as the 47th largest city of Russia. That said, Ulan-Ude is by no means similar to the cosmopolitan urban center comparable in the United States[30]. In Russian, the official word for urbanization is the Anglophone *urbanizatsiia*, which was not a term expressed by my informants. Instead I heard *moving в город* (to the city) and *в центр* (to the center) or simple *в Улан-Удэ* (to Ulan-Ude). In academic texts, I noted *миграционный отток населения* (migratory draining of the population) as well as *урбанизация* (urbanization). However, for semantic efficiency, I will use the term *urbanization* to describe the population shift occurring in Buryatia.

The reasons for migration, emigration, and immigration are quite similar across the world and include greater access to educational and livelihood opportunities, access to modern conveniences, and the disintegration of rural industries much of which was described by my informants in the narratives of change presented in the previous chapters. As I illustrated in Chapter I, in the case of the former Soviet Union capital cities are largely associated with the regulation of behavior and the embodiment of modern life. Similarly, from my interviews and discussions with rural ethnic-Buryats, moving to the city was associated with progress and westernization. As discussed above, young people are an important factor in the population shift, not only in that they would rather live in the city, but also because their families often follow them.

In the nine years between my travels to Buryatia, Ulan-Ude has seen tremendous infrastructural upgrading and urban development projects. Entering the city, the skyline is scattered with construction cranes and new commercial and residential buildings outlined with scaffolding.

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[29] The actual number is likely higher. Amogolonova states that the number of immigrants from the countryside who do not have a city registration is significant (2005).

[30] Comparable cities in the United States include Oakland-California, Miami-Florida, Tulsa-Oklahoma, and Honolulu-Hawaii

Older buildings and cathedrals are mid-renovation and surrounded by new pedestrian areas, plazas, and monuments. During my research, the entire central plaza was renovated with a tile mosaic (using Chinese labor in fact). My informants boasted of the new opera house and the Russian National Theater with a colorful fountain show. Even in the Buddhist cultural center of Buryatia in Ivolginsk, new and old temples and walkways were mid-renovation, while new golden prayer wheels and newly painted *stupas*[31] glistened in the sunlight. In Ulan-Ude, there were also new movie theaters, trade centers, internet cafes, and dance clubs in a place where nine years ago, only a few Western-style restaurants could be found. These physical, infrastructural developments of Ulan-Ude wove together layers of Buryat, Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet symbolisms and nostalgias that were recounted by my informants in the narratives I heard. Urbanization, which is often characterized as a dismantling of the countryside, a process of disintegration or cultural destruction, could be viewed as one that creates new identities through new consumptive capabilities. In fact analyzing urbanization in this more dynamic, non-linear frame helps to resolve the problem of conceptualizing urbanization (and post-socialism more generally) as a phenomenon with a pre-determined direction or one that is rooted in a static, un-re-definable past.

Getting to the countryside I was introduced to a different set of temporalities underlying urbanization. These included anticipations of the future, nostalgia for the past, and a yearning for a present where both could coexist. I came to see the landscape as a set of spaces that activated these temporalities. The self as an anthropological category that is an unstable, ever-shifting assertion of value (Kondo 1999) is not an independent entity floating in space, but a set of relationships and exercises of power in time and space. This became to me the other dimension of the urbanization narrative in Buryatia, the coupling of emotion and landscape that sur-

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[31] Commemorative monument to a lama.

faced in the personal narratives I heard and the practices I observed while conducting my field-work.

My analysis of urbanization in Buryatia focuses on how individuals shift from one survival repertoire to another, constantly moving between the symbolic spaces of their future and their past. In fact, as individuals move from one space to another, they take on new forms of conceiving themselves and organizing the decisions they make regarding their lives. These new forms are not random, but can tell us a lot about a particular place in time and its historically, spatially, and socially defined norms. I came to appreciate the modes of transportation from city to countryside and back, *na mikrike*, or on the minibus, as not just a means of getting from one place to another, but as a place in and of itself. The *mikrik* is a place where social boundaries are negotiated, where modernity is confronted, and where spiritual practices are collectively enacted. Participating in this movement, in what I am calling the *mikrik* journey, not only helped to contextualize the broader narratives of social change I investigated, but also helped to create a social bond between my informants and myself vis-à-vis a shared experience. While my intention is not to make sweeping generalizations about the Buryat people, the *mikrik* as a space that facilitates social interaction and exchange is an integral space for anthropological analysis. In what follows, I will focus on the journey from the city to the countryside and how particular segments of the trip activate survival frames embodied in people's voices and practices. Ultimately, the intent is to show how spatially activated practices shed light on a broader meta-narrative of social change.

While urbanization is common throughout the former Soviet Union, the urbanization process I witnessed and heard about in Buryatia entailed a systematic back and forth between village and city by individuals and families in preparation for a permanent move to the city.

While I was keenly aware of this social phenomenon going into the field, it was only when I was actually there that I began to understand the deeper significance of urbanization. My research in Buryatia did not just take place in the villages or in city cafés, but also in getting from one distant place to the next. While collecting narratives of social change in rural Buryatia, my trips *na mikrike*, emerged as an important factor in the lives of my informants. While the impetus for these trips, just as mine, varied from rest and relaxation to helping village relatives with the summer hay harvest, repeatedly the topic of moving or preparing to move to the city emerged as a common theme. The *mikrik,* as a vessel for transportation, became an important site for experiencing, observing, and theorizing change in Buryatia. The *mikrik* came to symbolize the journey of urbanization more broadly and to provide a context in which to ground questions about post-socialist modernity, tradition, and nostalgia.

As the *mikrik* moves from urban to rural landscapes and back, the conversations and practices of its passengers began reflecting moments in which social boundaries were redefined, modernity confronted, and where spiritual consciousness was awakened. Narratives and practices along the trip as ordinary as eating together, sharing life stories, or helping each other in and out of the *mikrik*, in fact reflect the complex relationships between individuals and the physical, spiritual, and historic landscapes through which they pass. The *mikrik* journey represents, again, how cultural change is not linear, but that it loops back. The *mikrik* journey shows how positivistic development is not a step in a hierarchy of change, but that it is a process that is informed and co-constructed by both ends of the journey. What follows is a closer examination of the *mikrik* journey, its benchmarks, and representations.

4.3   The Mikrik *Journey*

The *mikrik* (pl. *mikriki*) is a minibus that takes passengers from the city to the countryside and back. In the early morning hours of each day, *mikriki*, their drivers, and passengers gather near the central train station in Ulan-Ude to take the first bus to leave to the countryside. There are no fixed schedules, but generally one bus will leave before 9 a.m. and another soon after-wards, depending on the number of passengers and the whim of the drivers. Foreigners usually do not take these buses, so on my first trip I was intimidated by what seemed to me a chaotic push and pull of yelling drivers stuffing people on to their small buses with luggage, bags, and boxes strewn across the pavement and eventually roped tightly on the tops of the buses. Indeed on my first trip, I was keenly unaware of what the drivers were managing: collecting payment, tracking headcount, managing drunk men, answering their cell phones, and catching a smoke from time to time. Because of the high demand for transportation services to the region I was studying, there were several buses and four different drivers each with a unique management and driving style.

Having taken this trip many times both from city to countryside and back, I observed a qualitative difference in people's practices determined by the direction of travel. The trip from the countryside to the city was often a quieter experience, with less excitement attached to the journey and its some segments, which I will describe below, rushed or skipped altogether. The trip from the city to the countryside emerged as a symbolic trip *back* in terms of a *return* rather than a mere trip *to* some place. Upon noticing this, I decided to observe more closely and con-verse more pointedly with my fellow travelers to determine what were the qualitative differences between these two trips. My approach relied on informal conversations with other passengers, most often the individuals directly by my side, although conversations took place outside of the

mikrik, at one of the several stops along the way that I explore in greater detail below. I had the chance to speak to one driver several times and one time I traveled with an informant whom I subsequently engaged in in-depth interviews. I was interested in what each segment of the trip represented and why. How did the physical geography of the journey inform and trigger my fellow travelers' practices?

The *mikrik* journey starts with a departure from the city, leaving behind the noise of cars and trams and the dust and sand of the city. As we drove out of Ulan-Ude the geography shifts from one of reconstruction and renovation to one of half-built wooden homes and garden plots of potatoes. As we drive north, I see the Buddhist mantra OM MA NI PADME HUM[32] written in white rocks on a small mountainside. Bulldozers and portions of road tunnels are scattered along the road in a concerted political effort to create a sleek road from Ulan-Ude to Lake Baikal for tourists. My fellow travelers and I try to find a comfortable position in the cramped bus, anxiously and cautiously shifting from one position, almost in reflection of what is to come, as the driver swerves to evade potholes, debris, and construction materials. As opposed to the trip back to the city, the bus is quiet partly because we are strangers at this point, anxious and uncomfortable, silently reflecting on leaving the city and all it entails. One person later mentioned to me "I am excited to be in a quieter place. It is nice to leave so many people."

The Café

After three hours of being trapped in the *mikrik* with little air circulation over the bumpy road, we stop for the much-anticipated lunch. The fifteen or so people pile out of the *mikrik*, some men immediately light cigarettes, others rush to the latrine, others know that it is best to rush into the café in order to be first in line. Many other buses stop at this particular café, *Av-*

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[32] In Russian, ОМ МАНИ БАД МЭ ХУМ; a Buddhist mantra that my informants generally did not understand.

tostop, so there are often several dozen people pushing and shoving to get to a single register to order a lunch of *buuza* (Buryat dumplings), cabbage salad, beef cutlets, bread, and milky tea. On my first trip, I ate alone but quickly noticed that many of my fellow travelers started talking to one another. Here stories were shared about where they were going and why. Some things I heard or that were said directly to me in subsequent trips included: *I still have not found a job in the city and must go back. I am going to help my uncle with haying. I am going to N [village] for a while.* The café stop in a sense starts to consolidate the trip—it starts to unveil the anonymity typical between urban interlocutors. The café is a spatial benchmark for the journey to the countryside where culture is separated into its urban and rural representations.

At the café I hear some ethnic-Buryats switch to the Buryat language, including the driver. In fact, the Buryat language is considered one of the most important markers of Buryat identity and is one of the most obvious differences between urban and rural social worlds (Amogolonova 2005, 2008, Leisse & Leisse 2007, Dyrkheeva 2003). In a study conducted in the late 1990s, over half of the rural respondents indicated the Buryat language as the most important marker of identity, while urban respondents reported it much lower, placing it fourth after other responses like *traditions* and *homeland* (Amogolonova 2005:155-156). Maria, from Ulan-Ude said to me, "In the city I don't feel so comfortable speaking in Buryat sometimes. But it feels so nice to speak in Buryat." Erzhena, from Yarikto, mentioned to me how when her family moved to the city from the countryside, that they stopped speaking Buryat. In fact, research findings state that contemporary ethnic-Buryats know Russian better than they know the Buryat language (Dyrkheeva 2003). However, others have stated that the Buryat language is symbolic and unifying but that it does affect ethnic identity (Khilkhanovna 2004) – a sentiment shared by many of my informants in this study. Several of my informants in the previous chapters, but also in the discus-

sions I had with local social scientists, stated that the decline of the Buryat language was largely due to a lack of political investment.

This change in atmosphere was not limited to linguistic sensibilities, but also to social interactions more generally. I observed how once limited interactions between strangers, and especially between children and adult strangers, became blurred at the café yielding what seemed like greater trust amongst once unknown individuals. I also noticed that this kind of bonding and interaction was greatest between ethnic-Buryats, with any ethnic Russians and myself on the trip often being excluded[33]. In leaving the city a new set of social expectations regarding interaction was awakened that was either unneeded or inappropriate in an urban setting, but necessary in the countryside.

The café en route to the city was often quite different. With the city just a few hours away we were encouraged to eat quickly or simply did not stop at the café at all and continued on to the city. On one trip back to the city, the whole *mikrik* was engaged in a heated discussion on whether to stop at the café or continue on to Ulan-Ude. Ultimately, the driver observed the wishes of the majority on the *mikrik* and did not stop at the café. The journey was not just a static path, but was one that changed with changes in social possibilities and expectations along the journey. While en route to the city the café seemed like a burdensome or unnecessary stop, en route to the countryside, the café served as an index for new expectations for social interaction. Ultimately, leaving the city and stopping at the café was needed to begin to redefine linguistic, cultural, and social expectations and boundaries one would confront in the countryside.

The Lake

The next important marker along this journey comes in two hours: Lake Baikal. Lake

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[33] In subsequent trips my curiosities were received well.

Baikal at 23,000 cubic kilometers with depths up to 1620 meters (1637 meters according to some estimates) is the oldest and deepest lake in the world and an important physical marker for the region. In 1996, UNESCO designated the Lake Baikal Watershed as a World Natural Heritage Site. Although my fellow travelers have seen this lake literally hundreds of times before, as soon as Lake Baikal peers across the horizon, all eyes in the *mikrik* turn to the lake. In each one of my trips, this never failed. My informants said things like: *Baikal is the spirit of Buryatia. Baikal is sacred. Baikal is clean. Baikal is ours.* On one trip, I sat on the opposite side of the bus and was not looking toward Lake Baikal when an old man scolded me by slurring, "Young man, look!" (*Молодой человек, смотрите*!) while he slapped the back of my head with his palm.

Buryatia is shaped by Lake Baikal – geographically, 73% of the lake borders Buryatia, but also metaphorically. It is spoken about both as a place of natural beauty and bounty and as a place for economic exploitation and development – simultaneously invincible and extremely vulnerable. In fact, the Buryat national epic, *Geser*, dating back 1,000 years, closely links Buryats to nature by showing how the main hero gathers his strength from the Earth around him and the people who exist by living on and through the Earth[34].

The driver usually stops in one of a few places where the lake can be easily accessed from the road. The passengers hurry to the lake's pebbly shore to wash their hands and their faces while taking a few sips of its icy waters, even in the summer. Some bring empty plastic bottles to fill up with Baikal's waters for relatives in the villages more inland. I heard often that Baikal is clean and that drinking water from Baikal is healthy and has curative effects. At the same time there is great concern of pollution and development, especially with an increase in

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[34] I hesitate to use *Geser* as an example, because of its seductive implication of authentic Buryat culture. Harvilahti (1996) analyzes how the epic has served local purposes in Mongolia and Buryatia and how politics became intertwined with the epic in the 1990s, especially in Buryatia.

tourism. Tamara, who lives in Kurumkan, traveled to Ulan-Ude frequently preparing her new home in the city. She invited me to her home one evening and mentioned that one of her fears was that Baikal and the forests surrounding Baikal are becoming a façade. She states that "if you fly by helicopter, see from the air, you can see that Barguzin [river] flows and the forest are only near the banks. On the other side there are very big lands without forests. They cut the forests. I think this is bad for Baikal." In fact, moving along the same roads as the *mikrik* are the gigantic Korean-made trucks with timber headed for Buryatia's largest economic partners: China and Japan.

So Lake Baikal as another benchmark on this trip is where the past and the future begin to intersect in uncomfortable ways. This is where the ideals of preserving Buryat culture, language, and way of life intersect contentiously with the protection of Lake Baikal and economic progress. The environmental pressures on Lake Baikal heard on the news, local press, and in academia interconnect with this physical and metaphysical confrontation with Lake Baikal. Amogolonova (2008) notes that Lake Baikal, and indeed the environment more broadly, is part of a national imagination (*национальное воображение*) of great riches and natural uniqueness, what she refers to as an *ideologeme* of self-sufficiency (*самодостаточность*) (2008:79). In fact there are industrial plants located the North Baikal industrial area (as well as in Ulan-Ude and town of Gusinoozersk), which have been criticized for polluting the lake. For many residents of Buryatia, the lake is not only a sacred object or a unique part of their heritage – it is the only source from which they can make a living.

Lake Baikal thus represents that fundamentally difficult question about modernity and ethnic minorities: how to both retain the past while embracing the future or how to seek the answers to contemporary social issues and ills by looking back to tradition. This paradox has at

one emotional extreme the desire to move to the city, participate in modern life, and have steady employment, and on the other a melancholic nostalgia for the past. Drawing on Paxson's (2006) description of the emotive power of place, Baikal then, is like a social pathway that leads individuals down divergent paths for conceptualizing the past and future. So if the café is a space for renegotiating cultural and social boundaries, reaching Lake Baikal is a space for confronting a broader national or regional consciousness linking individuals, their environment, with choices regarding development and economic progress.

The North

Driving along the shoreline for a few more hours, we reach the village of Ust-Barguzin, which divides Buryatia into north and south along its main paved road. Ust-Barguzin is a Russian medium sized fishing village. Passing Ust-Barguzin, one enters the Buryat countryside in the north. In order to cross to the north, the *mikrik* and all of its passengers must mount a ferryboat and cross a river. As the bus stops by the dock, all of the passengers meander out of the bus to use the latrines or buy smoked fish, milky tea, and beer or vodka. On either side of the river, vendors are lined up on both sides of the road with handmade signs waiting for this bottleneck. The ferry ride across does not take more than ten minutes, but loading the cars and gathering the passengers can take up to 45 minutes. Pass this trial and one reaches the next benchmark along the *mikrik* journey: the north.

If the café prepares passengers for a new set of social expectations and Lake Baikal confronts them with the complex realities of modernity, then entering the north awakens a collective spiritual consciousness. Here the air is cooler and the landscape changes dramatically with the great Barguzin and Ikat mountain ranges surrounding us on both sides, cutting open a large,

marshy valley, the Barguzin valley, which has been described as one of the most inaccessible areas of southeastern Siberia (Humphrey 1998:63). Along the road, there are fewer cars, no bull-dozers, and almost no litter. I notice that passengers begin dropping *kopeki* (coins) out the window upon passing streams or mountains. The driver stops at several places along the road like an *arshan* or natural spring where passengers ritually wash their hands and face and leave *kopeki*, matches, crackers, and candy. An informant explained to me that it was important to make these offerings for safe passage. Pointing to an ethnic Russian dropping *kopeki*, an older man said in passing, "You see, even Russians do this, this is important." I came to understand this symbolic behavior as a form of invoking ethnic and inter-ethnic cohesion and distinction. At another stop near Sarankhur, there is a *stupa* with a view of a sacred mountain near an *arshan* where passers-by stop for a quick sip of water, to leave offerings, and pray to and circumambulate the *stupa*. Many times, acquaintances, friends, and families acknowledged each other and shared smoked fish, bread, vodka, or cigarettes.

Entering the north spiritual consciousness is awakened on the *mikrik*. Although there are natural springs and other sacred places along the entire journey, it was upon entering the north that these practices became collectively enacted. Soëlma said to me on the *mikrik*, "there is something special and sacred about entering Kurumkan. Here everyone pays respect for good health and fertility."   In the city, these practices were also enacted but within the confines of a *datsan* or cultural center and were thus personal and intentional, rather than collective and auto-matic. Outside of the *mikrik*, daily life is sprinkled with these spiritual enactments. While it is tempting to say that individuals are more spiritual in the countryside, I posit that entering the north awakens, physically and emotionally, a new set of social and spiritual expectations that influence behaviors.

4.4   Приехали: Arriving, Ending, Beginning

With the end of the journey upon us, one by one my fellow travelers are dropped off in their respective villages and are greeted by their families. For my fellow travelers the café changed social boundaries, while confronting Lake Baikal evoked issues of nostalgia and economic progress, and lastly upon entering the north, where a spiritual awakening enveloped the *mikrik,* my fellow travelers are confronted with their decision to leave this place and seek a life in the city. Again, the journey to the countryside differs in that when my fellow travelers arrived, they were met and welcomed home, and when they left the villages, they were bid farewell. But when leaving the city and returning to the city, my fellow travelers did so alone. For me as well, my arrival and departure to and from the villages involved Darima, Vadim, Gerelma, Viktor, Tamara, Erzhena, Soëlma, Ana, and the others I profiled above, while the city, instead greeted me with a seven-ruble trip back to my apartment. The journey *back* to the countryside brought my fellow travelers to where their journey began; familiar spaces marked with the reasons for their decision to move away from it: lack of paved roads or running water, crumbling infrastructure, few employment opportunity, and isolation. What I am positing is that the geography of the *mikrik* journey in a sense awakens collective ideologies and personal anxieties. The *mikrik* journey shows how the movement across, through, and between those spaces shapes imaginations of the city, countryside, future, and the past. The individual journey from one place to the next, in a sense, redefined both ends of the journey. In this way, the landscape is not, just as individuals are not, static. Their very meaning and imagination is redefined as it is filtered through the liminal experience of movement between spaces and places. During that movement

from one symbolic space to another, social change is, in a sense, experienced as a dialogic relationship between individual and landscape.

V. CONCLUSION

5.1   *Reflecting on Narratives*

What I account for in the vignettes above is not, of course, the reality for all the individuals that I met, but a topic of much debate and speculation across the republic and one that deserves critical analysis and social theory to unpack. In Chapter II, I show how the narratives of change that I heard were framed as dreams and expectations imagined and located in particular places. Change cannot be simply understood in terms of binaries like rural and urban, here and there, the past and the future or universals like cultural loss, revitalization, or the reinvention of tradition. Instead, I show how social change can be typified as a co-constructed system of values, imaginations, and discourses of place. Ethnographically, I show how while my informants acknowledged dominant discourses of Buryat identity and the meaning communicated through various cultural symbols, in their personal recounts they did not limit themselves to those parameters. In fact, they implicitly index another set of fixed and public symbols (the city, the village, the lake) that I posit are alternative vehicles of meaning (see Ortner 1984:129, Geertz 1973 in McGee 2007:530-531). By doing so, I reframe *moving to the city* and *remembering the village* from a discourse on progress or loss to something porous and nuanced, yet grounded in particular places and spaces. In Chapter III, I show how places are laden with specific gendered expectations. Whether in ritual, cultural, rural, or urban spaces, gender norms are reaffirmed and my informants' imagined and interacted with these places through their personal narratives. For

many of the women I interviewed, the tension of proper forms of being, including achieved or failed idealized masculinities and femininities, emerged as strong thematic undercurrent in the narratives I collected. This tension was ultimately connected to specific places where their particular futures were possible or impossible. In Chapter IV, I theorize that looking at the village and the city separately is actually not sufficient for a better understanding of the complexity of social change. Rather, I look at the spaces and movement between places, which inform and shape the places my informants are from or intend to go. Above I posit that the geography of the *mikrik* journey awakes collective ideologies and personal anxieties suggesting that landscapes, like individuals, are not static. Journeying to, from, and between places, triggers contradictory emotions and reactions to economic development, cultural revitalization, and even to the factors that drive individual decision to move away from the countryside like lack of economic and educational opportunities and general isolation.

Through this analysis, I do not intend to discount the important roles of cultural or social systems in determining human action and social change. Instead, my analysis elaborates on how my informants indexed social change through experiences and imaginations of self in particular places and spaces. As mentioned above, these narratives identify and value social change, but also powerfully create it and embody it. It is precisely for this reason that these narratives are a form of personal resistance against the identity politics inherited from the Soviet era and largely reproduced by elite cultural discourses of identity. The identities that teased out of the narratives I collected show how dominant notions of indigenous identity are co-constructed, resisted, and enacted by individual practices. The social change that I originally attempted to understand in terms of a linear progression is an active, embodied, and political process.

Through the narratives of my informants I heard of both the excitement and angst of moving or preparing to move to the city, but to say that *Buryatia is urbanizing* or that the *villages are emptying* is an oversimplification. I argue that the narratives I collected show not a straightforward progression from rural to urban or past to future, but instead how movement to, from, and through spaces and places triggers, activates, or suppresses imaginations of progress. By moving, both physically and discursively, to, from, and through the imagined spaces and places of their past and future, my informants reinforce a dialogic relationship between modernity and tradition.

5.2   *Locating an Ending*

Returning to Moscow after 65 days in the field, I went to a glitzy café with my friend Ivan to have a much-welcomed café latté and a very much-unwelcomed 500-ruble bottle of water (the same amount as a one-way trip from the city to the countryside in Buryatia). At one point, Ivan asked me: why did you move from Washington, DC to Atlanta, GA? The question was asked more as why did I move away from the capital of the United States to some other, perhaps provincial, place. Reflecting on that question in retrospect I realized that was the same question I asked of so many of my informants. A question I had not considered in my own life. Although it seemed a simple and straightforward question, I realized then just how complex the response would be. My move, in fact, was purposeful for many reasons: to further my career and education, but also to embrace adventure and independence. But is that all? This reflection, in a way, tethers my narrative with those of my informants.

On the plane back to America, I saw representations of Russia fade away into representations of America as the Atlanta skyline greeted me and I switched from Russian to English; from

being elsewhere to being home. Seeing this place, my home, made me think of the narratives I heard in Buryatia slightly differently. The plane was kind of like my own *mikrik*, with its own benchmarks and meanings: entering the plane, crossing the Atlantic, walking through customs, and arriving where I began. Beginning in a place that is not actually my home *per se*, but to where I moved for many of the same reasons as my informants: to seek the life that I wanted. My own imaginations of the past and future, like that of my informants, are connected to the places I go to, come from, and am in between. That relationship to place is what helps me to articulate what I mean by "my self" that although, historically contextual, has an emotional immediacy that is meaningful in anthropology.

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