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Conversations on the Top Steppe: The Impact of Tourism on Traditional Siberian Culture

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
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CONVERSATIONS ON THE TOP STEPPE: THE IMPACT OF TOURISM ON
TRADITIONAL SIBERIAN CULTURE

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	4
INSPIRATION, PURPOSE	5
BACKGROUND INFORMATION	7
METHODOLOGY	11
LIMITATIONS, EXPLANATION	13
TESTIMONY	16
DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS	55
THOUGHTS MOVING FORWARD	66
BIBLIOGRAPHY	69
APPENDIX A	73
APPENDIX B	76

ABSTRACT

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, inbound tourism spread across Russia. The small economy of Olkhon Island, located within Lake Baikal, was soon dependent on a rapidly expanding tourism industry. Shamanism, the dominant religion on the island, and native Buryat culture were unlike anything the majority of tourists had ever experienced. Religious and cultural tourism soon became very popular, and very profitable. As there is currently very little research on the topic, this project aims to serve as a pilot examination of the impact of the tourism industry on shamanism and native Buryat culture. To do so, testimony has been collected and analyzed from six native Buryat people working within the tourism industry. Overall, this project seeks to lend a platform for those most directly affected by tourism of Olkhon Island to have their overlooked voices heard.

INSPIRATION, PURPOSE

When I first walked the shores of Lake Baikal, the surface-level understanding of indigenous Buryat culture that reverberated off of every lapping wave also brought a host of challenging questions. The sound of drums filled the air as native people and now tourists gathered for rituals performed on ancient holy ground. One sacred site in particular - Huboi Cliff on Olkhon Island - overlooks Baikal and hosts several famous shamanist rituals. Though Baikal holds an immense amount of spiritual importance to the indigenous Buryats and a significant 20% of the world's fresh surface water (USGS, 2020), I have watched cigarette butts and plastics repeatedly and indiscriminately discarded onto its shores. The greenhouse gases emitted from tourist transportation threaten to melt the Siberian permafrost with every passing day. Buryat culture and shamanism are based entirely on the worship of the nature that surrounds it, and are at risk of irreversible damage. Our world, however, risks losing a crucial stronghold in the fight and hopeful victory against climate change. Though at the time I was also a tourist, I could not let this kind of unsustainable tourism continue to go unrecognized.

Upon my initial return home from Southeastern Siberia, I decided to study the relationship between increases in tourism and development, and indigenous religion and culture. With generous support from Florida State University, I was able to realize this goal. Native tribes in my home country, specifically the Seminole Tribe of Florida, which maintains a close partnership with my undergraduate institution, have always been among the loudest voices in the crusade for sustainability and the perseverance of culture and tradition (USDOJ, 1996).

I knew I wanted this research to serve as a pilot project of an oral history, and do its part to uplift indigenous voices globally. When I returned from Southeastern Siberia for a second time, I had a collection of both formal testimony and casual conversation, which proved firsthand that the lack of indigenous representation in academia, in positions of power and influence, was not caused by a lack of perspective, of opinion, of experiential knowledge. “Dominant cultures,” like that of white America and white, Western Russia, “have a tendency not to notice or acknowledge the experiences of certain subgroups, viewing them as peripheral rather than central—in other words, marginalizing them,” (The Writing Center, 2020).

As an academic, I hope to uncover and convey experiences through the collection of testimonies from Siberian Buryat people that might otherwise be underrepresented in mainstream, dominant culture. I chose the medium of oral history because it is an authentic way of both accessing and expressing experiential knowledge. As a tourist, I hoped to pay homage to the people who welcomed me with open arms, and shared their once criminalized culture and history with pride.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Olkhon Island is located both in Lake Baikal and Irkutsk Oblast: the Southeastern Siberian region of Russia. The island was originally inhabited by the Western Buryat people, who are most closely related to the Mongols. The modern Buryat people are currently the largest indigenous group living within the Russian Federation, and remain concentrated within Southeastern Siberia (Bernstein, 2008). The Buryats were traditionally nomadic and pastoral, and practiced what is described in the modern day as classic shamanism. Classic shamanism is believed to have originated in Northern Asia and is marked by its culturally specific rites and rituals, special clothing, and accessories (Diószegi and Mircea, 2019). Traits of classic shamanism and classically shamanist societies (Appendix B), like that of Olkhon Island, are marked by the presence of shamans and shamankas¹ who are believed to be in direct contact with the transcendent or spirit world. Specific to Buryat shamanism, a large amount of spiritual importance is placed in nature. By way of word of mouth and local folklore, many of the sacred landmarks on Olkhon Island, for example Huboi Cliff or the Shaman's Cave, are believed to have once been the residences of old gods and spirits.

However, years of modernization efforts under the Tsarist regimes and more vigorously under the Soviet Union (USSR), brought an end to their outwardly classical shamanist way of life (Bernstein, 2008). Though Siberia has effectively been under Russian control since the cossack expeditions of the 1580s, outside of integrating indigenous Siberian elites into the new colonial government, life in Siberia remained relatively unchanged for hundreds of years (Skripnik, 2016). The governing cities of the Russian empire remained thousands of miles away

¹ A "shamanka" is a modern word for a female shaman.

and outside of initial contact with indigenous people, little interaction occurred moving forward (Skripnik, 2016). Yet as the Russian Revolution came and went and the Soviet Union rose to power, Siberia no longer enjoyed relative isolation.

Coinciding with Stalin's campaign of the early 1930s to transform the USSR into a modern industrial power with collectivized agriculture, prison labor camps grew in tremendous proportion throughout the country (Center for History and New Media, 2020). The largest camps were located "in the most extreme geographical and climatic regions ... from the Arctic north to the Siberian east and the Central Asian south" and soon became known by the acronym "gulag," meaning "Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps" when translated into English. In near lockstep with the establishment of the gulags, the Soviets enacted an unjust economic and cultural transformation known as "Russification." Targeting Siberian indigenous people like the Buryats, these new set of policies effectively made them second class citizens (Bernstein, 2008).

Working in part to contribute to the USSR's industrial and agricultural goals, "Russification" entailed collective and experimental farms replacing traditional gathering and herding, or prosperous individual farms. Timbering and fishing soon became major industries as nationalized factories were built across rural Siberian landscapes, and many indigenous peoples found themselves with little to no other economic opportunities (Zhambalova, 2000). Culturally and religiously, "Russification" strictly prohibited the practice of indigenous and Asian religions, with shamanism and Buddhism receiving the brunt of the enforcement because of the religions' entirely divergent outward optics from that of developed, European Russia. Holy sites and places of worship across Southeastern Siberia were destroyed, traditional rituals and clothing were made illegal and many indigenous peoples, including the Buryats, were denied rights granted to

the Western section of the country. Any resistance was met with severe consequences, including but not limited to public humiliation, beatings, and even death (Bernstien, 2008).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, religion and divergent cultures were decriminalized and enjoyed massive upsurges in public visibility. Scholars Quijada and Stephen justify this as human beings' need for a higher purpose which a crumbling national identity could no longer provide, but the end of the USSR was followed by receptivity to outside influence, and widespread inbound tourism (Rogers, 2018). Though the uptick in shamanism and the revival of pre-Soviet Buryat culture may have begun as an act of reclamation or to fill a void in social function, its lucrative nature within a budding tourism industry cannot be ignored. The visible practice of traditional Siberian culture and religion soon provided employment in the wake of complete economic devastation.

For context, the majority of Siberian economies did not have a diverse portfolio. Towns built around collective and experimental farms, timbering, or fishing factories were reported to have 100% unemployment rates (Kilgour, 2018). The onset of globalization soon thereafter, exemplified by the presence of multinational corporations and fledgling Internet services made available to the public, paved the way for Russia's development and current robust inbound tourism industry (Jaaskelainen, 2020). Many Siberian communities, however, were not nearly as well equipped to welcome this transition compared to larger, more western Russian cities. Tourism, morphing into one of the only profitable industries in more rural regions, took somewhat of a stranglehold on local economies ("Ecotourism in Siberia," 2018).

While there is some existing literature regarding the growth of global tourism and shifting economic infrastructures in the Southeastern Siberian region, there is little documentation of the

thoughts and opinions of the people most directly affected by this rapid transition. Developing tools to measure the effects of tourism on complex assets, including culture and religion in areas such as Lake Baikal, has proven difficult as it encompasses a variety of fields including conservation, sociology, environmental science, and geography. Much of the scholarship surrounding the changes witnessed in the Baikal region use solely quantitative indicators. This project does not intend to propose a revolutionary system of assessment, but rather to offer a more human centric perspective of the people most affected by the effects of tourism on Olkhon Island.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this pilot project was based on the collection of testimonies through interviews. The preparation prior to conducting the interviews, however, was the most important step. This included obtaining a working proficiency in the Russian language, and reviewing the albeit limited documentation and literature about the people, and the native culture and religion. After having reviewed the available resources, and having toured the island the summer before, I felt as though my understanding of the culture was rudimentary, but sufficient enough to undertake this kind of project. My supervising professor, who has taken students with her to the Lake Baikal region for ten years, was available for frequent advising sessions throughout our time spent in Russia.

With her consultation, I chose to gather testimony from Buryat people of varying socioeconomic statuses in the Southeastern Siberian region near Lake Baikal, but more specifically on Olkhon Island, as that is where tourism has expanded most rapidly, and the people were more isolated. The interviews were set to focus on the effects felt by tourism by the Buryat people and their communities; with special attention paid to their thoughts toward traditional culture and religion, and the impact tourism and modernization has had on it. I drafted a questionnaire in Russian and in English (Appendix A), and followed the guideline that it was better to have too many questions, rather than too few (Ritchie, 2014, pg. 76).

In tandem with drafting a guiding questionnaire for the interviews, I heavily considered the budget and time constraints, and the objectives of the project. The general methodological guidelines of oral history advise to “try to conduct more than one interview with each person,” as “it often takes more than one interview just to break the ice. Repeated visits help establish an

intimacy that encourages candidness” (Ritchie, 2014, pg. 72). Understanding that I had a limited budget and a very limited timeframe, being a cumulative ten days spent on the island to both build trust and rapport with the people I would be interviewing and then formally conduct their interviews, I knew my sample size would be small. I planned to conduct roughly one interview per day, and one interview per interviewee. The duration of the interviews was ultimately up to the interviewee and how much they had to say about the prompted questions and topics, but I planned “each interview session for no longer than two hours. Longer sessions often have a ‘narcotic’ effect on the interviewee, who can become fatigued and distracted.” I also wanted to prevent myself, the interviewer, from “{having} trouble listening to what is being said” (Ritchie, 2014 pg. 75). Acknowledging that I do not speak Russian natively and have learned the language entirely in the classroom with limited immersion, it was crucial that I remained focused and ready to listen, as the interviews would all be conducted in Russian.

Ultimately, six interviews were able to be planned in advance, but three interviewees had last minute cancellations. The three that were left and willing to be interviewed were a museum director, a shamanka, and our accommodations’ managing employee. The other three interviews, being with a driver, and two stablehands were arranged in a more impromptu fashion. The Russian version of the questionnaire was used as a guide for each interview. The interviews were all documented via either an iPhone 8+ voice recording, manual note taking, or both. Later, these notes and recordings will be transcribed and translated from Russian into English as verbatim as possible. In the interest of uniformity, the names of all of the interviewees will be withheld as some wished to be kept anonymous.

LIMITATIONS, EXPLANATIONS

While conducting the research in Siberia, a number of limitations were anticipated and realized. Prior to being in the region and conducting the interviews, the pilot project did not receive approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). An important distinction to make is, however, that the project was not disapproved of. Due to time constraints, the application simply did not have time to process, and at that point the travel dates could not be moved.

Nonetheless, though IRB approval would have been preferable to expand the potential of the pilot project and its ability to inform policy, it is not needed to achieve a collection of testimony for the purpose of oral history. I address this specifically because I aim to preemptively answer any questions that may arise about the project's lack of IRB approval, and my lack of certification and licenses to work with what were once classified as human subjects. As of "January 19, {2017}," however "the federal government issued its final rule governing Institutional Review Boards, which 'explicitly removes' oral history and journalism from the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects," (National Coalition for History, 2017). Moreover, the rule acknowledges "scholarly and journalistic activities (e.g., oral history, journalism, biography, literary criticism, legal research, and historical scholarship), including the collection and use of information that focus directly on the specific individuals about whom the information is collected," specifically do not need approval (Federal Register, 2017). This ruling went into effect January 19, 2018, and the interviews did not occur until June of 2018 (National Coalition for History, 2017).

As the collection of testimony was conducted with the purpose of creating a fledgling oral history of the Siberian Buryat peoples. The interviews focused explicitly "on the specific

individuals about whom the information is collected,” and after the ruling went into effect on January 19, 2018, IRB approval was not necessary for this project. “In issuing this change,” however, “the federal agencies also recognized that discipline-specific codes of ethical conduct already existed” and I consulted these codes heavily (Oral History Association, 2009).

The issue of time and funding constraints must be addressed, as well. Though the financial support I received from my home university was generous, I spent only two weeks in Southeastern Siberia. Though an adequate amount of time to start an oral history, this project cannot be classified as anything but a pilot test for a larger project. If the project is to be continued, it will take several months, if not years, to both gain trust and build the relationships needed to procure a large quantity of testimonies from the indigenous people on Olkhon Island, outside of how long it would to actually conduct, translate, and transcribe all of the interviews. Financially speaking, this would cost tens of thousands of dollars, as only two weeks, including the price of a round trip plane ticket, necessitated roughly \$5,000.

Atop time and funding constraints, it is crucial to note that obvious cultural differences were a barrier in conducting this research. Though not speaking Russian natively occasionally caused problems for me, because I was a young, American woman asking questions most of the island was not used to answering, people were wary of giving testimony in any language. Though nearly every Buryat person working within the tourism industry I came into contact with was friendly, there was a relatively pervasive unwillingness to speak openly and honestly about topics they considered political, or socially inappropriate. Many also worried specifically about what the implications and insinuations of speaking privately with an American could be. Luckily, and with the help of my native Russian supervising professor, many people did agree to sit down

with me, but usually with the promise that their names would not be included in the final product.

TESTIMONY**Shamanka, Registered Nurse, Businesswoman**

Phone Interview

May 24, 2018 at 2:13 pm

She picked up on the second ring, and I was greeted with a chipper hello.

We moved relatively quickly through the preliminary questions, noting for the record that she identified as a Russian woman who adhered to shamanism. She had been to university, had earned her degree in medicine, and that she was a certified nurse alongside being a shamanka. She pleasantly stated that she was comfortably middle class.

As we hit the brunt of the questionnaire, her pleasant tone remained unchanged. Regardless of the difficulty or variance of the questions, many of her answers were very similar.

“Yes, I have noticed an increase in tourism over the past 10 years,” she said. “It’s been great!” I paused, and waited for her to continue. She didn’t.

“How has it been great?”

“Well,” she responded, “an increase in tourism leads to an increase in cultural awareness, and cultural exchange. Buryatia is so small. I’m glad it’s gaining recognition.”

As the conversation started to flow more naturally, I asked about the changes in the physical environment, the changes in Buryat culture and shamanism, and any other changes that she may have noticed in her own personal life. She said she'd noticed no changes in the environment, nor changes in Buryat culture.

“Tourism does not change shamanism,” she said firmly, but brightly. “Tourism also does not affect Buryat culture.”

“Okay,” I said, looking for a way to follow, not lead, with my next question.

“How do you feel about tourists participating directly in the culture? For example, maybe in shamanist rituals?”

She paused, and also collected her thoughts.

“I promote tourists participating in these rituals. It adds to the tourists’ experience and observance of the culture.”

I waited, and hoped she would continue.

“Observing the shamans and shamankas, like myself,” she noted “is not a disturbance. Tourism doesn’t affect rituals and religious practices. Tourists don’t affect the shamanists.”

She paused again, and emphatically explained “shamanists either don’t really care, or they want the tourists to be involved. It helps us all. They learn something, and our uncommon traditions are shared with the world. Nothing changes on our end. We are just sharing.”

When I pressed specifically about the changes in diet and drinking habits that may have been caused by the influx of tourists, noting that other local people have confirmed the changes coincided with non-native presence in the region, she was reluctant to engage with the topic. As I shifted back to the presence of tourism within shamanistic rituals, and what this might have done by way of the region’s economic development, she was eager and willing to give insight.

“Oh, tourism is great for economic development! It has definitely been very positive for the region and the people.”

“So, would it be fair to say that you think tourism has brought positive economic changes to the region?”

“I think it has brought more business and more money to people, which is positive overall.”

“Okay,” I said. “Can you elaborate on that just a little bit more? What does more business mean?”

She told me that more business means more opportunities for work. For her specifically, she said that more tourists often means more groups that would like to see her perform rituals, and more word of mouth advertising about the services she offers. Though the word “hire” was not used

specifically, she referred to these performances and tourist-inclusive rituals as her job. When I asked for clarification about any sort of compensation she receives, she said that she is always paid as the majority of the performances are pre-arranged, and that she is generally tipped afterwards by individual tourists.

“So,” I asked, “what do you think this does for the role of shamanism in contemporary society? Do you know if people, Buryat people view it more as a religion, or a superstition? What about the younger generation?”

“I definitely think this has a positive impact on shamanism. People aren’t forgetting about it any more. As for religion, I am not sure. I would say that young people definitely understand the business side of it.”

“Okay, and what does that mean? The business side as opposed to the spiritual side? Or they see it as just a business opportunity?”

We both paused, and for a moment I was worried my tone was entirely insensitive.

I continued, almost rushed, clarifying “I hadn’t meant to say that it was just a business-”

She interjected, not offended.

“Yes, understanding the business side,” she repeated. “As for the religious side, I’m not sure I can answer that for all people. Especially not for younger people. They are still figuring out what they believe. But the business side is clear, and great for both the Buryat economy and culture!”

Trying to loop in my last question, I continued, asking if she had “noticed any prominent social changes because of the business of it? What about the roles of women in the economy shifting?”

She said enthusiastically that women did have an opportunity to integrate further into the economy through sharing Buryat culture and shamanism with tourists, and that she herself had benefited from the integration.

I then asked my last questions about the commercialization of indigenous peoples and culture globally, and Russian policies toward Buryatia. She chose not to answer outside of expressing support for both Putin’s domestic and foreign policy. Towards the end of the interview, she insisted that we look into her business. We politely thanked one another for our time, and said our goodbyes.

Matriarch, Museum Director, Educator

In-person interview

June 20th at 3:17 pm

My supervising professor and I had arranged to tour the museum earlier in the year, and had followed up a couple of days prior to the scheduled date to ask the director for an interview. She was subtly thrilled, much to our surprise. She said that any chance she gets to speak about Buryat culture and shamanism is one she'll gladly take.

I walked into her office, and she offered me a seat and some tea. I accepted, and she wasted no time jumping straight into the material.

“So,” she said with a smile, “what would you like to know?”

“Just a couple preliminary questions first, and then we'll jump into some heavier questions.”

She waited for me to continue.

“Okay, I'll just list them off. Can you tell me your nationality, gender, education level, economic status, and religion?”

“Sure. Buryat, female, I am university educated, middle class, and I practice shamanism.”

“Okay, next question,” I said, matching her matter of fact tone. “Have you noticed an increase in tourism within Buryatia in the last 10 years?”

“It’s difficult to say. From my perspective, as this museum’s director, I would say there’s only been a marginal increase in visitors. I know for a fact, however, that more tourists are visiting the island and the mainland. Museums,” she chuckled, “well ... tour groups can only handle so many museums. They grow tired of them eventually. And, we’re a little out of the way for most groups. They would have to mark it as an explicit stop.”

“Great,” I said. “Have you noticed any changes in the physical environment in the last 10 years?”

“Hm,” she thought, “nothing overbearing. I understand things have gotten worse with the rise of tourism, with litter and new hotels and travel pollution, but I can’t say I’ve really noticed anything except for maybe some extra litter here and there.”

“Do you feel like either increased tourism, or environmental issues have affected you personally in any way?”

“No,” she paused, “not really.”

“What about Buryat culture? How has it been affected?”

“Again, I wouldn’t really say it’s had an effect on the culture either. I’d say more than anything the culture is modernized, but the internet has as much to do with it as tourism and development does.”

We then jumped into the overlap of shamanism and Buryat culture. She insisted the two were integral to one another, but that shamanism as a religion was at a higher risk to corruption than the culture itself. When I asked her to explain, she said that all cultures have ebbed and flowed over time. She couldn't name one that had stagnated in strict tradition for more than 30 years. I didn't understand what she meant about how shamanism, integral to Buryat culture, could be corrupted, but the culture left untouched. She drew my attention to church attendances, or strength of belief among the people who practice the religion. Not what the practitioners wear, or how they speak, or what they eat if everyday diet was not necessarily a part of the religion.

“Okay,” I concluded. “I think that all makes sense to me. So shamanism, to you, is about intention and belief, but it only belongs in Buryat culture which is subject to change as any other culture would over time?”

“Yes, in short,” she said. “You can think of it that way.”

“So, then what do you think about shamanism and its influence on Buryat culture? Is it a good thing, a bad thing?”

“I think it's a very positive influence. I think a lot of what's good about Buryat culture comes from traditional shamanism.”

“Can you give me some examples?”

“Well, for example being good stewards of the environment, as shamanism involves the worship of the nature that surrounds it. I think there's a lot of respect for family and elders, and spending time with one another through ritual and holiday is important.”

She paused, and I waited to see if she would continue.

“I think shamanism, ironically like the Soviets attempted to encourage, increases collectivism. We value one each other. The religion and therefore the culture, emphasizes a lack of adherence to individual wants and wills.”

“Hm,” I said as I sat for a second, letting her words marinate for a second before I moved to my next question.

“Do you think shamanism has a role in modern society? What is it? Do you see it influencing younger generations at all?”

“Like all religions . . . ” she said, almost wistfully, and trailed off with her thoughts.

She continued, recollected, “Society is becoming more secular, I think as a whole. Globally speaking. I think, like all religions, fewer and fewer genuinely practice it. I would say it still holds a firm place in society, though. It is strongly ingrained. Even if people don’t actively believe, I think what you grow up with influences your moral code. I think this is especially true for young people. Not as many true shamanists, but they understand the teachings’ importance.”

Ready to combine my next two questions into one, I asked about the effects of tourism on shamanism, and about tourist participation in shamanist rituals and practice. She said while she

did not feel that tourism necessarily influenced the religious convictions of shamanists, it was clear that shamanism was becoming a business. I pressed slightly about the founding of this museum, and her own form of income.

“I think that’s a good question, and an important distinction. As a museum director, I do receive an income, but I am primarily an educator, not an entertainer. Any rituals that may be performed are strictly demonstrations to educate people about the religion and the culture. No one pays a thing except the cost of an admission ticket. The stream of ticket sales keeps the museum operational, not profitable. We also receive territorial and federal funding. It’s clear, however, that shamans entertaining private groups of tourists for money, and including them in ancient and traditional practices for which they have no context, nor appreciation, is very different. We are a place to learn.

“Thank you for sharing so candidly. Can you speak a little more to the pay to play ritual dynamics?”

“Absolutely.”

She went on to explain how she feels that tourists, who are strangers to her, to her culture, really have no place at what are meant to be private, reverent religious gatherings. She feels that it is a complete invasion of privacy. She used both the examples of Passover for Jewish people, and Easter traditions for Christian people. As they would never invite strangers into their home to ogle at them and take photographs of their family while they ate, worshipped and performed

rituals in their traditional languages, neither would she. She continued, and spoke about the brutality the Soviets paid to shamans and shamanists. They were pushed underground, their religion and way of life criminalized.

“Really,” she continued, “it’s both a miracle that shamanism survived, and that we are even stronger in our convictions today because of it.”

She paused, cleared her throat, and took a sip of her tea.

“I think, unlike the artifacts in this museum, we are not relics. We are still here, just trying to go about our day to day life. Was that sensical?”

“Yes, I think I understood,” I said, racking my brain for a way to summarize it so I could ensure we were on the same page amid a language gap. “Would you say your biggest problem is being treated like something exotic? Being paid extra attention because you’re perceived as outside of normal?”

She didn’t respond immediately.

“Say, to put it bluntly,” I continued, “something funny or interesting to look at?”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “A spectacle.”

We both waited a minute before inquiring about another question.

“So,” I finally picked up, “do you think that tourism has influenced the younger generation in any way? Maybe within religion, or popular culture, or diet and drinking habits?”

“I wouldn’t say that it has influenced popular culture. I would refer to my statements about the way in which Buryat culture evolves and changes, just like every other culture. I have, however, noticed more alcohol on the island as a result of tourism, and young people consuming more than they should. It is so readily available now, and that’s putting our youth in danger.”

“Interesting points. So how then do you feel about the economic development of Buryatia?”

“I think it’s generally good. We don’t have collective farms anymore, and people have a bit more money which means a bit more freedom. I obviously don’t agree with people selling their religion, but educating tourists about our culture and showing them the nature that surrounds it has been very good for the economic development of the region.”

“I guess in conjunction,” I said, trying to find a way to tie in my last few questions, “how do you feel about the commercialization, if that’s the right word, of indigenous culture globally? Do you think it’s an issue?”

“Well, I’ve never been someone to tell another to tell them what they can and can’t do. I wouldn’t like the idea of selling religion, of reducing it to profit if it was truly important to the people. I can’t fault anyone for profiting from tours and museums and whatever else they have to offer to those non-natives who would be interested. The Buryats do it.”

“Okay,” I said, “last two questions! What do you think about Russia’s political policies toward Buryatia?”

“Oh,” she bemused. “A difficult question. I could go on, but I will try to be concise. The policies of Russia’s past were barbaric. They forced us underground, criminalized our culture, burned our places of worship, and instituted harsh penalties, sometimes even death, if our people didn’t comply. They called it ‘Russification.’ They wanted everyone to be like Moscow. They called it civilizing us.”

We paused, she continued.

“As people adjusted to the way of life within the Soviet Union, things normalized. Clothing changed, electricity came, and cars and stable factory and farming jobs. In some ways, you have to give credit where credit is due. I like electricity,” she laughed.

“And that’s the issue. I feel Buryatia grew and developed quickly because we were ruled by such a powerful country at the time, but there was no self-determination. Inevitably some of the things that came with Russification were good, but I think maybe they would have come eventually, and not so forcefully. Would we have had a university on the mainland, however? Would formal education have been here in time for me to attend? I don’t know. It’s difficult to say. Nowadays, we are generally left alone. There are protests on occasion. People like people anywhere have reason to be upset with the government outside of just its treatment of minorities.”

“Interesting. I hadn’t heard that from someone yet,” I told her. “But with that being said, I have one last question for you,” I said.

We both smiled, and she encouraged me to ask.

“Have you noticed any prominent social changes in the last ten years? For instance, maybe the roles of women shifting?”

“No, nothing major. I do see more women, maybe like myself, able to be involved in work outside the home. It’s important to distinguish, however, that Russia always encouraged that.

Women working in the factories and restaurants. Buryat culture is much more segregated along gender lines.”

With that, I thanked her for her time. She said she was grateful for the opportunity to share her thoughts, and encouraged us to stay and look around the museum. If we had any other questions, she would be available.

Engineer, Veteran, Tour Bus Driver

In-person interview

June 23rd, 2018 at 3:21 pm

We had met through the woman who ran the campsite we were staying at while on Olkhon Island. Given that it was the end of June, the busiest time for tourism of the Baikal region, she had several drivers on call for when her guests needed to get around the island. He was one of them and came highly recommended.

Having traveled to Olkhon Island the summer prior and having ridden with many other Siberian drivers, I immediately noticed the difference. Though he was a man of few words, when he chose to entertain conversation it was articulate and concise, but never terse. He'd told me that he had served in the army and attended university on the mainland where he studied engineering.

Many of the drivers we had met before did their job well, but their education was entirely informal. Most were young, with young children, and had lived their entire lives on Olkhon Island. When I told him about the project and asked if he'd like to give an interview, he agreed. With a small smile, he told me as long as he was getting paid to drive he didn't see the harm in talking to me while doing it.

The next morning, I climbed into the front passenger seat. I knew he'd meant business, so I was prepared to rattle off my simpler questions one by one. I was hoping he'd save the bulk of his thoughts for a more open-ended question that really piqued his interest.

“Your nationality?”

“Russian, but I am a Buryat.”

“Economic status?”

“Middle class.”

“Highest level of education?”

“Bachelor’s.”

“Religious affiliation?”

“Shamanist.”

“Gender?”

“Silly question. Next.”

I looked up at him and was unable to wipe an expression of nervousness off of my face. I finally heard him laugh, not chuckle, for the first time.

I paused, but also joined in the laughter. I waited to see if he would indulge the question. He didn’t, and I asked if he had noticed an increase in tourism within Buryatia in the last 10 years.

“Yes.”

“Okay, what about any changes in the physical environment in the last 10 years?”

“Yes.”

I paused. He kept his eyes on the road.

“Okay.”

Seeing as he was oblivious to my desire for explanation, I continued.

“Okay, how? Do you think it’s affected either you personally or Buryat culture as a whole?”

He sighed, glanced at me briefly, and with a smile said, “Yes, obviously.”

I waited for him to continue. Through my silence he finally began to take the questions a little more seriously.

“Yes, I think it’s obvious that tourism has affected Buryat culture, and myself.”

Another pause.

“As you know, I served in the army and I have an engineering degree. I make more money driving during the tourism season than I would working in my field year round, and this wasn’t how it was before. I think,” he said as he glanced back over at me, “that tourism has obviously affected me.”

I waited, and followed up. “Do you want to talk about the economics of that for a little bit? How tourism has affected the economic development of the region?”

He paused, and took a breath.

“Oh it has a complete strangle on the economy,” he said while exhaling, and laughed again. “I can’t prove that working as an engineer isn’t profitable, but I have eyes. The only industry on this island is tourism. Maybe there is some business in building the hotels, the restaurants and things like that but they aren’t hiring Buryats to do it. Lots of investment from Moscow, or foreign investment.”

A pause.

“If I wanted to work as an engineer,” he continued, “I’d have to leave this island everyday, which includes a ferry ride, and have a car waiting on the other side to drive about four hours away to Irkutsk. So it’s either I move to the mainland permanently away from my home, or I stay and make more money working as a driver. I chose to work as a driver. It is what it is. I can’t do much to change it, so I make the best of it.”

I hesitated, not necessarily sure how to transition smoothly.

“So, you’d say that the draw for these tourists is what? Shamanism? Shamanist culture and the nature around it?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “I’d say that’s what most people come to see. And the nature that surrounds the island, but it’s difficult to separate nature from the shamans that live here.”

“Okay, so do you think the increased tourism has affected shamanism in any way?”

“Like how?”

“Like, have you noticed the tourists participating in rituals? How do you feel about it? Specifically tourists hiring shamans, and paying to participate in rituals and cultural practices?”

“Oh. Well, I don’t really care that much.”

“Really,” I asked. “Why?”

“I think religion and worship is personal, and it doesn’t affect me. There aren’t tourists around when I worship.”

“Hm. So as long as it doesn’t affect you personally, it doesn’t bother you?”

“Right,” he said firmly.

“So,” I continued, “how do you think tourism has affected shamanism as a whole? Or Buryat culture? Do you think it has shifted popular culture, or diet and drinking habits, or even the way people view the religion now?”

He didn’t answer immediately, and perhaps trying to encompass a little too much, I continued.

“What’s shamanism’s role in contemporary society, do you think?”

“Well ...” he mused.

“Sorry - ” I said quickly, but he cut me off.

“No, no it’s fine.” He paused slightly, and said, “I think, nowadays, a big role of shamanism in contemporary society is as a business.”

He went on to say that though many people still do practice shamanism, much of it has resurged, or so he’s noticed, because tourists will pay for it. He mentioned that he had travelled to western Russia before during his time in the military, and much like it has also modernized, so has Buryatia and the Baikal region.

“I think that, while people do drink more, eat worse, and take religion less seriously, that’s not only caused by an increase in tourism. That’s happening everywhere. It just happens with time and people everywhere pulling farther and farther away from tradition.”

“Interesting take,” I said. “Do you think that’s especially prominent with the younger generations?”

“I think every generation everywhere veers a little farther and farther away from tradition, but I think with tourism {increasing}, this young generation is more aware of shamanism and how it

affects the island. Most if not all of their parents work in tourism, and tourists come to see shamanism sacred sites. Most of them were born after the Soviet Union, too.”

“I hadn’t heard that yet,” I said, “and lucky for you I only have a couple more questions!”

We both chuckled, and with a smirk he said our trip was almost over, anyway.

“So how do you view the Russian Federation’s political policies toward Buryatia and the Baikal region? And how’d you feel about the Soviet Union’s policies toward the region?”

He stated simply that he had no desire to talk politics. I then asked about any prominent social changes he noticed, like the roles of women shifting, and he noted that this felt overly political, as well. I told him quickly after that I had just one more question. I asked if he thought the type of commercialization that tourism brought to the Baikal region and the Buryat shamans was also a global issue for indigenous people.

“Well,” he said, bringing the van to a stop and setting the emergency brake, “I haven’t met any other indigenous people. I can’t really speak to that.”

With a smile and a nod, I thanked him for his time, and he assured me the pleasure was his. He jumped out of the car, and came around to open the passenger side door. Politely motioning for me to exit the van, I obliged, and tipped him well.

A Wife, A Cook, A Christian:

In person interview

June 25rd, 2018 at 6:03 pm

Perhaps it was the late hour, or the cramped conditions inside of the yurt, but the mood was oddly tense. I fiddled with my phone, and eventually set it to record the interview of the campsite's only cook and maid; both self given titles.

"Thanks for agreeing to sit down with me."

"Oh, sure."

"Okay, let's just get started then," I said politely. "I know you're very busy around the camp."

She nodded.

"Nationality?"

"Well, my mother is Russian. My father is Buryat. I guess I identify as both, but I feel more Russian."

"Okay. Gender?"

"I am a woman."

"Your religion?"

"My husband is a Christian. Russian Orthodox."

I paused.

“Do you... yourself practice religion?”

“Well, I don’t think of myself as a shamanist. I’d say right now I’m at a crossroads of religions. I don’t have a defined religion, but in a week or two I will be a Christian.”

“So, for clarification you were a shamanist, or born into shamanism, but you’ve chosen to convert to Christianity?”

“Yeah, I would say no one converts to shamanism. No baptism. I think it’d be easier for us to be Christian.”

She went on to explain that dual religion marriages are not overly common, and it’s better for the children to be raised under one faith. When she was growing up, she didn’t actively practice nor feel particularly strongly about either. Both her parents, her mother practicing Russian Orthodoxy and her father practicing shamanism, kept their religious beliefs relatively quiet. Looking back, she said she realized it was because her parents grew up and wed within the Soviet Union. Religion then, she emphasized, was not as religion is now.

“I don’t plan to be baptized, either. I am clear that I support the church, and that I support my husband. I don’t plan to baptize our children, either. But the support is very clear.”

“Thank you for sharing,” I said, giving her space to continue. She didn’t.

“Do you mind if I ask you about tourism in the Baikal region now?”

“Of course! Go on.”

“So, have you noticed an increase in tourism in Buryatia in the last 10 years?”

“Yes, definitely. I think it is mostly good. Before tourism developed on the island, we had nowhere to work. The business side of it is certainly very good. In the summers, I work almost every day. There are bad parts of it, too.”

“Really,” I asked. “Like what? Can you give me an example?”

“The nature on Olkhon. I would certainly limit tourism for the sake of nature.”

“It’s interesting you say that,” I told her, “because my next question was actually about the changes in the environment over the past 10 years. Can you speak to that a little bit more?”

“What has brought the most change to the environment is how tourism has changed. The increase we were talking about. Now there are more boats and trash in Baikal. The amount of cars on the island has gone up dramatically. However, I think the roads are the most noticeable.”

“How do you mean?”

“Just the new dirt roads that have been put in, the few paved roads near the ferry port. It cuts all through the nature.”

“Has this affected you personally at all? The environmental changes? Or tourism? We’ve already touched a bit on the tourism changes, but feel free to add anything!”

“Well, in terms of the environment the rain this year has been good to us, and because of the increased tourism we’re able to build a house this year. I have been affected personally, but not in a bad way.”

“Great, thank you. If you don’t mind, can I ask you a couple more questions about shamanism, and Buryat culture?”

She looked wary at first, and restated that her mother was Russian, and that she was converting to Christianity. I assured her that I had documented this in the recording, and that if she did not want to talk about either shamanism, or Buryat culture any more that we could stop, or move onto a different topic. She insisted that as long as her personal affiliations were documented, she didn’t have a problem with sharing her thoughts, or life experience. She was clear, however, that speaking about these topics was not issuing a statement of complete and total support. I assured her that I understood.

“Do you think tourism has affected Buryat culture? Also, what do you think about the role shamanism places in Buryat culture? How does it influence the culture?”

“I think that it is near impossible to separate shamanism from Buryat culture, and both have been affected by tourism. So tourism effects both.”

“Can you explain that a little more?”

“Sure. Growing up, even if we were not devout shamanists, we were at least part Buryat. We lived in native Buryat lands. We would still do all of the rituals for the well being of the family, for good luck in finances, things like that. As a lot of shamans will say it's the shaman's job to open the path to their children, but to support the path they choose to walk.”

“Meaning whether or not they chose to practice shamanism even though they have been exposed to it?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“How does tourism affect this?”

“Well, so many people are now exposing tourists to this, not their children. It is very different, and less true to the culture. It is, however, very good for business for the Buryat people. And I guess more people outside of the Buryats know about shamanism.”

“Hm,” I mused, and tried to find the best way to encompass all the questions I'd prepared.

“How do you feel about that? Specifically, about tourists and non-shamanists participating in shamanistic rituals? Or hiring shamans and paying to participate in these rituals?”

“I think this is bad,” she said quickly. “For example, there are rules within several Orthodox churches that often don't allow tourists to participate or even observe services. The only times

they are allowed to enter is when the service has ended and famous churches turn into basically museums.”

I waited to see if she had anything more to say.

“Today,” she continued, “I watched a shaman performing a ceremony, and he allowed all of the tourists to photograph him, but only after they paid him,” she said with chagrin. “It just doesn’t feel authentic anymore. I swear the shamans have taken to performing in tourist heavy areas. They’re attracted to the money and I don’t agree with it, but I can’t blame them.”

I thanked her for her honesty, and she laughed while asking how many questions were left. I said just a few, and I promised that we would be quick.

“What do you think this says about the role of shamanism in contemporary society, and in global society? How do you think it’s influencing young people?”

“The young generation accepts shamanism. They either see the value for the mind and soul, or they see that it is the main business on the island. I do think the younger generation is more susceptible to tourism and tourists, however. Tourists bring a certain energy that we don’t have here. They distract from true shamanism, and this is clear in the young people.”

She paused, and collected her thoughts.

“I’m not sure if tourism weakens shamanism, or if it strengthens it and helps it survive because more people know about it, and come to see it. It’s a very difficult question. In modern society, the tourist has definitely changed, as well.”

She continued, and explained to me that it wasn’t that life was easier prior to the tourists, but that tourism, especially within the last 10 years, has had a “devastating effect” on people, and especially the young people.

“Can you give me a couple of examples? I know you serve food to a lot of tourists. I was wondering if those tourists, and the types of food they like to eat, have influenced the popular culture, or the local diet and drinking habits?”

“Oh, absolutely,” she said with the most confident, firm tone I had heard yet. “I see this every day at the store, in my line of work. Our children have a disease that we never battled. The few local stores order more alcohol for the tourists to buy, but now it has seeped into the young people here like poison. They are less engaged in sports, they work less. Or if they work, it is usually with tourists, who also drink. Maybe not as much, but it is definitely encouraged. It is awful. Only young people working in construction on the island avoid alcohol during the workday. Too dangerous. They know this.”

“What about the food?”

“Well, some tourists want a real local experience, and eat Buryat cuisine.” She said, through pursed lips, “They did build a McDonald’s in the big resort in the middle of the island. Not good”

“Hm, so thinking about this McDonalds,” I said, as we both chuckled, “how do you feel about the economic development of Buryatia?”

“This area used to be somewhat of a collective farm. Now look at us. Vastly different. The economy feels worse because shop prices have certainly risen, and I’m definitely on a budget and have to keep steady work. For example, I have a salary of 15,000 rubles, and it’s never enough because the prices are rising in front of my eyes. Because of tourism, everything is available all the time. You can basically get whatever you want on the island, or in a short trip to the mainland. So I guess the economy is thriving, but I still find it very expensive. So do my friends.”

Remembering that I had forgotten a couple questions earlier, I quickly clarified that she felt she was economically middle class, though she joked she often felt herself slipping into poverty because of the economic development. She said she had received up to a middle school education.

“So,” I continued in my previous line of questioning, “with the increased economic development, have you noticed any major social changes in the last 10 years? Say the roles of women shifting?”

“Hm, not really. I would say women are in business now more than ever, but women have always been hard workers. Still, I think it’s more common for women to take more active places in businesses, say even as bosses or leaders.”

I waited for any follow up, but chose to move onto my last two questions, as our time was running short.

“Okay, thanks. I have just two more questions for you,” I said.

She smiled, and nodded.

“Go on. Ask.”

“What do you think of Moscow’s policy regarding Buryatia? The tourism, the economic development, everything. Does anything stick out?”

“Oh,” she said, somewhat surprised. “Well, I couldn’t really say. I haven’t heard anything out of the ordinary. I know there’s always been restrictions, some rumors.”

She paused, and continued more quietly. “I don’t really handle that type of business. I wouldn’t be the one to ask.”

“Okay, thank you, and my last question. Do you have any thoughts about the commercialization of other native people globally? If that makes sense?”

“Oh, no. I just don’t know any other native people. None other than the Buryats.”

I thanked her for her time, and she headed off to prepare dinner for the campsite.

The Two Horsemen²

In-person interviews

First: June 27th, 2018 at 4:12 pm

Second: June 27th 2018 at 4:26 pm

We sat on two old foldable chairs in the stables. Though the first man wasn't thrilled at the thought of speaking with an American woman at first, my supervising professor, born and raised in Russia and having visited Olkhon several more times than I, assured him, in earshot of his coworker who agreed to interview next, that he would be kept anonymous, and the questions short. They weren't required to answer anything that made them feel uncomfortable.

"Okay," I said, admittedly a bit nervous. "Let's just get right into it?"

Silence.

"Alright, so nationality?"

"Buryat."

"Gender?"

He looked confused. I explained that I had to ask, just for the record. He was slightly offended, and said, for the record, that he was obviously a man.

"Education?"

"Hm," he said, and took time to think. "I've taken about 10 classes."

² These interviews were particularly difficult. The two men, who describe themselves as equestrian athletes, made it very clear that they would only entertain the interview because we had members of our group that were renting their horses for the day. Nonetheless, though the interviews were terse and at times uncomfortable, their perspectives about the effects of tourism or lack thereof were important to include. They represent a large demographic on the island and rarely speak to non-native people, let alone those outside of their direct social circles if they were not conducting business.

“Okay, of formal education?”

“Yeah, sure. In the school.”

“What’s your economic class?”

“Average. No richer or poorer.”

“Do you have a religion?”

“Shamanism. Born into it.”

I tried my best to transition into the presence of tourism in Buryatia. He said he wasn’t sure what I meant, so we framed the question in terms of his business. Since tourist presence had increased on the island, their stables had begun to offer guided tours of Olkhon Island on horseback led by an experienced professional like himself.

“So, would you say you have seen more tourists than not using the horses? Have you been taking more people out on guided rides and tours?”

“I guess. A couple more groups. A lot more groups that don’t speak Russian.”

I waited, seeing if he would continue.

“I think more tourists being here is bad.”

I waited again, and followed up with a simple why.

“My horses aren’t treated well. They throw trash on the ground and in Baikal. I worry that the horses will eat it, or drink unclean water.”

As he was a man of few words, I used this opportunity to shorten the interview and clarified that he said he’d seen changes in the environment and that tourism has affected him personally because of those changes. He agreed, and we moved onto shamanism.

“What do you think about shamanism? Do you think it has an effect on Buryat culture?”

“Of course. Birth makes you a shamanist. It’s what develops your beliefs, being in the culture, surrounded by it. They are one.”

“Buryat culture and shamanism, you mean?”

“Yes,” he answered finitely.

“How do you feel like shamanism specifically affects the younger generation, much like yourself?”

“Oh, I am 24. Not that young,” he laughed.

I smiled, but waited for an answer.

He simply said, “I don’t think it does.”

“Can you explain that to me?”

“It doesn’t effect young people any differently from it does old people. Simple.”

We then spoke about the general effect of tourism on shamanism. He said he hadn't noticed much and spoke very briefly about how he didn't agree with it. He believed selling rides on the island's horses was a fine and moral business to conduct, as no one is born into horse riding. He felt the culture was in his blood and didn't appreciate sharing things he felt were his birthright, like shamanism. When I asked about tourists being directly involved in rituals and cultural practices, he said again that it was not something he supported.

"So," I followed up, "do you think Buryat culture is ever influenced by the tourists? Maybe by drinking habits, or diets?"

"Sure, new foods are here. And on the mainland. American chains like McDonald's," he said with a poorly masked hint of disgust. "That's why everyone is getting fat! So fat!"

In all honesty, I knew Russian and Buryat culture was generally very blunt, but I had to stifle a surprised laugh. I still wasn't used to how normal intense honesty on the island was for Buryat people.

He noticed.

With an almost more measured tone of explanation and half-apology, he continued. "Bad food, mostly an American problem. Here too, but mostly America."

I paused, as I was American, but maybe not the type he was referencing. I didn't feel like it was my duty to comment.

“But the Buryats. They’ve picked up habits from the tourists, yes. Too much drinking, no sports. Only tourists ride the horses now. No locals. So lazy!”

“Okay,” I said. “Do you have any thoughts about the economic development here after the collapse of the Soviet Union.”

“Hm,” he pondered. “Yes, things have developed. I’ve noticed.”

I waited, but he didn’t follow up.

“Any thoughts on Moscow’s policy toward Buryatia?”

“Hm,” he said.

We waited again.

“No, no thoughts. I don’t think about it much.”

Sensing the interview was done, I thanked him for his time. He got up from the chair and went to get his coworker.

....

The second man I interviewed came over and sat down before I could get up. He said, with a cheeky smile, “Buryat. Man. Secondary technical school. Average.”

I paused and waited to see how far he would take it.

He continued, filling the space with a smile. “I know the drill, and I also want this to be short.”

I laughed. “Thank you for making things easier, but you did forget to give your religion!”

“Oh!” he gasped, feigning shock.

Shifting to a church appropriate tone, he said “Christianity is good. I support it.”

I waited for any further explanation.

From here on, he was keen to just have me read off questions one by one and answer them in as few words as possible.

“Have you noticed an increase in tourism within Buryatia in the last 10 years?”

“Yes.”

“Have you noticed any environmental changes over the course of the last 10 years? What kinds?”

“Hm. I’ve noticed the trash around the stables, and on the shore of the lakes more. Everything seems a little more clogged up.”

“What do you mean by clogged?” I asked. “Like the air and waterways.”

“Yes,” he drew out slowly. “Just dirtier. Air, waterways, dirt roads, lake shores.”

We spoke more freely about the effects this has had on him personally, and Buryat culture as a whole. He said he didn't think about it much, but that he definitely has noticed a difference in economic development and business that tourism brought. The Buryats on Olkhon Island and on the mainland were making much more money, but paying much more for things. He noted he wasn't quite as to why or how this was possible, but that he was certain it was happening. He spoke about his own wage and said though it had grown, so had the prices in the stores.

“Do you mind if we talk a little bit about shamanism now?” I asked.

“Sure, go on,” he said casually.

“Okay, so what do you think about shamanism and its influence on Buryat culture?”

“The influence is positive.”

“And what about in contemporary society? Or on the younger generation?”

“It's fine. I don't really notice a big influence.”

“Do you notice tourism having an influence on shamanism and shamans?”

“Yeah, definitely. I don't think it's good.”

He went on to explain that he didn't feel the tourists had any shamanist convictions, and when they involved themselves in shamanism, it felt inauthentic. Taking the next questions out of my mouth, he spoke about seeing tourists participating in rituals and running wild over shamanistic holy sites; the likes of which he had never seen in his own Orthodox church. To him, this

cheaped the culture, and the more time the shamans spent with tourists, the less of their culture and respect for their homeland they retained. When I inquired if diet and drinking habits were related, he answered with a simple yes.

“I only have a couple more questions left,” I said, as I saw a new van of tourists pull up to the stables. “Do you have any thoughts about the economic development of Buryatia? After the fall of the USSR?”

“Yeah, I think it’s good that there are no collective farms any more. There’s more opportunity, and a lot more food now that we all aren’t farmers,” he joked.

“Do you have any thoughts on Russia’s political policies regarding Buryatia?”

“Yes, I support Putin. I think he’s doing a good job.”

“Okay, and last question. Have you noticed any major social changes? Say the women’s work is changing?”

He paused, and looked pensive.

“Not really, but I do see a lot more cafes, and small restaurants. I know those are mostly run by women.”

He then noticed the tour van, and asked if we were finished. I said yes, thanked him for his time, and he went to help his coworker tack up a fresh set of horses for the new group.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Using the lens of social constructivism³ when reflecting on the collected testimonies, two main concepts emerge across all six. Foremost, whether the interviewee perceives tourism as a necessary evil for the economic development it brings despite its commercialization and degradation of shamanism and Buryat culture, or if they perceive it as holistically beneficial because of the outside interest and consequent revival of the religion and culture that tourism generates. Then it can be discerned to what extent do the interviewees perceive inbound tourism as directly responsible for the degradation of culture and growing secularization of Olkhon Island.

Beginning with the first interviewee, the Shamanka, Registered Nurse, Businesswoman, she said that she felt tourism was entirely beneficial for the island's economic development, and for the revival of shamanism and Buryat culture. Out of every interviewee, she holds a unique perspective as she works most closely with the practice and performance of shamanism and traditional Buryat culture for tourists. Throughout her testimony, she repeatedly says that an increase in tourism on Olkhon Island "leads to an increase in cultural awareness," which results in Buryatia as a whole "gaining cultural recognition." When I asked specifically about the effects of tourism on shamanism, she simply said that there are none. When I inquired further, she emphatically explained "shamanists either don't really care, or they want the tourists to be involved. It helps us all. They learn something, and our uncommon traditions are shared with the

³ Social constructivism, developed by Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, asserts that language and culture are the frameworks through which humans experience, communicate, and understand reality (Vygotsky 1968). As a result human cognitive structures, or an individual's perception of reality, is socially constructed.

world. Nothing changes on our end. We are just sharing.” Later in the interview, her reasoning for the promotion of tourism and “sharing” culture became somewhat clearer.

As we spoke more conversationally about the economic development of the region, she said that tourism has “brought more business and more money to people, which is positive overall.” I then asked about her business interests specifically, noting she had said that she did not have an issue including her name and photograph within the project because it might catch the eye of potential customers. She confirmed that she does profit from the sale of shamanism to tour groups on the island. To her business, increases in tourism meant more opportunities for pre-arranged performances and very valuable word of mouth advertising to follow. She explained that she was generally paid before the rituals began and occasionally tipped by tourists, especially those that had engaged in the rituals or other traditional practices with her, after.

Like the rituals she performed in tandem with the tourists, it is important to understand that human perception is a product of social engagement (Vygotsky, 1978). Every interaction the Shamanka, Registered Nurse, Businesswoman had, and continues to have, aids in the subjective co-construction of how she perceives the world around her. As a result, it can be argued that the positive reinforcement she receives from the steady income she earns by marketing her culture and religion contributes to her view that the tourism industry is generally positive. Yet, it is unlikely that someone who has successfully navigated self-employment within the tourism industry on Olkhon Island has made only general observations of its effects.

It would be naive to discount that if she were to criticize the effects of tourism, regardless of what she has observed or not, her own primary source of income would be subject to the same scrutiny. She likely understands the complex ethics behind commercialization and cultural

degradation, but open acknowledgment of it is not necessarily a good business model. If the customers were to acknowledge any potential ethical issues, they may feel shame or confusion after having engaged initially with pay-for-participation rituals, or refuse to engage entirely. Word of mouth advertising could take a sharp decline as well if tourists were to feel at all uncomfortable with their experience. Choosing to focus on the positive effects of tourism avoids this. The Shamanka, Registered Nurse, Businesswoman can instead explain how the interest and curiosity she witnesses among those who may otherwise interact with her religion and culture helps to keep it relevant.

The second interviewee, the Matriarch, Museum Director, Educator, also works within her religion and culture in hopes of keeping it relevant, but only through education. Throughout her testimony, she continually disagrees with the commercialization of shamanism and Buryat culture. She explained, however, that “as a museum director, {she} does receive an income,” but “any rituals that may be performed are strictly demonstrations.” She also adamantly made the distinction between education and entertainment, saying that unlike “shamans entertaining private groups of tourists for money, and including them in ancient and traditional practices for which they have no context, nor appreciation,” the museum is solely a “place to learn.” Both she and the museum do not make profit, but remain operational because of things like ticket sales and guaranteed federal funding.

Though not by name, the Matriarch, Museum Director, Educator illuminates both the appreciation versus appropriation⁴ discussion and the issues surrounding dominate cultures

⁴ “Cultural appropriation can be defined as the ‘cherry picking’ or selecting of certain aspects of a culture, and ignoring their original significance for the purpose of belittling it as a trend. Appreciation is honoring and respecting another culture and its practices, as a way to gain knowledge and understanding” (Phillips, 2017).

exoticizing minority groups through her explanation of what she feels to be educational and respectful and what she feels is not. She references Judaism and Christianity and says that much like the shamanists, the practitioners of these more widely recognized religions would never invite strangers into their private homes and families to photograph them and/or participate in their sacred meals, rituals, or any other traditions. She views this as a complete invasion of privacy, and seen within shamanism only because they are an easily identifiable, lesser known religion.

For the Matriarch, Museum Director, Educator, her recognition of what is appreciation versus appropriation, coupled with the actions she consciously takes against the facilitation of appropriation on an island full of cultural tourism, takes a degree of privilege. Not everyone working within the tourism industry has this. Alongside the formal education she received in order to curate and manage a museum dedicated to Buryat culture and shamanism, the museum's guaranteed government funding provides her financial security. Though she welcomes the opportunity to host tourists in the museum, "there's only been a marginal increase in visitors." She noted that the museum "is a little out of the way for most groups," and they would probably have to mark an explicit stop to visit. Unlike the Shamanka, Registered Nurse, Businesswoman, her current income and livelihood does not depend on hosting visitors, or booking tour groups, receiving tips nor word of mouth advertising.

The privilege that can accompany the argument that tourists engaging in sacred shamanist rituals is appropriative does not invalidate it, but the acknowledgement of potential appropriation does not carry the privilege that may be needed to refuse it, nor the exoticization of minority groups living within primarily tourist economies. The Engineer, Veteran, Tour Bus Driver

exemplifies this. Though he does not work directly in the commercialization of shamanism and Buryat culture and he disagrees with these business practices in his testimony, he cannot afford to work outside of the tourism industry that provides for it. With laughter absent of a joke he said that tourism “has as a complete stranglehold on the economy.” Describing his own lived experience, though he served in the Russian military and has an accredited engineering degree, he still makes “more money driving during the tourism season than {he} would working in {his} field year round.”

His tone throughout his testimony is resigned to the “stranglehold,” but the Engineer, Veteran, Tour Bus Driver also displays an ability devoid of passion to adapt to Olkhon Island's rapidly expanding tourist economy. He explained that rather than moving to the mainland, having mentioned earlier in his testimony that he would earn a smaller income, he would have to take a semi-regular ferry to and from the island and drive eight hours roundtrip to the nearest city to work as engineer. He chose to “stay and make more money working as a driver. It is what it is.” He felt he could not “do much to change it, so {he makes} the best of it.” Given the physical inconvenience coupled with the financial toll, it is easy to sympathize with both his resignation and detachment from his career path.

This same resignation and detachment towards his career path, however, may contribute to his removed, globalized perspective about the effects of tourism. When discussing the question of whether or not increases in inbound tourism contribute to the revival or degradation of shamanism and Buryat culture, he stated very matter of factly that he thinks that while “people do drink more, eat worse, and take religion less seriously, that’s not only caused by an increase in tourism. That’s happening everywhere.” While this argument exists outside of his observations,

the nature of his career within the tourism industry aided in his making of it. The Engineer, Veteran, Tour Bus Driver serves as a vessel for potential degradation or appropriation, not a perpetrator. He does not concern himself with tourists hiring shamans and paying to participate in rituals or sacred cultural practices, regardless of his negative thoughts towards the business practice, because “it doesn’t affect {him}” personally. He is not directly involved with commercialization of his religion culture and has no plans to change his private routine, nor outwardly advocate for others to change the way they engage with shamanism, because “there aren’t tourists around when {he worships.}”

Though the Matriarch, Museum Director, Educator does care deeply about the effects of tourism on religion and culture outside of her personal relationship with shamanism, she shared a similar perspective to the Engineer, Veteran, Tour Bus Driver about the increases in inbound tourism contributing to its degradation. She noted that though she felt that Buryat culture and shamanism were inextricably linked, Buryat culture was not as easily corrupted by the effects of tourism as shamanism could be, and is becoming. She explained further and said that culture, with or without the presence of tourism, is not stagnant and that societies all modernize over time. “The internet,” she said when referencing how traditional Buryat culture has changed, “has as much to do with {these changes} as tourism and development does.” She feels that the tourism industry has a much greater potential of affecting shamanism, and religion as a whole rather than culture.

To frame her argument, it is helpful to deconstruct what differentiates religion from culture. In essence, the practice of religion always involves culture, but cultural practices are not always religious. Much of what is considered to be a part of religion can be cultural, such as eating

specific foods or speaking other languages or dressing a certain way when practicing religion. Yet, if specific foods are eaten, different languages are spoken, or certain clothing is worn without religious intention, it could all be deemed as simply cultural. For the purposes of this analysis, I am defining “religion” as the Matriarch, Museum Director, Educator did: practicing “religion,” or having religious intent is marked by an adherence to spiritual faith. The adherence to spiritual faith is dependent on in what regard the practitioner holds that faith. Faith, therefore, is then placed at the mercy of external, emotional stimulus. If faith and religion are used for purposes other than faith and religion, the simple increase in the amount of thought and feeling that would be required may be enough to shake it. The sale of shamanism is a prime example: concern over whether or not this business model is able to provide a suitable living - when there are few other economic opportunities - may shape the adherence to faith and religion outside of its commercialization, if the two can even be mentally separated once this point is reached. The Matriarch, Museum Director, Educator’s argument would then have cause to say the practice of shamanism may have consequently been corrupted by the introduction of the tourism industry that encourages its commercialization.

In concurrence with the Engineer, Veteran, Tour Bus Driver, she said that while she does believe the sale of shamanism corrupts the religion, “society is becoming more secular ... globally speaking” and that any lack of adherence to religion on Olkhon Island is not an isolated phenomena (Pew Research Center, 2019). Nonetheless, as a devout shamanist she feels that regardless of pre-existent widespread secularizing, the continued sale of shamanism and Buryat culture will only perpetuate this: actively transforming shamanism into a business when it was once a religion. She credited much of shamanism’s ability to become a business to that of

dominant cultures' fascinations with minority groups they can exoticize, alongside her recognition of global secularization.

The Matriarch, Museum Director, Educator spoke directly about her disdain for exoticization. She recounted her own experiences with it; caused by shamanism and Buryat culture's visible divergence from the more broadly accepted religions and cultures present throughout Russia and among the tour groups. While the Wife, Cook, Christian did not express disdain for exoticization verbatim, she chose to repeatedly identify with her Russian heritage and express "support" for Christianity aside from looking very much like a person of Buryat descent. She does not outwardly condemn shamanism nor Buryat culture, but there is a noticeable lack of support and voluntary affiliation with her Buryat heritage and shamanism.

Within her testimony she makes sure to clarify that the separation of Buryat culture and shamanism is difficult. She grew up a part of Buryat culture by virtue of being born to a Buryat father and living on native Buryat lands, but she notes that shamanism dictates "it's the shamanist's job to open the path to their children, but to support the path they choose to walk." She is adamant that she did not choose shamanism faith and in part credits her conversion to Christianity to her marriage and husband. She finds marriages of dual faith to be difficult and she states multiple times that she supports her husband's practice of Russian Orthodoxy and the church. When asked to give her thoughts about shamanism and the effects that tourism has on the religion, she again said that as long as her current personal loyalties were documented, she did not have an issue sharing. She was careful to re-emphasize that her speaking about shamanism and her life experiences should not be taken as a statement of support.

The Wife, Cook, Christian may wholeheartedly align spiritually with the Russian Orthodoxy and the associated culture. There may, however, be an unspoken factor of shame and embarrassment accompanying an association with a visible, exoticized minority group in the presence of the dominant culture like that of her husband's, as it is somewhat of a common occurrence (Cvetkovska, 2020). When asked about the participation of tourists within shamanist rituals she was quick to note she felt that it was a "bad practice." She made an immediate comparison to the "rules within several Orthodox churches that often don't allow tourists to participate or even observe services." In contrast, she detailed how she "watched a shaman performing a ceremony, and he allowed all of the tourists to photograph him, but only after they paid him." She then doubted the current authenticity of shamanism as she swore "the shamans have taken to performing in tourist heavy areas." She stated after, however, that she cannot "blame them" for capitalizing on the economic opportunity.

Her perception of the effects of tourism on shamanism, and shamanism as whole, are informed by both her lifelong and current comparison of the two religions. Through the eyes of her father she has seen shamanism criminalized and shamed. In her own adult life she has witnessed it morph into business or gimmick for tourists: all in stark contrast with the reverence she sees paid to the Russian Orthodox church. Per her comment about her inability to place blame on those profiting from the sale of shamanism, she may view the effects of tourism on shamanism and culture as derogatory yet necessary evils because of the economic development the tourism industry provides the region. Her willingness to accept the negative externalities of tourism could also be influenced by the alternatives to shamanism that are available to her. The reasoning behind her choice to practice Christianity may be largely in part because she truly

identifies with it, but the ease with which she sees the Russian Orthodoxy command respect and understanding over its beliefs and practices likely shapes her perception about shamanism and the attention it is paid.

Though both of the Two Horsemen were of few words, the thoughts they shared related to the two emergent concepts throughout their interviews were left less to interpretation and focused more on the tangible effects of tourism than the other five interviewees. The first horseman noted that because of tourism, his “horses aren’t treated well. {Tourists} throw trash on the ground and in Baikal.” He worries that his horses may eat the trash, or drink potentially unclean water. Due to these specific changes in the environment, he feels that tourism affects him personally. The second horseman shared very similar thoughts. He also “noticed the trash around the stables, and on the shore of the lakes more.” He said that the environment was “just dirtier” than it had been prior to the influx of tourism. Though the two men agreed with every interviewee but the Shamanka, Registered Nurse, Businesswoman that tourism brings an increase in economic development, what they distinguish as the largest negative impact on shamanism and Buryat culture is different.

To them, the nature integral to shamanism and the history of Olkhon Island is what they interact with on a day to day basis. When prompted the Two Horsemen recognize less physical effects, such as the commercialization of religion and how this can be problematic, but state specifically that they do not think much about it. When asked to speak to potential social changes, the second horseman says he has seen “more cafes, and small restaurants. {He knows} those are mostly run by women.” Rather than speculate about complex or opinionated intangibilities, he focuses on his own concrete, lived experiences. Both men’s perceptions of the

effects of tourism are shaped almost exclusively by what they can see and touch, and little else.

On Olkhon Island, a large portion of the demographic may process this similarly.

THOUGHTS MOVING FORWARD

This pilot oral history about the impacts of tourism on traditional Siberian culture has laid not only the foundation for an expansionary project, but contributed to the framework for discussing indigenous treatment in the United States, and the conversation about what is appreciation versus appropriation that has dominated western media. Many of the issues discussed on Olkhon Island can be found on indigenous reservations within the United States. Culture that was once criminalized then reclaimed is now becoming a tourist attraction. Many indigenous Americans living on the reservations cite little economic opportunity because of the lack of diverse industry (Pow Wows, 2020). Poor diet and alcoholism is prevalent, and powerful United States business interests have wreaked havoc on the environments that native tribes hold sacred and steward. Some indigenous issues have received media attention, a recent example being the controversy that exploded over the environmental pitfalls exposed by the Standing Rock Tribe of the Dakota Access Pipeline (Pow Wows, 2020). As is the story of many indigenous tribes in the United States, though the Standing Rock Tribe organized and led the protest to protect America's now shared environment, they do not receive the respect nor positive attention they deserve for their efforts.

Nearly every Halloween, people purchase native American chief and princess costumes and wear the outfits inappropriately. Indigenous people are still the only ethnic minority in the United States to be legally discriminated against and still used as a mascot for universities and sports teams (American Psychological Association, 2020). When the company "Land 'O' Lakes" removed the indigenous woman from their packaging by request of indigenous Americans, consumers responded with boycott threats (Kallingal, 2020). As Florida State University (FSU)

has made this project possible and uses the Seminole Tribe of Florida as its mascot, hopefully those affiliated with FSU are able to find relevance in this project though Olkhon Island and the Buryat people are thousands of miles away.

In order to expand this project and share the knowledge I gain from Olkhon Island with my home institution, I plan to continue to keep in contact with the Buryat people I met on the island and work to build an increased trust and rapport. This will increase the likelihood that people will want to repeat and build upon the interviews they have given, and that more will be inclined to interview for the first time in order to develop a much larger sample size. Donald A Ritchie, author of “Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide” says that the preliminary work of the interviewer is often reliant on word of mouth; as it is crucial to speak with the community you intend to work with about who would be best to interview, and why.

When my supervising professor and I began to ask the Buryat people living on the island if they would be willing to share their thoughts about the influx of tourism, the news of the project spread quickly. Almost everyone living on the island full time, or even seasonally for business, are very accustomed to tourists. Rarely, however, are they asked to give their honest thoughts and opinions about tourism. Having interviewed select members of the community, they gave the impression that they welcome their opinions and thoughts being engaged. With more potential time to spend on the island in the future, I hope to benefit from voluntary participation as word spreads among the members of the small community. It is not typical for the Buryat people, being traditionally isolated and continually marginalized to be anything but suspicious of strangers, let alone complete foreigners asking uncommon questions. Now, after being properly introduced to one another, and having documentation that my promise of anonymity has been

kept, I believe that more people will be inclined to be interviewed the next time I return to the island.

What I learned about the effects of tourism, though my sample size was small, it has affected each of the people that were interviewed differently. They each represent unique sections of the demographic of the island, I would expect any other driver, museum director, shaman/shamanka, domestic employee, or set of stablehands would have entirely new perspectives to offer when prompted with the same questions. With this in mind, what I recommend for continuing this oral history is to speak with as many people as possible, allow your interviewee to guide the conversation, and to leave any biases you may have outside of the interview room. As pioneer oral history Ronald Fraser defined it, “Good interviewing combines a mix of privilege, passion, patience, and persistence.” It is crucial to remember the privilege that accompanies the opportunity to share someone else’s story. In integrating with the Buryat people and collecting these initial testimonies, it is my hope to lend a platform for historically underrepresented voices to be heard.

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APPENDIX A**Russian Version - Guiding Questionnaire:**

- 1.) Ваша национальность.
- 2.) Пол.
- 3.) Образование.
- 4.) Материальное положение.
- 5.) Ваша религия, если вы принадлежите к какой-либо религии?
- 6.) Что вы думаете о развитии туризма в Бурятии за последние 10 лет?
- 7.) Что вы думаете об изменении окружающей среды (природы) за последние 10 лет?
- 8.) Отразилось ли это на вас, и если да, то как?
- 10.) Ваше отношение к шаманизму. Что вы думаете о роли шаманизма в бурятской культуре?
- 11.) Влияет ли шаманизм в какой-либо степени на современное бурятское общество?
Влияет ли он на молодое поколение бурят?
- 12.) Ваше мнение о туризме, как туризм воспринимается в шаманской среде. Влияете ли туризм на религиозные убеждения шаманистов и на развитие шаманизма?
- 13.) Ваше мнение о том, что туристы присутствуют и даже принимают участие в шаманских ритуалах?
- 14.) Вы думаете, что туристическая реклама о бурятах является частью развития цивилизации?
- 15.) Повлияли ли туризм на современную народную культуру в Бурятии? Например, изменение в питании и употребление алкоголя зависит от влияния туризма?

- 16.) Ваше мнение об экономическом развитии Бурятии после распада СССР.
- 17.) Что вы думаете о политике России и Москвы относительно Бурятии?
- 18.) Видите ли вы заметные социальные изменения в Бурятии за последние 10 лет?
Наприер, изменилось ли положение женщин в Бурятии?

English Version - Guiding Questionnaire:

- 1.) Your nationality?
- 2) Your sex? (gender)
- 3.) Your education?
- 4.) Your economic status?
- 5.) Your religion, if any?
- 6.) Have you noticed an increase in tourism within Buryatia in the last 10 years?
- 7.) What do you think about the current physical environment and its change over the last 10 years?
- 8.) Has it effected you in any way?
- 9.) Has it effected the Buryat culture?
- 10.) What do you think about shamanism and its influence on Buryat culture?
- 11.) What do you think about the role of shamanism in contemporary society? Is it superstition, or religion? Do you believe it has a positive influence on the young generation?
- 12.) What do you think about the effects of tourism on shamanism?

13.) How do you feel about tourists/non-native Buryats participating in shamanistic rituals? How do you feel about non-native Buryats/tourists hiring shamans, and paying to participate in rituals and cultural practices?

14.) Do you feel the commercialization of indigenous people to be a global issue?

15.) Do you feel as though tourism has influenced popular cultural within Buryatia? Do you feel as though diet and drinking habits have been influenced by tourism?

16.) How do you feel about the economic development of Buryatia?

17.) Your views on Russia's political policy regarding Buryatia?

18.) Have you noticed any prominent social changes in the last ten years? For instance, the roles of women shifting?

APPENDIX B

The Encyclopedia Britannica lists nine traits specific to classical shamanism and classically shamanist societies; also known as the North Asiatic sects of shamanism in the 19th century (Diószegi and Mircea, 2019). This encompasses the Buryat people living on Olkhon Island.

“1.) A society accepts that there are specialists who are able to communicate directly with the transcendent world and who are thereby also possessed of the ability to heal and to divine; such individuals, or shamans, are held to be of great use to society in dealing with the spirit world.

2.) A given shaman is usually known for certain mental characteristics, such as an intuitive, sensitive, mercurial, or eccentric personality, which may be accompanied by some physical defect, such as lameness, an extra finger or toe, or more than the normal complement of teeth.

3.) Shamans are believed to be assisted by an active spirit-being or group thereof; they may also have a passive guardian spirit present in the form of an animal or a person of another sex—possibly as a sexual partner.

4.) The exceptional abilities and the consequent social role of the shaman are believed to result from a choice made by one or more supernatural beings. The one who is chosen—often an adolescent—may resist this calling, sometimes for years. Torture by the spirits, appearing in the form of physical or mental illness, breaks the resistance of the shaman candidate and he (or she) has to accept the vocation.

5.) The initiation of the shaman, depending on the belief system, may happen on a transcendent level or on a realistic level—or sometimes on both, one after the other. While the candidate lies

as if dead, in a trance state, the body is cut into pieces by the spirits of the Yonder World or is submitted to a similar trial. The spirits' reason for cutting up the shaman's body is to see whether it has more bones than the average person. After awakening, a rite of symbolic initiation, such as climbing the World Tree, is occasionally performed.

6.) By attaining a trance state at will, the shaman is believed to be able to communicate directly with the spirits. This is accomplished by allowing the soul to leave the body to enter the spirit realm or by acting as a mouthpiece for the spirit-being, somewhat like a medium.

7.) One of the distinguishing traits of shamanism is the combat of two shamans in the form of animals, often reindeer or horned cattle. The combat rarely has a stated purpose but is a deed the shaman is compelled to do. The outcome of the combat means well-being for the victor and destruction for the loser.

8.) In going into trance, as well as in mystical combat and healing ceremonies, the shaman uses certain objects such as a drum, drumstick, headgear, gown, metal rattler, mirror, and staff. The specific materials and shapes of these instruments are useful for identifying the types and species of shamanism and following their development.

9.) Characteristic folklore (oral and textual) and shaman songs have come into being as improvisations on traditional formulas used to lure or imitate animals" (Diószegi and Mircea, 2019).