ABSTRACT

Group identities are often built on genealogies. Buryat culture appears to conform to this general rule. Elaborate Buryat historical genealogies have been written and preserved. Today, scholars regard them as a key source of insight into the structure and character of Buryat society. Most scholars treat Buryat genealogies exclusively as descriptions of kinship systems. In keeping with a rich anthropological literature, Buryat culture appears to fit into the paradigm of kinship as the “irreducible principle,” “atom” or an “elementary structure,” which, as the complexity of society grew, ceased to be the central organizational principle in favor of the state, politics, economy, etc. However, this interpretation occludes the meaning of Buryat genealogies as carriers of historical memory and understanding of the world. By insisting on treating it in ethnographic categories, the academic view of Buryat culture reduces the Buryat society to the level of a primordial one.

In this article, I will use the findings of my fieldwork to briefly introduce the historical context of the Buryat genealogies in the broadly defined pre-So-
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viet, Soviet and post-Soviet periods. I am interested in the motives of those who created these genealogies, and the place these documents occupy in the contemporary Buryat society and culture. I will also note the coincidence of a revival of interest among Buryats in their genealogies in the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of Soviet modernization’s power to suppress local cultures.

**Keywords**: genealogies, kinship, social order, history, elites

**INTRODUCTION**

In social sciences, *kinship* is habitually considered to be the “irreducible principle,” “atom” or an “elementary structure,” which, as the complexity of society grew, ceased to be the central organizational principle in favor of the state, politics, economy, etc. (Branstätter 2009, 6). However, this concerned mostly the “complex” or “modern” societies of Euro-America, where kinship was being reduced to the nuclear family, while the minimally differentiated societies like that of the Buryats were believed to be still based on kinship ties. Indeed, practically no works on Buryats and the Buryat culture go without the extended study of, or at least reference to, kinship or kinship ideology. This overemphasis on the major role of kinship in patrilineal organization of community, marriage practices, tribalism, labor, property exchange, etc., reflects the Buryats being treated as a typical “kin-based” society. Thus, a host of cultural ideas is attributed simply to kinship, which gets extended almost limitlessly to the whole social structure (Schneider 1984; Carsten 2004).

Genealogies, both those written and those memorized, are often assumed to be evidence of the general organization of
a society along kinship lines (Sneath 2007, 105). However, I claim that they are not always useful for understanding the kinship relations and that they could function divorced from the social structure. In this article, I will use the findings of my fieldwork to sketch out a brief historical context of Buryat genealogies in the pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet periods. I am interested in the motives for creating these genealogies, the role of those who created them and the place these documents occupy in the contemporary Buryat society and culture.

**GENEALOGIES IN THE PRE-SOVIET AND SOVIET PERIODS**

Genealogies have constituted a significant part of Mongol historiographical tradition at least since the 13th century. This component was under strong influence of Tibetan (Buddhist), Chinese and Russian epistemological cultures but has retained its relevance and significance throughout history. Practices of revising genealogies and manipulating one’s origin were common (Kollmar-Paulenz 2014). Especially in the pre-Soviet period, genealogies depended on political (and religious) orientation of the elites. After the Buryat-Mongols became subject of the Russian state in the 18th century, their particular genealogies and chronicles developed relatively independently of one another and did not agree in terms of ancestral origin – there were plenty versions of the legends and names, and no attempts were undertaken to construct a single all-Buryat ancestral ideology (Tsydendambaev 1972, 50).
The genealogies written in the pre-Sovietization period could be divided into two types. The first type were family histories of nobles, which rather remind records of service and official documents. Clan aristocracy was a part of the indigenous political system but also, through the system of indirect rule, part of the Russian administration, and thus written genealogies were also the way to legitimize the power of a leader or a ruling clan and their heritage (Tsydendambaev 1972, 168). The second type of genealogies were private family genealogies and general genealogies of entire localities (Tsydendambaev 1972, 48). Gradually, genealogies acquired a more general and extensive character and included both the nobles and commoners (Tsydendambaev 1972, 172–3).

Further in the article, I will focus primarily on such extensive genealogies comprising the populations of whole villages. I visited the Khezhenge (Kizhinga) Aimag in 2014 and 2015 to contact with the local people occupied with maintaining the genealogies (*harbaalzhi, ugai besheg, ugai dansa*) of the villages of Zagustai, Mogsokhon, Khezhenge, Ulzyte, Sulkhara; I also gathered materials concerning the village of Kuorka. I confirmed my findings based on the fieldwork in different regions of ethnic Buryatia which I conducted in close cooperation with my mentor Ewa Nowicka as well as Wojciech Połec and Blanka Rzewuska in 2012, 2013 and 2014;¹ and independently

¹ The research project “Between Russia, Mongolia and China: Buryats and the Challenges of the 21st Century” was funded by the Polish National Science Center (Grant No. DRC-2011/03/B/HS6/01671) and led by Ewa Nowicka. I accompanied Professor Nowicka’s team only in Aga Okrug, Ulan-Ude and Khezhenge Aimag of the Buryat Republic, and Khentii Aimag of Mongolia.
in 2015 as well as during summer vacations between 2012 and 2015.

Despite the long tradition of genealogical writing, during my fieldwork I never saw the old pre-Soviet genealogies – one would have to go to the museums and archives to see remnants of the surviving documents. Old genealogies were, however, used by those who gathered the village genealogies later. For example, one of the newer genealogies mentions a genealogical list (*ugai dansa*) of the head of Khudai Clan written in 1850, and some of the older genealogies that were written on huge “bed-sheet-sized” pieces of paper (male, aged 94, 20.07.2014, Khezhenge).

Most of the village genealogies were created during the Soviet time, usually in the 1970 and 1980s. To my mind, this is not accidental, since it was the time when the “model minority” began realizing that with the advancing paces of Soviet modernization, it was losing its culture and language (Chakars 2014). As in other places of the world, the local elites played the key role in shaping the cultural content. This was also true of the genealogists, who could all be counted among the local intelligentsia, for usually they were either teachers or local historians (*kraeveds*). During my fieldwork, I contacted people who took upon themselves the task of gathering local genealogies. Usually, there are one or two seniors in every village or locality who started gathering the genealogies in their youth. Many of the genealogists that I was able to locate have since died, though their work is sometimes continued by people of other generations. Thus, I had to contact their close relatives or people who would remember them. It was also very interesting
to trace their personal background and motivation for gathering such material. As far as I found out, these persons usually did not have any “noble” origins which could indirectly point to their continuing of the family tradition or legitimizing their leading position in the community, as it is said to have been the case with pre-revolutionary chroniclers. Gathering the genealogies was their personal initiative – it was not a task which they were obliged or expected to perform. Collecting the material was quite a hard task for them, which they supported from their own funds.

A 94-year-old citizen of Khezhenge started gathering genealogies in his youth and used older records written in the classic Mongolian script, modifying the information based on his fieldwork. He keeps the records in a few notebooks, each concerning the residents of one village: Khezhenge, Ulzyte, Sulkhara etc.

I began with the old records. There was also a man called Ochirzhapov Dondog, born in 1912, who performed the work [of documenting genealogy – A. Zh.] on his own village called Khuurai. Sulkhari was recorded by another old man; and I took the material from the museum in Mogsokhon, then I took material from one man in Khezhenge. From everywhere I could. It is not a work that could be just memorized, even if it concerns events that happened a year or two ago; it is also based on the older records. Apart from that, I went to meet people, visit every family and ask what their ancestry/lineage [ug] was, whether they knew or not. If one knew, I wrote it down, and if not – I didn’t. It is not just my work that went into this, everything is based on the older records (male, aged 94, 20.07.2014, Khezhenge).

The genealogists thus used pieces of genealogies written before and the materials gathered by other local historians.
In the written genealogy kept in Mogsokhon, the author Tsyren-Namzhil Ochirov even listed the names of some of his main informants who knew the local lineages by heart. Interestingly, genealogists also personally contacted and consulted one another. Their major research method were interviews. Interviewing the local families must have been hard work, which was perhaps not especially encouraged or, at least in some periods, discouraged altogether. The daughter of another genealogist remembers the way her father used to gather material in the 1970s and 1980s:

He would go to every person. He would take his case and travel to Khori [Khori District], to Khezhenge, to Chesaan, he would go everywhere, even to the city [Ulan-Ude], ask people from there, go here and there, here and there ... It was the Soviet time and people did not pay attention to his work, they did not think it was of any importance (female, aged 65, 19.09.2015, Khezhenge).

The situation is still very similar nowadays. People usually do not care much about maintaining the village genealogy, even if they consider it a praiseworthy thing. The role of updating and gathering information is put squarely on the shoulders of the local intelligentsia, who are all of senior age and not sure whether the records will be continued after their death:

After that [the death of the previous genealogist] nobody cared about it. I was puzzled by this and had to ... the new names ceased being recorded and it just finished. I do not know what will happen with it afterwards, will there be a person who could continue it or not ... The majority of the data I gather myself. They do not care that much ... If they move to the city [Ulan-Ude], there are people whom I ask [in the village]. I ask people. Here I go to the ambulance clinic to ask about the newborn children; of course, I have many people who were not recorded here (female, aged 80, 19.09.2015, Khezhenge).
The interview was taken in 2015, when I came back in 2016, I learnt that the 80-year-old woman had unfortunately already passed away. I was told that during her funeral the work she did was announced to the mourners and volunteers were sought who would continue her work, but I do not know whether any were found. All in all, the genealogies in the Soviet period were compiled by local elites who realized the gradual loss of the Buryat culture – it was not, as the apparent lack of new genealogists perhaps proves, a matter of public demand.

Apart from the extensive village genealogies, people often keep lists of their forefathers’ names on a piece of paper. Such written genealogies are considered a sort of cultus image, kept in special places together with representations of deities and family photos. The genealogies of this kind that I was shown were compiled recently, often noted down from the village genealogies or consulted with senior members of the family.

At least two important things could be seen here. Firstly, the written genealogies were not necessarily used for maintaining the social order: recognizing one’s relatives does not always imply a deep knowledge of the ancestors. It seems clear that the village genealogies, both those compiled in the recent past and the contemporary ones, were used neither for maintaining exogamy, arranging marriages nor for distributing property. They do not serve as documents having any role in arranging the community structure currently, either. This has been so predominantly because though they reproduce local lineages, the connection with the clan ancestors should be considered
outside of biological categories. They are more a symbolic way of creating and then identifying the past. That is one of the reasons why these written genealogies are not the reflection of the social order or people’s relations with each other.

Secondly, the genealogies comprising the population of whole villages are (like the villages themselves) a rather recent phenomenon that appeared in the Soviet times together with changes in the administrative structure.\(^2\) Perhaps the genealogies which previously were used by the elites, for example in the distribution of inheritance and power, in the Soviet conditions lost many of their functions. After the appearance of collective farms, the abandonment of genealogies might have been one of the techniques used to attract people to these new communities. Later on, when the diminishing of the Buryat culture became evident, the genealogies took on another important function – the construction of historical myths. As we shall see, the history thus produced was alternative to that written in official books, it described the “great ancestors” instead of the “backward nomads.”

THE CONTENT OF GENEALOGIES

The content of the genealogies presented the multiple local views of alternative history, contrasting with the Soviet modernist historiography. The genealogies contain in fact not merely

\(^2\) The rise in popularity of genealogies seems to be much more common among Buryats than in Mongolia, which is perhaps connected with the processes of sedentarization of Buryats (Slawoj Szynkiewicz, personal communication) or with the spread of shamanist practices (Bulag 1998; Shimamura 2014)
names of people and the scheme of their relatedness with one another but also short histories, explanations and remarks. They look more like a kind of textbooks on local history, where one could trace the lot of one’s own family in the context of many centuries. The reader is struck by the great number of names of both dead and living people collected over just a few sheets. Not all the lineages are treated equally – some of them stretch seven, others as many as 25 generations back. Besides the names, some of them contain information about profession, character and biography of people living several generations ago. For example, included in the genealogies of Mogsokhon written by Tsyren-Namzhil Ochirov is a story of Butid, a noble man’s daughter born in 1889:

Butid, having arrived as a wife to Dorzho, whom she did not like, sang the following song ... Before this, they tried to marry her off to Bambain Seren, and she used to sing this song: “The head of the Council in Anaa/ Says that he wants me as his wife/ Is it really the result of good deeds [buian] of my father and mother?/ Is it really my luck? …” (Ochirov 1980).

Various phrases people once uttered, remarks on their character and other fragmental testimonies are also to be found on the sheets. Next to some of the names, there are records about the person’s occupation – usually lama or shaman (böö) – or the place where they used to settle and their migration routes:

Gonchig, gabzha [rank in the Buddhist clergy], used to travel in China; ... Dainsha, [who] was a shaman, willed to have his dead body left on the top of Mount Hepkhien Uula, but people found it to be too far and instead left it on the top of Mount Gazar-Sagaan, they say (Ochirov 1980).
Apart from that, all possible data are included of people who contributed to building stuppas or datsans, or distinguished themselves with special achievements, profession and education. Most genealogies begin or conclude with general information about the Khori Buryats, containing their ancestry and some historical events. In Zagustai, I even saw a Soviet reprint of a 19th century Buryat historical chronicle kept together with the genealogy. The name of Genghis Khan or names of other significant people in Mongol history are not rare in those pieces. Perhaps then, the village genealogies, along with manuscripts in the classic Mongolian script – written in both the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods – should be considered rather as records of local history, an alternative (though not always opposing) one to that abundantly created in the official Soviet discourse.

GENEALOGICAL TRADITION IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD

These deeply rooted but unofficial historical narratives come out of the shadow during the “cultural revival” in the post-Soviet period. The early 1990s saw the publication of twenty Buryat chronicles and other works transliterated form the Old Mongolian script to modern Buryat (L. Badmaeva 2005, 8), and recently eleven chronicles were translated into Russian and became even more available. This has revived genealogical narratives not only as versions of history, but also as reflections of destroyed social structures.
I would venture to call the modern nostalgia for clan and tribe divisions an influence of European evolutionist conceptions of society development and their application to the Buryat community, first during the Tsarist and then the Soviet period, through education and academia. The kinship-centric character of the Buryat community was, and is, emphasized often enough in most of the ethnographic and historic works to have become an important element of the Buryats’ casual reflections on their own society. The Buryat terms associated with social structure and institutions are interpreted in terms of kinship solidarity – and consequently translated as “clan,” “tribe,” “houses,” etc. Commonly, instead speaking of the “Buryat population,” scholars use the cliché of *buriatskie rody* – “Buryat clans” – even in contexts when clan solidarity is doubtful. Kinship solidarity and clan division became a sort of a priori knowledge that predetermined the character of the whole vocabulary. David Sneath notes that in texts like *The Secret History of the Mongols* (ca. 1237), a series of different terms related to social organization, such as *irgen* (people, subject), *ulus* (polity, realm, patrimony, appanage), *aimag* (division, group), were translated as “tribe” in places where the considered unit was believed to be tribal. Similarly, the term “clan” was very often used to denote any group which the translator believed to be a clan (Sneath 2007, 62). Interestingly, the paradigm of Buryat social organization based on “clans” formed in the Russian Empire and then itself became the major interpretational grid for the academic researches on other Mongol communities, which, however, were shaped under the strong influence of Qing Empire policies
(Mönkh-Erdene 2011, 31). The local social structures were considered in this essentialized way, although in ontological terms they generally did not share much with the colonial background of those writing the official histories and ethnographies.

In the nature-culture discourse, increasingly popular in the post-Soviet period, the Buryats find their place to be closer to “nature,” which apart from strong associations with backwardness has also the seemingly attractive hues of “noble savageness.” The clan and tribe divisions are now described as the natural, and thus more authentic and moral, form of social organization in comparison to the “modern,” less “spiritual” structures. One of the authors of a contemporary genealogical book writes in the preface that according to some researches, 70–80% of the surveyed Russian students do not know the names of their grandfathers and grandmothers – this poor knowledge of the genealogy is then contrasted to the sophisticated system of the Buryat genealogies as a certain proof of Buryat superiority (Tsydenov 2014, 11). Some other researchers also note that extended knowledge of their origin was seen by former nomads as the point of superiority over sedentary Europeans (Zapaśnik 1999).

In the modern Buryat discourse, genealogies go hand in hand with the supposed clan division. During fieldwork in ethnic Buryatia, the Polish anthropologists whom I accompanied were frequently told that each Buryat can name the last seven generations of their ancestry, though according to my personal experience this exists merely as an ideology. Many of the people with whom I talked would remember their genealogy as
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children, but could not recall it anymore in adult life. Knowing and declaring the knowledge of one’s ancestry is a source of pride, of confirmation and at the same time propagation of the vital forces (sülde)\(^3\) of one’s immediate family, but it is not knowledge that is important in social structuring. The ways the image of kinship community really does function in the modern context are best shown by the examples of the Buryat children education, the publishing of books and genealogies and other similar projects.

Schoolteachers, who in the recent Soviet past were rather important mediums of Sovietization, currently are often occupied with “revival of Buryat culture.” An old woman to whom I talked was surprised to hear that religion and “clan issues” are taught and encouraged in schools. Indeed, the educational system was the key part of Soviet modernist and cosmopolitan ideology (Chakars 2014, 119). Nowadays, however, for many Buryats, mass events (cf. Nowicka 2016) and schools are the only sources of Buryat ethnic culture: “introduction of the youth to the knowledge about the ancestry [ug garbal] is a holy duty of the whole nation and most of all of the teachers” (B. Badmaeva 2009, 29). Projects whose goals are in line with Badmaeva’s call are provided on different levels of school educational system, and are realized most commonly by teachers of the Buryat language and literature within the “Regional Component” included into the curriculum of regional schools. Apart from multiple undertakings aimed at the revival of the endangered Buryat

\(^3\) For more on the topic of vital forces see: Humphrey and Ujee 2012; Skrynnikova 2012; Tangad 2013.
language, customs and rituals – these projects also mention the clan and tribe division, presenting it as an important element of the traditional culture. The data on the genealogies, clans and tribes are sought in academic works, which enjoy almost absolute authority – perhaps this is another example of the use of ethnographic data in nationalist ideology. The local genealogical records written during the Soviet period, which were described above, also become important sources in the reconstruction of tradition, though a few years earlier they were not as popular.

What is interesting is that since the clan and tribe division of the Buryats is presented as an object of national pride – all other discourses, associated with “backwardness,” are omitted or reinterpreted. The teachers whom I interviewed believe it to be an important tool for propagating “moral values” and “stronger unity of family, ties between generations, instilling respect towards the ancestors” (Tarnueva 2009, 11–2), which “will not let children forget about the native land, beloved father and mother, and merited people” (B. Badmaeva 2009, 29). During lessons of the Buryat language, in school clubs and at various contests, children present their genealogies, and “tribal” and “clan” origin. Such tasks are also assigned to university students during the Buryat language classes. Students consult with the elder members of their family or relatives who know the genealogical lineage by heart or have it in the written form. Usually, most of the young people are able to reconstruct them seven generations back, but there are also many of them who go back as far as 25 generations. Each genealogy represents a line of names until the mythical tribal ancestor. For example,
almost all genealogies presented in Khezhenge derived from one and the same ancestor, Khoridoi Mergen, the son of Barga Bagatur. Such genealogies, known, kept and now written down in separate families, are useless for ranging the social distance, for they are quite isolated and contain no information about relatedness with other genealogies. The best and the longest genealogies and essays are granted awards and prizes. As one of the teachers told me, such projects will help children to have their genealogies reconstructed and written down, and from then on serve as a source of precious memories for their families.

Scholars note that copies of genealogies suddenly started to spread among people in the early 1990s, on the wave of national revival in Buryatia (Zhambalova 2008, 76). Such genealogies, published in books and tables, serve as a popular wedding gift, and are often exhibited during the wedding ceremony and other gatherings. However, the form of the genealogies has changed significantly: they are concerned with a territory and the clans that have gathered on it, not the separate clans themselves. They have also started to include names of women – which in the older pieces were as a rule omitted – as some researchers did not like the fact that mothers were not included in genealogies and have proposed the genealogical schemes that included them (Lubsantseren and Tserenchimed 2009, 120).

Interestingly, while the Buryat mythical ancestors are numerous and diverse (from various all-Mongol ancestors to Indian and Tibetan kings), most of the contemporary genealogies tend to come down to one of the three ancestors which have been accepted by the majority of the Buryat local groups.
ALTERNATIVE HISTORY: CREATION, USE...

The ancestors are derived from the legend of Bargu-Bagatur (descendant of the Burte Chinu-a), who had three sons: Oliudai, Buriadai and Khoridai (see, e.g., Tsydenov 2014, 23; Aiushiev 2013, 11). The first son is the ancestor of the Oirats – Western Mongols, nowadays commonly associated with the Kalmyks; the second son, Buriadai, is the forefather of the Western Buryats; and Khoridai – of the Khori and Aga Buryats. This legend, first recorded in a historic report by Dorzhi Darbaev (1839), has been preferred to others, and often reproduced and used in other projects related to clan revival. The tradition is still alive and developing. However, it does not embrace the large part of numerous southern Buryat groups (the Tsongool, Sartuul, Tabanguud, Khotogoid, Khatagin, and others, all of whom migrated from Khalkha Mongolia), groups which have played significant, if not central, roles in Buryat history.

Most people do not know the clan affiliation of other people, nor do they strive to know it. It is not information shared between people, though almost every family keeps the memory of their clan and refers to it during rituals. However, there are numerous attempts to “revive” the supposedly traditional division, at least during some national holidays and public events. Thus, during the Lunar New Year feast in 2015, people gathered on the central square in Khezhenge at a certain moment were encouraged to divide according to their clan affiliation. It is symbolic that the group thus formed consisted primarily of people many of whom had never met one another before and who certainly did not think of one another as kin. This state of communitas was temporary; created during the event “for fun,”
it quickly dissolved when the event was finished. This and other examples above show that the clan system exists merely as an ideology created by the local elites, whereby it is presented as part of the “lost tradition” that requires reviving. It departs from the actual social division, which is organized according to principles other than kinship.

CONCLUSION

I began my article by embedding the Buryat genealogies within the Mongol historiographical tradition. Later, I showed how this tradition developed in the Soviet period as an alternative to the mainstream texts of history, and how it later gained currency in the post-Soviet period (as a history alternative to the official one). I then discussed in brief some of those who wrote them and those who used them, and concluded that the function of genealogies in social organization was minor in comparison to their other functions, like the construction of historical myths, ideologies, and being the object of religious devotion.

This analysis of the process of creating, functioning and interpretation of genealogies contributes to the general discussion in the humanities about “Who owns history?”: it is not only a matter of the “practical past” (White 2010) but also of the “practical interpretation of the past.” The theory of kinship was a frame applied limitlessly in academic research, a generally accepted theory which prevailed with few exceptions in all major orientations of the humanities as a kind of “conventional wisdom” (Schneider 1984, 43).
The written genealogies circulating among contemporary Buryats should be considered more as an alternative to official versions of history than a means of constructing or reconstructing real kinship relations between people. The genealogies should be perceived outside of biological connotations: they are not always useful for understanding the social distance and kinship relations (Szynkiewicz 1992, 68).

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