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The Russian State, Remoteness, and a Buryat Alternative Vision

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1. Introduction

Any state, when constructing a central location of power and wealth, at the same time also creates other areas that are seen from the center as “remote.”¹⁾ The Russian state in its Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet variants is no exception; indeed, the geographer Boris Rodoman has argued (2004) that Russia provides an extreme example of centrality. It concentrates all lines of power, infrastructure, and communication toward the metropolis—and this has generated a particular pattern of “remoteness” across provincial regions. The spatial pattern identified by Rodoman locates such remote areas especially at administrative boundaries, as will be discussed below. This paper will discuss the consequences of such a pattern in relation to the Russian–Mongolian border. This is a sparsely inhabited region where, broadly speaking, the border coincides with an ecological frontier: the mountainous taiga forests of Siberia with well-watered valleys give way here to the dry and open grasslands of Mongolia. However, the argument made by the geographers is not about ecology but essentially about political structures. It is inattention from the state administration that produces undeveloped and cut-off places. The perception that such an area is “remote” comes from outside, from people located in cities. With the dramatic shifts in the meaning attributed to such places in the post-Soviet era, urban residents now often see these places as somehow culturally authentic, to be “rediscovered” and their secrets opened up (Humphrey 2014). But such an external perspective leaves almost unexamined the real lives of the people living in remote frontier zones, in particular their experience and concepts of space and borders. In this paper, I shall argue that the Buryats of the borderlands have an alternative vision of social space, and that this is not simply a different autochthonous register but rather a profound otherness that has to be seen as “minoritarian” and hence related to the hierarchical state order of Russia. The Buryat spatial–social form is in many ways the converse of that of the state. This could be seen conceptually as a Lévi-Straussian “structural opposition” against the state order, but in this paper I shall take a different approach to show how it is the outcome of an ethnically specific way of inhabiting and orienting to external spaces, in newly isolated lands.

There is now an extensive anthropological literature on life in contemporary rural

Siberia (see Donohue et al. 2004) and especially on Buryatia (Gomboev 2006; Nanzatov et al. 2008; Skrynnikova 2009; Popkov 2009; Rinchinova 2014; Shaglanova 2010, 2011). This paper frames its study in a particular way, by focusing on the rural lacunae in areas between administrative entities, zones from which the tentacles of the state have been almost completely withdrawn, and where a literally de-modernised life is going on. In these places, Buryat ideas of boundaries have been revitalized in recent years. Although the Buryat concepts refer to their own history and legends, because these people have always lived in the interstices of alien state structures (Russian, Mongolian, Manchu, Chinese), in practice some of the Buryat boundaries coincide with recent (Soviet) and contemporary borders, but they are conceptualized in quite different ways. Thus, for these rural Buryats, “the same” border or boundary may have several overlaid meanings. Let me explain the specific sense in which I shall examine this phenomenon. As Nadya Nartova has rightly observed, all state borders are seen differently by the various actors engaged with them, such as customs officials, migrants, tourists, smugglers, or lorry drivers, and she suggests the engaging idea of the hologram as a way to conceptualize the concentration of different perspectives on one object (Nartova 2010: 268–73). I wish, however, to focus not on individual perceptions of borders but the way they appear in common Buryat understandings of landscape, relatedness, and extra-local geo-political articulations. It will be suggested that just as the hierarchical “vertical” structure of the Russian state produces “remoteness,” a “horizontal” idea that in Slavic culture also corresponds with depth (*glub’*, *glubinka*), it happens that the Buryats’ notions concerning borders also relate verticality with expanse. Their ideas, however, are the reverse of the Russian, since in the Buryat case the distant edge (boundary, border) is identified with height and sacredness, and also—paradoxical as it might seem—with centrality.

Ultimately, I aim to relate the boundary consciousness of rural Buryats living in the border zone to their contemporary historical–geographical situation, namely their positioning both *within* a modern state as stranded within “remoteness” and *beyond* it as a historically mobile minority that uses its own ideas to give this placing a different meaning.

2. The Spatial Order of the Russian State

For an analysis of how remoteness has been produced in Russia, I turn to the work of Boris Rodoman. By the 2000s, aghast at urban sprawls, reckless agricultural expansion, and industrial destruction of wild lands, Rodoman argued (2004) that Russia had developed an “anisotropic” society, one in which vertical links are very strong, while horizontal ones are weak. The administrative–territorial division of Russia, especially under the Soviet government, was a demonstration of this. The state amalgamated all vital activities (political, social, economic, ethnic) into one uniform system. The transport system became the reflection of the administrative divisions, and vice versa, and the radial roads that connected the center with the periphery were a manifestation of the power vertical. The lines of communication prioritized were those that connected the capital with the regional centers, the provincial party leader with the district subordinates,

and the *raion* (district) bosses with the directors of enterprises. Today also, in rural areas the only roads kept in good repair are those used by the authorities (*nachal'stvo*). Other side roads die out. The absence of lateral connections is the weak aspect of the anisotropic society: many roads, bridges, public transport, and more generally the social links, that in pre-Soviet times used to connect settlements with one another, no longer exist.

Rodoman argues that this structure operates on different scales in the same way. Thus, the same center-focused organization is found in Russia as a whole, in each Republic and Oblast, and in districts (*raion*) and down to the lowest level. Because this order applies not only to roads, but also to public transport, communications, distribution of supplies, and allocation of funds, it creates enormous inequalities, which people feel very strongly at each level. If we apply his idea to Buryatia, there is a huge difference in prosperity between life in the capital Ulan-Ude and some outlying district center of the same Republic, and a similarly great one between the district center and the poverty-stricken villages in its peripheries. The acute experience of this inequality, combined with the ability to compare one's own with other places, is central to post-Soviet experience. The centric structure also provides a mode of geographical orientation. In Russia, Rodoman writes, "I can always sense where the center is and where is the periphery, in any village, in any forest I can feel it, where is our center and our edge (*okraina*), which is the direction of Moscow" (2004: 3).

Rodoman continues that what is significant about this pattern is that a decaying zone (*upadochnaya zona*) tends to occur on the edges of each Oblast, even Moscow Oblast. Since this is true for each administrative unit, the borders between them turned into a kind of vacuum. "Where three boundaries meet in one place, real godforsaken pockets ('bear corners,' *medvezhyi ugly*) result" (2004: 5). Today, these border zones are where depopulation is strongest, where there are fewest villages, and those that exist are decaying.

Note that the adjective *upadochnaya*, which could be translated as "falling," refers to a vertical drop; in other words, the zones at the edge are also the ones "below." Russian vocabulary referring to remote places includes the idea of distance or farness (*udalennost'*), but also in everyday speech to depth. Thus, the rural hinterlands are commonly known as *glubinka* (from *glubina*, depth, deep places, also heart or interior) and such places in an abandoned, overgrown state are known as *glush'* (roughly translatable as "backwoods").

3. Living in "remoteness"

The Buryat villages along the Russian border with Mongolia would no doubt be described by urban dwellers in exactly these terms. Indeed, they are triply subject to the spatial order described by Rodoman, since they are located at the peripheries of the Russian state, of the Buryat Republic and the Zabaikal'skii Krai, and also of the districts that lie along the border (Oka, Tunka, Zakamen, Dzhida, Kyakhta, etc.). In addition to languishing in neglected "remoteness" as Rodoman would have predicted, they are also

enclosed and cut off by the international frontier from the countries on the other side. The border districts were given the special administrative status of a “border zone” (*pogranichnaya zona*) with specific legislation related to security (Nanzatov and Sodnompilova 2012a: 165). A large military force is maintained at Kyakhta, which is now the only crossing point for road traffic still open to Mongolia from Buryatia (a nearby crossing for rail traffic is nearby at Naushki). The Buryat–Mongolian border is 1,213 km long, and a number of other crossing points used to exist; but, in the last twenty years, many of them became inactive and in 2010 all were closed “for security reasons.” This means that to go to Mongolia the inhabitants along the frontier have to travel inwards to a local center and then out again to the crossing points at Naushki/Kyakhta.

Formerly, the Buryats used to cross the border in many places in the course of their normal economic activity. Their main livelihood was based on nomadic livestock herding and the summer pastures of some communities were located in Mongolia. In Soviet times, Buryat collective farms, including some located at a distance from the border, took their sheep to Mongolia and mowed hay there annually (Humphrey 1986), and people often crossed the border for hunting and gathering. Many Buryats visited relatives in northern Mongolia and attended family festivals, etc. without hindrance. Now, with the post-Soviet tightening of the border regime, maintaining relations with kin in Mongolia has become difficult and more intimidating; people do still make the journey but “secretly” according to Nanzatov and Sodnompilova (2012a: 165), which probably means that they cross the border illegally. One of the legislative differences applying to inhabitants of the border zone is that they are allowed (as are Mongols on the other side) to travel to nearby districts of Mongolia without a visa. However, the number of vehicles that can cross at Kyakhta is limited by a slow, restrictive regime at the crossing point. A further hindrance is that the settlements immediately adjacent to the border on the Russian side, such as the entire town of Kyakhta, are subject to additional frontier security limitations; they are “closed zones,” accessible only to those with residence documents or special permits granted by the FSB, and this deflects private investment in such zones. For all these reasons, the cross-border contacts and visa-free travel that might in principle have alleviated the boundary torpor pointed to by Rodoman, does not in fact result in economic development or a thriving border trade.

Buryats—and in fact anyone—living in the border zone thus find themselves more “remote,” in the sense of cut off, than they were in Soviet days. Each district has its own small and generally sleepy town as an administrative center; and then spread out over a vast area are villages separated by mostly unused grasslands, forests, and mountains. Characteristically, the Buryat settlements are not built directly on main roads, but a few kilometres off to the side, reachable by uneven sandy tracks. In summer 2013 I met Buryat villagers of Yonkhor, who were trying to make a success of horse herding for meat production, but they bemoaned the difficulties of life when their long access road regularly became impassable during the year. The collective and state farms of the region have long since closed down, leaving ruins in each village. Institutions that used to connect the villages with towns, such as schools, post offices, medical and children’s centers, and culture clubs, have disappeared. Public transport services have been reduced

or shut, and those that exist are expensive. In most large villages there are a few larger private farms, the so-called “peasant enterprises” (*krestyanskoe khozyaistvo*), but these tend to employ outside workers and the proceeds are generally set aside for the owners to purchase accommodation in the city and leave the village (Amogolonova 2009: 119). Many other residents have already left, and their houses are now boarded up.

The remaining villagers produce their own subsistence on small plots. As there is so little paid employment, money reaches most households regularly only from state pensions and allowances. It is uneconomical to sell meat, milk, butter, or vegetables in distant towns because of lack of transport and market fees. Credit and new agricultural technology are unavailable. The result of all this is that the ordinary villagers are economically unambitious and generally produce only what they need for a pared-down existence.²⁾ Amogolonova (2009: 120) note, “In conditions of chronic absence of money, making use of nature has become the only way to survive...in fact, there has been a return to the traditions of natural appropriative economy.”

In fact, there is no question of a “return,” as Buryats never used to live in this way in the past. In the pre-Soviet period they did not live year round in close-packed villages and did not depend on hunting and potato production. They moved seasonally between winter and summer pasture areas with herds of cattle, sheep, goats, and horses, and occasionally did some agriculture on the side. Their settlements (*ulus*) varied in size, larger in winter than in summer, and the houses or yurts were widely dispersed. The current compact village pattern arranged around communal facilities, such as the collective farm office, the shop, the well, and the club, was inherited from the Soviet era. But now, because they no longer have a collective farm or local industry to unite them, these villages are isolated from one another. The memory of the former Soviet organization makes the large empty intervals between them seem bleak. When I once mentioned the beauty of the empty grasslands stretching up to the hills and dotted with groves of pine and cedar trees, a woman exclaimed, “I hate those trees! They just sow themselves anywhere and no one does anything. I cannot forget that that land used to be productive fields.”

The administrative and physical isolation of “remoteness” is tempered by modern technology. Many households have cars, though they often cannot afford to run them. More important are TVs, radios, computers, and mobile phones. These, especially phones, have become central to managing daily life, and everyone is aware of the areas where the signal is strong and where it is weak. In describing the life in these places, it is necessary to remind readers that most of the people I have been calling “villagers” are well educated and many have held responsible positions or been trained for specific work (librarian, accountant, mechanic, medical assistant, etc.) that no longer exists. Now, perforce confined to the village for long periods, they turn their attention to the village as a society. Each settlement I visited seemed to contain at least one person who was devoted to chronicling the history of that place, its ancestors, notable inhabitants, and the elaborate genealogies of the kinship groups living there. In summer sporting events, the competitors’ village origin is always mentioned, so it is as though the villages are teams challenging one another.

If all this suggests a village-focused sociality, there are nodes where the localized economy links to the greater economy of the country. Traders, who as in Mongolia are often women (Pedersen 2006), sell village-produced meat, potatoes, furs, etc. in the capital of Ulan-Ude. Timber logged nearby is transported to the nearest railway head. The business-people/mediators in such transactions, at least in my experience, are usually outsiders. Meanwhile, all the villagers can calibrate their position, and one simple way this is done is by comparing—and lamenting—prices. For them the locality is thus not only laden with a multiplicity of inward meanings and feelings, but is also a place understood as a model that articulates with, and can be compared with, large extra-local geopolitical entities (see Stasch 2013). They often look outwards to the great Russia in which they are situated. Their gaze tends to follow the trajectory of those who have left for the towns, often their own departed children, the vertical hierarchy mentioned by Rodoman; they do not compare the locality with any “sideways” place, some Sretensk or Orel, but look directly “upward,” first to the nearby town, then to the Republic capital, and most of all to distant Moscow, the center of power, wealth, and prosperity. People thus have an acute sense that they live in remote obscurity in Moscow’s terms, and yet, as I shall describe, the Federal hierarchical is not the only, or even the primary, sense they make of the geography of their situation.

4. The International Border: Looking over to the Other Side as a Citizen of Russia

Rodoman’s argument, concerned primarily borderlands between internal administrative entities and the international border, presents a somewhat different, more complex situation. Other Russian geographers have expressed the hopeful view that international borders are areas of contact rather than zones of closure; they have become “nodes of growth” where people learn new ideas and technologies, not from the inaccessible center but from their foreign neighbors (Kagansky 2010: 36). This idea has limited applicability to the Russian–Mongolian border. On Buryat websites, the impending massive growth of the Mongolian economy is discussed with a mixture of amazement and envy, but there is little mention of learning from there.³⁾ At the border itself, Russian citizens seem to have rather negative opinions of the “mentality” of the Mongols. One resident of Kyakhta, combining ethnic stereotyping with a feat of self-Orientalization, described the Mongols as cunning, unreliable, and “born traders,” who “unlike us get up early at four in the morning with only one thought in their heads, ‘How can I make money today,’ and they do everything to achieve their goal. But our people sleep in; they come to work (if there is work) and do it just somehow, or they simply spend time there and that’s all, with no idea of working to earn. The idea doesn’t even come into their heads.” He accused Mongols of using the local visa regime to come over to Kyakhta, impudently ignoring the travel restrictions, and taking multiple jobs, while Russian citizens who go to Mongolia are constantly afraid of the authorities (Nanzatov and Sodnompilova 2012b: 60–61). In practice, quite a few Buryats from the town do engage in various small schemes with partners across the border—buying petrol to re-sell, exchange of meat for

potatoes, currency speculation, day-work as “camels” (transporters) for traders, and so forth. Elsewhere, some smuggling takes place across the border via obscure paths in the forests known to locals.⁴⁾ One Buryat from Kyakhta, a driver and minor entrepreneur, said to me, “The border will always feed you.” But he also grumbled at the restrictions, and said that of course the closure of the entire length of the border (apart from Kyakhta and Naushki) renders traffic in any other place strictly illegal.

The international border is a highly complex and densely over-layered interface between different kinds of social agency and spatial perception. It encodes, for example, a social fault line, which can be seen in hostilities such as cross-border cattle raiding. This is in fact a “scalar” phenomenon, mirroring administrative divisions, since livestock theft is reported to be particularly prevalent inside Russia on the borders between the districts, and between the villages within one district (Nanzatov et al. 2008: 200). The crucial moral injunction is that one should not steal from one’s own people—but “one’s own” may be defined more widely, or more narrowly. Such relative, or scalar, fault lines appear also in perception of occult social realms, which also sometimes coincide with administrative and/or socio-economic divisions. An example of this way of thinking can be seen from the following contribution to a Buryat online forum: “There was such a ‘meat king’ in our village—that’s what they called him after he was revealed to have been a cattle thief. No one would talk to him. And after a while his daughter died; she burnt out from cancer in just six months.”⁵⁾ It was left for forum participants to understand that this illness was not an accident; it was a punishment by the spirits. The spirits are territorial beings, attached to areas with boundaries marked by *barisa* shrines, and this also applies to the shamans, who master their own spirits but not those from neighboring lands. Thus, in the case of the international border, it is not surprising to learn that Zakamen Buryats say of their Mongol neighbors, “They have very strong shamans; they can send very powerful curses—*jadha hayana*⁶⁾—which can bring harm to more than one generation of our people.” Meanwhile, on the other side of the international border the same kind of threat is seen as coming from the Buryats. Nanzatov and Sodnompilova conclude, “So this is how they live, afraid of one another on each side of the border, people who have kinship links and common ancestors, yet they have already become ‘Mongols’ and ‘Buryats’ to one another” (2012b: 60).

However, politico-administrative and occult divisions do not always coincide. Ethnography from a more eastern section of the border presents a different picture, where the more mobile Buryats of the Khori-Aga group of clans live on both sides of the Russian–Mongol and the Russian–Chinese frontiers. In these regions, shamanism unites more than it divides people: the Russia-based Buryat shamans travel to their kin in Mongolia and China to learn “authentic traditions” lost during the Soviet period, while the Buryats living in China and Mongolia travel to Russia to visit their homeland (*nyutag*) and the places of their ancestral spirits (Namsaraeva 2010, 2012; Shimamura 2004). This case shows that there are registers of ideas of space and place that override, or exist in a different mode from, the divisions created by centralized states. Indeed, I shall argue in the next section that there is a Buryat geography whose structure is the converse of that of the hierarchical state.

5. An Alternative Sacred Geography

Buryats prefer to live in the open, treeless grasslands of wide valleys. Their villages are not usually located beside the rivers (*gol*), which may flood, but some distance away, often nestled in a sheltered area at the foot of hills. A large valley system, such as those of the Dzhida, Barguzin, or Chikoi Rivers, has a number of branch valleys that are separated from one another by forests and low-rising hills. These hills, as well as the high mountains on the periphery, are studded with sacred sites of various kinds: notably, the *oboo* (a cairn of stones), the *shandan* (a shaman's grave), the *barisa* (a tree or pole on which people tie ribbons, *zalama*), and the *arshan* (a sacred spring) (Galdanova 1992; Gomboev 2006).

On the ground, the topography of these sacred sites is not random, and yet neither is it simply a “cultural construction of nature,” for Buryats like other Mongolic people have an acute awareness of the inherent capacity for meaning of mountains, cliffs, rivers, or prominent rocks or trees—their shapes, orientation, reflection of sunlight, and likeness to human or animal images (Humphrey 1996: 86; Pedersen 2011: 14). Since the Buryats prefer a pattern of habitation in a valley-plain surrounded by mountains, their ideal landscape has the form of a broad bowl.

The most socially important of the sacred *oboo* sites are constructed on the tops of the mountains that dominate the valleys. It is here that communities regularly gather to pay their respects to the spirits (*gazaryn ezhed* “spirit masters of the land”) that govern the blessings, fertility, and prosperity of the inhabitants of the area—or alternatively, if angered, send them misfortunes, illness, and early death. The *oboo* cairns are said to be the “seats” (*suudal/huudal*) of the spirits, who may come and go, but have their main abode on the mountain. Most of these spirits are the transformed “souls” of ancestors of local kin groups.⁷ On the same mountainsides, or nearby in the forests, are the worshipped grave-sites of deceased shamans, male and female (Abaeva 1992: 78) and it is at these places that new shamans are often consecrated (Gomboev 2006: 95–96). Stories about these remarkable ancestors and shamans constitute the history of social groups—and they are sometimes the main discursive basis of the groups' existence. In Buddhist areas, the mountain master-spirits will have been given the Tibetan name of a deity. In any case, however, the plethora of sacred places surrounding a valley is linked by social relationships to the communities living at the foot of the mountains. When I travelled in summer 2013 among the villages of the Buddhist Tsongol Buryats in the Chikoi River area, I was told that each lineage (*ug, yahan*) in the neighborhood had its own mountain with an *oboo*, and that on the same day in summer the male members of each group would climb up to their own site to “meet” and make offerings to their ancestral spirits. Later in the month, following these separate rites, the men of all the related lineages would join together and go to the highest mountain of the vicinity for a common sacrifice.⁸ These dominant mountains are called *Khan* (“king”). Being so high, they are difficult to access, and they are located *on the edges* of a system of communities.

It can be seen already that this Buryat set of ideas contrasts strikingly with the

Russian state system. Instead of the latter's conical model, with "height" and political power at the center and "depth" in the gaps and at the edges, the Buryat bowl-shaped vision locates highness and spiritual lordship at the boundaries. Meanwhile, the riverine middle is occupied by ordinary people, who are differentiated only by kinship and/or which village they live in. The topographically central area, which is low-lying and not necessarily even inhabited, has no obvious feature to align with political centrality.

This political absence at the heart of the Buryat landscape must be related to their "minoritized" status, to the fact that for centuries their political masters have been "foreigners" (Russians, earlier Halha Mongolians) while their own potential hierarchies were truncated at local levels. But it is also connected, I suggest, to the Buryats' own alternative understanding of political content, pattern, and direction. To explain this, let me begin with the strongly gendered conceptual and affective aura of mountains. Nanzatov et al. (2008: 52–60) have observed that the worshipped mountain is a "masculine" idea, contrasted with rivers, lowlands, and marshes. The mountain is invoked as the seat of the patrilineal ancestors and past leaders of a kin group ("clan," "tribe").⁹ Women, strangers, and males of other clans are generally forbidden to climb up the sacred mountain and to attend the holy rites at its *oboo*, a prohibition that is linked both to the impurity (for men) of menstrual blood and to the fact that, because of the practice in principle of exogamy, the category of married-in women at any given place are seen as foreign to the clan (Nanzatov et al. 2008: 52–53; Shaglanova 2010). The male mountain spirits, the *xada-uulyn-öbögöd* (lit. "respected old men of cliffs and mountains"), represent the notion of the originating fount-leader of an exclusive patriarchal group. This is also a scalar vision. Such local kin groups are nested within more inclusive categories—e.g. the "seven clans" in the border area originating from western Buryat lands and the "eight clans" originating from the east and Mongolia¹⁰—and it is these broader agglomerations that worship the great King ("Khan") mountain spirits, which operate on a more expansive scale and wider territory. In such cases, the spirit, such as Burin Khan (see Figure 1), becomes an almost deity-like figure, usually pictured as a mounted warrior brandishing weapons.

This is a martial image that is common to land deities across Inner Asia, yet it is not purely conventional—there are old Buryat people who claim to have seen Burin Khan with their own eyes and who are able to describe the color of his horse, his clothing, and bows and arrows (Abaeva 1992: 79). What is notable about this kind of master-deity is not only that he can appear to people as a visible "presence" but also that he stands as the content of a particular conception of power. He is not so much imagined as governing us, like a Russian ruler, as dispensing fortune, defending against demons, and ensuring the continuation of our group through generations—if only we respect the natural order over which he presides. Yet real-life local headmen, and even government officials (at least in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia), make sure to take charge of the main *oboo* rite of their region. The political leadership represented at *oboos* is not realpolitik, but it is a demonstration of hierarchical social status.¹¹ At the same time, power here is imagined not as located in living humans, but derived from the autochthonous spirits of nature (into which the ancestors have transformed), a power that confers the blessed



Figure 1 A recently constructed statue of Burin Khan

reproduction and good fortune of social groups, whether these be defined by kinship, territory, or political allegiance. In the post-Soviet era, there is renewed vigor in the notion that this power-energy-fortune (*sülde*) is necessary for any person wishing to succeed in worldly politics. At the same time, as Buryats say, *sülde* also is the gift of fertility. Childless couples go to sacred mountains to pray for a baby, and, if the wish is granted, the child is known as “born of the mountain spirit” (Nanzatov et al. 2008: 55, 215).

So far, my account has been similar to the description given by Morten Pedersen of the “Shishged Depression” inhabited by Darhad Mongols just on the other side of the international frontier in the Khubsugul region of Mongolia. It is worth briefly discussing this case, since the Darhad are minoritized within Mongolia in a way that is not unlike the Buryats in Russia. The Shishged Depression is a wide valley surrounded by mountains and forests, known by other Mongols as “a destitute, barbarian, and shamanic backwater, whose fate was always to hover at the edge of civilization” (Pedersen 2011: 10). Pedersen observes that the largest and most important *oboo* of the southern Darhads is on the high Öl mountain pass, which marks the border between the Shishged and the rest of Mongolia, and therefore is not anywhere near the town of Ulaan-Uul, the administrative center (2011: 143).¹² This is similar to the Buryat case, but Pedersen has a

different interpretation from mine concerning the relation between edge and periphery.¹³⁾ He concludes that a “weighty” centered steppe opposes the “weightless” counter-image of a marginal taiga (forest), a zone of pure multiplicity and metamorphosis (2011: 146). This idea, however, ignores the peculiar nature of the *oboo* type of centrality, which, if I am right, occurs at a *joint* between realms.

What significance does this notion of edge-based centrality have for the practical life of Buryats? The *oboo* rites gather people who otherwise rarely meet to one spot. From their various settlements, they drive most of the way and then climb up to the peak. The goal of worship is not only for the elders, leaders, and kin groups to gather blessings, but is also directed toward practical concerns, such as the weather, the state of the pastures, attacks by predators, or epidemic diseases. In 1996, the Chairman of what was then still the Karl Marx Collective Farm of Selenga District told me that when there had been a drought recently, he had sent a group of men on horseback to make offerings at a distant peak—one so high that the snow at the summit “reached the tops of their boots.” This expedition was to request rain for the farm’s fields.¹⁴⁾

Some great *oboo* rites provide the occasion for a meeting of otherwise separate groups. How is this conceptualized? In Mongolic languages, to go outward is also to rise up, a positive movement toward the sacred, while to return home is expressed by the same word as to descend (*buu*) (Nanzatov et al. 2008: 91; Bakaeva 2003: 237). Looking upward from the village, only one side of the mountain, of course, is visible and it appears as an edge, beyond which nothing can be seen. But once at the top, a vast new vista opens out, and it is of this entire expanse that the mountain is a center. The notion is inherently expansive. It includes both what is behind (below) us and what lies before us. This is why a grand mountain will not only form the border between communities but also be the point that links them, since people from the other side come to worship there too.¹⁵⁾ In the Buryat border zone, people of all clans converge on the great mountain called Burin Khan, coming from two directions: on the same day, the 2nd of the last lunar month of summer, the villages of Iro, Udunga, Tashir, Selenduma, and Nandi arrive from the eastern side and people from Inzagatui, Borgoi, and Ichetui come from the west. At the summit there is a lake. Twelve small *oboos* are set in a circle surrounding one large *oboo* and each of the small cairns is worshipped by a different clan (*rod*) (Abaeva 1992: 79).

Not only is one *oboo* multiple in this way, but mountains are held to be in relationship with other mountains. In the case of the great peaks, this expands the sacred geography far beyond the next valley. These links are quite mysterious and difficult to understand, with constellations of mountains existing on different scales. If Burin Khan is the “king” of the varied local cluster just mentioned, it is also a point in a far wider network of grand mountains, some of which are in Mongolia.¹⁶⁾ Meanwhile, the realm of each great mountain contains its own internal concatenation of lesser mountains with different characters. During fieldwork in 1996 in Tashir, I was told that the nearby pleasantly rounded mountain called Khongor-Uula was the wife of Burin Khan, and that Adkhata mountain near Selenduma was his son. Right next to Khongor-Uula, which was considered to be “calm” (*nomkhon*), was another forested and somehow ungainly

mountain known as Kharuukha Emege Ezhi, a female spirit with a fierce, vengeful (*dogshin*) nature. Fewer people went there to pray than to the other mountains, though Nina, the Secretary of the Trade Union, attended regularly as she lived close by. Meanwhile, the farm's territory also included a different and very powerful Emege Ezhi shrine—one of three “sisters” whose seats were distributed across the borderlands of south Buryatia. High in the upland forests, this site had only recently been constructed; yet already it was regularly attended twice a year by 200–300 members of several clans, many coming from long distances.¹⁷) The example of Tashir seems similar to other places in the region, and it makes clear that sacred mountains exist in scattered networks.

6. A Lived-in Landscape

During most of the year, no one goes near the peaks of sacred mountains, which are surrounded by many prohibitions,¹⁸) and women do not go there at all. Yet there are ways in which the presence of mountain spirits are acknowledged daily. People often make libations to mountains from just outside their homes, at a distance. And mountains can approach close:

There is a saying that children born of Khumun Khan [the main worshipped mountain of Tsongol Buryats] sometimes notice a vast shadow behind them. The explanation for this is that Khumun Khan keeps watch over his children (Nanzatov et al. 2008: 215)

It seems that it is the height, the “look,” and the aura of a given mountain that give rise to the sensation that it is a living presence, and also to the relational naming of mountains in terms of gender/kinship categories. The characters of mountain spirits, especially the maleficent, are then linked to events—accidents, illnesses, cattle blight, etc.—that people explain as caused by the spirit's wrath at some person having cut wood, dug the ground, or otherwise having infringed the prohibitions surrounding the mountain. In the 1990s in Tashir, I had the impression that the linguistic expressions, “wife of” and “son of,” were shorthand for what must have been multiple affective and non-verbalized experiences of living in the shadow of these mountains. Even I, as a stranger in Tashir, could sense the counter-play of different mountain force fields, given that Burin Khan glimmered in the barely visible distance, whereas benign Khongor-Uula and the evil, tree-covered Kharuukha Emege Ezhi loomed close by. The main road ran along at their foot. Each time we drove anywhere, other hills would be passed without comment, but at these particular mountains it was necessary to stop and make a libation of vodka to the spirits, for safety's sake.

What, however, do rural Buryats make of the spatial structures created by the state? At one level, they react to them in a matter-of-fact way like any other citizens of Russia, but at the same time Buryats have their own histories that inflect and destabilize the common ordinary ideas. For example, there is a Buryat account of the establishment of the international border between Russia and Qing Mongolia by Count Raguzinskii in the 1730s. According to this history, Raguzinskii asked for help from a Buryat guide called

Shodo, and he in turn had recourse to animal knowledge when delimiting the exact line of the border. Shodo said that the boundary should be where the tracks of his horses led when out at pasture, since “we know very well where our lands are, where our fathers lived, and where their bones peacefully lie. Not only people, but our horses know.” The horse tracks were then adopted to form the international border (Nanzatov et al. 2008: 205–206). Two aspects of this story are significant: first, that, of all the domesticated livestock kept by Buryats, horse herds are in fact the ones that graze furthest away, and therefore their roaming defines the extent of the lands that a given community practically use. Second, a song about this event that is sung to this day lauds the idea of a border that not only delimits “what is ours” but also links us with others. In this song, Raguzinskii is praised as wonderful, for having “introduced us to peoples” (2008: 206).

The Buryats have thus found a way, at least in folkloric history, to “naturalize” the international border, to remove the sense of its being an alien imposition, and to assimilate it to their own practices. This fits with the loyal stance toward the Russian government that Buryats almost invariably assume in public. However, in the case of roads, which are the sinews of the state structures that connect “down” to the villages, we find a far more ambivalent set of ideas with which I shall conclude this article. Indeed, this is another facet of the reversal of the state geography: if lofty inaccessible mountains are the epitome of “remoteness” and yet valued by Buryats so highly, it turns out that main roads—which in principle should be their lifelines to towns and wealth—are in some important respects disliked and feared by them.

7. Roads

Buryats, who in the past travelled on horseback, or with slow-moving carts and caravans, would not have had much in the way of roads of their own. Their vocabulary reflects the ideas of the road as a main route (*zam*), as a cart track (*zim*), as a trace (of footsteps, *mör*), and as a path (*khargui*). Seasonal migrations to fresh pastures, the main occasion for travel, would not involve specially constructed roads at all. A notional circle was used to model actual transhumant journeys (though these were not usually circular but more like an elongated loop) and this enabled the conceptualization of the series of pastures as a protected, encircled precinct (*khüree*) with the affective qualities of the idea of a homeland (*nyutag*).¹⁹ Roads constructed by outside authorities for their own purposes, coming from some unknown place and bisecting homelands, were a different matter, and in some ways dangerous. In Tsarist times, roads brought troubles: the authorities would order Buryats to serve travelling officials, provide horses, carts, and food, or act as guards for columns of prisoners stumbling along the “penal roads” (*katorzhnyye puti*) that led through Trans-Baikalia.

Even now there is a sense that roads—the ordinary roads maintained by the Federal Roadways Service—are dangerous. They lead out, elsewhere, to some other (unknown) place, and hence potentially to an alien or hidden (*daldyn*) world. They belong to no one alive. Evil spirits, as well as ordinary people, travel along them, particularly at night. Hordes of ghosts may be met where three roads meet. Stories abound, such as that of the

group of boys and girls walking along the road to the club at night when they heard a mysterious bell, which came closer and closer, and “suddenly I was thrown to the ground by a blow. After that, my mother yelled at me for walking along a road at night” (Nanzatov et al. 2008: 302). Humans should give way to travelling spirits (*yabadal*), whether these are great “fate-spirits” (*zayan*) who use vehicles like officials, or small ones that travel on horseback or on foot. Since the spirits take the middle of the highway, people are advised to walk along the edges. It is forbidden to build a house on a former road, and also to light a fire on a road, these being prohibitions that Nanzatov et al. (2008: 303) explain by the conceptual contradiction between the domestic home, the hearth, and the very idea of a road. For the same reason, dwellings should not be sited beside a road, but safely at some distance.

However, enforced collectivization entailed the construction of Russian-type houses in rows along roads. The idea behind this policy was not only the imposition of a cultural pattern common to Russia but also the practical policy of gaining access to the scattered population, providing services to them and, at the same time, control over them. In Soviet times, the Buryat villagers must have balanced their fear/dislike of roads against the advantages of closeness to the shop, the club, the school, the bakery, or the bus to town, but now almost all of these benefits have disappeared and the occult threats loom larger than ever. Travelling with Buryats by car today, one frequently stops at roadside offering places called *barisa*. Scraps of cloth are tied to the shrine (often a tree), coins, matches, and other offerings laid down, and vodka is thrown to the spirits and also consumed by the travelers. This is done to get protection from the dangers of travelling the road itself, such as accidents, breakdowns, or robbery. The *barisa*, however, also has other connotations. It commemorates ancient mythic tragedies. It may contain the ashes of a deceased shaman in a secret crevice.²⁰⁾ It is also the gateway of a clan territory: people say it is necessary to stop at these places to beg protection from the outside spirit-masters, since in leaving one’s home area one also leaves behind the protection of one’s shamans.²¹⁾ Even the Soviet boundaries were subject to a version of this practice, so for example, the statue of Karl Marx which stood by the road to mark the entrance to the collective farm became a kind of *barisa*. Incoming drivers would halt there, visitors leaving would say their farewells there, and libations were made. The foot of the statue was heaped with empty bottles, coins, etc.²²⁾ Therefore, the first thing to note is that Buryats deal with roads by *stopping* the flow along them—and also that after a few such stops the journey carries on in a state of inebriation, which we can perhaps see as a mental abstraction of the act of travelling.

Furthermore, in these borderlands that have been rendered increasingly “remote,” even the most disbelieving and practical person is likely to see roads in a negative light; local roads are often impassable, transport is expensive and unreliable, and the road system was planned for state purposes, not your own. Roads do not take the shortest route to where local people may want to go, such as your mother’s village over the hills, and, in the valleys by the border, with the closure of crossing points, roads turn into dead-ends. At the furthest points of these roads there was hunger and destitution in the 1990s, and today there is still a sense of being marooned, abandoned. Roads are the

connections of rural people to the state that register in imagination the fears and disappointments in this relationship.

8. Conclusion

This paper has tried to explain the condition of “remoteness” brought about by recent changes in the economy and administration of Russia at its borders. The new isolation of Buryat villagers, and their sense of being cast adrift to manage as best they can, has been observed with dismay by local writers (Skrynnikova 2009: 107–109). Studies by Buryat ethnographers have documented an indigenous semiotics of space that seems to have increasing vitality in the present day. My aim has been to show that these Buryat understandings are not simply survivals from a timeless “traditional culture” but closely related—by means of contrast—to the state structures within which they live. I have not emphasized Russian nationalities policy toward Buryats (for an excellent comparative survey, see Donohoe, et al. 2004). Rather, the paper has drawn attention to the more neglected topic of the geography created by the state. Hyper-centralization, I have argued following Rodoman, has systematically created areas of “remoteness” at the edge of administrative units on all scales—and in particular a vast and elongated area of isolation along the Siberian border with Mongolia. Buryats, Russians, and others living in this zone are subject to the same contemporary conditions of withdrawal of state services, lack of transport, unemployment, high prices, scarcity of money, and difficulty in obtaining goods. From the perspective of Moscow officialdom there is a “geography of ignorance” (Van Schendel 2002) that fails to acknowledge these zones as having any importance, and may hardly even register their existence. This is compounded by the “political geography of forgetting, silence and erasure” (Grundy-Warr and Sidaway 2006) that still occludes the histories of these people, which is no doubt related to the fact that they criss-crossed the international frontier whose integrity was so jealously guarded by the Russian state. It is for these reasons, rather than nationalities policy, that I have called the historical–geographical consciousness of the border people “minoritized.” The epithet could as well be applied to some borderland Russian populations too, such as the Old Believers and certain remnants of the Trans-Baikal Cossacks (Peshkov 2010), but the Buryats of remote valleys are a particularly vivid case, for in their long history of exception they have generated an understanding of spatial forms that is counter to that known, or even possible to know, in cities. In this sense the “remote” Buryats are minoritized even in relation to their prosperous, Russian-speaking, urban co-ethnics.

By allowing the contours of the land and their own lives in it to take precedence—or rather to “take form” as a set of spatial concepts and feelings—the Buryats counteract the hyper-centric hierarchical structure of the Russian state. Without uttering a word of opposition, indeed maintaining a loyal stance, they nevertheless organize the crucial ritual events of their lives around a notional protected hollow with powers located not in the middle but at its rim, and thus they enact an utterly different vision. When the sacred mountains at the edges are envisaged as pivots connecting one broad valley with the next, and these, at a wider scale, connect the “hollows” across a vast region, this can be

seen as a challenge to the state model, which has always insisted on a single, inviolate international border line. What is perhaps most minoritarian about this vision is the evacuation of any indigenous notion of political power in the depth of the hollow, in other words the absence of an idea of static authority *at the center*, its extrusion of centrality to distant sacralized heights.²³⁾ In this way, it is as though people are living out, without saying so, a refusal of the state version of what power is. It might be objected that I have described only some folkloric never-never land of superstition, but I hope I have provided enough evidence that the mountains, the boundary shrines, and the sinister roads are more than this: for villagers they are the “face of history” (Stasch 2013: 566) and they are points of concentrated memory and emotion to which people relate their everyday lives. In these remote areas, boundaries are certainly conceived in terms of defense and self-protection, but they also have a semantic richness entirely foreign to the state version oriented to external enemies—since it is from these places on the rim that a host of life- and death-related forces derive: ancestral blessings, fertility, prosperity, and the filaments of opening social connections.

Notes

- 1) The first version of this paper was published in France. See: Caroline Humphrey 2015 “Remote” areas and minoritized spatial orders at the Russia-Mongolia border,’ *Etudes mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines*, Vol. 46 (2015): 2–19.
- 2) Some more hard-working folk produce a little extra for exchange. This is done through barter, notably the exchange of home-grown potatoes or meat for sacks of sugar, cans of oil, and clothing brought to the villages by local traders. Most households keep 2–3 cows for milk and a few sheep for festivals and ceremonies, and more rarely chickens and pigs. In this situation, hunting and gathering have become important resources. Hunting is a very widespread occupation, not only for furs, which can be sold, but also for meat. For Buryats, meat is the central element of the diet, and it is estimated that half of the meat consumed by villagers is now game from hunting. In summer, women and children forage in the woods for pine nuts, berries, and mushrooms, which are prepared for storage and consumption through the year, and also sold or exchanged when possible. In these hunting and foraging activities, the laws concerning land property and hunting seasons are widely ignored (Amogolonova 2009: 140).
- 3) See www.buryatia.org forum entitled ‘Dalekaya blizkaya Mongoliya’, accessed January 2013.
- 4) In 2010, along the Buryat part of the Russian–Mongolian border, 130 people were arrested for illegal crossing of the border and 360 for infringing the “border regime” (i.e. traveling beyond the permitted zone without a visa). The guards confiscated from the arrested 30 guns, 2,000 rounds of ammunition, and narcotics (Nanzatov and Sodnompilova 2012b: 50).
- 5) www.buryatia.org, forum entitled “Skotokrady,” p. 3, accessed December 2013.
- 6) *Jadha hayana*: literally “to throw magic.”
- 7) “A significant proportion of the cult sites of Zakamen are for the worship of real ancestors buried on the slopes of the highest mountain of the valley” (Galdanova 1992: 109).
- 8) Among Ekhirit people, Baitag Mountain is the cult centre for all lineages of the Buura clan. The lower mountains surrounding it are attached to individual lineages and small patri-focused

groups. “Informants link a specific mountain with a concrete group: ‘Our Markuseevs and Altaevs have the Uuta Khada hill, but the Khushkheevs have Malaan Khada hill’” (Nanzatov et al. 2008). In other areas along the border, the basis for *oboo* worship may be territorial, i.e. nearby villages and hamlets, rather than kin-based. The same principle still obtains, however: smaller groups worship the lower mountains and they join together in wider, more inclusive assembly to pay respects at the highest mountain (Galdanova 1992: 109–110; Abaeva 1992: 64; Natsagdorj, personal communication).

- 9) Female ancestors (*ütöödeinüüd* lit. “respected old women”) are often linked to waters and lakes.
- 10) At the end of the *oboo* rites, competitive games were held to entertain and honor the spirits. In tales of the Zakamen Buryats, it was recounted that these used to set clan against clan, or even the whole “western seven” (*baruun doloon*) versus the “eastern eight” (*zүүн найман*). When the western side won in the wrestling or horse races, shamans from the eastern side would complain that of course they had prevailed, since their most powerful and first ancestor, Bukha Noyon, had intervened to help his team, upending and tripping eastern competitors with his horns (Galdanova 1992: 110).
- 11) This is encoded in the roles of patron and leading officiant, and it is made evident by seating patterns and the demeanor of elders at the ritual (Pedersen 2006: 94–95).
- 12) In an illuminating earlier paper, Pedersen argues that the Darhad Mongols know two kinds of center, an intrinsic “absolute” one represented by *oboos* and household hearths, and an extrinsic “relative” one manifested in the District Center and the state hierarchy. Different kinds of social leadership are associated with the contrasting types of center (2006: 95–98). I would query here only the adjective “absolute,” since it seems to me that the intrinsic form is also scalar and relative.
- 13) To support this argument, Pedersen cites the (now-abandoned) Jargalant Oboo, located on a hilltop close to the geographical center of Shishged, which “played the role of a spatial technology” that organized places and divinities around a central point in the form of a Buddhist mandala (2011: 137). It should be noted, however, even these notional mandala patterns, i.e. those read into the lands surrounding a monastery with its protective *oboo*, were not necessarily imposed at geographically or administratively central locations. Monasteries as places of ascetic retreat were ideally located at a distance from clusters of lay population.
- 14) Caroline Humphrey, fieldnotes, 1996, Tashir, Selenga District, Buryatia.
- 15) This was pointed out to me during recent fieldwork in Urad (Inner Mongolia), where the sacred peak called Shar Oroï, the seat of the land-master deity Muna Khan, forms the boundary between the southern (*öbür*) and the northern (*ar*) Urads. These two populations have very little contact apart from their common attendance at the annual rites for Muna Khan (even though administratively they form one Banner).
- 16) Burin Khan is said to be one of the three King Mountains of the Trans-Baikal region known as Ar-Khalkha (northern Khalkha, where “Khalkha” denotes Mongolia), the others being Khumun Khan and Khugtei Khan (Abaeva 1992: 79). There are several other mountains in Buryatia and across the border in Mongolia also called Burin Khan. It is not clear whether people in different places had the same idea about their mountain (*burin* means “full” or “complete”) or whether the groups which historically moved northwards from Mongolia into Russia took their

- oboo* with them as they migrated, reconstituting it at each place (Nanzatov et al. 2008: 187).
- 17) The site was very large, consisting of the wooden shrine itself, a sacred tree, six big altars for offerings of vodka, milk, bread/sweets, and mutton, and sixteen further tables and benches for the worshippers' feast. A thread tied from tree to tree enclosed the whole precinct, with an opening to the south. The prayers were read in Tibetan by a lama. Women workers of the Milk Production Brigade paid particular attention to worship of this Emege-Ezhi, a female spirit. It was regarded as the master-spirit of the whole village, so incomers wishing to live there, such as new brides, should request its permission before settling. Caroline Humphrey, fieldnotes 1996, Tashir, Selenga District, Buryatia.
 - 18) For example, trees on the mountain should not be cut down, springs not polluted by human dirt, and, even at a distance, impure objects should not be thrown in the direction of the mountain.
 - 19) Bakaeva observes, confirmed by Nanzatov et al. for Buryats (2008: 296), that for traditional Kalmyks the annual migration was like a circle or spiral: ideally the journey, even if in fact horizontal, should proceed "upward" (*ööd*) in the "right/west" (*zöb*) direction, i.e. following the movement of the sun, while the return was conceptualized as travelling downward via the east to the initial stopping-place (K. *buuts*, Bur. *buusa*) (Bakaeva 2003: 237–238). Bakaeva links the nomadic migration circle to other notions of encircling protection and interior harmony, such as that of the *ger* (round felt tent) (2003: 239).
 - 20) Istvan Santha, personal communication, based on fieldwork among western Buryats.
 - 21) It is dangerous for shamans to call on spirits in "foreign" territories, and they will be punished for this by the spirit-masters of that land (Nanzatov et al. 2008: 203).
 - 22) Caroline Humphrey, fieldnotes 1995, Tashir, Selenga District, Buryatia.
 - 23) In this respect, the sacred mountain landscape has a somewhat different character in the interior of the independent state of Mongolia. Here, the city of Da Hüre/Ulaanbaatar has been the fixed capital for at least two centuries, and the main Buddhist monastery is also located in the city. Within the metropolitan area, I would argue, the worshipped mountains seem more like adjuncts to a central focus of power, arranged around it for its benefit, e.g. the four sacred mountains that ring Ulaanbaatar.

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