

## THE LIFE OF BALDAN CHIMITOVICH GOMBOEV: USING PERSONAL NARRATIVES TO APPROACH BURIAT POST-SOVIET MUSIC

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In this paper, I present the words of Baldan Chimitovich Gomboev, a 70-year-old Buriat instrument maker. I believe that Gomboev's descriptions of his personal aesthetics and of the path he followed to his profession are significant because they provide a detailed view of a past that both fostered and conflicted with his many identities: Eastern Buriat, educated Soviet citizen, and creative individual. Gomboev's words cast an interesting light on standard Russian and Western ethnographic approaches to non-Russian communities, and his example shows the need for closer attention to individual stories and personal details in historical and ethnographic research.

Buriats belong to a group of Mongolic people who live in southern Siberia around Lake Baikal and are originally nomadic animal breeders. Beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Buriats came into contact with, and were later dominated by, Russian colonists moving in from the west. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Buriats were forced to quit their nomadic lifestyle and settle down in Russian-style villages. Buriatia, as a political entity, is officially an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation. Buriats also live in the Aginsk Autonomous Area, which is located near the Chinese border to the east in Chita Province, and in the Ust Orda Autonomous Area, located on the western shore of Lake Baikal in the Irkutsk Province. Ust Orda, where Gomboev lives, differs greatly in dialect and lifestyle, as well as politics, from other Buriat regions. Located less than 100 kilometers from the large city of Irkutsk, Ust Orda is also the most Russified Buriat area. Gomboev hails originally from the Kizhinga Region in the east central part of Buriatia, not far from Chita Province. Kizhinga, where Buriat identity is still comparatively strong, has produced many successful Buriat artists, lamas, and businessmen in the last few decades. Buriat culture in the post-Soviet era is a hybrid of Russian, Soviet,

and Buriat elements that have been assembled by different people in strikingly different ways.

Through an interesting set of circumstances, I contacted Gomboev and asked if I could come visit him in the village of Ust Ordinsky in order to speak with him about his life. I traveled around Lake Baikal from Ulan Ude with two musician friends, one Buriat and one Mongolian. When we arrived in the small village where Gomboev lived, he received us warmly and enthusiastically and eagerly shared his projects, ideas, and dreams about Buriat folk orchestras with us. I, for my part, was eagerly on the trail of information about his personal decisions and how he had dealt with Soviet power, in particular his dual roles as both its object and its implement. Nevertheless, Gomboev led the interview doggedly and shaped our conversation with his passionate desire to discuss the details of his creative process. Handing me a stack of paper covered in careful hand-writing, he encouraged me to consult his autobiography. He told me that everything I would need to know was in that document. When I returned to the United States and began to examine the materials, however, I was disappointed. The interview, although interesting, had not allowed me to think about Gomboev's life chronologically; and the chronologically organized statement that had given me did not offer insight into Gomboev's eclectic careers as engineer, planner, bureaucrat, and finally creator of folk instruments for minority peoples in Soviet Russia.

As I began to think more carefully about what Gomboev had told me, however, I realized that I in fact had much more than I had anticipated. Gomboev's opinions are important, not because they reflect the imprint of history or represent a "typical" Buriat response to Soviet policy, but because Gomboev is exceptional in that he is one of the few people who are reconstructing and creating folk instruments for non-Russians in Soviet Russia. His unusual

career and ideas make him an important element in our understandings of the role of the Soviet version of tradition in shaping contemporary Buriat culture. Nevertheless, Gomboev, in both his texts, clearly sets himself against the Sovietized instrumental culture, while at the same time borrowing some of its approaches, most notably the concept and techniques of orchestra standardization.<sup>i</sup>

First, I will provide a brief summary of Gomboev's life and career. Born in 1932, Gomboev was raised in a pastoral nomadic community and did not attend school until World War II. After finishing a local secondary school, he went to Krasnoyarsk to a timber industry institute. After working in remote lumbering areas around the northern Baikal, he moved, "for family reasons," back to his native area and became a teacher. Due to illness, he went into urban planning and became a member of his region's local administration. Although Gomboev never spoke about this, he somehow began administering a division of the Buriat Ministry of Culture that was responsible for preserving historical monuments; he then started a music research and instrument building workshop in the 1980s in Ulan Ude. After some time there, he was invited to Kalmykia, another Mongolic area in Russia, to "revive" their traditional orchestra. His successful work in Kalmykia was followed by a stay in Tuva. Finally, the Ust Orda administration invited him to create instruments for their region, and thus Gomboev ended up in Ust-Ordynsky in the early 1990s.

Instead of emphasizing his former administrative positions, Gomboev discussed his work in Kalmykia and Tuva enthusiastically, almost to the total exclusion of other parts of his life. He emphasized that his experiences outside of Buriatia formed his personal approach to instrument making and his understanding of the nature of ethnic identity as expressed in music:

But in order to create something national, you have to...live with that people. And study them, research phonetics and the spoken phonetics of the language, vowels especially, just everything, everything. This research is part of the three stages of development [a musical instrument goes through].

The Kalmyks have a *khuur*<sup>ii</sup>, the Buriats have a *khuur*, Mongols have a *khuur*, everyone's got their *khuur*. You would think they arose from the same influence,

but they speak in totally different ways. The Buriat *khuur* should speak in Buriat. The Kalmyk *khuur* in Kalmyk and the Mongol one in Mongolian. So, that's why you see now in Buriatia, the opposite is happening. Everything that was Buriat once, I mean we did approach it very thoughtlessly back in the '50s – they took the Russian *domra*<sup>iii</sup>...[and] only changed the shape.... And so they ended up with a Russian *chanza*<sup>iv</sup> or a Buriat *domra*! But they called it the Buriat *chanza*, and they played and played it, played away until around 1993, when they figured out that it doesn't speak the Buriat language.... So that was it, in the 1990s...it became fashionable here to get rid of everything Soviet. So they destroyed the workshop... They went over to Mongolian instruments. They said no to the Buriat *khuur*.<sup>v</sup>

Thus, Gomboev contrasts his own approach – which is based on spoken phonetics, historical research, and technical development – to the "careless" Soviet approach, which destroyed "deeply national" qualities and the "language" of the instrument. At the same time, he rejects the equally careless approach of Buriat officials who wanted to assert their Buriat identity too hastily in the 1990s and threw out the Buriat *khuur*.

Although Gomboev criticizes both approaches to traditional instruments on nationalist grounds, he is not opposed to adapting other nations' instruments, if proper care is given to their sounds. For instance, he proposes to add the *tobshuur*, an Altaic and Oirat instrument, to the Buriat orchestra.<sup>vi</sup> Moreover, he believes that, "Every Buriat family should absolutely have one of these hanging on the wall in front of a beautiful Persian carpet, whether they play it or not, as a calling card to show that Buriats live here."<sup>vii</sup> Instruments are more than simply tools for musicians; they are potentially "calling cards," physical symbols of identity. These symbols, however, are not fixed according to Gomboev's philosophy. They can be created, shifted, and realigned as long as they are aesthetically and spiritually in harmony with the nation's local dialects and its regional cultures.

Gomboev also uses other images to invest his instruments with national significance, what he called the "deeply national." He builds his instruments in the shape of the *mönkhiin duhuu*, the drop of eternity that, according to Gomboev, symbolizes the fact that "Wherever there is even the smallest drop of life-giving

moisture, there's life."<sup>viii</sup> Another common shape Gomboev that uses for his instruments "represents a flame, *doluun* in Buriat. That means flame. So it's a new spark in the Buriat instrumentarium that turns into a flame, and God grant that this flame never dies."<sup>ix</sup> The images of a single drop giving life and a solitary spark giving birth to new fires paint a vivid metaphorical picture of Gomboev's personal desire to revive a culture whose only hope, he seems to imply, lies in a rethinking of traditions and return to nature. Nature and contact with natural surroundings is the source of this renaissance. Gomboev, in his written statement, discusses how his natural surroundings, which were pointed out to him by his grandmother Tsyрма, gave him the initial impulse to make music and art:

She was always drawing my attention to the beauty of nature, singing, and birds in any way she could.... This was how, I think, I developed my aesthetic sense. Once we were herding our animals along the river Kobun. When we sat down to rest on the white sand by the river, my grandma sketched a one-stringed khuur in the sand with a crooked twig.... She explained that if I would drag a bow stretched with hair from a horse's tail, then that khuur would sing just like me, but without words. I was so excited by that thought that I hardly slept the whole night.<sup>x</sup>

Nature is the inspiration and cradle of musical creation, and the source of aesthetic qualities that define and shape national cultures and identities. Gomboev, like many other Buriat musicians, sees his connection to place and nature as a guiding value in defining Buriat culture.

At the same time, Gomboev's views are closely bounded by Soviet ideas of nation and the Buriats' presumed position in the Soviet hierarchy of cultural development. Gomboev's main goal, he states, is to create a complete Buriat folk orchestra with the necessary range of timbres and soprano, tenor, and bass versions of all the stringed instruments. While instrumental ensembles have existed in Buddhist monasteries in Buriatia, secular orchestras are the product of Russian and Soviet musical ideology. The notion of an orchestra is fundamental to Gomboev's work and dreams. Gomboev is also concerned with his educational qualifications and his technical approach to designing and testing his instruments, and he has incorporated his

experiences and education as a Soviet citizen into his approach to instrument building. This incorporation, while seemingly contradictory to his philosophy about nativism, has, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, been a common practice among Buriat intellectuals who often feel passionately Buriat while remaining Russian or Soviet patriots.

Gomboev's words and instruments are interesting for those studying the history of Buriat music, but they also have wider implications for researchers investigating social phenomena in post-Soviet Russia. After the end of the Soviet era, many Russian and Western researchers searched for previously unheard voices by collecting and interpreting life stories. For instance, Elena Yarskaya-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov (2001) gathered and discussed the life stories of citizens from Samara and Saratov in order to examine the impact of Stalinist policies on individuals' identities. In another recent work, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine (2000) translated and presented a collection of Russian women's words regarding their experiences during the 1917 Revolution. Nevertheless, little autobiography or life story research has been conducted in non-Russian communities or among artists and cultural workers.

Moreover, the investigation of non-Russian arts and cultures remains focused on a group-centered history and ethnography, despite Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer's critical point that non-Russians often use a wide variety of identities in social negotiations (Mandelstam Balzer 1999). This approach originates in the early Western European and Russian ethnographies of non-Russians and later imitated by native researchers, albeit usually with more sympathy for traditional life ways. Interviews and biographies, however, were sometimes employed in Soviet scholars' discussions of traditional performers, such as research on Buriat epic singers.<sup>xi</sup> These accounts, however, rarely focus on performers' own descriptions of their creative process and aesthetics, with a few notable exceptions.<sup>xii</sup> Even in the post-Soviet era, when researchers have access to a broader variety of sources and ideological freedom, this approach continues. For instance, Carole Pegg, in her excellent survey of Mongolian performance genres, elides the individuality of her interviewees, many of whom certainly must be unusual and innovative members of their communities, and instead uses their words to create and bound a group musical expression (Pegg 2001). This view of the relationship

between tradition and creativity can be helpful, and some performers *do* feel that they are simply expressing tradition. Nevertheless, creative figures like Gomboev feel that they can play with tradition, despite what cultural authorities or fellow Buriats might think. For his part, Gomboev consciously presents his personality as innovative and rebellious.

While the words of artists like Gomboev do present more nuanced ideas about national and spiritual culture, artists simultaneously play another role that is specific to post-Soviet non-Russian communities. Buriats, like many groups after the fall of the Soviet Union, have been debating the future and form of Buriat culture while at the same time struggling to maintain the educational and cultural infrastructure that was developed under Soviet power. The number of people involved in the work of creating culture is small and intimately linked; as in a small town, everyone knows everyone else. For instance, a woman who is an actress from the Buriat Dramatic Theater also produced the first compact disk in Buriatia and now runs the Buriat Philharmonic. As there is a small group of intellectuals who are leading cultural discourse, the lives, opinions, and creative works of this group are incredibly important in understanding current discussions and performances of Buriat art, tradition, and culture.

Life stories are like mirrors that reflect how individuals create the past and themselves. In addition, they remind us, the listeners and recorders, that we, too, are telling stories and fashioning new images on their shining surfaces. For too long, meta-narratives that tell tales of progress, objectivity, and the written word have dominated other ways of approaching the past and the moment of describing the past. These reflections, these broad images of fleeting ages, nations, and places, need to be supplemented by detailed portraits and self-portraits of the figures who comprise these reflected communities.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> For an excellent visual picture of how instruments were transformed and "perfected," see Vertkov 1963.

<sup>ii</sup> A Mongolic term for any kind of bowed instrument.

<sup>iii</sup> A traditional Russian stringed instrument of Turkic origin.

<sup>iv</sup> A plucked stringed instrument played mostly by women.

<sup>v</sup> Interview with Gomboev, July 2001.

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<sup>vi</sup> For information about the Altai tobshuur, see Khokholkov 1994.

<sup>vii</sup> Interview with Gomboev, July 2001.

<sup>viii</sup> Interview with Gomboev, July 2001.

<sup>ix</sup> Interview with Gomboev, July 2001.

<sup>x</sup> Gomboev's written statement, 2000.

<sup>xi</sup> See Sherkhunaev 1964.

<sup>xii</sup> See, for an excellent and unusual example, Baranikova 1974. Also see Kara 1970.