

Lost Locale, Return and Healing in Kalmykia

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During the last two weeks of October 1996, I often waited in the main square of Elista for Schura, the healer, frequently delayed at home by inopportune needy patients, a welcome sight when she does appear lighting up the square in her dark red suit and blue turban; healers do not work by appointment, but are always accessible - a useful principle to keep in mind as we rattle away from the square in an old overcrowded bus to a more distant district of Elista to visit another healer who looks at water.

Life is moving forwards in Kalmykia, in fits and starts. Life seems normal now in many ways, even with its disappointments and limitations; yet every one of the Kalmyks have experienced, or were affected by the loss of their homeland, the loss of their locale and hence the disruption of their cultural and religious life.

It is the argument of this paper that with the collapse of the Soviet system, it has become possible for prerevolutionary belief systems - shamanistic practices and Buddhism - to revive, and with their revival to bring along and support the burgeoning sense of Kalmyk identity. Shamanism, unlike Buddhism which is based on a written canon and institutionalized church and ministry, is particularly sensitive to loss of specific locale. Shamanic practices are therefore more fragile, more easily disrupted by loss of homeland and potentially more difficult to revive unless the memory of these practices remains. Buddhism, on the other hand, has a more clear-cut process of regeneration, given input - lamas, teachings, religious texts - from abroad coupled with state support.

Even though the Kalmyks began to return from exile in 1957, shamanic practices of healing, according to healers I have spoken with, were not in evidence until the mid-1980s when there was apparently a more receptive environment. When I was in Kalmykia in the fall of 1996, I met with and observed a number of healers - all of whom considered themselves shamans - that is, they all had spirits with whom they communicated and who aided them in their healing work with patients. Often they used Buddhist prayers and implements, which relates to a long and tangled history of the suppression of shamanism by Buddhist lamas in the 16th. century in Mongolia, resulting in a somewhat truncated and syncretic form of shamanic practices that came

with the Oirat Mongols to the present Kalmyk regions (Heissig 1953). It was, however, the healers' ability to tap into this other, shamanic source of strength which gave them the power to heal. It was remarkable to observe the resurgence of healers - both lamas and shamans - in Kalmykia. I met with healers at the Badma Center for Healing in Elista, in the village of Ik-Chonos, and in various private homes within and outside Elista. Sometimes I watched or even participated in healing sessions and always I listened to their narrations, often notable for the healers' perceptions that exile and loss of homeland had led to subsequent loss of Kalmyk traditions - and the need to regain these traditions and the linked Kalmyk identity now.

Illustrative of current shamanic practices of healing and issues of Kalmyk identity, the following account of Schura, Alexandra Semenovna Konokova, is presented. Schura is a very active healer, who also has a great awareness of Kalmyk tradition and culture and of the need to regenerate Kalmyk ethnic identity. I was fortunate to be able to spend time with her and her mother, also a healer, discussing these matters and observing her healing practices.

Schura was born in 1946 in the Krasnoyarsk region. She became a teacher of Russian language and also began to do some healing occasionally. For the last 10 years she has been healing full-time and has a busy healing practice with an average of 7 or 8 people coming to her home everyday.

Schura has very clear-cut ideas about those aspects of Kalmyk culture and religion which are important for her, and for the Kalmyk people. She said there are now many women and men who are healers in Kalmykia, young as well as old. She herself heals doctors and nurses, using herbs and Buddhist prayers, as well as shamanic prayers for the Kalmyk variant of the Belii Staretz, an old white man associated with special prayers to the earth and animals. On the second and sixteenth of every lunar month is the day of the Belii Staretz. On this day it is good to carry out a ritual of sprinkling for the cleansing of cattle and possessions, since the Kalmyks worship the Belii Staretz as the protector of the universe and the caretaker of the year. Therefore on this day it is necessary to read the Mantra of the Belii Staretz:

Om namo sulu tumu doka tulu tun

Om tulu tulu dnya cuuxa xa xa xa (Omakaeva 1995:39).

In addition to specific shamanic rituals for the God of the Earth and water, there are also Buddhist rituals associated with the God of the Spring (water) "Üres" and Festival for the Earth "Troitsa". This festival celebrates small animals and is considered Buddhist but comes from shamanistic practice. There is a spirit underworld, called "xovdg-shivdk" and this spirit in animals and people needs to be fed with candy or other small food items, but not prepared foods. She also noted the importance for the Kalmyks of shamanic rituals at the time of death when there is a need to propitiate and give food to the Gods of the Earth, water and air. After a person has died there is still a continued connection between the dead and the living, sometimes manifested in the spirit of the dead person who will come to a living relative in a dream and draw energy from them. Schura believes (or has observed in her practice) that this still happens to people, although she said that after 70 years of Atheism people have lost their traditions - they don't understand that the spirit of the deceased is sucking out their energy - and hence they don't know what to do to heal this problem.

Schura comes by her gifts of healing in the traditional way: she has ancestors who have been healers. Schura's maternal grandfather healed cows and horses. Her father also healed animals and was a bone-healer for people, although this was not his only work. But her mother, age 91, who lives with her, is (or was) a healer. She is known as a "boo" or shaman, but she herself does not openly admit to that, preferring to emphasize her Buddhist practices.

Schura's mother recalled how they would pray at home. She had learned Buddhist prayers in the Kalmyk language, which were translated from the Tibetan - one of which she recited during the time of deportation. Remembering the old lamas from pre-revolutionary times, she recalled how little boys would study to become lamas. Schura told me of 300 year old prayer beads which had been handed down in her father's family from generation to generation and were saved by her mother and then given to Schura's oldest brother. Schura has other old prayer beads which belonged to a Lama Tepkin Sharv-baksh who taught in Tibet before and during the time of the Russian Revolution. When he died in 1979, his relatives gave these beads to her mother because she was a very devout believer.

Schura's mother participated for many years in a prayer group of 15 to 20 women. They gathered every three months and chanted Buddhist prayers, some also in Kalmyk language. Sometimes, Schura said, these groups of women were invited when a child was ill or 49 days after a death and they would cleanse the house of bad influences and misfortunes by reciting

Buddhist prayers. During the time of deportation these groups hardly met, but if they did, they were much smaller and met secretly. Schura told me also that during the period of exile her mother was afraid to heal because she was afraid of the militia police who might come around; her standard answer was “my nichevo ne znaem” - “we don’t know anything”. But she has told her daughter how herbs can heal cancer. Schura says her mother is “iasno” - clear-sighted, meaning that she can foretell the future from prayer beads.

Schura began to heal people after she had been ill with sicknesses for many years. She said she was constantly sick until she started to heal others. Suffering with appendicitis and gynecological problems, unable to carry through a pregnancy, she had five operations, took medicines and tablets, developed an allergy to medicine and it was only when she began to use herbs and began to heal people that she stopped being sick and felt well and energetic. This account is typical of one of the most commonly described features in the "calling" to become a shaman: healers almost always suffer from chronic and incurable sicknesses until they finally give in to the demand of the spirits to become a shaman and to practice this calling, whereupon they become asymptomatic. The other criterion for becoming a shaman is to be of the right ancestry - that is, to have shaman-ancestors in their lineage.

Schura's spirit helpers are the Belii Staretz, the Buddha Maitrea, the medicine Buddha, the Green Tara - the goddess of universal compassion, who is especially helpful for women and children, and has special powers to help overcome dangers, fears and anxieties and to grant wishes - and Avalokuteshvara or the Buddha of compassion, the White Tara who also has power to grant long life and help the practitioner overcome obstacles, danger and distress (Batireva 1991: Illus. #6). These deities come by themselves to Schura when they are needed.

Doctors and nurses come to Schura for healing and often refer patients to her, evidently feeling that she has special skills for healing which the medical profession itself cannot call forth. A case in point was a young nurse who came to see Schura for massage. She had problems in her abdominal area, and while Schura was gently massaging her abdomen she spoke with her about her menstrual period, about her fears of pregnancy, about problems with her husband and her desire to get pregnant. She gave her a recipe for taking water so many days before menstruation, so many days after in order to achieve the desired result. After the massage, the girl put on her bra and shirt and put some money on the table in front of the tankas of the buddhas and bowed three times formally with clasped hands. Not all patients are able to

pay in cash in these difficult times, explained Schura. They may pay in products such as foodstuffs instead; Schura's sunporch was filled with watermelons (payments from patients?), and when I was there I saw a patient bring fruits.

Massage and touch was an important part of Schura's practice. A mother brought her young child to Schura daily for massages. The little boy, aged fifteen months, exhibited symptoms of distress, lying like a limp fat doll on his stomach and wailing. Schura massaged his stomach and talked to him. The child had no energy at all and apparently could not walk, nor even move in his mother's arms in an energetic manner. Schura showed the mother exercises she could do with the child. She placed dark brown square packets on his back and rubbed him with a black cerdolite stone which, she explained, gave cosmic energy when a person had weak energy. Other shamanic implements she used in the treatment of other patients were an ebonite pencil used for massage, a copper 5-kopek piece for healing, and a silver coin from 1925, which was originally a church medal minted by Soviet authorities and was considered useful for cleansing from illnesses. When the treatment of the little boy was concluded, the mother gave him money to put on the table in front of the tankas. She bowed, holding the baby, and the baby bowed with her solemnly to the altar-table.

Theoretically, the healer is working on the assumption that symptoms, whether physical or emotional, are caused by bad energy coming from a disappointed or dissatisfied spirit of a departed relative. Once the needs of this spirit are satisfied, then the symptoms will be alleviated and/or positive energy will return to the patient. For example, I observed the following case: a young man, who had consulted Schura previously, came to her for healing. Schura began to talk to him and do some massage. Then she asked him whether anyone in his family had died. Her patient said: "Yes, my aunt Katya died 10 years ago." Schura told him what to do. "Make tea, give it to the soul of Aunt Katya." She then actually saw the spirit of Aunt Katya drinking tea, the tea going down her body and she heard the spirit say 'thank you.'

Schura told me that this patient had originally come to her because he had large lumps on his hands which could not be cured. After the patient had gone home from his first consultation, Schura saw a little babushka (grandmother) who had died when the patient was 10 years old. She wanted to eat. He had told her that his grandmother liked to eat. She said she wanted a head kerchief and hot food. The little babushka began to pray and to thank Schura. She bowed three times and prostrated herself. When the patient returned to consult with Schura,

she told him about the little grandmother and what to do to please her. He was so grateful that, filled with emotion and remembering his grandmother, he began to cry. Having made the appropriate offerings to the spirit of his grandmother, the lumps on his hands disappeared.

As noted in the instance above, communication between the shaman and the dead person can be very helpful for the patient. The soul of the dead person talks to Schura and she tells the sick person "He wants vodka, bouillion, food - you must go home, prepare a hot tea, give it to an old woman or an old man and then they will remember this (deceased) person". She says she can look at a person and see clearly the spirit of the dead person as if he were alive. She knows this is the spirit of that person, and she even knows how he died and what catastrophe caused his death. She sees various gods of that person - God of the Earth, little grandfather, "domovoi" (spirits of the house), xozzyan of the house (the master or caretaker). She says that she sees so much but she cannot and does not tell all because if she told everything she saw, many atheists might think she is (mentally) ill and be afraid and not believe her. So she (very cleverly, like a western psychotherapist!) phrases her thoughts into a question, such as "Was there someone who died"? She also is testing herself, wanting to know if she saw correctly.

Schura's use of massage, bio-energy concepts and healing of physical as well as mental disorders is quite typical of Kalmyk shaman-healers; an integral component of her ability to do this healing is the strength she draws from her personal protective spirits. Locale comes into play in that her ability to heal is bound up with her identity as a Kalmyk person, and this was an identity that was maintained by her mother even in the period of exile and hence has become a basis for her daughter's strength as a healer. Schura believes that the loss of homeland and the experience of exile and separation from locale has been disastrous for the maintenance of Kalmyk traditions and religion. In that sense, the restoration of locale (coupled with strong religious traditions from her mother) has impelled her towards healing in the traditional Kalmyk manner now that it is permissible to practice openly. Despite the loss of locale, however, Shamanism, or the internal connection to the spirit world, can regenerate, given a renewed association with the homeland. In this new period of Kalmyk life, with the connection to the Kalmyk homeland, the regeneration of Buddhism and Shamanism have supported and sustained the emergent sense of Kalmyk ethnic identity.

Buddhism, as an element of this ethnic identity, has always held a foremost position in the construction of Kalmyk ethnic identity. When the Kalmyks, Oirat Mongols from Mongolia,

migrated to the present Kalmyk areas in the 17th. century, they were observant Buddhists. A flourishing Buddhist culture developed so that by 1917 there were more than 100 kuruls (temples) in Kalmykia in which about 3000 clergy lived. In the 1930s all their lamaseries were closed and destroyed. Thousands of Kalmyks died in this repression, including lamas; sacred texts, if not salvaged and buried in private household gardens, were burned. What had been a magnificent and flourishing Buddhist culture, with grand temples, vast monasteries, and thousands of lamas was completely destroyed or left to ruins (Bakaeva 1994:26).

In 1988 there were no Buddhist temples in Kalmykia. In 1990 the first house of prayer was opened in the city of Elista; in the summer of 1995 when I was there, there was a constant flow of people of all ages into this small temple, especially during the morning when the monks were reciting prayers. The regeneration of Buddhism, possible after 1990, began cautiously but has continued steadily. In 1993 the President of the republic, Iliumzhinov, established a Department of Religious Affairs, with the aim of supporting the Buddhist religion.

By October 1996 there were 14 kuruls operating in Kalmykia, and 6 centers of Buddhist learning. All new kuruls and temples were constructed with the support of the state. The President of the republic gave his personal support for the construction of the new kurul designed by Volodia Gilyandikov on the outskirts of Elista; the dedication on October 1, 1996 was attended by 33,000 people of all ages and generations. The new kurul is very large and well decorated, with wall paintings on the exterior entrance side and open terraces on the second floor from which the monks can blow trumpets to call people to prayer. Plans are already underway to expand the temple which will allow more people to pray together and to house a library. A total of 8-10 buildings is projected for this site (which will be typical of Buddhist monasteries, characteristically places of prayer, learning and residence for fairly large groups of monks and novices).

The Kalmyk scholar Elza Bakaeva has noted how important the renaissance of Buddhism has been for the development of ethnic identity among the Kalmyks. One of the main problems is the need for education, not only of the laity but also of a whole generation of young lamas who will be able to staff the new kuruls and instruct those who come to pray. In 1991 a Buddhist center for youth was opened with the main aim of religious education. The Dkharma Center, for older lay people, was opened in 1992, and in 1995 the Karmapa International Buddhist Institute

(known as KIBI) was founded for monks and lay people. In its first year KIBI had eleven students, Russians and Kalmykians.

Five students have been able to complete their studies in Ulan-Baator, Mongolia in the highest Buddhist school; these monks are now working in the rural regions of Kalmykia - Yashgul, Tsagan-aman, Ketechineri, Lagan and in the kurul in Elista. Having travelled to Iki-Burul and Yashgul in the summer of 1995 to visit small kuruls there, I can testify to the great value the people of the local regions place upon the existence of a place of prayer, whether it is a converted school-house, or a small hall where 50 people can gather in front of a few tankas and religious objects.

What seems to be most important to the lay-person is the opportunity, after so many decades of repression, to practice Buddhism openly, even without fully-fledged lamas available. In the small kurul in Iki-Burul a woman testified that when she was 16 years old in the 1930s there were many monks in that region. Under persecution they took off their monk's clothes and became ordinary people. In 1943 her family was deported to Siberia where her 7-year-old son died. They brought objects with them to Siberia and tried to do all necessary rituals to maintain the practice of Buddhism there. Another woman, now 82 years old, who said she had been working "for the Reds", testified that they had destroyed Buddhist temples and artifacts.

Fourteen monks from this kurul, who had received education in Tibet, were executed in 1930; she knew these monks because her parents both had service in the kurul. Then, in 1942, when the Germans came they took all religious objects. She still has a rosary from her mother. She was 26 when they were deported to Siberia in 1943 and had two children, one of them a son who died in Siberia (testimonies in Iki-Burul, July 3, 1995). These narratives were corroborated by many others; what distinguished them also was the fact that this was literally the first time these people were able to openly talk about their experiences. It is difficult to ascertain whether Kalmyks spoke much among themselves about these experiences but according to Zhukovskaia (1993:88) until the mid-1980s Kalmyks avoided writing or speaking about the deportation period and it was mentioned only briefly in scholarly historical writings.

It also was clear that despite the fact that all traces of Buddhism were destroyed and it was impossible to practice the religion in a public place for more than 60 years, yet people conserved whenever possible religious artifacts and texts. Bound together with the resurrection of Kalmyk language and culture, new museums of history show ecology, herding economy,

Kalmyk costumes, the period of exile, and religious artifacts. The close interrelationship between Kalmyk Buddhism and Kalmyk identity as a people with a language, specific culture and historical unity which has been maintained despite the drastic disruptions of the Soviet period, indicates that these connections have a long and deep history.

Ethnic identity for Kalmyks - their sense of themselves as a people - is bound up with their deeply ingrained practice of Buddhism and of Shamanism. Shamanism, a form of religious practice that by definition communes with the ancestral spirits as well as the spirits of nature and of a specific physical place, is especially vulnerable to disruption by loss of locale. Hence, exile from their territories propelled the Kalmyks into an alien world devoid of familiar homes and kin. It weakened their ability to practice Buddhism by destroying all their temples and religious artifacts, and separated them from Shamanism by removal from sacred locale and spirits of these places - in effect, robbing them of their own ethnic identity and any psychological means to access it.

Volodia Gilyandikov's account of his family's exile and return to Kalmykia is perhaps the epitome of the Kalmyk experience, bringing together the themes of displacement, loss of language, culture, land and then return to homeland with the gradual acquisition of house and hearth, profession, Kalmyk language and Buddhist religion. Volodia, the architect of the Buddhist temple near Elista, narrated a life history which embodies some of the most characteristic features of the Kalmyk experience of the Soviet period. Volodia's father was in the Red Army during World War II. Upon his return to Kalmykia, he and his family, like all the other Kalmyks, were given two hours notice on December 28th, 1943 to collect their things before being deported by train. Three days later the Kalmyks arrived in northern Siberia and were dispersed into different settlements: Magadan, Vladivostok, Sakhalin, Norilsk, or Tumen, all areas north of the 50th parallel. The Gilyandikov family was deported to Tumen in the far north of Siberia near the 60th parallel, where Volodia was born in 1950.

In Siberia his family lived in an army barracks with some electricity, but used kerosene lamps. Many people died due to the extreme cold in Siberia and the lack of adequate clothing and household possessions. The Kalmyk language was not allowed to be spoken in school and if caught speaking it, a person could go to prison. Volodia's mother worked in a factory, his father in a forest cutting trees. Although officially there was no religion, his grandmother did small Buddhist rituals on Buddhist feast days. She poured butter into metal dishes and said short

prayers, but there were no prayer books. Volodia's grandmother also practiced some shamanic healing. He remembers that when he was a small boy four or five years old, he was afraid of something unknown. His grandmother covered him with a white sheet, heated hot metal and put it into a water container which she held over his head. Then she took out the metal form and read it for the shape which indicated what the fear was - a dog or another animal. Apparently this procedure cured him of his fear. Volodia also noted that old men and women practiced healing with massage of the limbs or of the head.

When the Kalmyks were allowed to return to Kalmykia after 1957, he said they wept and kissed the earth after their absence of 13 years. Volodia returned with his family in 1959. Since their original housing had been destroyed, his father's brother came back first and built a dwelling, then his family came and they all lived together. At first when people returned they lived in tents while they quickly built a house, moving in once the walls and roof were up, despite the dirt floors and lack of plumbing.

In 1957 he first started to study Kalmyk language in the 5th. grade one hour per week. His parents didn't speak the language and his grandmother knew Kalmyk but felt afraid to speak it during the period of exile. Now his daughter, age 7, goes to a school where she studies Kalmyk, English, German, and, of course, Russian language. She corrects her father's writing of her name in Old Kalmyk! Volodia has worked as a professional architect for many years, designing major government buildings and monuments in Elista, the capital. He not only designed the new Buddhist temple but is also the architect of a pavilion which encloses a huge figure of Buddha in the central park.

The Kalmyks' recent experience in 1943 of exile and dislocation, spiritual as well as physical, from a homeland, was only the latest in a series of disruptions. It is in documenting these losses of locale that a foundation can be laid for understanding how Buddhism and Shamanism, wrapped into Kalmyk ethnic identity, were able to be maintained or lost their connection with the Kalmyk people.

The Kalmyks are western Mongols, part of the Oirat tribes. They originated in Chinese Turkestan and northwestern Outer Mongolia, first unified under Khan Esen in the 15th. century in the course of fighting the Ming dynasty. As a result of opposition to the increasing power of the Manchus and conflict with eastern Mongolian allies of the Manchus, a group of Oirats, later

known as the Kalmyks, moved westwards during the first two decades of the 17th. century into Russian areas north of the Caspian Sea, near the lower Volga.

Historically, the relationship between the Kalmyks and the Russians was, at best, uneasy. In 1941 the Kalmyk region of the Soviet Union was invaded by the German army. The Kalmyks, Soviet citizens, fought with the Soviet Army in World War II and although there were many distinguished heroes among them, occupation of Kalmykia by the Germans for six months starting in August 1942 gave the Soviets reason to fear Kalmyk collaboration with the enemy - this was the justification for the deportation order of December 27, 1943. When the Soviet Army regained the Kalmyk territory in 1943, they liquidated the Kalmyk ASSR and deported all the Kalmyks with two hours notice to Sakhalin Island as well as to other parts of Siberia. Approximately thirty percent of Kalmyks died during the deportation (Zhukovskaia 1993: 90). Only in 1957, after Stalin's death, were they permitted to return to their former territories. On July 29, 1958 a decree restored the Kalmyk ASSR minus two provinces which remained part of the Astrakhan Oblast. One of the significant results of this deportation was the absolute silence in the public sphere in the Kalmyk Republic concerning these events and years of exile, a silence only broken in the spring of 1989 during perestroika with the showing of a film in Moscow (Zhukovskaia 1993:88).

As can be seen in the above account, the rebirth of Buddhism now is seen as an integral part of the reestablishment of Kalmyk ethnic identity. Buddhism as an institutionalized religion with its specific prayers, objects and images of veneration, priesthood and temples, is, with State support, rebuilding its traditions and practices. Given an active input from the Dalai Lama and the opportunity to bring Tibetan teachings to Kalmykia, many Kalmyks are now practising Buddhism and displaying Buddhist icons and religious objects in local museums of Kalmyk culture.

Kalmyk ethnic identity is also expressed by traditional shamanic healers who were long compelled to hold their practices in secret. In her practice Schura honors Buddhist and Shamanic deities who are related to the earth, air, land and water springs. She stresses the importance of the Old White Man, a shamanic deity particularly connected with the earth and the specific place where people live. When the Kalmyks were exiled, they were able to take a few small Buddhist objects with them, but Shamanism, with its close relationship to the deities of a specific locale, does not allow for such portability. At most, according to these accounts, old

women remembered some healing practices which they were able to do, thus maintaining some continuation with their traditions. Exile, therefore, is more destructive for Shamanism than for Buddhism but, on the other hand, once the reconnection to the homeland is made, the possibility of shamanic healing arises when a more permissive environment exists. In the new atmosphere of religious freedom after 1990, shaman healers also have reappeared, now able to connect more freely with old traditional Kalmyk customs and with the local ancestral spirits - and hence contribute to the development of ethnic identity.

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