Introduction

From the interesting encounters I had while compiling this project, the strangest of all was at Tsugol. The proximity of the Chinese-Russian border had created the possibility for local Buryat lamas to have easier contacts with the Buddhist world and their kin in the Qing Empire. Consequently, in the 19th century, this area grew to become one of the largest centres of Buryat Buddhism with thousands of lamas resident, and yet was desolated during the anti-religious campaign soon after the rise of the Soviet state. After this, the border region became heavily militarized in order to avoid the threat from the pro-Japanese Manchukuo state and, later on, due to worsening relations with China. When in 2012 me and some Polish anthropologist colleagues were there for a short fieldwork study, I saw the typical post-Soviet scenery of an abandoned and devastated semi-urbanized settlement. Unlike other Buryat monastic compounds, the main temple complex has been preserved, primarily because it had served as an important military supply depot and, then, it seemed out of place, almost anachronistic. It appeared as a mismatching object from a parallel world. After recent restoration works, it was the only island of relative prosperity amid the general backdrop of relative decline. However, while there were neither crowds of lamas, nor regiments of soldiers, the flow of history in this place was always present to its observer.

We met a local school teacher, a pleasant Russian woman who had been gathering materials over the years and was truly interested in the local history and culture. She had come there from a different region of Transbaikalia in the 1980s and witnessed many macro-changes, which were transforming this place. I decline to elaborate on the much-exotisized

topic of the post-Soviet frustration, which is actually my everyday reality, because a more pertinent topic demands my attention. It was clear to me that this woman was trying to tell us something that she found of cultural significance. She began more than once with phrases like: "This was peculiar…" or "I was stricken with the fact that…", but could not continue because she had to introduce the historical context first. She found it necessary to say that there were few Buryat families in the surrounding area whose children attended her school since a big part of the local Buryat population had been driven away from the state border. Those left there, as a rule, adjusted to shifting cultural trends and inevitably became more Russified. Eventually, she came closer to the topic:

> During the first year of my work, I was stricken with the fact… at that time, in 1985, the military personnel left the settlement and it [the temple – A. Zh.] became free for public access, and everyone who wanted it started visiting it there. And, we… I had the school graduation, the farewell bell… and I with children went there to the temple to have a look at… And, what was peculiar, the Buryat children… they transmit it through generations… none of the Buryat children came upstairs higher than the ground floor and touched nothing there… in contrast to the Russian children… because we, Russians, have a different religion. And the Buryat children would say to their Russian fellows and they also tried not to touch… those who kept company with the Buryat children would also not touch... [DS750616].

It was clear to me that what she was stricken with was that after more than a half century of Sovietization and the erosion of loss of the native culture and language, the local Buryat children, who had likely never previously visited a Buddhist temple, still observed the common rules of behaviour there. During our further conversations, she brought up also other interesting evidence of the vitality of Buryat culture, which contradicted manifestly the cultural policy of the Soviet period (which declared the radical cultural change of "traditional" societies due to the rapid modernization [Zapaśnik, 1999: 22; Chakars, 2014: 210]) and contemporary Buryat lamentations of linguistic assimilation, and the loss of the "native" culture (which has almost become the symbol of the national identity). Perhaps, despite those processes, from the perspective of a presumably impartial non-Buryat observer, many

elements of their "tradition" were still strong despite these significant transformations.

This episode during the initial year of my fieldwork remains in my memory and I found it later to be a useful metaphor in summarizing the contemporary state of Buryat society. It introduces us to a wide range of issues of social and cultural transition, for example, how the Soviet version of modernity transformed local cultures, or even to what extent Soviet culture was truly "Soviet". Problems of these types have been of a staple concern for contemporary social scientists, often arising from their discontent with the banal statement that "modernity" replaces "tradition".

Theoretical considerations on the problem of social order

I will be interested in the traditional Buryat social thought and its contemporary changes. My investigation departs from many sociological analyses of continuity and social change because I claim that there existed the reflections of the social order which influenced the way Buryats perceived and reacted to those social changes. The problems concerning sustainability, forms and change of social order are central for contemporary social analyses [Falkenhayner et al., 2015: 9].

The problem of order is a vast theoretical issue in social sciences. Niklas Luhmann even positioned the "problem of order" as the catalyst that led to the crystallization of sociology as an independent academic discipline [Luhmann 1981; Luhmann 1996: 21; after: Falkenhayner et al., 2015: 9]. In general, the problem could be called the fundamental, if not central, issue of social sciences. The matter of social order was developed as a rule in macro-theories, such as functionalism or Marxism, which saw the order as constructed by shared norms, values, distribution of labour, power or property [*Słownik socjologii*, 2006: 175–176]. However, to describe the changes of contemporary Buryat identity, I will go beyond the categories of the macro-pattern of social order which does not include cultural vision in analysis.

In my research, I will apply the methodology proposed by the interpretivist generation of the social sciences (symbolic interactionism, social

phenomenology, discourse theory). In particular, I was inspired by the interactivist assumption of social order understood as the product of shared sense-making practices of a group member's concern. This individual experience never maps on the complete cultural set of a symbolic universe and represents Alfred Schütz's "finite provinces of meaning" [Woroniecka, 2003: 34]. This knowledge existing both as conscious reflections and as unaware assumptions constitutes the sense of the social world and its orderliness. This practical reasoning could serve as a self-sufficient interpretative grid without giving precedence to those proposed/imposed by the privileged methods of academic social theory. This "indifference" to the objectivism and the multiplicity of interpretation possibilities fits well in the postcolonial protest against the dominant narratives.

Nevertheless, I am fully aware of the impossibility of not referring to a more general theoretical perspective in the descriptions of the social order. The ordinary, everyday interaction could not be imagined without relations with the intellectual tradition of thought and its impact made through the history. Many categories born within academic social theory (so-called "reflexivity") have already gained currency as colloquial ideas. This is what Anthony Giddens claims in his theory of double hermeneutics: "the 'findings' of the social sciences very often enter constitutively into the world they describe" and the other way round [Giddens, 1993: 150, 153]. On the other hand, historians of ideas clearly show the "folk" roots of many scientific concepts. Thus, despite the ethnomethodological skepticism, the division between "folk" and "academic" descriptions is not so evident: there are no "common practices" without background theory.

Thus, interpretivist orientations in the social sciences attribute meaning to two conditional contexts: actual and heuristic [Woroniecka, 2003: 42]. The actual context implies the changing nature of meaning. The researcher in the field has contact with people and contributes to the change of the meaningful context. It is open to transformations, negotiation and dialogue. No ideas should be thought of as stable and non-changing – one deals with multiple transforming meanings, which are expressed in particular contexts. The context, however, proposes multiple interpretations and invariants that should be seen from the various positions. The heuristic context implies reference to the earlier

interpretive experience. For the needs of my research, I am going to incorporate some elements of history of ideas into this heuristic context. It would imply that certain meanings have their own more or less vivid "genealogy" and "geography".

In the manner of the Western division into the "folk" knowledge and "science", the Buryat-Mongol culture of knowledge also contained the imagination of more privileged and less privileged epistemology. As I will show in chapter 1, Buryat understanding of folk (*jure-jin*) knowledge was distinguished in opposition to that produced in the Buddhist institutions. I include there various canonic Buddhist literature, didactic texts addressed to the Buryat masses, historical chronicles and other texts, which, directly or indirectly, considered the ideas of social order as defined in the culture as the evidence for "reflexivity" on ongoing social processes [Giddens, 1993: 90]. These two spheres, however, did not exist in isolation and they determined mutually the knowledge production. For denoting this knowledge, I apply the term "epistemic culture" which I borrow from the works of a Swedish and German Mongolist Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz [Kollmar-Paulenz, 2014: 139]. In connection with this, I also use numerously the word "version": a version of history, a version of sociology, despite the general tendency of using distinct epistemic vocabulary for Western and non-Western cultures [Sneath, 2007: 64; Carsten, 2004: 189] due to either evolutionist assumptions, or the fear of performing possible "intellectual colonialism".

Together with the accelerating contacts with the Western science in the 19th century and its triumph during the Soviet era, the local culture of knowledge, both its "folk" and "high" versions, were classified as illegitimate. On the one hand, the institutions producing the "high" sphere of social reflexivity were totally eliminated. On the other, many practices, which people performed in their everyday lives, were stigmatized and, consequently, subjected to the "refinement". The ideological hegemony of Western science strongly influenced social reflexivity, while cultural ideas were seen as relics of a traditional, archaic world vision or superstitions doomed to vanish in the contest with modernity. Nevertheless, I claim that these ideas still constitute an important factor of social processes along with a still strong ideological and practical influence of the Western "science" in the Buryat society.

The approach brings another serious theoretical problem that I cannot ignore. Fredrik Barth, in his essay, highlights the gap in defining culture as abstract cultural material and variations of its social embeddedness [Barth et al., 2001: 435; Barth, 2004a: 189]. Thus, I needed a definition of culture that could bring the consensus between the two orders. In the dispute between those who claimed knowledge to be obtained from the individual experience (empiricists) and those who believed it to be universal and located within the mind *a priori* (rationalists), Émile Durkheim took the third position, arguing that knowledge is of cultural origin. The basic "categories of thought", like: time, space, number, causality, etc., have been invented by human mind and they are different depending on the culture that mind belongs to [Durkheim, 2001: 16–19]. Culture can be understood as a system of logically interrelated categories of thought, which are unique *représentations collectives* of a particular community. Individuals are not isolated in their subjectivity and they receive the categories of culture due to socialization and social interaction and they do not create them. They are the part of the broader context in their whole and totality, which deliver its significant meaning. Among the scholars influenced by the Durkheimian ideas was his student, Marcel Granet, who – in his prominent book *La pensée chinoise* (1934) – confirmed the views of his teacher using the example of categories of traditional Chinese thought. Granet denies the significance of abstract categories, like: time, space, number, or substance in the traditional Chinese thought, making way for the categories connected with order, totality and rhythm instead [Granet, 2008: 20]. Another prominent scholar, who was a reader of Granet [Zapaśnik, 1988: 19], Aaron Gurevich, applied a similar methodology for description of the medieval European past. Culture becomes the dimension for human interaction and mutual understanding with all possible diversity of beliefs, concerns and ideologies. One cannot think of the world without the categories of culture, which are not something one is conscious of, but constitute the reality preceding individual experience [Gurevich, 1972: 16]. This also includes the so-called "pre-understanding" in the philosophic hermeneutics [Woroniecka, 2003: 47].

This approach to culture dissolves the cognition and acts as distinct ontological orders. The social life could be considered as a symbolic

manifestation of the way of thinking, specific to a particular society in a particular historical period [Zapaśnik, 2006: 20]. This is what Barth proposes as practicable epistemology, which traces "how people interpret the world and act on those interpretations" to avoid seeing culture as ideas detached from practices [Barth et al., 2001: 435]. I deal with a certain fragmental participation in social reality, a fragmental imagination of the social wholeness, as expressed by people, or observed from particular situations. That is why I am not going to analyze the categories of the "privileged" discourse (whether it is science, high culture, etc.), unless they appear in the field. The present work, though deals with some texts produced by culture, pays more attention to common (everyday) practices and knowledge that shape and produce reflections on the social processes. I am also aware of the high level of abstraction in distinguishing these loosely defined categories of culture. Nevertheless, I would like to implement it in my work as a different sphere from the "ideas", "concepts" and "meanings", which could be more or less consciously defined in the culture. Meanwhile, the categories of culture as a certain logic of producing and perceiving these ideas are required to explain why certain ideas did not appear or they function differently in the Buryat culture.

This approach also offers the possibility to go beyond the essentialized restrictions of a "national culture". Certain ideas transgress the borders of ethnicity and languages. I mention this to underline that the ideas discussed in the book extend well beyond the selected geographical area. The Buryat culture should not be locked within such terms as a "Siberian", "minority", "indigenous", or "local" culture, which even was not the way they viewed themselves:

> In contrast to many scholars, who have seen Buryats purely as "native", "indigenous", or even as "a fourth world" people, many Buryats have long viewed themselves as cosmopolitans, regarding the long history of Buryat Buddhist pilgrimages to Mongolia and Tibet as a prominent marker of southern Siberia's transnational history and identity [Bernstein, 2013: 34].

Considered together, the strands of this research will illuminate the crucial peculiarities of the social organization of the cultures of "Inner", "Central" and "East" Asia, which historically were neighbouring to that

of Buryat-Mongolian and developed many shared ideas. Thus, the research reveals many of the ideas shared with Tibetan, Chinese cultures (e.g. ideas of Dao, Yin-Yang, etc.), and also other cultures of Central Asia, which could serve as alternative "East" – "East" ways of translation to the dominant "West" – "East" perspective. I assume that there is no shared meaning between the distant cultures without preceding "interaction". The definition of cultural circles, which I call East and West in my book, is always an arbitrary procedure, because the borders of these circles cannot be objectively established. Over the centuries, these cultures have been in touch with each other and borrowed different ideas, institutions and behavioural patterns. In my work, I distinguished the concepts of East and West, bearing in mind the differences in the categories of thinking. It is obvious that both societies that I count among Western and Eastern societies are very diverse internally.

In this case, each of them guides its own logic and language. These particular "modes of knowing" produce unique meaning [Hastrup, 2004a: 460]. One cannot describe the culture with the established antagonistic categories like Eastern–Western, collectivistic–individualistic, spiritualism–rationalism, nature–culture because the culture in its emic perspective is neither this, nor that. Moreover, if one element of the dichotomy is missing, it is no longer valid. Here, then, we deal with the problem of expressing/translating the meanings of one culture with the language of another and the borders in cultural communication. That is why the context, which interpretivist methods could (re)construct, is a necessary step of any intercultural dialogue through distinguishing these metaphors. There could not be a pure interpretation of meanings or description of facts without the background assumptions. I consider my research generally as an interpretation and translation following the Clifford Geertz comparison of doing social research with trying to read a manuscript: "foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour" [Geertz, 1973: 10].

The case of the Buryat culture is even more complex. It has to be described and expressed in the language of alien cultures, like Russian, English, or Polish, which is another level of a hermeneutic barrier.

The issue of translatability is crucial for understanding texts produced by cultures distinct in terms of time, actual knowledge and concerns. Regarding texts of the Buryat culture, as well as many other "Oriental" cultures, there dominates the dictionary model of translation, which pulls the words out of the cultural and cognitional context in which they were originally created [Hansen, 1992: 8–9]. It leads to the faulty conclusion of similarities of the words and their meaning. However, the meaning cannot be determined independently from belief. One should not ponder sentences in isolation. The understanding of Buryat culture was based on the assumptions of the traditional translation model, which very often favoured different degrees of symbolic violence [cf. Bourdieu, 2011]. I consider dictionaries to be projects and aspirations for intercultural communication and mutual understanding but not as a fixed and final documentation. That is why I will introduce non-conventional translations of various ideas to convey their contextual value. A researcher has to deal with complicated configurations, perspectives and origins of knowledge and disentangle the "mess of encounters" to reveal the role of non-European epistemic cultures played in the formation of a global modernity [Kollmar-Paulenz, 2014: 123].

Questions and claims

The interpretative social sciences attempt to bring reconciliation between the sociological theory and actual life practices [Woroniecka, 2014b: 8]. It is contiguous to the world through being qualitative, relativist and constructivist. However, this theory is a point of departure for me, not necessarily the point of destination. It gives the possibility to disclose another theory, grounding and interpreting the colloquial sense-making practices that could be based on some distinct assumptions.

Such an angle leads to a certain conflict of theoretic perspective where cultural ideas are contesting with the sociological categories in terms of applicability and serving as an interpretational grid. I claim that Buryat-Mongols possessed reflexive "sociological" ideas. My definition of a social thought is very broad and includes those reflections which were considered as the "high" knowledge as well as those accompanying

everyday practices. This would give the possibility to consider social reflections and their interpretations on various levels. The goal of my research is (1) to explore the ideas concerning social order in Buryat traditional culture and (2) their implications in shaping contemporary Buryat identity.

In connection with the goals, I raise two types of questions for my analysis. The first one concerns the characteristics of this thought: how is this social thought different from the Western social thought and sociology understood in academic categories? (I am aware that this question is very broad and in my academic education and observations from the field I identified some specific areas that could serve as examples of this difference.) How/whether are the three conventional individual, social and cosmic orders defined in Buryat thought? What theories, categories and metaphors is this thought resting on?

The second series of questions is devoted to the feasibility of this thought in the face of cultural changes: what was the history of this thought? How does this vision of social order exist in the modern Buryat community facing the challenges of assimilation and acculturation? How are these challenges seen and defined from the prospect of this social thought as presented by common people? I pose these questions because I am aware that the assimilations processes are interpreted by people according to categories of the local social thought in a specific way.

My contention is that the comprehension of the questions depends much on the interpretation tools one applies. That is why I will attempt to present the Buryat social thought and introduce it as an independent interpretational grid in the analysis. I argue that this knowledge could be found in conceptualization of order among common people. I am studying the Buryat social thought as cultural base of considering contemporary social processes (e.g. assimilation, identity), in order to show my reader that academic social theory despite its prominent achievements cannot fully comprehend these processes. This is because there is no such thing as sociology without a cultural framework. Sociology, and social science more generally, is thought and interpreted differently within different epistemic cultures. The sociological categories used in each culture are distinctive and must be taken into account. Doing so in the case of Buryat culture corresponds to the general tendency of

making the academic sciences more responsive, inclusive and dialogical [Odora-Hoppers, 2002: 4].

Methodology of data collection

The fieldwork process and the problems one encounters are the integral part of the research because they reveal the implementation of methodological knowledge in field and disclose ethical issues of the work. In most of the cases, however, this part of the research process is preferred to be concealed in fear of betraying possible deviations from ideal methodological standards [Thøgersen, Heimer, 2006: 2]. Indeed, the fieldwork as an integral part of the learning process of PhD students never meets the forethought plans and expectations, which require working out one's own "coping strategy" [Saether, 2006]. Both success and failures in the field could be useful in learning from it and making conclusions, which is richly described in scholarly literature. In my opinion, the process of gathering empiric data and the role of researcher's personality in it would be an interesting topic to discuss. I would like to share my own fieldwork experience with special emphasis on the researcher's position in the field and the knowledge one could have access to due to it.

I conducted fieldwork in different regions of ethnic Buryatia, Mongolia, in close cooperation with my mentor, Ewa Nowicka, and Wojciech Połeć, Blanka Rzewuska in 2012, 2013, 2014[1]; and, independently, during summer vacations 2012–2016. My PhD project was dedicated to the ideas of social order in the Buryat culture. This is not something that could be asked straightforwardly, but a topic that demands a lot of creativity and good imagination from the researcher to (re)construct/discover the theory used in the everyday practices. Conducting research itself could be seen as a sort of disturbance of the

[1] The research project led by Nowicka entitled *Between Russia, Mongolia and China. Buryats and the Challenges of the 21st Century* funded by the National Science Centre, the decision number DRC-2011/03/B/HS6/01671. I accompanied the fieldwork only in Aga Okrug, Ulan-Ude and Kizhinga aimag of Buryat Republic, Khentii aimag of Mongolia.

order of things as a kind of "breaching" experience [Garfinkel, 1991]. This is how the ideas of social order, which are the main topic of my research, grasped me from the very first steps in the field. In the case of the loosely defined outsiders and insiders, the reaction of the field was very different, which I want to develop in the following parts.

Map № 1. Map of the Republic of Buryatia and two Buryat okrugs.

Guest researchers in Buryatia[2]

Despite the controversial ways of applications and its effects, the Western scientific discourse could already be counted as common meaningful ground between the Western researcher and the non-Western community. It is not the 18th–19th century, when the Western researcher could arrive into an "intact" community, draw the line between the scholar and the local. The ideology of objectiveness and privileged position of "science" has already performed the dialogue (though often unfair) and

[2] The fragments of this part are going to be published in my article *The Falling Rain Will Stop, the Guest who Arrived Will Leave. Once Again on "Insider" and "Outsider" Positions in the Buryat Field* in volume of the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" UW entitled *Searching Identity: Personal Experiences and Methodological Reflections*.

transported various ideas between these worlds. Thus, the academic categories and elements of sociological analysis are common discourses uttered by the Buryat field. One should also add the common use of the Russian language as the factor of easier interaction for both sides. Moreover, as in the case of Polish researchers, the common historical experience within Russian empire, the influence of USSR policy and many other historical events do not allow the researcher to consider their fieldwork interaction merely in terms of "cultural" differences. It is only one chain in the history long dialogue. Nevertheless, I had a general impression that the distance between the Western researchers and the Buryat field is often exaggerated from both sides.

When I was offered to become a co-researcher and interpreter at the fieldwork of Polish anthropologists, I took it as a perfect opportunity to learn about their methodology and to gather my own field materials. During my first visits in the field, I decided to see my work as an open-ended explorative project. I was overwhelmed with the conceptual cosmologies of these worlds, which – despite the processes of globalization and some common historical experience – still were very distant in many aspects. The project of the Polish team was dedicated to the modern cultural canons of Buryats living in Russia, Mongolia and China. During the previous researches of Nowicka in Ust-Orda Buryat Okrug (2000, 2010) and in the Republic of Buryatia (1993 and 1994), she was constantly told about Aga Buryat Okrug as the most "traditional" Buryat region with the language and culture surviving in a most undisturbed form in all ethnic Buryatia. This was also the information I heard many times myself in the regular life. Thus, let me emphasize this point here. I do not define and contest the status of these regions of being more "traditional" because this definition was taken from the field.

My experience of accompanying foreign anthropologists acquainted me with the privilege and prestige they enjoyed and what I later missed working on my own (I will consider it below). Foreign anthropologists were classified as "the respected guests" and as Uradyn Bulag noted as important "cultural brokers" [Bulag, 1998: 6] that brought certain "outsider possibilities" [Young, 2004: 192]. Their position of "teachers" (*bagsha*) and scholars (*erdemten*) at universities added more prestige

than if they would be just regular guests, since education (*erdem*) is traditionally a highly valued trait among the Buryats.

People in Aga Okrug were extremely helpful. Nowicka in her book *Korzenie Ałtargany sięgają głęboko…* (*The Roots of Altargana Run Deep…*, 2016) written on the material of these fieldworks called these conditions even "luxurious" [Nowicka, 2016: 9]. Indeed, the local people did much to accommodate the "guests". In Aginskoe, local administration even supplied us with transportation to get to the remote villages. With their help in 2012, we first visited Duldurginski district – villages Duldurga, Alkhanay, Togchin and Uzon. In Duldurga, a local TV-journalist shot a report for a local news-channel and another journalist conducted an interview for a newspaper about the Polish researchers, so that when we visited other localities, many people already knew about us. Later, we visited towns and villages of Aga district that is Budalan, Kunkur. We were shown all the key places of local importance, places of cult and historic sites. I had an opportunity to watch the image and symbols of Buryatness that local people tried to present for the foreign guests.

In 2012, we visited the town Aginskoe of Aga Buryat Okrug, in July, at the opening of the "international" Buryat festival Altargana, uniting the Buryats from Russia, Mongolia and China. According to rough estimations, there were gathered around 10,000 guests. We had a chance to conduct interviews with guests who arrived from various places of ethnic Buryatia and even with those living abroad. Moreover, we made contacts with people from other parts of Aga Buryat Okrug whom we visited during the remaining period of our stay after the festival. In 2013, during our second visit to Aga Buryat Okrug, we decided to visit the third and the last part of the okrug – Mogotuiski district. Here, we used our own contacts from the Buryat State University in the village Mogotui and the local administration, again, helped us with transportation and accommodation. After that, we made short and longer visits to the villages Usharbai, Zugaalai, Kusochi. In every village we were met by locals and accommodated in their homes, local school dormitories and even, once, in a Buddhist temple.

In 2014, we visited my home region in Republic of Buryatia that is Kizhinga district. This is another region treated as most "traditional",

where I spent most of my life from the kindergarten to the end of the school. I had a net of relatives and acquaintances in this place. They were very helpful and took us to the important places of the region, proposing their assistance and guidance. We had a chance to visit a mass ceremony dedicated to Buddha Maitreya in which there were gathered more than 13,000 people in Kizhinga and a minor *oboo* ceremony in Ulzyte dedicated to the respected lamas from this locality.

After visiting Kizhinga, we continued our research in Mongolia in a predominantly Buryat village Dadal of Khentii aimag. We managed to participate in the 10th edition of Altargana festival. For me, it was an astonishing experience to see how a small village became full of various people sharing some Buryat origin. Long trails of buses and cars were bringing the participants from different regions of ethnic Buryatia, Mongolia and China. We were also pleased to see people whom we knew from our previous fieldwork in Aga. They were glad to see the Polish anthropologists once again, took pictures with them and talked like old friends. There were many unidentified "friends" who would wave to us while driving past in buses and cars and we waved to them in reply. I was also surprised to find some relatives in Dadal whose grandfathers migrated there from Kizhinga during the civil war in Russia. It is during such mass events that many Buryats have chance to meet and communicate with their kin. After the festival, we spent a few days in the village communicating with local people. Apart from making interviews, a huge part of our research activity was dedicated to the observation and the participant observation.

During the fieldwork with the team of Nowicka, our informants were mainly representatives of local elites or those who are counted to be them. Since teachers traditionally possessed high status in the Buryat society (*bagsha*), we often were referred to them as to the best specialists in the local culture. In the Buryat villages, teachers apart from instructing their main subjects, often volunteer in various kinds of workshops and organize local cultural life. For example, a teacher of Maths was the person who organized a local museum, gathered artefacts and provided some educative lessons for children. Many of them are also keen on researching local traditions and respectfully

called *kraevied*[3] (a local historian or a regional ethnographer). Generally, school and teachers in the Buryat village could be called the centre of cultural life of community. Apart from teachers and cultural workers, we conducted numerous interviews with the representatives of local administration and religious institutions – lamas and shamans – who also have enormous influence on the contemporary shape of the Buryat culture. In Ulan-Ude and Aginskoe, we met many activists of cultural revival, artists, singers, actors who eagerly shared with us their experience, plans and opinions on the issues of the Buryat culture. Of course, many accidental people made an important contribution to our research material.

The contacts with our Buryat informants always evoked panic among them. Clueless what to do, the Buryat hosts turned to me for advice how to treat the foreign guests from Poland. Numerous times I was asked about very practical things like what they eat and drink or what not, how could they react to this or that. Many of them felt uncomfortable because of their poor living conditions or unawareness in the topics they would be interested in, and I had to calm them down, explaining the cultural background of European guests. They told me also many things they never uttered to the guests directly, identifying me as an insider (*manai Buryaad khübüün*, "our Buryat boy/son" or *nyutagai khübüün*, "a boy/son from our homeland"). During the fieldwork, I often felt as a mediator (and interpreter) between the Buryat world and the world of foreign guests, which I partly understood during my stay there for study. By the time of our first visits, I had been learning Polish for 3–4 years and staying in Poland for couple of years and was able to interpret ideas when it was necessary. Priceless were our conversations with professor Nowicka and doctor Połeć who would share their thoughts and explain to me various aspects of the anthropology and sociology. The border between our cooperation and friendship was getting more and more fluid and, thus, perhaps, also fruitful, as well as sensitive [Nowicka, 2012: 109].

I would not like to idealize the local hospitability for, of course, both pleasant and unpleasant situations took place during the fieldwork.

[3] *Kraevied* was also the status which was applied to me as to a researcher and, what is most important, as to a "local" researcher.

I also sometimes felt uncomfortable when I would notice some abrasive situations. Various sensitive topics like the attitude to World War II in Poland and Russia, or contemporary political situation could appear in our conversation [Nowicka, 2014]. During the three years of our visits, we could observe certain changes in views and attitudes, various other topics could gain currency – both the field and the researcher changes. Every contact brings a new insight to the culture and serves as empirical material. Nevertheless, despite the whole trickiness and controversies, it certainly brings new opportunities and multiple perspectives to experience the culture.

This way, I spent the fieldwork not only gathering the empirical data, but also gathering impressions, experience and ideas, which I developed during my further independent fieldwork. While working on my own, I could see how the sense of the Buryat social order was subjectively important for me and for those I came into contact with.

Researcher "at home" and the Buryat social order

"The falling rain will stop, the guest who arrived will leave" (*orohon boroo arilkha, yerehen ailshan kharikha*) – this popular Buryat proverb shows the double-facedness of local hospitality. It means that one should exert any effort to make a good impression on a guest, comforting oneself in mind that his stay will not last for long. However, this recommendation does not refer to those who were not classified as a guest. Let me describe the other side of this proverb that I experienced while conducting my research.

In the Buryat culture, one could commit a sin (*nügel*) by telling improper information (*buruu yume khelekhe*) which could disturb the order of events. It is one of the basic sins in the Buddhist view along with the sin of improper intentions and improper deeds. I noticed that many people whom I met thought of themselves as not capable to say anything of their culture because they did not want to take such responsibility. Especially, when I was asking about some religious issues, they would recommend going to another man or lama who would tell it.[4]

[4] Though it is a very common strategy that could be seen also, for example, in Poland.

In this context *kraevieds*, ethnographers and other scholars bear the same responsibility as traditionally lamas, seniors and wise and educated men did in producing knowledge.

Kraevieds and ethnographers enjoy a high position in the Buryat society as specialists in the sphere of culture who have authority to determine cultural canons and produce legitimate narrations of tradition and history. These are the specialists whom local people trust and to whom they turn to in their undertakings on the revival of local cultural heritage. My position of a researcher who was looking for the culture, understood as the categories of thought and scope of existing ideas, was strange to the image of "a scholar" they got used to. I was often blamed for the lack of knowledge. And, in the opinion of my informants, I asked very "elementary" questions. While the foreign anthropologists could feel free to ask about the sense of commonly known practices, it was irritating when I did. I heard some subtle comments like whether I read books and Buryat newspapers, because "everything was already written", and me as a *kraevied*, in turn, should know a good deal more about the local culture than they do. The local people were very respectful of positivist, certain knowledge and suspicious of the questions indicating uncertainty. By asking them, I definitely was marking myself as an outsider.

I was blamed even more not only for being a poorly educated *kraevied*, but also as a poorly instructed young Buryat who is obliged to learn from his family and relatives. One of my uncles, who introduced me to a senior man for interview, instructed me not to ask "foolish" questions because the informant would think, if not talk, in a bad way of my family and me. Also, my informants very often did not tolerate when I asked some things twice, when I was "chatting" too much, which is considered to be a "female" feature, not appreciated much as a part of my personality. Generally, the attitude to young men in the Buryat culture is sometimes very harsh. I had to consider such matters, while my gender, age and family origin played a huge role in openness of people I met. The configurations of being insider or outsider seemed to me limitlessly relative.

However, there were, of course, those who get my methodological suppositions, but some of them were also not contented with it generally

due to two reasons. This could be described using the example of my communication with a Buryat man. I asked him about the categories of kinship, which for him was elementary knowledge for a Buryat, thus, after initial discontent with my ignorance, he started instructing me as a young, inexperienced person. Soon, due to the character of my sometimes quite subtle questions, he understood that I knew more than I pretended to know. He was quite enraged after realizing this because he thought that I was just proving his knowledge and making fun of him. The second reason I found out after I explained properly that what I was trying to obtain from him was his knowledge, his experience and his opinion about the matter. After some considerations, he finally said that what I was doing is not a good thing because I was just "dragging" rumours (*khob sherekhe*) from here and there. Thus, gathering information "in field" unexpectedly turned to become another "sin" for me – dragging rumours, which is also considered a very impolite and "ugly" (*muukhai*) way of behaviour. Consequently, the work I was writing indeed could be seen as a collection of different rumours picked up from an enormous number of people in various situations which I had experienced even long before having thought about becoming a researcher. The position of inside researcher in the Buryat society challenges to make a range of personal decisions, many of which still are not completed. My position implied that I had to break many norms of "politeness", sometimes even that of "morality" and other restrictions with a limited possibility of excuse in a comparison to an outsider one. This opposes the view that "the insider" position is presumably more conductive for data collection [Young, 2004: 188]. It determined my possibilities and strategy of the research work in the field.

It is a common problem. The researcher asks about matters that lie on the surface, while he thinks about their deeper meaning. As a person who is just learning the way of doing independent research, gradually I tried to modify my coping strategy in the field. Soon, I understood all the limitations of in-depth interviews in my case. Thus, the best method for getting information was observation and participant observation. It actually agreed with local behavioural tradition while, according to Buryat cultural ideal, a young man like me should maintain silence, talk less, listen and watch what and how other people do. Moreover,

my position was strengthened by the role of a student who receives education far away from his homeland, somewhere in Poland. It was considered as extremely positive part of my personality – I was always encouraged and some people I visited even granted me money gifts to support my education.

Thus, in the field, I lived my role of a young man who should be instructed and informants took the role of teachers and the elderly. There is probably a practical strategy to use to avoid offending your informants. However, there is a deeper, methodological question – is it "fair" to pretend to ask about one thing, while really being interested in something else? I did not try to hide my knowledge in order not to be classified as a fool, but I courteously asked them to share their experience to help me in my research. They had to interrupt their routine to talk to me and as a rule refused to record the interview as in their imagination, their words could be not that good to be heard somewhere far in Warsaw. In most of the cases, I had to ask them: "please, let me record you, I will urgently need it in my study" and that sometimes worked. My own circle of relatives and acquaintances was extremely helpful because I could rehearse the interviews with them, test, consult and negotiate many ideas. This was the most effective and for me psychologically the most convenient strategy of getting the knowledge. It was also important for me because one cannot ask directly about the problem of social order but only extract it through a complex analysis.

Through such various situations, I have come to know much about the ideas of social order – through disturbing it and synchronizing with it. I also took inspirations from various academic literature, testaments, documents (in Władysław Kotwicz's archives in Cracow, private archives of Dambinima Tsyrendashiev, regional museums' archives) and Buryat literature. Apart from the fieldwork and analysis of various literature and documents, during my stay in Buryatia, I lived an extremely active Buryat cultural life. I visited all possible exhibitions, museums, meetings, performances, local movies, concerts, theatrical productions, public debates, book presentations, conferences, religious ceremonies and many other events to understand what is happening in the contemporary Buryat culture, for as any other society in the world it is always in the process of change and searching its way. This was almost a paranoid

state of finding, selecting and interpreting the meanings produced and negotiated in the culture.

The research project, however, was not restricted to the fieldwork and the analysis of literature on the topic. My stay in Poland as a PhD student also significantly influenced my own position. I could experience how the field is changing and how the researcher, myself, is changing. Below, let me quote the words of a famous Polish linguist Anna Wierzbicka about her stay in Australia, which perfectly mirrors my situation:

> One of the most important of these personal discoveries, which I owe to my life in Australia, was the discovery of the phenomenon of Polish culture. When I lived in Poland, immersed in Polish culture, I was no more aware of its specialness than I was of the air I breathed. Now, immersed in the very different Anglo (and Anglo-Australian) culture, I gradually became more and more aware of the distinctiveness of Polish culture [Wierzbicka, 1997: 115].

During my stay in Poland, I made important notes on the social order of a distant culture, making comparisons, finding similarities or distinctions. I was never thinking of myself to be purely "Asian" but "assimilated" enough in the European culture. Despite the fact that during my whole life I was in regular contacts with Russian culture and language, I studied in the school and university with Western curriculum and I understood that my own conceptual cosmology is rooted strongly in my native culture. I had not realized it until I have endured several cases of cultural differences while living and studying in Poland. I appreciate much the instructions of professor Stanisław Zapaśnik who spent an enormous amount of time explaining various aspects of Polish and, generally, European culture. I had an opportunity to live and function in a foreign environment and experience cultural differences and similarities on my own.

On the more reflexive level, I had the chance to study sociology, consult with researchers and negotiate the theory I was trying to ground. It is in this context that the cooperation with Polish anthropologists gave me numerous opportunities to observe my own culture from different perspectives. It showed me the prospects and blockades of my own mind and the possibility to construct a particular distance to my own culture following the principle of a methodological relativism [Zapaśnik, 2010: 8],

though I am fully aware that this relativistic demand is the same way vague as the requirement of being objective.

One has to confess that, despite the aspirations for methodological objectivism, the researcher never is able to suspend his personal background and experience. This background, however, should not be considered always as an obstruction, blockade, but also as a fundamental ground for possibility of various ways of interpretation. I do not want to go into discussion on whether it is better to be an inside or outside researcher. Each position opens one sphere of culture and, at the same time, closes the access to others. There are no clear measures of an insider and outsider [Young, 2004: 201]. The advantage of my research is the opportunity to experience both of these loosely defined positions in their multiple manifestations. The multiplicity of these perspectives gives the access to the multitude of meaningful contexts.

Summary

During the fieldwork – my own and within the team of Polish anthropologists – there was gathered a huge corpus of in-depth interviews. I do not include here other records and various unrecorded interviews and conversations, which I conducted during my summer vacation in Buryatia. Of course, I am not aiming to impress the reader with the quantity of conducted interviews – the relativist assumption [Hastrup, 1995: 50] somehow frees me from a positivist requirement of representativeness. The qualitative methodology does not have ambition to prove that the fragment of the world it considered is typical for it as a whole.

The main methodological assumption is the phenomenological view that those with whom I talked represent their "macro" vision of the social order. Through my contacts with those people and personal observations, I find these categories without assertion about the whole culture. I am aware that there exist multiple perspectives within a culture and that the Buryat culture seen as absolutely separate from the Russian environment is merely an abstraction. Nevertheless, I reserve the right for myself to analyze the fieldwork material, select or reduce it in the dialogue with the requirements of academic theorizing.

The descriptions of this order will not be given in their original "raw" form but will acquire a certain macro-theoretic perspective and metaphoric structure: it is my subjective analysis of subjective statements of my interlocutors. I am extracting the repetitive metaphors, narrations and interpretations and putting them into a particular narrative structure. The elements of the theory I ground were also discussed with the informants from the fieldwork area and other parts of Buryatia and Mongolia. I want to emphasize that the field is a reflexive area, not only in the sense of their "practical sociology", but also that the field constructed their own interpretational social theories through the history. The research was a cycle of reflections and metareflections [Wyka, 1993: after Woroniecka, 2013: 39] which brought more confidence in the theory which emerged from the empirical material.

The empiric knowledge I gathered forms a certain grounded theory which could confront and contribute to the existing sociological theories. In turn, the theory does not have the status of a final interpretational model, but is being constantly revised in confrontation with the field data. Such a dialogue between the macro and micro levels conducted by the researcher is the major point of the interpretivist theory and reflexive social science [Burawoy, 2009: 8–9]. In this way, I would like to avoid multiplying of isolated cases [Woroniecka, 2013: 41] and contribute to the wider theoretic discussions on social orderliness.