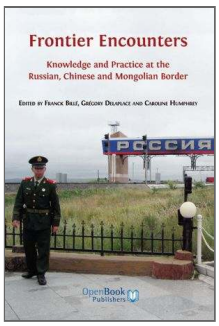

Franck Billé, Grégory Delaplace and Caroline Humphrey (dir.)

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Knowledge and Practice at the Russian, Chinese and Mongolian Border

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8. Ritual, Memory and the Buriad Diaspora Notion of Home

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8. Ritual, Memory and the Buriad Diaspora Notion of Home

Sayana Namsaraeva

Nayan-Nava – a horse flew
Nayan-Nava – a nomad sang:
"Wherever I unsaddle my horse
There will be my home and my homeland…"
– Bair Dugarov, contemporary Buriad poet[1]

In recent years there has been a rapid growth in the number of studies exploring transnational, transborder and diasporic lives, some of which reflect on trans-state processes after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The emphasis is on the increase in trans-border mobility and especially on cross-border contacts between different segments of one ethnic people, those living outside the homeland in diasporas and those who constitute what I call the "the kin-majority" in the historical or national homeland (Diener 2003; Safran 2004; Kosmarskaya 2006; Markowitz 2004; Shami 2007; Sanders forthcoming). With the dramatic political and economic changes in post-socialist countries, it has become clear that new socio-spatial entities have emerged, where ethnic space functions beyond the territorial boundaries of nation states.

1 http://www.sibogni.ru/archive/37/420 (accessed 15.6.2011). All translations of quotations from Russian, Khalkh Mongol and Buriad languages are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

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This chapter is an effort to advance our understanding of recent developments in the region of North Asia shared between Russia, China and Mongolia by examining the trans-border dimension of Buriad[2] social space. Being an ethnic minority in all these countries, the Buriads can be described using anthropological theories of diaspora. Those Buriads who moved away from Russian colonisation in Eastern Siberia almost a century ago will be referred to as "diaspora" groups or "kin minorities"; they consist of 42,000 people living in Mongolia and around 7,000 living in Inner Mongolia. Those who stayed behind at their home villages in the Transbaikal region (Russia) are referred to as the "kin majority" and they comprise 445,000 people. Meanwhile, the neighboring Mongol speaking territories just across the border to which the newcomers moved (Hulun Buir in Inner Mongolia, China, and the eastern provinces *aimags* in Mongolia) are called "host societies", or sometimes "host countries" if there is need to stress the public policies toward the newcomers.

Relations with "home" and with the "host" society continue to be distinguishing features of diasporas. Robin Cohen (1996) and William Safran (2004) both stress the role of the host country (with its public policies toward the newcomers) and a "homeland orientation" as being among the major elements distinguishing diasporas from ordinary immigrant expatriate communities. Therefore, a key issue regarding the Buriads who moved to Mongolia and China and have now already lived there for several generations is to define what is "home" in their understanding; we need to ask whether or not they still have a homeland orientation after generational changes, and if so, where they locate it. If we take various historical cases of migration, it could easily be imagined that "movers" scattered away outside the homeland and formed diaspora groups, while "stayers" continued to live at the homeland. However, I am wary about using the term homeland in this way in the Buriad context, because, as I will show later, there is confusion and ambivalence in defining what is "homeland" (*nutag*), not only from diasporic perspectives but also from the majority Buriad point of view. This being the case, I shall pursue the goal

2 Throughout this article, I use the spelling "Buriad" rather than the alternative "Buriat", the Russian spelling "Buryat" or Chinese spelling "Bu-li-ya-te". This is because: (1) this is the Buriad official spelling based on Cyrillic according to the Buriad–Orod dictionary (Cheremisov 1973), and (2) only in the Buriad Republic (Russia) does the Buriad language have the status of being one of the official languages, unlike in either Mongolia or Inner Mongolia (China). The Khori dialect was taken as the point of reference for Buriad literary language.

of ascertaining not only the different notions of the Buriad homeland and what they might mean to people in diasporas, but also the idea of having several homelands in a much broader context – from the perspectives of different generations, and at different geographical and historical points.

The choice to concentrate my field research in particular Buriad diaspora communities – in Bayan-Uul, Dadal and Dashbalbar in Eastern Mongolia, and in Hulun Buir in Inner Mongolia – was determined mostly by the migration routes of some Aga Buriad[3] families (who were close kin relations of my grandparents' families in the villages Uzon and Suduntui in the Aga steppe – nowadays the Aginskii district in Zabaikal'ski krai, Russia). The intended final destination for many such refugees was Hulun Buir in Inner Mongolia, but only some of them succeeded in reaching it, because the long march through Eastern Mongolia was exhausting for families with young children and for the cattle. Many families decided to slow down at thinly populated and convenient places with enough space for grazing along the Ulzii gol river in Eastern Mongolia, where they ended up establishing several permanent communities. Thus many families "on the move" were segmented into smaller parts and re-dispersed in the areas around the settlements along the migration route (see map in Appendix II highlighting Buriad emigration in the 1910s and 1920s). The devastating political persecutions of Buriads in the 1930s and forced relocations during military actions in Eastern and Inner Mongolia during the Second World War caused renewed chaos, and people were again separated from their kin. Many were unable to find each other for decades.

Before addressing the main topic, I want to add some self-reflective notes on research ethics. One may see me as of a native anthropologist: born in a Buriad family in Aginskoye (Russia). However, I began research on Buriad diasporic groups only recently. Distanced from this natal society due to many factors, I think of myself as neither an insider nor an indigenous researcher, and I do not claim an "authentic" point of view to the anthropological community. Kirin Narayan, who herself has a complicated family background, critiqued almost twenty years ago the traditional view that polarised "real" and "native" anthropologists and the sharp divide between "insiders"

3 Aga Buriads mostly consist of eleven *Khori* Buriad clans and constitute the main group of the Eastern Buriads. An estimated one third of the Aga Buriads fled to neighboring Mongolian territories mostly in the period between the 1910s until the end of the 1920s. More on lineage composition of Buriads in Tsydendambaev 1972 [2001].

and "outsiders" (1993). Nowadays, ethnographic writings are richer, and draw attention to personal experience, self-reflection and autobiographical accounts that bring more subjectivity and dynamics into academic writing. Moreover, there is a growing tendency to treat personal experience also as ethnographic data, especially by those who do "anthropology at home"; they more often position themselves somewhere between being an ethnographer and an informant, trying to maintain a double vision that combines both (Collins and Gallinat 2010). Accordingly, I will use my own recollections (including from times before my professional training) and personal experiences of family reunions. I will also include personal impressions of witnessing difficult moments of family reunion, when people who had been separated by state boundaries, catastrophically changing politics and personal anxiety, finally succeeded in finding one another.

The significant geographical distance between my natal home in Russia and my fieldwork sites in Mongolia and China did not allow me to feel "at home". Deploying my grandparents' kinship ties with people whom I had never met (in most cases) also presented me with a number of challenges, even if we speak the same dialect. So, my experience in the field was not dramatically different from that of other "outsider" colleagues, despite having more emotional involvement and personal responsibility. Being familiar with Buriad culture did not grant me insider status either. On the contrary, I felt as though I was being examined on how "authentic" I was; it seemed that, by looking at me, the diaspora could make judgments about Buriads in Russia in general, whether or not they were still bearers of Buriad customs and identity or have already become entirely Russified. Perhaps some of them saw me as the right person to talk to not only about their family, but about all matters concerning Buriads. Those I spoke to touched upon broad topics including how Buriads live in Russia; in which ways Orosiin (Russian) Buriads – or *khoit nutgiin Buriaduud* (Buriads from northern homeland) – are different from *Mongoliin Buriaduud* (Mongolian Buriads); and popular issues like "how we Buriads live in three countries" and "in which country do Buriads live better?'. They often compared their own experience to that of their kin who live in Chinese Hulun Buir and call themselves Shenehen Buriads.

On hearing these conversations about different places and different people I could not help but see them all as reflections on the notion of the "Buriad homeland", and the expression of personalized

concerns about kinship and places that are called *nutag* (homeland). In the following section I highlight the range of historical and cultural senses of the term *nutag* in order to link it with migratory Buriad consciousness, and I investigate how the changing discursive landscape of *nutag* evolved finally into diasporic reflections on community and individuals.

The "homeland" lexicon in the Mongolian language

The Mongol language (including its Buriad dialect) has developed a rich vocabulary to express the socio-spatial characteristics of the notion of homeland. Many meanings can be expressed by the term *nutag,* which is used in various grammatical forms as a noun, adjective and verb in numerous word-combinations. Traditionally *nutag* refers to the area of seasonal migration, for example, *gazar nutag* (land territory) and *nutag belcher* (grazing space); it also suggests that many criteria must be met for good grazing land. Thus *nutagluushtai* is an adjective qualifying places with good potential for grazing livestock. In the historical and anthropological literature we can find references to the variety of its uses. For example, Bat-Ochir Bold (2001) shows that part of the *nutag*-related lexicon was created during the Manchu period following changes in jurisdiction over land in Mongolia. The term was used to express a shift in rights to use or possess land. For example, pastures could be measured and divided (*nutgiin deeslekh)*, confiscated *(nutag khuraakh*) and granted to a different owner (*nutag evdekh*). Furthermore, people could be expelled from their land (*nutag khüükh*).

Uradyn Bulag (1998) also explains various meanings of the term *nutag* but focuses more on everyday conceptions that reinforce its "territorial" meaning. There is a traditional view that a specific land is possessed by ancestral spirits, and is thus confined to a particular people. Usually the main inhabited area and the boundary of the *nutag* is marked by *oboos* (ritual cairns), which embody the local spirits and are places of communal worship. The *oboo* were associated with obligations to make offerings to ancestral and local spirits (*gazariin ezen*), which are considered to have control of nature and living creatures. Offerings, either during the large collective ceremonies (once a year) or during individual visits to homeland *oboos* (*nutagee oboo takhikh*), were aimed to obtain the protection of spirits and thus to legitimise people's rights to use the *nutag*. It is believed that

favorably inclined local spirits (or "masters of the land") would sustain the fertility and vitality of the places with rich pastures and clean water sources, enabling people to increase their herds and have numerous children.

Nutag can be located at different levels, from a larger space to a local one, and can vary in scale depending on whether it refers to the group or to the individual. Expressions such as *törsön nutag* or *turel nutag* can be translated as "birthplace homeland" or "natal land" and do not signify strict territorial limits, while another term *toonto nutag* "placenta homeland" points to the particular site where the parental encampment (*ger* or *yurt*) was situated at the moment of the child's birth. A special ritual, at which the child's afterbirth was buried under the *yurt* (*toomtolkho* or *toonto khadagalkha)* establishes an intimate and magical relation between the person and the birth place. Interestingly, another meaning of *toonto* is a special type of knot, while the verb form *toontodokho* means to "tie-up". This seems to indicate that the person is understood to be "tied-up" and attached to the place where his/her placenta is kept and remains connected to it throughout life. People believe in the special power of the *toonto nutag* over the individual fate and spiritual strength. Strong attachment to *nutag* in general evokes deep emotional feelings and sentiments, and becomes a source for constant inspiration of nostalgic lyrics and poetical longings. The obligation to attend it and execute life protecting worshipping practices (*toonto taikha*)[4] at the individual birthplace involves specific connotations and additional complexities of the "homeland" concept for Buriads.

The phenomenon of the *toonto nutag* also represents a personal feeling of aging; ties with the *toonto nutag* change over the life-cycle and generate repeated "return" practices with the course of time. Ideally, a person should return to the place where his or her life started to signify the symbolical

4 Folk worshiping practices at the toonto (*toonto murgekhe*): a person should offer butter and put it on a stone marking the birth place at the old location of the ger (*toonto taihan tohotei chulun*); the same person should walk around the place (*toonto goroolkho*) and roll around naked on the ground (*toontodoo khölvörkhö*) in order to "embrace the earth" and absorb strength body from the "source" in the ground containing personal vitality and life force. Nowadays people prefer a rather simplified version of the worshiping ritual: instead of rolling around naked on the ground as tradition required, people just lie down on the ground with their clothes on. Sometimes it is enough to scatter the soil of *toonto nutag* on one's hands and neck, to drink water from the local water source and wash one's face and other exposed parts of the body. Offerings of rice, biscuits, tea or milk are also made. Nowadays, when long distance migration (both within the national states and across the border) has become a common phenomenon, elders recommend that those who live far away should take with them a piece of stone from *toonto*, so that they can still feel in touch with the homeland.

accomplishment of the life cycle, when one's death also symbolises transition to the next rebirth. Maurice Bloch noticed that in many cultures death is represented as a part of a repetitive cyclical order, and "good" death is that which occurs in the home, the place of the ancestors with living descendants to maintain the continuity of the lineage. "Bad" death, on the other hand, occurs at the wrong place, away from ancestoral shrines and thus represents the loss of regenerative potential (Bloch, 1999). Similarly, Bulag writes that "Mongol tradition held that one should be buried in one's natal land or homeland (*törsön nutag*) after death." (Bulag 1998: 75).

That is why, especially in the diaspora perception, to pass away in a foreign land was perceived as a karmic punishment and a serious obstacle for a better rebirth. Strictly sealed off state borders with Soviet Russia (especially between the 1930s and the end of the 1980s) denied migrant Buriads not only the opportunity to go back, but also the possibility of making a short visit to their *toonto nutag* and parental villages, which, in many cases, were just across the Russian border. As some families remarked, "Our *nutag* was the distance of a dog barking". Members of the second and the third diaspora generation recounting their family histories remember their parents facing their homeland to the north while telling their praying beads, showing their desire to return to their *nutag* before they died. After their tragic lives and death in exile they wished to access the lost homeland if not in this life then in the next rebirth and prayed to be "reborn again at homeland" (*nutagtaa khoito türelöö olokho*).

This strong desire also likely influenced diasporic funeral practices. Reports of several researchers who visited the diaspora in Shenehen show burned corpses, as it was believed that bones should not be buried in foreign land, while the smoke of fires would take the souls of the dead back to the homeland (Sanzhieva 2006). Some informants also said that their parents on their deathbeds asked their children to visit their *toonto nutag* when the Russian state "opens the pass" (*khargei nekhe*) through the border, thus symbolically bringing their souls back to *toonto nutag*.

Surprisingly, the term *nutag* is also used for the binary opposing concept to "homeland": "foreign land". For instance, the expression *khari nutag* can be translated as "unknown" or "foreign" land, an "alien" and "outside" terrain. The way diasporic people now speak about their host society (which was a foreign land for their parents when they arrived) helped me to understand that the dual meaning of *nutag* was an effort to transform the "foreign" land into "homeland". Different verbal forms of the term *nutag* emphasise the different stages and emotional tension of this inversion.

As a Shenehen elder said about their diaspora community, "*Ishe erheer maanad nayad jil nutaglaja bainabdi*" (Since we came here more than eighty years ago, we have been [living here and] making it [our] home). As people have to learn to adapt themselves and their livestock to a new place they can express this through complex grammatical constructions in the causative and passive voices, such as *nutagjuulkha* or *nutagjuulagdakha,* to indicate that the unfamiliar conditions of new place would be transferred with the course of time into a familiar homeland.

Techniques of creating homeland in exile

Anthropologists writing about Mongolia have been intrigued by the different engagement of pastoralists with land and space, and they interpret the Mongolian concept of the landscape as an interactive field of engagement, where cyclical movement between different seasonal encampments can be viewed as passage from one kind of space to another, each time requiring an engagement in relations with the spiritual powers of the locality (Tserenhand 1993; Humphrey and Onon 1996; Bulag 1998; Sodnompilova 2005, and others). They argue that pastures are traditionally not held as private property, since people associate land with spiritual and temporal agencies who are considered to be the "owners", "masters", or "stewards" of the land from which people live. Regular seasonal movement within a familiar landscape requires reestablishing relations with the "owners" of a locality each time upon arrival at summer or winter pastures, because after people leave a place (a year ago or even longer) it becomes to a certain extent "alienated". People should remind the spirits about themselves and renew their ties with this segment of homeland by holding certain "home making" rituals.

Detailed descriptions of these rituals are found in the writings of the Mongolian ethnographer G. Tserenhand (1993) and the Russian ethnographer of Buriad origin, Klara Basaeva (1998). They explain that movement from the winter encampment to summer pasture was highly ritualised. It included several "blocks" of rituals. These are enacted at the moments of departure, arrival at the new place, marking a "chosen" place as already reserved (*geriin on avakh*), rituals of worshiping and symbolic "payment" to local spirits (*ejen*, masters of the land) for the right to use their territory, rituals of "feeding" the master of the fire place in the newly erected *ger*, etc. Actually, moving away and separating from one encampment means homecoming to another encampment.

In the cyclic seasonal movement between at least two homes – summer encampment *zuhalan* and winter encampment *übeljöön*[5] – the latter was perceived as the main and more "fixed" one. Severe winter conditions required herders to locate winter encampments at secure places: less windy with low snow cover and pastures for different types of domestic livestock. Standing wooden fences (*khashaar*) to keep cattle warm and secure from wind and wolves, the wooden winter *ger*[6] and horse tethering pole (*serge*) all marked the territory as someone's permanent place of residence, even if the family left it temporarily for summer camp(s). Winter encampments with permanent constructions stand closer to one another and are more compact, organising a group of kin families into a small settlement (*ail*).

In general, the orbital trajectory could be widened and narrowed depending on environmental conditions (draught, plague, etc.) and other circumstances, such as war, land disputes between pasture claimants, or when the expanded clan divided into several lineages. In these cases, the trajectory could be changed. People searching for new pastures (or a more peaceful place) could move to another orbit, where a foreign landscape could be again "domesticated" and transformed into a new homeland using these rituals. An additional set of rituals was used for settling if the family arrived at a completely new place. This ritual was a sort of "transplanting" of the homeland to the new settlement. In Buriad folk practice the separating group carried with them some stones from their natal *oboo* at the parental *nutag* and put them into the foundation of the worshiping site at the new location.

Ethnographic literature provides some descriptions of this practice among different groups of Buriads. For example, Taras Mikhailov (2004) writes that groups of Ekhirit Buriads that have moved to a new place would take stones from the *oboo* on Baitog mountain, where, as people believe, a powerful local spirit resides. At their new settlement, they would erect a cairn using the stones, thus creating a substitute of Baitog *oboo* at the new place and keeping lineage succession (Mikhailov 2004). Buriad refugee-migrants followed the same traditional practice when they arrived. As I was told in Dashbalbar, migrants brought with them stones from their

5 Interesting comparison between pastoral herding and sailing activities have been made (Chabros 1988; Pedersen 2007). It is suggested that movement between pastures is not perceived as movement; even though there is a change in the surrounding landscape as *ger* and its contents remain the same.

6 Buriads used to build winter wooden *ger* a shape of seven/eight wall yurt or Russian style wooden houses. Felt yurt in which family lived during the summer was built inside the wooden carcass of *ger*, thus making it much warmer in winter.

nutag and put them into the base of the Buddhist temple that the newcomers erected near their settlement at River Jarakhei. Another example from Shenehen tells us that newcomers "adopted" a local *oboo* which had been worshiped by local Evenkis before the Buriads arrived. They put some stones, brought from the homeland, into the existing construction of the *oboo* at Bain Khaanei mountain.

Nevertheless, individual practice could differ from group practice. One family history from Bayan-Uul in Mongolia tells how a Buriad son accomplished his father's last will – to return a little piece of gray stone back to the *oboo* at Budalan mountain at his father's *nutag* on the Russian side. The son, who is today a famous Mongolian poet and representative of the diaspora's second generation, was only able to visit his father's natal village, Suduntui, at the end of the 1990s, when he himself was 70 years old. He found his relatives in the village and told them the amazing story of his father who, just before he escaped, had grabbed at a gallop a piece of stone from the local *oboo* and fled. He carried it on his body when he was hiding for two years in the forest from Mongolian soldiers, who, on Soviet Russia's order, were hunting for "counter-revolutionaries" who had escaped from Russian territory. He kept it with him after he was caught, sentenced to prison, and sent to dig fortification ditches on the Mongolian border with Manchukuo in the 1930s, when he was wounded during the Japanese Kwantung army air attack on the frontier, and when he was released from the prison after Stalin's death in the mid 1950s and returned to his wife in Bayan-Uul. Probably it was his individual choice that he did not want to be "rooted" in exile, because he kept this piece of stone hoping that one day he would go back to his *nutag*. Perhaps he kept it with him as a sacred object, as a "piece of home", as a protective symbol that tied him to his homeland. By bringing this piece of stone back to his father's homeland, the son symbolically completed his father's life trajectory, returning him to the place where he was born.

Engagement with local spirits upon arrival to a new place required a ritual donation to local masters (*gazarai ejen*). Before building a new house (*buusa*), a vessel (*bumba*) was filled with precious and valuable things (silver coins, pieces of coral, etc.) depending on the wealth of the family, and buried. This symbolically bought the permission of the masters to reside at this place. After this moment the site was considered occupied and it belonged to the family, with the right to pass it on down the patrilineal line. One of our family legends concerns the maternal grandfather of my

father, who was a skillful *darkhan* (blacksmith). When the family prepared to move, he took with him only his instruments. He stored pieces of gold and silver somewhere at his *buusa*, thinking that one day he would be back, but he never returned. In 2006, his son, now at an advanced age, travelled to his father's *buusa* from Dashbalbar, to where the family had migrated. He was impressed to see how spacious the old *buusa*, now covered by nettle bushes, must have been. When I visited my uncle a couple of years ago, he joked that during severe economic crises in Mongolia in the 1990s, he often dreamed of finding the family's legendary "hidden treasure" and becoming rich. Yet when he journeyed to his father *buusa*, he took nothing. When I asked him why, he said that taking things away from the *buusa* now, when they had been stored for so many years, could make the *gazarai ejen* angry: he didn't want to disturb them.

Buriad migrants in exile used traditional technique of "creating" home at the new place, a technique based on long existing pastoralist tradition and practice of regular migrations between seasonal pastures. One could even suggest that for Buriads migration to Mongolia was not exile, that it was just an extension of their orbital trajectory, especially since Aga Buriads previously used to move within large tracks of land in extensive nomadic pastoralism. Indeed, some of them living near the border with Mongolia used to cross it and temporarily camp on the other side at summer pastures, but they were always free to return for winter residence. The tragedy of Buriad migration and what actually constitutes this group as a diaspora, to my mind, appears to be in people's emotions and feelings about the sudden traumatic separation from their families and close kin, when strictly sealed state borders extinguished the hope of returning to *nutag, toonto nutag* and other worshiping places on the other side of the border. Political upheavals in the region and Soviet-style campaigns of persecuting "counter-revolutionary elements" both in Russia and in the host countries (China, Mongolia) made this group of people feel unwelcome everywhere. The people in the diaspora attempt to explain the sense of catastrophic deprivation by saying "Losing the homeland, we lost everything" (*nutaga aldaad bükhiigöö aldabdi*).

The feeling that they had "crossed the borderline" of normal life and have to survive in a strange apocalyptical world was formulated in a self-reflective explanation: life in exile in *khari nutag* was not a real life. Rather, it was a strange existence in an inverted world where, as in a cracked mirror, everything went in the wrong way and all engagements with the world and objects were not

correct. In diaspora tales, life in exile is described as life on the "wrong side" (*buruu tala*) and done in a "wrong way" (*buruu*): as if they milk cows from the "wrong side" or saddle and mount horses also from the "wrong side".

Through decades and lines of separation: practice of legal, illegal and imagined border crossing

Techniques of border crossing mean not only going away but also coming back, like the "nomadising" that used to be practiced in the frontier area. Despite state policies to divide and to control land and people, local inhabitants – especially if they belong to an ethnic group separated by state borders – generate local knowledge and cultural practices of how to keep borders "open" and how to go through this "slightly complicated door". In this section I will describe how Buriad migrants challenged strictly sealed Russian-Chinese and Russian–Mongolian border to visit their kin on other side. It is mostly based on oral histories of separated families, and it shows how they see acts of border crossing both as it was done *physically* (legally or illegally from the point of view of official border crossing regime) and *in an imaginary way,* via occasional messengers who could bring oral messages, short letters, pictures, little gifts and even spiritual messages received through special shamanic rituals.

Oral histories present different stories of migration, depending on the time, locality and other circumstances of the flight. Some groups of families prepared their migration well. Firstly they sent rangers (*türüüchul*) to search for suitable and under-populated pastures across the border. They managed to take the livestock bit by bit and to send some men of the family to prepare encampments for arrival of the rest of the family, elders, children and other belongings. Other families fled in a hurry, saving their lives from mass red-terror execution and not able to take anything with them. One elder describes her childhood memories, how she and her parents passed by the emptied neighboring village of Tokchin:

> Everything was disemboweled (*zadarkhai*), empty houses, unfastened doors and gates, wooden chests (*khanza*) thrown away empty (*angarkhai*), family belongings thrown everywhere and cattle unattended. It was very frightening (*aya güi*) to be there (Dolgor, 95 years, Uzon, Russia, 2008).

Groups of mobile armed horsemen were able to cross border regularly, hiding from the border patrols, whose service was disorganised during the civil war in the 1920s. When border control tightened in the 1930s, open

crossing became impossible, but still "courageous people" (*berkheshuul*) continued to cross the border through secret mountain and forest passes at night to visit their families. Some locals in Suduntui used to joke that the wife of their neighbor, who fled to Mongolia during the civil war, continued to give birth to children until the moment her husband was caught and killed by a border patrol. Families were separated in different ways. Manlai explained an episode of separation from her husband's family,

> My father-in-law was a rich man from Borzya. After he moved to Shenehen he came back several times to carry his family over the border. But I was the only daughter of my parents and refused to move away following my in-laws (*khadam*). Who could take care of my parents if I left them? Father-in-law came at night and cursed me loudly because I again refused to join him. Later I heard that he was caught by the GPU[7] and died in prison. I was also locked in prison because they thought that I kept contacts with my in-laws and other *bodkhul* (those who resisted and fled) people. But I was from a poor family, and our neighbor Dugar, who worked for Communists, helped me to escape the punishment. Soon I got married again. In the 1980s I went to Shenehen to visit my other relatives and saw there my former in-laws. They still blame me for the death of their father…(Manlai, 99 years old, Suduntui, Russia, 2009)

Almost all Buriad families along both sides of the border experienced human tragedies. Numa was left with her grandparents when she was only two years old. Her parents settled in Bayan-Uul and later wanted to bring her there, but she was a sickly child and the grandparents preferred to keep her with them. Once, when Numa became dangerously sick, the shaman explained that the child's spirit regularly flies away to see her mother, who missed her so much that the spirit might leave Numa's exhausted body to be reborn again in the parents' family. As Numa explains the situation now, the shaman turned into an animal (*amitan*) and ran over the border to pass her mother a message that she should not miss her daughter so much, and that other children would be born to their family soon. Numa remembers that from time to time her parents sent her occasional gifts, like pieces of pressed sugar cane, with messengers:

> These pieces were all dark from sack dust, and when I ate it, it had the flavor of tobacco (*makhorka*). Who knows, who risked their life to bring it to me from so far? Now I have more relatives in Bayan-Uul than here. My parents had six children there, they all live well, have their own families with many children.

7 GPU was a special department of NKVD, the Soviet secret police from 1922 until 1934.

> Now they have dispersed all over Mongolia. At first I received message from them in the 1960s, when our *Voroshilov kolhoz* was allowed to send working brigades to cut hay across the border on the Mongolian side. People found each other there and sent me letters. Now when I go to visit them, they treat me with respect (*höö l bolodog*). "Our Mongols" (*manai Mongolchuud*) [this is how she calls her siblings and their children] came here in the 1990s and we went to the *toonto nutag* of our parents. (Numa, 85 years old, Uzon, Russia, 2008)

Although separated by state boundaries people still felt an obligation to visit and to support their parents and elders across the border, especially during celebration of Sagaalgan (lunar New Year) or other communal celebrations. If the border was closed and snow cover would reveal their footprints, people invented special tricks to avoid detection by the border patrol. Some attached deer hooves to their snow shows, while others fitted their shoe soles backwards, so that the patrol would start hunting in the wrong direction.

Illegal border crossing was a "cat-and-mouse" game that was deadly dangerous. Yet people responded to the oppressive situation with irony and sarcasm. One "humorous" story tells how a young husband decided, together with other young people, to visit elder kin during Sagaalgan, according to tradition. The wife collected presents for the parents into a sack, and the husband went away. The group was caught at the border and sentenced to prison. Only twenty years later did the husband return to his wife; he had survived in a *gulag* camp somewhere in northern Kazakhstan, was released during the "years of Khruschev's Thaw" and went back to his parental village on the Russian side in the mid 1950s. He again illegally crossed the border, this time to see his wife on the Mongolian side. At the moment when he opened the door, his wife was busy cooking something. When she saw him at the entrance she said, "Are you back? You've been celebrating New Year holidays (*sagaalgakh*) with your relatives for a long time…" The attraction of this story is its special way of making tragic events into an object of comedy. It plays around wife-husband relations, about relations between parents-in-law and daughter-in-law, and evokes classical fables of a wandering hero and his adventures. It also reveals the true technologies people used to cross the border. The story has the underlying context that people in fact crossed the border when they needed to, and this is just a story about one man who was unfortunate.

The pain of separation found an outlet for suppressed emotions in Buriad lyrics. The song "*Ütakhan Ononei erie deeguur*" (Beside the long Onon River) recalls a woman dreaming of flying as a bird to cross the Onon river, an allegorical symbol of separation, to meet her beloved. In Soviet official discourse, this song was considered to be a longing song about Buriad soldiers

who had been sent to fight against the fascists during World War II far away to the west. But women sang the song much earlier, before the war started, and they sang about men who departed to the south, not to the west. Many women continued to wait for decades for their husbands and sons to return home.

One story from my maternal grandmother (*nagasa-eji*) Dari-Tsyren and her mother Balma represents the human tragedies of many separated families. As many Buriad Cossacks were involved in the anti-Bolshevik movement in Eastern Siberia, people from Uzon village crossed the Mongolian border in early spring of 1922 to join troops of the warlord Ataman Semenov in Hulun Buir. As my great-grandmother's caravan crossed the Onon river near Ul'hun border pass, there was the sound of a machine gun firing, and part of the caravan turned back in panic to hide in the forest. Balma, who was pregnant with Dari-Tsyren, was separated from her husband, who was at the head of the caravan. Her husband's part of the caravan, which safely crossed the border, settled in Mongolian Bayin-Uul not far from the border, while her part being cut off from the head of the caravan had to return to Uzon on the Russian side. As she grew up, Dari-Tsyren never talked about her father and even denied his existence, claiming that she was the daughter of a single mother. She even registered herself as "Balmaeva" – a surname derived from her mother's name.

Dari-Tsyren's personal response to family disaster was to be silent about her lost father and his relatives. For her, having witnessed decades of political repressions against so called "counter-revolutionaries" and members of their families, it was the only way to survive. She revealed some information about her father only recently under pressure of shamans, who requested this information from her in order to "improve" the life of her children and grandchildren. As *nagasa-eji* told us, her mother Balma never saw her husband again, but every evening she rode a horse to the road to wait and see whether a man would appear on the horizon. She waited for him for the rest of her life and did not marry again[8].

Other families tried to relieve the pain of separation by imagining symbolical meetings with kin; it was believed that staring at the full moon would allow communication between relatives. As the daughters of Erdem-Belig remember, when they saw their father for the last time at the end of the

8 Several years ago we found that Dari-Tsyren's father finally had reached Hulun Buir. A few elders in Buriad community in Hulun Buir still remembered him; according to them he suddenly disappeared in the mid 1930s. Some GPU files now open to the public reveal the role of informants within Buriad exile community in helping GPU agents to "kidnap" Dari-Tsyren's father from Hailar. He was later killed in a Soviet prison for his "counter-revolutionary" activities.

1920s, he told them, "Look at the full moon every fifteenth day of the month and think as if we see and talk to each other" (quoted from Balzhinimaeva 2012: 8). At that time there was no postal service and no telephone calls. The official atmosphere of paranoia about "foreign spies" created a situation of general suspicion. The fact that someone had relatives abroad was already a crime, and the family would fall into the social category of "untrustworthy". Photographs and letters occasionally received from abroad would be destroyed and the names of relatives there could not even be whispered aloud. In public discourse people in exile were more dead than alive. All of these acts can be seen as violations of memory on an individual level.

Neighbours often informed on each other because of some personal antipathy, jealousy or desire for revenge. It was not so much having relatives abroad (almost everybody had then) but keeping contacts with them that was seen as a reason for informing and accusations. One family told me that their father, having been frightened by regular visits of the KGB secret service in the 1960s and 1970s, burned letters from his brother, who had moved to Inner Mongolian Shenehen. When his wife asked him, "Why don't you read them first?", his answer was "There's no need (*khereg ügi*) to know; it can be dangerous for us". This man felt that he was not even safe holding the information inside his head. The paranoia of the state produced a general atmosphere of fear, and this man seemed to have lost confidence in his ability to maintain a barrier between the inside and outside worlds. A sense of his own permeability, and total state control over his private life, made him feel afraid. The act of publicly burning letters, with his wife and son as witnesses, was done to reassure himself that not only he but also his family members would be more secure without knowing this information.

Other families had a different attitude and preserved their private narratives, letters and pictures hidden "at the bottom of the chest"[9]:

> Around the 1960s I received a letter from my elder sister from Shenehen. She sent me a picture of my mother and my sister's daughter Tuya (Fig. 1) who was born there. But I could not read it, because it was written in old Mongolian script. In Soyuz [the Soviet Union] we learned Cyril writing [Cyrillic script].

9 In Mongolian nomadic culture a chest (*khanza*) was a piece of transportable furniture provided with a length of adult dress (*degel*), where family keep all seasonal cloth and other valuable belongings. In this type of usage of the chest acquired an additional allegorical character linked with chronology and layers of memory. Upper layers contain everyday objects which are more often in use. Deeper strata often hide more precious and personally valuable things.

I heard that one repressed lama returned from *gulag* prison back to Tsogto-Khangil [a neighbouring village about 20 km away]. Only he could read my letter, because other people couldn't read old Mongolian script. So one evening I rode my horse to his house. He read it to me, but also said not to show this letter to anybody and to burn it. I did not burn it and kept it at the bottom of my chest (*khanza*). I also kept some other letters that I received through "people's hands" from time to time, but I was afraid to show them to anyone. Even if I couldn't read them, anyway I was happy, that they remembered me, that they were alive and in good condition. I embraced the letter, cried, stroked the pages with my hand, and dreamed as if we were all together again, as if I went to see her over the border to Shenehen, as if she came to see me. When my sister came to *nutag* from China in the 1980s for the first time after 60 years to visit me (Fig. 2), with her daughter Tuya, I opened my chest, took out her letters and asked her to read all of them, that she had written to me in the last twenty years (Sanjit, 87 years old, Aginskoye, Russia, 2008).

Fig. 1 Photographic evidence sent by Sanjit's relatives to inform her that they are alive in exile. Hailar (Inner Mongolia, China), 1960s.

Fig. 2 Family reunion. Sanjit and her elder sister from Shenehen. (Aginskoye, Russia, end of 1980s).

The border-crossing regime in the late Soviet period, especially the Soviet-Mongolian part of the border, was relaxed compared to the Soviet-Chinese border, which remained strictly sealed until the end of the 1980s. Some people were allowed to cross the border, but not everyone. There were a number of special Soviet-Mongolian border regulations, which infiltrated categories of people who could cross into the frame of the official Soviet-Mongolian friendship treaties. Alexei Yurchak (2006) raises the question: what was the nature of the late Soviet system and way of life that had this paradox at its core? Exploring the period between mid-1950s and the mid-1980s, he criticises the prevailing binary characterisation of Soviet life produced in the west and later in the former Soviet Union and responds to the earlier argument of Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (2000), that in these societies, "*… [r]ather than any clear-cut 'us' versus 'them' or 'private' versus 'public', there was a ubiquitous self-embedding or interweaving of these categories*". But he also comments on their underlying assumption that socialism was based on a complex web of immoralities: "[Gal and Kligman] claim that '… everyone to some extent [was]complicit in the system of patronage, lying, theft, hedging and duplicity of thought which the system operated', and that often even 'intimates, family members and friends informed on each

other'" (Yurchak 2006: 24). Caroline Humphrey (1994) pointed out that the state and state institutions in socialism were not defined as separate from the people or the public sphere, but incorporated everyone, top to bottom, through complex, multiple, and shifting "nesting" hierarchies consecutively embedded like Russian dolls. The following stories present vivid examples of what kind of "immoralities" people had to face if they wanted to visit a homeland across the border, and how relations based on ethnicity and kinship needed to be hidden and concealed.

It was a common practice in the Soviet block states to set up "brother capitals", "brother towns" and even "brother state farms". Uzon village, officially named *kolhoz Voroshilova*,[10] was considered to be one of the best and most "progressive" (Rus. *peredovoi*) collective farms in the Chita region. The Mongolian village across the border, Bayan-Uul, became a "brother collective farm". In this official partnership the Mongolian village was the "mentee" (Rus. *podshefnyi*) while the village from the Soviet side acted as the "mentor" patronising partner (Rus. *shefskii*) in the official discourse of Soviet-Mongolian relations. Ironically, Bayan-Uul, a hundred kilometers away from Uzon, had been established by Buriad emigrants who had fled from Uzon and the neighboring villages Tokchin and Alhanai. In official discourse, these "brother state farms" were local symbols of Soviet-Mongolian friendship, and examples of how Soviets provided economic and social help to Mongols. But in private and individual discourse "Mongols" from the Mongolian side and "Soviets" from the Russian side were all connected within a net of related kin groups. To illustrate how official, private and individual categories were mixed at the local level, I use the story of a retired Communist Party functionary, Lodoi, who was the Chairman of the Uzon collective farm during the 1970–80s:

> Visits from Bayan-Uul, our Mongol *podshefnii kolhoz* were arranged and controlled by the *okruzhnoi partkom* [district Communist party committee in Aginskoye distric center]. They gave me instructions on how to make a good reception for Mongolian guests. We, a group of *parthozaktive noyod* [Rus.*parthozactiv* local party and administration activists; Bur. *noyod* bosses] usually went to meet the Mongol delegation at the nearest Russian border pass not far from here, at Ul'hun. But you know, the Head of Bayan-Uul Somon in Mongolia at that time was my cousin Jamso. We knew that we were *brother-relatives* (*akha-duu*). He was one of the sons of my father's elder brother Ausha. I found Ausha in 1961. At that time our *kolhoz* was allowed

10 Kliment Voroshilov was one of Stalin's comrade-in-arms.

> to send work brigades to Mongolia to cut hay in the frontier area according to the Soviet-Mongolian Border Cooperation Agreement. Buriads there one by one contacted us and asked about their relatives. They all were from our *nutag* (*manai nutagei zon*). I asked them about my uncle Ausha, they told me that he lives in *Eren*, not far from them. I went to *Eren* and found him. He cried and wailed [Bur. *uyeraa-baria*] that all his life he hid the fact that he had relatives in Soyus [Soviet Union]. Only later he told his sons about us. So, you see Jamso was a son of my uncle Ausha. Usually Jamso came as a member of Mongolian delegations, also with some important Khalkh Mongols from the Aimag center. We greeted each other, but Jamso spoke only Khalkh Mongol like the whole Mongol delegation or Russian with other Russians from Chita [the regional capital city]. What a time! We did not dare even to talk to each other [with Jamso] openly in Buriad language. As Chairman of the kolkhoz I had a 'state Volga' car.[11] Once after an official meeting I invited Jamso with Mongolian guests to the riverside to have an unofficial party there. While others were busy drinking and eating, I briefly asked Jamso about Ausha-*ahai* and other family related things. It was really strange time (*jigte sag*)! But I also denied that I had relatives abroad in all official papers and forms. I also denied that I was 'kulak spawn' [Rus. *kulatskoe otrodie* or Bur. *muu zonei ulegdel*], even if the whole *kolhoz* knew that my parents were repressed and other relatives lived in Mongolian Bayan-Uul (Lodoi, 78 years old, Uzon, Russia, 2008).

Even if Lodoi expresses his surprise at the conditions of the time, as a local functionary he understood very well how to combine his individual needs with official tasks. He used official visits to go to Mongolia and found time for his personal wish to find his relatives there. As an official functionary he lied and denied that he had relatives abroad. As an individual, he kept memories of his family and tried to maintain relations with them. He also understood why his relatives did not dare to openly reveal that they were his kin or speak Buriad among accompanying Khalkh Mongols, because Buryats in Mongolia were still the object of latent ethnic discrimination from the Khalkh majority. Lodoi also understands why Russian language was the only language of official communication during meetings with Mongols, because it was the language of transmitting the official Soviet ideology and the language of the Soviet ruling elite. In his story he calls them *obkome orod* (Russians from the regional party committee). His story is an interesting example of attempts to keep up individual family relationships under an official pressure to cut these ties.

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11 "State Volgas" were government-owned cars usually used by party functionaries. These cars were seen as luxury means of transportation and owing a personal "Volga" (light vehicle produced at the Volga car plant VAZ) signified success and a privileged official position.

Oral history tends to reveal the underside of political and social changes in neighboring countries. People's stories show that so many things in their lives at individual and collective levels were dependent on international politics, relations between neighboring countries and internal politics. Retired Chinese Communist Party (CCP) functionary Namdak, remembers that he came to Aginskoye for the first time in 1986 as a member of the first official Chinese delegation from neighboring Hulun Buir. By that time the Soviet Union and China had signed an agreement to develop Soviet-Chinese Border Cooperation, and for the first time a Chinese delegation came to Chita region. Namdak had been *darga* (boss) of Baruun Somon (Hulun Buir, Inner Mongolia) for fifteen years, and his *somon* was one of the leading districts in Inner Mongolia for agricultural production and cattle breeding. The Soviet partners invited the Chinese delegation to visit one of the best collective farms, *kolkhoz* "Pobeda" (Victory), which was in the Aginskoye district. The head of this Buriad *kolkhoz* at that time was someone named Majeev. Surrounded by Chinese and Russian officials and translators, Namdak and Majeev had a very formal conversation about agricultural productivity, comparing how much grain they obtained from one hectare of land, herd average milk yield, etc. Only on the third day of the official visit, when they were away from the Chinese and Russian officials, Namdak confided to Majeev that he was also a Buriad and started speaking Buriad language with him. He said that his relative's *nutag* was not far away in a village named Borzya. As Namdak remembers, Majeev's first reaction was very contained: he just gave a sign to wait and called someone. Obviously he needed to organise a time and place to meet and speak freely without Russian and Chinese attendants. Majeev organised a private meeting with Namdak on the pretext of an official visit to a sheep herder's farm, and put his people to check the road so that no one could come close to the farm during their semi-secret meeting. Because it was the time of an alcohol prohibition campaign in Russia (s*ukhoi zakon* or "dry law"), as Namdak remembers, Majeev showed him how to drink pure alcohol by pouring some water on top, and "…we cheered our meeting and spent all night drinking and singing Buriad songs." (Namdak, 76 years old, Manzhouli, China, 2008).

The end of the Soviet era again brought new complexities for the Buriad diaspora – starting from the 1990s, an open border crossing regime between China, Russian and Mongolia gave new "transnational" opportunities for the children of Buriad immigrants. Their ties with the ancestral homeland *nutag* and parental *toonto nutag* across the border were regenerated and

also revised (see Chapter 10 in this volume). Frequent border crossing is increasingly linking the kin-majority and kin-minority, constituting them nowadays as a single cross border transnational ethnic group. The common social phenomenon of ethnic revival in post-Soviet space challenged all groups of Buriads, both those living at home (in Russian Eastern Siberia) and those in diasporas, with decisions about re-identifying their relations with the Mongol world, or their ethnic origin with the Buriad lineages, and this again raises the controversial and confusing question: what and where is the Buriad *nutag*?

Movement across the border as movement between homelands

Children of immigrant parents constitute a diaspora's second generation, and their life in the receiving society, as recent research on transnational communities has shown (Levitt and Waters 2002), cannot be adequately understood without reference to their ancestral background. The general observation is that only a small proportion of the second and third generations is involved in transnational activities and keeps social contacts with the homeland. In the Buriad case these generations face an interesting paradox in that the ancestral *nutag* is now accessible, and border crossing is no longer illegal. However, only a small part of such diaspora communities have decided to return to their parental *nutag*.[12]

If the idea of the homeland return was the main consolidating ideology of the generation of their parents, the next generation already feels rooted in the host society. Most of them see it as their new homeland and another *nutag*. Nevertheless, Buriads "anchored" at a different *nutag* (in Mongolia or in Inner Mongolia) still feel strong attachment to the parental homeland. The first homeland trip of the second generation in the descriptions of my informants is filled with overwhelming emotional stress and pain concerning the fate of their parents as people who "suffered greatly"

12 Statistics shows that starting from the 1990s around five hundred Buriads repatriated from China and only hundred from Mongolia: www.infpol.ru/news/670/66574.php?sphrase_id=206191 (accessed 31.5.2011). Personally I have observed that only a five-members family from Mongolian Bayan-Uul returned to their parental village Uzon. The pattern of movement across the border is more complicated in the case of Buriads from China. Many families after repatriating to Russia in the 1990s, returned to China in the 2000s due to the many factors connected with the tightening of citizenship rules in Russia and with growing economic opportunities in China.

(*zobohon zon*). They realise that the narratives of their parents, the stories about their childhood and beautiful homeland are all true. The process of learning about their family history and reestablishing ties with their kin at the ancestral *nutag* in fact brings into existence dual lives; it changes the life trajectories of all groups of kin on both sides of the border.

Many families have been separated not only by the Russian-Chinese or Russian-Mongolian border, but also by the Chinese-Mongolian border: that is why quite often the second generation expands their quest for family members into three countries. The life story of Gulgon is an interesting illustration of this phenomenon. Gulgon's father was a child when his family moved from Suduntui in Russia through eastern Mongolia to Shenehen in Inner Mongolia. The child became seriously ill during the long journey and his parents left him in Mongolia with a childless Khalkha family not far from the *Altan Emel* border pass between Mongolia and China. When Gulgon's father grew up he moved to the Buriad settlement of Dashbalbar (Mongolia) and brought his adoptive Khalkha parents with him. In 1990, the first Chinese border traders came to Dashbalbar and one of them, a woman from Inner Mongolia, started asking people about Gulgon's father. Gulgon contacted her and found out that she was his cousin – the granddaughter of his grandparents who had moved to Shenehen. Around that time relatives of Gulgon's wife Dimid came to Dashbalbar from Aginskoe in Russia searching for their kin in Mongolia. As Gulgon jokes now, suddenly he and his wife Dimid became "rich in relatives" (*türel bayin*), both in Soyuz and in China.

Now Gulgon and his wife are busy traveling regularly between different *nutags* (Fig. 3): the *nutag* of their parents in Buryatia (Russia) and the *nutag* of his relatives in China. Wedding ceremonies and jubilees happen frequently among extended family members across the borders of three countries. Gulgon's children also joined the "transnational field" by choosing to study at a Chinese university in Hohhot under the supervision of his relatives there, while one son studies in Ulan-Ude (Russia) and lives with a family of Dimid's relatives there. Her relatives from Aginskoe decided to send their children to study in Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia), arguing that the future of their children should be secured by living among Mongols who have "their own independent state" (*ööriin güren*). In their opinion, all Buriads came to Russian territory from Mongolia several centuries ago, and Mongolia is the real homeland of all Buriad-Mongols. They say, "… in earlier times Buriads came to their present *nutag* from the south, travelling northwards following the Onon river (*Onon goloo dakhaad*)". This widespread folk notion can be related to Bulag's research into the common identity of all Mongol peoples.

Fig. 3 Gulgon and his wife Dimid (both in Mongol dress) during one of the homeland visits to Buryatia accompanied with their kin (Ivolginski Buddhist temple near Ulan-Ude, Russia, spring 2010)

The notion that Mongolia is the ancient and present homeland for Buriads was discussed among Buriads not only during the 1990s, in the first flourishing of Buriad ethnic revival after the fall of the Soviet system, but also more recently, from 2005 onwards. Recent political processes in

Russia – in which the two ethnically defined Buriad autonomous districts (the *okrugs* of Ust'-Orda in Irkutsk region and Aginskii in Chita region) were dissolved into (or "unified") into the larger territories surrounding them in 2008 – were emotionally distressing for all groups of Buriads living in Russia and abroad[13]. Discussions on popular Buriad websites (possible only on the Internet due to the total control of the public media in Russia) have raised the old issues of Russian colonialism and the tragic Buriad experience of colonial encroachment. Here I quote some comments made during the discussion, which show that the ethnic majority (or at least part of it) regard themselves as potential emigrants, ready to move away to join other Buriads if the next stage of Russia's "internal colonization" proves too hard to bear, just as Buryat migrants did almost a century ago: "Now Buriads from Irkutsk region are moving to Buryatia. If Buryatia merges with Irkutsk, where can we escape to – return to Mongolia?"; "*Again* to leave our native land in search for our survival?" and "Shall we look for Buriad stability *again* in the Mongol world?"[14].

The obvious parallels between the earlier colonial and present-day situations have aroused interest among the kin majority in the history of the Buriad emigration to Mongolia and China, and in life there at present. The mutual cultural rediscovery of the Buriad kin-majority and the diasporic kin-minority has produced discussions about where true "Buriatness" is better preserved, and about whether or not the kin-majority in Russia are still holders of Buriad traditions, even if they live at the main homeland. After trips to parental villages across the border, the second generation diaspora strongly criticise the kin-majority for losing and even betraying Buriad identity in favour of "Russification". This period of discussion coincided with my field work in diaspora communities in eastern Mongolia, and people there criticised their kin in the Buriad homeland for not being able to resist the political reorganisation. They were blamed for their lack of courage in standing up for their right to ethnic autonomy, for their "sheep-like" (*khonin shendi*) obedience to the Russians and the Russian state. In conversation with me (as one of the "kin-majority") they expressed sorrow about this situation, saying, "You also have lost your homeland (*nutagaa aldaat*), as happened with our parents before".

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13 More about details of the dissolution of the Buriad Okrugs are available in the field report by K. Graber and J. Long (2009).

14 http://www.buryatia.org and http://www.erkhe.narod.ru (accessed on 13.4.2007). Emphasis added.

Personally, I had the impression that the second generation has a feeling of discontinuity between their imagined idealised homeland, which was cultivated by their parents, and the present day situation in Russia where their kin-majority lives. It seems that Buriad territories in Russia differ greatly from the homeland they imagined. This leads to the paradoxical situation that the diaspora second generation is rejecting their parental homeland. The Mongolian journalist Jambaliin Ganga, a native of the Dashbalbar Buriad community in Eastern Mongolia, describes his ambiguous feelings on visiting his parental homeland in Aginskoe when, as a member of a Mongolian delegation, he was invited to the official celebration in Aginskoe of the merger with Chita region:

> [You] feel the fear of [the Russian] Empire at every step. It looks like [local] Buriads consider Russians to be superior. [That is why Buriads want to] speak Russian better than Russians, drink more than Russians, and [they] deny their [Mongolian] origin, even if they have higher cheekbones than us Mongols. [In the presence of Russians] they wanted to demonstrate that they have nothing in common with Mongols.
>
> …Finally, we are witnessing how the last Buriad has been wrapped in a big Russian patchwork blanket and disappeared underneath. There is no Aga anymore on the map. When we were driving back to the Mongolian border I heard someone starting to sing an old song of Buryat [migrants]: "The homeland (*nutag*) of Khori Buriads is covered by white fog, [we] cannot return from the foreign land (*khari nutag*) and [our] eyes are full of tears and misery" (*Khori buriadiin nutag duuran tsagan manantai, khari nutagiin busakhagui düüren düüren nulimaste*). A [border guard] Russian soldier with a Kalashnikov [gun] led us to the border pass, and the song was not heard anymore. Goodbye, my Khori Buriad [land] which became foreign (*khari*) to me! (*Bayartai, khari bolohon khori buriadamni*) (Zhambaliin Ganga, 2008).[15]

Conclusion

The modern nation state borders that strictly delineated the territories of China, Russia and Mongolia have influenced the fate of Buriads in many different ways. From one point of view, these territories formed Buriads into a distinctive ethnic group, which evolved over several centuries in Eastern Siberia, separate from the rest of the Mongol world. From another point of view, various border crossing practices during the twentieth century allowed

15 http://buryat-mongolia.info/?p=437 (accessed 17.6.2009).

Buriads to sustain kinship ties as one united group, despite political isolation and strictly sealed state borders. And finally, in the post-Soviet era, borders also constitute Buriads as differently positioned groups in relation to Mongol identity. It seems that the new transborder dimension reveals a contradictory situation: the Buriad kin minority which lives in Mongolia in reality belongs to the larger Mongol-majority, and this means that Mongolia not Buryatia is more likely to be considered as the "kin-state" for Buriads. In this situation "return homecoming" can mean not only the return of the kin-minority to Buriad parental villages on the Russian side, but also homecoming practices of Buriads from China and Russia to Mongolia, where their Buriad kin live in a Mongolian speaking and culturally Mongolian surrounding as distinct from the largely Russified Buryatia or Sinicised Inner Mongolia.

Recently increasing movement across the borders has been connected not only to homeland visits but also labor migration and various economic activities in border regions. Uncertainty about the different notions of a Buriad homeland *nutag* (whether historical, parental, or the actual place of birth) is not so important any more for the diaspora second generation. Transborder mobility is perceived more as movement between different segments of one large homeland, in which everyone is free to return to one's chosen "main" encampment. This situation recalls the way things were before borders went up, when *nutag* was not dissected by lines of separation.