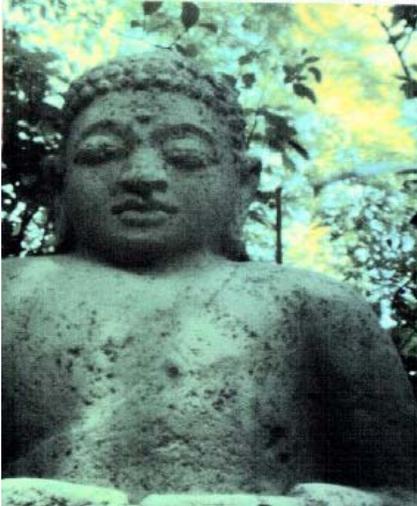


Book Review

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Book Review

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One of the most remarkable aspects of the religious history of Asia has been the diffusion of various forms of Buddhism from their cradle in India into Tibet, China, Mongolia, Manchuria, Korea, Japan, and Siberia. During their extraordinary march, these various schools of Buddhism interacted with indigenous systems of shamanism, animism and fertility cults in those host societies, and absorbed many of their rituals into their own systems. The result of this interaction was the emergence of complex hybrids and modified forms of Buddhism, which themselves later travelled into the adjacent lands of Central and Northeast Asia and Siberia. While there is a vast literature about the diffusion of Buddhism into Central and Northeast Asia, Bělka's work is an important contribution to the scholarly literature about the spread of Buddhism into Siberia, especially Buryatia.

Bělka's work is based on solid research carried out in 1993, 1994 and 2000, during which he lived in various monasteries, interviewed monks as well as Russian state officials, and studied pertinent manuscripts *in situ* as well as in the archives in St. Petersburg and Moscow. His command of the languages went a long way toward enabling him to

pursue his research project in the field. Proceeding from the results of his fieldwork and his research in the archives, the author proposes a new six-stage periodization of the evolution of Buddhism in Buryatia, organizing his book accordingly.

Bělka's first stage is the penetration of Buddhism from Tibet and Mongolia into the regions east of Lake Baikal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Describing the second stage, the author explains how the Tsarist Government recognized the Buryat form of Buddhism as the national religion of the entire region in the middle of the eighteenth century. As his third stage, Bělka sees the evolution of an indigenous ecclesiastical structure, the Buryat National Buddhist Church, still under the patronage and administrative control of Russian officials. He then gives a very detailed account of the network of monasteries set up in the regions west and east of Lake Baikal, during the period of 1850 to 1920. His fourth stage is the liquidation of the Buddhist National Church in Buryatia by Leninist policies promoting atheism during the Soviet period after 1920. Because Buryat Buddhism proved resilient, Bělka explains a fifth stage: Soviet authorities' concessions, which resulted in the first period of Buddhist restoration from the late 1930s to 1980. The sixth stage accounts for the second period of restoration of Buddhism in Buryatia, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Bělka ends his study with a description of the renaissance of Buddhism in Buryatia today. However, for this reviewer, the most interesting part of the book is Bělka's discussion of the *modus operandi* of the diffusion of Buddhism into Buryatia.

According to the author, the penetration of Buryatia from Mongolia by the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, as well as by Kālacakra Tantrism, took place during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Mongols had accepted Buddhism from their Uygur

neighbors in 1252, and this date is also considered the beginning of Buryat Buddhism because Buryatia was part of Mongolia at that time. Although small, individual Buddhist missions entered Buryatia following this date, they had no significant impact on the region. Buddhism's more systematic penetration of Buryatia began with a mission of 150 Tibetan and Mongol monks in 1712. The new religion advanced unobstructed along the Selenga River into the northern regions of Buryatia for about one hundred years, but was stopped at the southern banks of Lake Baikal, where it encountered the missionary activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in about 1646.

As Bělka relates, since Buddhism encountered resistance from powerful shamanist priests and magicians during its march through Buryatia, a two-pronged strategy had to be developed, as previously in Tibet, to ensure its further advance. While one prong aimed at destroying the power of these shamanist priests, the other prong incorporated into Buddhism some elements of shamanism and its practices in order to isolate their leaders and win over and convert their followers to Buddhism. Thus, elements of shamanism are evident in many Buddhist rituals in Buryatia even today, as for example the *obo* cult, as Bělka states on page 44. Unfortunately, he does not expand on this important point, a topic that is generally neglected even in the literature about Buddhism in other countries and its interface with local indigenous systems of beliefs, superstition and magic.

This period was also marked by the intensification of Russia's colonization of Siberia, a no-man's land at that time, inhabited by a mixture of tribes and clans belonging to many ethnic groups practicing shamanism and various indigenous magical cults. Bělka explains how the colonial expansion of Russia was carried out on behalf of St. Petersburg by Cossack troops who built chains of fortified cities,

ostroy, in the conquered territories. It was from these military, administrative, and commercial cantonments that Orthodox missionaries fanned out into the region to convert the local population, attempting thus to stem the tide of a spreading Buddhism.

The Tsarist government declared the Buryats settled along the Uda River subjects of Russia in 1648, and by 1660 the entire area around the eastern shores of Lake Baikal was under Russian control, Buryatia included. However, the Russian colonization of the region did not proceed smoothly, and the Cossacks and the missionaries met fierce resistance from the Buddhists as well as from the shamanists. At the beginning of these encounters the Russian authorities considered Buddhism the lesser threat to Russia's colonizing interests. However, explains Bělka, this assessment of Buddhism rapidly changed when Beijing, through Mongolia (under its domination at that time), injected itself into the picture. This they did by supporting the Buryat Buddhists in their resistance to the Cossacks, using Buddhism as an instrument of Beijing's imperial policy to contain Russia's drive to the shores of the Pacific.

As described by Bělka in the best and somehow most dramatic narrative of his book, Russia's response was as imaginative as it was decisive. It consisted of two elements. First, in order to legalize its colonization of Buryatia and other regions east of Lake Baikal, the Tsarist government and the Manchu government concluded the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689, by which China recognized Russia's conquest of Buryatia. In 1727 they signed the Treaty of Kyakhta, setting the Russian-Mongolian border. This move isolated the Buryat Buddhists from their maternal base in Mongolia, preventing Mongolia from intervening in Buryat internal matters. Moreover, this isolation from Mongolia created conditions for the Buryats to develop a distinct identity as a nation, with consequent

political ramifications and a future tied to the destiny of Russia. The second element in the Tsarist policy towards the Buryats at this stage was to strengthen the evolution of their identity by enabling them to develop their own ecclesiastical hierarchy free of foreign control, but under close supervision of the Russian authorities.

We may appropriately see this two-pronged policy as Tsarist Russia's strategic doctrine. It ultimately enabled Russia to win the race with China to control Siberia up to the shores of the Pacific Ocean and was most forcefully reaffirmed by Savva Raguzinski, St. Petersburg's ambassador in Beijing. While the Treaty of Kyakhta stabilized the Sino-Russian border, Manchuria posed a new threat to Russia's strategic interests in Siberia through its influence on Buryat Buddhists.

Raguzinski insisted that in order to safeguard the interests of the Russian state in Siberia, the Buryat Buddhists must cut their links with foreign Buddhist centers. To that end, he pleaded for a speedy implementation of provisions for an independent Buddhist ecclesiastical hierarchy: the Lamaist National Church in Buryatia, the establishment of which had been promised in the main documents articulating this strategic doctrine.

According to documents cited by Bělka, Raguzinski took a bold step in 1728, issuing a document entitled *Instructions to Personnel Guarding Our Frontiers*. Among other things, the Instructions ordered the frontier guards not to permit any foreign lamas to cross the frontiers into Buryatia, and called upon the local Russian authorities to speed up, by any means, the development of an independent hierarchy of Buryat lamaism and its church. His *Instructions*, in force for almost one hundred years, further suggested that two boys should be selected from each Buryat clan to attain high ecclesiastical and other positions in the province. Raguzinski's *Instructions* confirmed the ecclesiastical hierarchy already existing in Buryatia, proposing a Tibetan lama, a

member of the mission of 150 lamas to Buryatia in 1712, as the head of the hierarchy. While Raguzinski prohibited the Buryat lamas from visiting Buddhist centers in Urga, Tibet, Mongolia, and Manchuria, the appointment of a Tibetan lama went a long way to convince the lamas that St. Petersburg was not anti-Buddhist. Bělka correctly considers this act an extremely important event in the history of Buryat Buddhism, the beginning of the independent Buryat National Church, which provided the basis for the evolution of the Buryat national and political identity. The act won Buryatia a special status under the Tsars, designation as an "Autonomous Region" under the Soviets, and recognition as a Republic within the Russian Federal State today.

Raguzinski's aims received a shot in the arm with the establishment of the Irkutsk Gubernia in 1803, and with legislation during the following decades regulating the emerging structure of the Buddhist National Church in Buryatia. These proposals regulated financial matters, monastery-building, and church appointments, and gave officials of the Gubernial government the right to participate in the entire process. The Buryat nobility were also assigned an important role in this effort to subordinate the Buddhist Church in Buryatia to the interests of the Russian state. The noble families cooperated in this scheme because of their conviction that the cultural and religious identities of the Buryats and their larger national interests were best advanced in cooperation with the Russian state, and under its protection against the predatory intentions of the Mongols, Manchus, and Chinese.

The policies of Russia towards Buryatia were formally approved by the Tsarist Government in 1853, and published later that year as: *The Position of the Lamaistic Priesthood in Eastern Siberia* (pp. 269-275). Naturally they came under strong criticism from the Russian Orthodox Church, which had frequently been forced to hold back Orthodox

missionary activity in Buryatia, effectively protecting Buddhism, a "foreign" faith. The reasons for this seemingly contradictory religious policy were geopolitical and strategic: they grew from the need to have stable frontiers and peaceful relations with China and Mongolia in order to enable Russia to march undisturbed across the continent to the Pacific. Bělka believes that a religious war in Buryatia between Buddhist and Orthodox missions, provoked by the latter's aggressive proselytism, might have invited an intervention from the outside and thus prevented Russia from achieving its dream of being a Euro-Asian power.

Bělka's study clearly shows that Buddhism in Buryatia prospered, contrary to the general scholarly impression, under the protection and enlightened tutelage of the Tsarist government, from the earliest arrival of Buddhism in Buryatia until the demise of Tsarism with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. However, the prosperity of Buryat Buddhism soon came under the hammer of the Leninist policy of state-supported atheism. According to Bělka's account, the toll was terrible. While in 1916 Buryatia had almost fifty monasteries, temples, and shrines and about sixteen thousand monks, in 1935 there were no functioning monasteries in the country and the number of monks had dwindled to 1,271. In the concluding section of his book Bělka offers some tentative ideas about the renaissance of Buddhism in Buryatia today. He also treats this topic more extensively in a recent and insightful article, coauthored with Martin Slobodnik, dealing with it in the context of the revival of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Asia (see "The Revival of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Asia: A Comparative Perspective," in *Asian and African Affairs* 11, 2002, pp. 15-36).

The last sections of Bělka's book amount to an empirical case study and veritable inventory of Buddhism in Buryatia. They describe the number,

location, history and physical features of the main Buddhist religious establishments, monasteries, schools and temples, and the various stages in the evolution of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Buryatia over time. The forty-nine establishments surveyed and reported upon indicate the extent of Bělka's fieldwork in Buryatia.

The technical aspects of the production of the book, the illustrations and the charts, are excellent. More importantly, the multi-disciplinary approach employed by Bělka make his pioneering study of interest not only to scholars of religion, but to historians of Russia's march to the shores of the Pacific, to social anthropologists studying the emergence of religious and cultural hybrids as a result of encounters between "high" and "low" religious systems, to political scientists interested in the institutionalization of these hybrids in administrative and legal structures, and to scholars of strategic studies interested in the competition between Tsarist Russia and Manchu China for control of Siberia and its shores. For these reasons the study, written in Czech, should be translated into English and made available to wider international scholarship.