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Research Article

Between Indigenous Knowledge and Imperial Scholarship: Buryat Lama Galsan Gomboev as a Russian Orientologist

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This article examines Buryat lama Galsan Gomboev, the 19th-century Buddhist monk integrated into European scholarship, who bridged Buddhist knowledge and Russian Orientology. Despite lacking a formal European education, he became a translator, author, and cultural mediator. Drawing on postcolonial theory, the paper explores his hybrid scholarly identity and contributions to Mongolian studies, emphasizing how Gomboev's work challenged Eurocentric epistemologies and illuminated alternative modernities within nineteenth-century Russian academic and imperial contexts.

Keywords: Buryats; Buddhism; Imperial Russia; Russian orientology; hybrid identity; Mongolian studies; postcolonial critique

In 1847, Leo Tolstoy, then a nineteen-year-old student at Kazan University, noted in his diary: "To win back from the lama what I lost in chess." At the time, the future Russian writer was receiving treatment at the Kazan University hospital, where a Buryat Buddhist monk had also been admitted. There, they spent time playing chess together (Madason 1966: 146-147; Serebrianyi 2016: 10-24). At that time, Lama Galsan Gomboev was undergoing treatment after a violent attack and exposure to frostbite. In the Syzran' uezd (Simbirsk Province), bandits ambushed his sleigh as he returned to Kazan from a journey to the Kalmyk steppes.

A native of Transbaikalia, Lama Galsan Gomboev began working in 1841 as a teacher of Mongolian at the Kazan Gymnasium, later teaching at the Kazan Theological Academy and then at Saint Petersburg University. He appears to have been the first Siberian indigenous scholar to attain a university teaching post without a formal European education, and the first Buddhist monk to integrate into the structures of a European academic system. His ethnographic works and Mongolian translations left a lasting impact on Oriental studies in Europe. Yet after Gomboev's sudden death in 1863, he was seldom mentioned thereafter. In Soviet times, Gomboev was largely overshadowed by his spiritual protégé and friend, Dorzhi Banzarov, although in objective terms, Gomboev's scholarly contributions were no less significant—and in some respects even greater—than those of Banzarov, achieving outcomes that the latter, for various reasons, could not.

In this article, I seek to address several questions: Can Galsan Gomboev be regarded as a full member of the European scholarly community, or does his activity demand alternative conceptual frameworks? Why did the Russian imperial academic system enable figures like Gomboev to pursue scholarly careers even without a European secular education? What insights does Gomboev's story offer about the nature of knowledge produced at the intersection of European and Asian traditions? And what motivations and circumstances prompted Gomboev to engage with European scholarship and remain within its structures?

Gomboev, who worked not only at the imperial universities of Kazan and Saint Petersburg but also at the Kazan Theological Academy, remained a Buddhist in his upbringing and worldview until the end of his life. The lack of formal academic credentials imposed limits on his advancement within the hierarchical structure of Russian academia beyond the rank of lecturer. Yet his official status as a university employee afforded him the opportunity to act as an author rather than merely an anonymous informant, a role assigned to the vast majority of non-European experts of the period. The contours of Galsan Gomboev's personal worldview and perspective are difficult to discern behind the biographical facts and his published works. Nevertheless, when various sources about his life are examined collectively and his ethnographic writings are read closely, it becomes possible to surmise that his motivations for engaging in scholarly activity were complex and multilayered. Gomboev could hardly have been unaware that he was promoting knowledge about his religion within an empire that lacked a clear understanding of whether Buddhism at all merited the status of a tolerated faith. Particularly symbolic in this regard is his affiliation with the Anti-Buddhist Department of the Kazan Theological Academy, as well as his collegial and amicable relations with Orthodox missionaries. In this light, Gomboev may be viewed as one of the earliest ambassadors of Buddhism in Europe—one whose role in shaping European interest in Buddhism still awaits proper assessment. Even the episode involving the young Tolstoy may be relevant here, as some scholars suggest that the encounter could have contributed to Tolstoy's later fascination with Eastern spirituality and the idea of nonviolence (Serebrianyi 2016).

The case of Galsan Gomboev can be fruitfully examined from a postcolonial perspective, drawing on Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, cultural translation, and hybrid identity, as well as Dipesh Chakrabarty's theory of alternative modernities (Bhabha 1994; Chakrabarty 2008). In my view, such a postcolonial lens enables us to discern aspects of Gomboev's scholarly position that tend to remain obscured when he is merely described, as has been the case thus far, as one of the early representatives of Russian Mongolian studies. An analysis of Gomboev's linguistic choices in his works reveals an authorial stance that partially appropriates European scholarly methods while simultaneously deploying a perspective grounded in Buddhist notions of civilizational superiority. In this sense, echoing Chakrabarty's ideas, Gomboev articulates a form of Buddhist modernity in his approach to Mongolian culture and history, an aspect that will be examined in more detail below.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha introduces the notion of the "Third Space"—a site of intersection between cultural systems where new forms of knowledge and identity emerge. This is not merely a matter of cultural blending, but rather a tense and productive arena in which each culture undergoes transformation. Within this space, sharp boundaries between "colonizer" and "colonized," "tradition" and "modernity," become untenable. It is in such a context that hybrid subjects are formed—individuals capable of producing knowledge beyond dominant epistemologies (Bhabha 1994: 53-54). The figure of Galsan Gomboev serves as a compelling illustration of this theoretical position. His work unfolded at the confluence of the Buddhist tradition and European scholarly Orientology, straddling the realms of indigenous knowledge and imperial power, and embodying the dual status of lama and scholar. Gomboev did not simply move between worlds; he inhabited the interstitial zone where these worlds mutually redefined one another. He was an active participant in knowledge production, generating new forms of meaning at the boundaries of cultures. For Bhabha, culture is not mere reproduction but translation (Bhabha 1994: 39). Gomboev was engaged not only in translating texts but also in translating meanings, as will be demonstrated below, creating a discursive language that was neither strictly European nor entirely Buddhist. Such an approach transcended conventional academic rigor and consequently attracted criticism from professional Orientologists. Yet it is perhaps precisely in this arbitrariness that we may discern the source of epistemological innovation and, in a certain sense, a challenge to Eurocentrism.

At the same time, the case of Gomboev, in certain respects, enters into dialogue with some premises of postcolonial theory, which often presupposes an internal rupture or conflict of identities (Bhabha 1994: 43-44;

Fanon 1986: 17-38). In Gomboev's case, his integration into imperial scholarship can be understood as a conscious choice of participation—a means of speaking a comprehensible language without renouncing his own identity. His position thus appears less as mimicry and more as cultural mediation. This approach offers an alternative to the postcolonial dichotomy of resistance/subjugation. Gomboev emerges as a figure of epistemic solidarity—a man bridging tradition and scholarship. His reticence in his own writings may reflect composure rather than suppression, and his scholarly and expert activities constitute not a deviation from the norm, but an affirmation of an alternative norm of intellectual production.

In this article, drawing on archival sources and the research of other historians, I aim to reconstruct the trajectory of Galsan Gomboev, a lama from one of the Buryat *datsans*, into the field of scholarly Oriental studies. In the second part of the article, I will present an analysis of his academic works and offer my own reflections, grounded in the theoretical models outlined above, on the key factors shaping Gomboev's scholarly endeavors.

Buddhist monk Galsan Gomboev

Archival sources offer limited information about Galsan Gomboev's life prior to his departure for Kazan. From the available records, we know that upon his arrival in Kazan in 1841, he was 23 years old, indicating that he was born in 1818 (Ulymzhiev 1993: 10). A surviving personnel file provides further biographical details: Gomboev was of Buryat Cossack origin. In 1829, he became a *khuvarak* (novice monk) at the Gusinoozersk Datsan (Buddhist monastery), where he pursued studies in the monastic college. Five years later, he took monastic vows, and in the subsequent years, he held various posts within the monastic hierarchy until he was selected for assignment to Kazan (NART f. 10, op. 1, d. 1175, l. 15-1). Before explaining the reasons for this transfer, it is necessary to briefly outline the social context in which Gomboev spent the early part of his life.

Galsan Gomboev was born in the Verkhneudinsk uezd of Irkutsk Province, near Russia's border with the Qing Empire, which had been established less than a century earlier. The Buryats, or Buryat-Mongols, were a conglomeration of Mongolic-speaking tribes and clans, some of whom had long inhabited the territories west and east of Lake Baikal prior to Russian expansion, while others had migrated from the Mongolian steppe (Bogdanov 1926). The Selenga Buryats led a nomadic lifestyle along the steppe expanses flanking the rivers Selenga and Chikoi in Transbaikalia. The Selenga Buryats played a significant role first in establishing the borderline, and from the mid-eighteenth century onward, in defending it, as it was from among their ranks that irregular Cossack regiments were formed as part of the Transbaikal Cossack Host.

The Selenga Buryats played a significant role in the spread of Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism in Transbaikalia. The first lamas penetrated Transbaikalia from Mongolia. Count Savva Vladislavich of Raguza, who was dispatched by Peter I to Transbaikalia in 1727 to conclude a border agreement with the Manchus, acknowledged the presence of lamas among the Buryats. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Russian administration was compelled to grant *de facto* recognition to the Buddhist clergy, regulate the number of lamas, and require them to swear an oath of allegiance to the Romanov dynasty. In 1741, the Irkutsk Vicegerency introduced the concept of approved (*komplektnye*) lamas, which stipulated the number of monastics permitted to be assigned to specific *datsans* (Galdanova et al. 1983: 17-18). In 1766, the imperial administration recognized the institution of the chief Buddhist priest—the Bandido Khambo Lama—who was elected from among the abbots of Buddhist *datsans* and confirmed in office by imperial decree. In the early nineteenth century, Gusinoozerskii Datsan, located in the Selenga valley, was designated as the principal monastery among the thirty-four Buryat datsans.[1] It housed the residence of the Bandido Khambo Lama as well as the only officially authorized religious school for the training of *khuvaraks* in Buddhist teaching, ritual practice, Tibetan medicine, and astrology.

[1] Traditionally, lamas received their education in the Tibetan language, and only a few possessed literacy in written Mongolian—among them Galsan Gomboev.

After completing five to six years of education, the *khuvaraks* first took the vows of *getsul* (novice), and upon reaching adulthood—or later—the vows of *gelong* (fully ordained monk). Subject to the availability of vacancies, they were then included in the official roster of lamas and assigned to one of the thirty-four monasteries. Their subsequent lives unfolded at the *datsans*, where they participated in regular religious services, provided ritual and spiritual services to the laity, and engaged in healing and divination. Over centuries of historical development, the Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist tradition elaborated a distinctive system of knowledge grounded in the ethical framework of Mahayana Buddhism, the philosophical schools of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, an original system of logical argumentation, and a wide range of other theories and practices.

With sufficient financial means and ambition, Buryat youths could pursue advanced study in major Buddhist centers in Mongolia and Tibet, where education might extend over several decades. The majority, however, confined themselves to the standard curriculum of the Gusinoozersk Datsan, after which a monk was considered adequately qualified to provide religious services to the laity. Lamas could advance through the hierarchy of monastic offices, at the apex of which stood the elective and imperially sanctioned position of the Bandido Khambo Lama. Such a trajectory was, in all likelihood, anticipated for Galsan Gomboev as well. In 1841, however, Gomboev's life took a dramatic turn, precipitated by events that had unfolded several years earlier.

The Sending of Buryat Boys to Kazan

Although a portion of the Buryat population was incorporated into the Cossack estate, the majority were classified as *yasak*-paying indigenous peoples (*inorodtsy*) and were subordinated to clan-based administrations known as steppe offices (*stepnye kontory*) (Shagdurova 2011: 20–24). The system of self-governance among the Siberian indigenous groups was formally codified in 1822 with the introduction of M. M. Speransky's Statute on the Administration of the Indigenous Peoples (*Ustav ob upravlenii inorodtsev*). Under this statute, the Buryats, who fell into the category of nomadic inorodtsy, were governed through a structure of steppe dumas (*stepnye dumy*) (Hundley 1984). These organs were subordinate to imperial authorities and conducted correspondence with them in both Mongolian and Russian (Montgomery 2005: 131).

With conversion into Buddhism, some Buryats also adopted the Mongolian script, which was employed for communication with Russian administrative bodies (Montgomery 2005, 83). However, the problem of limited or nonexistent proficiency in the Russian language and literacy among Buryat Cossack officers and officials of the steppe dumas led to significant administrative and legal difficulties.[2] To address this issue, a Russo-Mongolian military school was established in Troitskosavsk in southern Transbaikalia, intended for the children of Buryat Cossack officers and the officials of the Selenga Steppe Duma. The initiative for founding the school originated with the Siberian Governor-General's office and the Ministry of the Interior. Upon graduating, students from the Cossack estate were assigned to serve in the Cossack administrations, as well as to serve as record-keepers and translators in the border administration. Most of the children admitted in the first intake in 1833 reportedly spoke not a single word of Russian but within a year, inspectors expressed surprise at the significant progress made by the Buryat students (RGIA, l. 5). The success of the Troitskosavsk school encouraged the provincial authorities to petition the ministries of the Interior and Public Education to nominate several Buryat students for continued studies at the Kazan Gymnasium, funded at state expense.[3]

The Irkutsk Province fell under the jurisdiction of the Kazan Educational District, which encompassed vast territories stretching from the Kazakh steppe to Irkutsk. The gymnasium enrolled the children of Tatar, Bashkir,

[2] The indigenous population of Transbaikalia, lacking knowledge of Russian literacy, frequently experienced systematic violations of their rights. See: Andreev 1964, 14.

[3] The Siberian Committee, which oversaw administrative matters in Siberia, ultimately deferred the decision to the respective ministries. The favorable outcome of the case was due to the government's pressing need for translators from Eastern languages. V. I. Andreev, by contrast, believed that the government was primarily motivated by the aim of cultivating a loyal indigenous elite. See: Kim 1974, 112–113; Andreev 1964, 83.

Kazakh, and Kalmyk elites, who could subsequently be admitted to the cadet corps for further training. Founded in 1804, Kazan University, within whose institutional structure the gymnasium operated, served as the principal center of Russian Oriental studies. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Russian Empire increasingly perceived itself as a global empire and acutely felt the need to develop its own systematic body of scholarly knowledge about the East, broadly defined. The demand for information about neighboring Qing Empire, for instance, had by the first half of the nineteenth century surpassed purely commercial interests and was driven by rivalry with other European empires for influence in East Asia (Afinogenov 2020: 2). This brought to the forefront academic specialists with regional expertise. Professional scholars proficient in Eastern languages were increasingly based not only in specialized ministries and the Academy of Sciences but also in university departments. The polymath scholars of the Enlightenment era gradually gave way to experts with narrow specializations and deep linguistic and regional competence (Afinogenov 2020: 211; Polianskaia 2019: 19).

In 1837, Kazan University established Russia's first chair in Chinese language. Even earlier, however, the discipline of Mongolian studies had begun to emerge as a distinct field, since Mongolia had historically and geographically served as Russia's principal gateway to China. To develop in this direction, the university, under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Education, dispatched in 1828 the graduate Osip Kovalevskii and the student Aleksandr Popov to Transbaikalia, as well as to Beijing and Urga, for four years of practical training in the Mongolian language. Upon their return from this mission in 1832, Kovalevskii and Popov were appointed to the university's faculty and soon established the first chair of Mongolian studies in Europe (Polianskaia 2019). It is likely that the initial idea of sending Buryat children to Kazan also stemmed, at least in part, from Osip Kovalevskii, who viewed this initiative as an opportunity to strengthen the future Chair of Mongolian studies at Kazan University (Polianskaia 2001: 65–70). From among the pupils of the Troitskosavsk school, the top four students were selected. In 1835, accompanied by their supervisor, lama Galsan Nikituev, they were transported several thousand versts from their homeland to Kazan.

At the Kazan Gymnasium, the Buryat students undertook an intensive curriculum that included the study of Mongolian and Tatar languages, Russian literature, grammar, geography, calligraphy, arithmetic, drawing, Latin, and French. From the very first year of study, the youngest of the Buryat pupils, Dorzhi Banzarov, began to excel, quickly surpassing not only his fellow Buryat classmates but also the Russian students enrolled in the Mongolian section (Kim 1974: 18–19). However, the harsh climatic conditions proved fatal for two of the Buryat students, and one more was expelled from the gymnasium for misbehavior and conscripted as a private into the Siberian Corps. Soon, the Buddhist overseer, Galsan Nikituev, submitted a request for retirement due to ill health (Asalkhanov 1956: 170). At that point, the entire initiative of educating Buryat students at the gymnasium seemed on the brink of collapse.

As Resident Supervisor at the Kazan Gymnasium

The departure of the Buddhist mentor from Kazan endangered the plans cherished by the Kazan Mongolists, who realized that the last and most promising Buryat student, Dorzhi Banzarov, needed support. Osip Kovalevskii, who maintained close ties with Transbaikalia, submitted a petition in 1840 to the Bandido Khambo Lama, the chief priest of the Buryat Buddhists, requesting that another lama be found to replace Nikituev as resident supervisor (GARB, ll. 1-1v). The Khambo Lama recommended lama Galsan Gomboev, describing him as "a diligent young man with excellent reputation" (GARB, ll. 3-3v). Beginning in June 1842, Gomboev assumed the position of resident supervisor at the Kazan Gymnasium (NART f. 10, op. 1, d. 1175, l. 15/1).

In addition to his spiritual mentorship of his sole Buryat charge—who was only four years younger than him—Galsan Gomboev was also responsible for teaching Mongolian to other students of the gymnasium. Unlike his predecessor Nikituev, who had performed only the duties of a resident supervisor, Gomboev, just one

year after his arrival in Kazan, submitted a petition requesting permission to attend lectures on Sanskrit taught by Adjunct Professor Pavel Petrov.[4] Gomboev attended classes alongside Dorzhi Banzarov, who by that time had successfully completed the gymnasium and been admitted as a student at Kazan University in the Department of Oriental Languages.[5] At the university, Banzarov received training under the direct supervision of Kovalevskii, focusing on textual scholarship and source studies with a specialization in Mongolian and Turkic texts and antiquities. Attending the Sanskrit course brought Banzarov and Gomboev into contact with Aleksei Bobrovnikov, a student at the Kazan Theological Academy, who was born in Irkutsk Province to a marriage between Aleksandr Bobrovnikov, an archpriest of the Irkutsk diocese, and a woman of Buryat descent (Znamenskii 1892: 75). Aleksei Bobrovnikov attended lectures at Kazan University as an auditor. Gomboev, Banzarov, and Bobrovnikov conversed in Buryat among themselves and became close friends, mutually fostering each other's interest in Mongolian studies (Polianskaia 2019: 144).

In 1846, Dorzhi Banzarov submitted his graduation thesis titled *Black Faith, or Shamanism among the Mongols,* which became his most significant scholarly work. For this thesis, Banzarov was awarded the degree of Candidate of Philosophy. Its central idea was that shamanism, as a religious system, was not a distortion or simplification of some preceding, more developed religion (such as Buddhism, Daoism, or Zoroastrianism), but rather a belief system that had arisen naturally and independently among the Mongols and other peoples of Asia. Banzarov's dissertation was well received in scholarly circles. Gomboev's influence contributed to Banzarov's success, as he clearly possessed deeper knowledge of Buryat religious beliefs and extensive erudition in Mongolian literature, which Banzarov drew upon in his work (King 2022: 65). Ultimately, Banzarov's academic career ended before it had truly begun. The main reason for this was his estate. Belonging to the indigenous Cossacks, just like Gomboev, Banzarov was obliged, upon completing his university course, to report to Irkutsk to serve under the Irkutsk governor-general as an official for special assignments. Banzarov worked in Irkutsk from 1848 to 1855 and died at the age of thirty-three (Tsyrempilov 2020: 251–252). In letters to friends, he complained about his separation from intellectual life and the constant business trips. Most likely, he died from a combination of unsettled living conditions, depression, and excessive drinking.

From a letter Banzarov wrote to Gomboev in 1848, we learn that the latter was considering returning home together with Banzarov, but he was still in demand at the Kazan Gymnasium (Polianskaia 2019: 152). Moreover, after Banzarov's departure from Kazan, Gomboev grew close to Aleksei Bobrovnikov, who at this time received an appointment as lecturer (*bakalavr*) at the Kazan Theological Academy.[6] There, Bobrovnikov was tasked with teaching the Mongolian language and Buddhist philosophy. In addition, he was commissioned by the Academy to compile a grammar of the Kalmyk language (Znamenskii 1892: 332). Bobrovnikov relied on Gomboev's expertise for developing his course on Buddhism and other projects (Polianskaia 2019: 152–153). Their personal friendship and collaboration led to Gomboev's engagement, at Bobrovnikov's request, in work with the Academy in 1850.

Associate of the Kazan Theological Academy

Although within Russian officialdom diverse views coexisted on the religious and cultural heterogeneity of the empire's subjects, the Orthodox Church perceived this as a challenge and did not abandon efforts to convert non-Russian populations, enjoying state support for its missionary endeavors (Werth 2003: 547). In order to improve methods of conversion, the Church developed its own sphere of expert knowledge (Geracy 2001: 49–50). For this purpose, in 1842, the previously closed Kazan Theological Academy was re-established, with the aim of

[4] Pavel Petrov (1814–1875) was a Russian Indologist, specializing in ancient Indian literature and language. He worked at Kazan and Moscow universities and made significant contributions to the study of Sanskrit and Indian culture in Russia.

[5] In general, the Russian University Charter of 1835, which was in effect during Banzarov's studies at the Kazan Imperial University, did not contain a requirement for baptism.

[6] Bakalavr was the lowest teaching position in the Russian academic system of the time.

intensifying missionary activity throughout the empire's eastern provinces. The expert knowledge cultivated within the Academy pertained to equipping future missionaries with competence in the languages and religions of the peoples targeted for conversion. Located in Kazan, the Academy was well positioned to raise students' knowledge by arranging for them to attend classes at Kazan University. The Academy sought to transform its first language-course attendees into language instructors for its own programs. This goal was soon realized: already in 1846, two of the most capable students—Aleksei Bobrovnikov and Nikolai Il'minskii—became teachers of Mongolian and Tatar at the Academy (Znamenskii 1892: 328–329).[7] As is well known, Nikolai Il'minskii would later introduce innovative methods into missionary work through instruction in Christianity in the native languages of non-Russian peoples. The aim of this approach was not the preservation of ethnic identity, but rather the effective propagation of Christianity and Russian culture through native languages of converts (Geraci 2001: 47–85).

In 1849, Aleksei Bobrovnikov completed the grammar of the Mongolian-Kalmyk language. The resulting book became a notable event in the Oriental studies of the time and was awarded half of the Demidov Prize by the Imperial Academy of Sciences (Polianskaia 2019: 147–148). Encouraged by this success, Bobrovnikov embarked on compiling a Kalmyk reader, intended to include excerpts from Kalmyk literature and dialogues on various topics. For the preparation of this work, Bobrovnikov required the constant assistance of Galsan Gomboev, who expressed his willingness to help Bobrovnikov voluntarily with his projects and to provide instruction in the Mongolian language to future missionaries. The Academy agreed to allocate him official accommodation, though it could not provide a salary (Znamenskii 1892: 342). Thus, Gomboev came to simultaneously fulfill teaching duties at both the Kazan Gymnasium and the Kazan Theological Academy, where he was officially listed as a teaching assistant.

At first glance, it seems paradoxical for a Buddhist monk to do unpaid work for an institution that trained missionaries whose aim included the conversion of Buddhists into Christianity. The absence of any material incentive for this second position becomes clearer when considering that Gomboev did not even make use of the apartment provided by the Academy, as he was required to reside in the dormitory of the Gymnasium. Yet this step can be explained by his desire to be of service to his friend and colleague in a field that was likely of intrinsic interest to Gomboev himself. Indeed, Gomboev's motivation in this specific case is directly linked to the central question of the present article. It is important to remember that he was an expert with a rare specialization, obliged year after year to teach languages to Gymnasium students. Bobrovnikov offered him collaboration in the research project where Gomboev's expertise as a Buddhist scholar was in demand. Work at the Academy provided him with an opportunity to apply and teach not only his linguistic skills but also his knowledge of Buddhist doctrine. It should be remembered that Gomboev operated in a "Third Space," situated between traditional religiosity and imperial expertise, where his hybrid identity was taking shape.

In the absence of direct sources that would allow for a definitive reconstruction of Gomboev's motivations, his affiliation with the Anti-Buddhist Department of the Kazan Theological Academy is best approached from an analytical perspective. Within the framework of the Third Space concept, this institution may be interpreted not only as a repressive missionary body, but also as an ambivalent site of knowledge production and translation concerning Buddhism, one that was structurally dependent on bearers of "internal" traditional expertise. From this perspective, Gomboev's participation in the Department's work appears less as evidence of ideological alignment with its Christianizing agenda than as a mode of entry into the imperial academic field, where Buddhist discourse was simultaneously subordinated to a Christian framework and rearticulated from within through the mediation of such figures. Personal ties with Bobrovnikov may have facilitated his access to this space; however, Gomboev's affiliation ultimately reflects a broader structural context in which representatives

[7] In 1854, the Academy established the specialized Anti-Muslim and Anti-Buddhist Departments based on its existing language chairs.

of Buddhist culture in late imperial Russia faced a severely limited range of institutional venues for intellectual activity.[8]

Aleksei Bobrovnikov worked on a comparative study of Buddhist and Christian teachings—a field of great importance for future missionaries engaged in promoting Orthodoxy among the Kalmyks and Buryats. With Galsan Gomboev's assistance, he developed a curriculum for teaching the fundamentals of Buddhist doctrine, which later became foundational for the establishment of the Academy's Anti-Buddhist Department in 1854 (Znamenskii 1892: 363). However, in 1855, Aleksei Bobrovnikov decided to leave the Academy in order to continue his career at the Orenburg Border Commission under the supervision of the prominent Orientologist Vasilii Grigoriev. Bobrovnikov would later bitterly regret this decision, in a certain sense repeating the fate of Dorzhi Banzarov. In conflict with provincial authorities, and suffering from professional marginalization and poverty, Bobrovnikov died in 1865 at the age of forty-three (Znamenskii 1892: 484–485).

Following Bobrovnikov's departure, the Academy requested Galsan Gomboev to replace him in the position of lecturer (Znamenskii 1892: 486). This marked a significant elevation in Gomboev's institutional status and formal recognition of his qualifications. The decision, however, was also pragmatic: after Bobrovnikov's exit, the Academy had no other viable means to sustain the academic activities of its Anti-Buddhist Department. Both the Academy's leadership and the officials of the Holiest Synod, under whose authority the Academy functioned, understood the ambiguity of the situation. Gomboev was not only outside the Orthodox faith, but also remained a Buddhist monk. For this reason, the Synod approved his appointment only as an adjunct, outside the official staff. Despite recognition of the value of his expertise, the Academy could not formally assign a Buddhist lama to an official teaching position within a theological institution of the Russian Orthodox Church.

At the very moment when Gomboev had begun to fulfill his new responsibilities at the Kazan Theological Academy, he received an invitation from Saint Petersburg Imperial University to take up a position as lecturer in Mongolian. This marked a major turning point in his life and the culmination of his academic trajectory. During his years in Kazan (1841–1855), Gomboev—who had arrived with little knowledge of Russian—had acquired the reputation of a respected expert in Mongolian and Buddhist studies. His collaborative work with Dorzhi Banzarov and Aleksei Bobrovnikov likely instilled in him a growing sense of scholarly self-confidence, although he had, until then, functioned primarily as an advisor, assistant, and informant. Among the broader community of Russian Orientologists, Gomboev was still not widely regarded as a scholar in his own right. That reputation was yet to be earned in the imperial capital.

Lecturer at St. Petersburg University

The decision to transfer Oriental studies from Kazan to St. Petersburg was made at the highest levels of the imperial government. In 1854, Nicholas I signed a decree establishing the Faculty of Oriental Languages at St. Petersburg University, a measure that reflected the empire's changing strategic needs. The mid-nineteenth century was a period of imperial expansion in different directions: Russia was advancing into Central Asia, conducting military campaigns in the Caucasus, and in 1853 had entered the Crimean War. There were also plans to seize territories of the Qing Empire in the Amur region and the Russian Far East. The empire required specialists proficient in Eastern languages and broadly trained in Oriental studies. Between 1847 and 1855, the Faculty of Oriental Languages at St. Petersburg University recruited leading Mongolists from Kazan – Aleksandr Popov and Konstantin Golstunskii.

[8] This is somewhat reminiscent of the situation of believers who worked in atheism departments in the USSR, since these were the few institutions where they could officially use their expert knowledge. The most famous such case related to Soviet Buddhology is the work of Bidya Dandaron at the Buryat Institute of Social Sciences. See Snelling, 1993, 260-264.

As noted earlier, in 1828, Popov had been sent on an expedition to Transbaikalia together with Kovalevskii and, upon his return, taught Mongolian at the Oriental Department as a professor (Polianskaia 2019: 52). When the Kazan school of Oriental studies was transferred to St. Petersburg, Popov was invited to head the Chair of Mongolian and Kalmyk Literature. Golstunskii had been a student of Gomboev back in the Kazan Gymnasium, later graduating from Kazan University and subsequently teaching Mongolian at the Gymnasium alongside Gomboev (Chimitdorzhiev 1997: 71–73). Since Gomboev did not possess a university degree or an academic title, he was not officially included in the faculty staff, working instead on a contract basis, which significantly affected his salary. The financial strain of his life was further exacerbated by the high cost of living in the capital.

During his eight-year period in St. Petersburg, which lasted until his death, Gomboev accomplished a remarkable amount of scholarly work—especially given the need to take on side jobs and his extensive consultation work for colleagues. The ”invisible” side of Gomboev's activity—as a consultant, translator, scribe, interpreter, and informant—is difficult to fully assess. He belongs to the category of what James Clifford or Mary Louise Pratt might call “co-authors without authorship” (Clifford 1986: 107–117; Pratt 1992: 7–9). Over his years in Kazan and St. Petersburg, many European Orientalists drew upon Gomboev's expertise, often without acknowledging his contributions in their published works. For his colleagues, direct access to a bearer of the tradition under study, without the need for constant fieldwork to consult informants, was undoubtedly a major advantage. In scholarly literature, the term ”natural Mongol” was often used to refer to both Dorzhi Banzarov and Gomboev. It could imply an authoritative voice in matters of Mongolian-Buddhist culture. However, this characterization also carried a racial undertone typical of the time, as reflected in the ostensibly complimentary yet condescending remarks of some Orientologists who expressed genuine astonishment at Gomboev's intellectual abilities:

> This Asian, together with his compatriot Dorzhi Banzarov, could serve as the best proof of the ability to acquire European education—even for nomads of the yellow-skinned race, provided favorable conditions (Grigor'ev 1870: 277).

Galsan Gomboev may have stood behind many of the achievements of European Oriental studies—including the grammars and readers of A. Bobrovnikov and A. Popov, the dictionaries of O. Kovalevskii and K. Golstunskii, the Buddhological works of E. Schlagintweit, and the Tibetan studies of V. Vasil'ev and A. Schiefner. Yet the reverse is also true: Gomboev's scholarly expertise was shaped by his interactions with the aforementioned Russian and German Orientalists, given that, as emphasized, he did not possess a systematic European academic education.

To more precisely define Galsan Gomboev's place within the academic landscape of the Russian Empire during the 1830s–1860s, it is useful to compare his biography with the trajectories of the earliest non-Russian Oriental scholars whose work also falls within this period. In most comparable cases, we are dealing with individuals who received training at the empire's higher educational institutions—whether at a university, as in the cases of Aleksandr Kazem-Bek (1802–1870) and Dorzhi Banzarov (1822–1855), or at a cadet corps, as in the case of Chokan Valikhanov (1835–1865). Obtaining higher education in Russian within the Russian Empire, which generally exposed students to the basic ideas of European philosophy, history, and science, was a crucial prerequisite for pursuing a career as a scholar or expert integrated into the colonial administrative system. Although Gomboev lacked this advantage, he was not an entirely unique case. Among Eastern non-Russians who, despite lacking European higher education, nevertheless managed to carve out a place for themselves within the imperial system of scholarly knowledge production, one should mention the Tatar ethnographer Kaium Nasyri (1825–1902) and the Azerbaijani Orientologist Mirza Jafar Topchibashev (1790–1869). Like Gomboev, both of these scholars received only a religious education.

Kaium Nasyri received training in a *madrasa* and later attended courses at Kazan University as a non-degree student (*vol'noslushatel'*). Subsequently, he was appointed to a teaching position at the Kazan Theological Seminary, where he taught the Tatar language for many years. Nasyri authored numerous works on Tatar lexicography and grammar, mostly written and published in Tatar Arabic script.[9] While he can hardly be described as an academic scholar in the strict sense of the term, Nasyri's works are scientific in both content and methods of systematizing knowledge. Mirza Jafar Topchibashev followed a different path into scholarship and ultimately attained a higher position than either Nasyri or Gomboev (Guliev 2015). Having received a Muslim religious education at a *madrasa* in Tiflis, he acquired mastery of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Owing to his expertise in Eastern languages, Topchibashev pursued a successful diplomatic career in St. Petersburg before turning his focus to teaching at St. Petersburg University, where, by 1843, he had risen to the rank of full professor (*ordinarnyi* professor). Despite his high standing within the imperial academic system, Topchibashev was not an active researcher and author; rather, he remained an outstanding teacher of Oriental languages and an interpreter. His work focused on practical knowledge required for diplomacy and personnel training, rather than on the production of independent scholarly works.

It remains unknown whether Galsan Gomboev was personally acquainted with Kaium Nasyri or Mirza Jafar Topchibashev. Nevertheless, their life paths intersected in many ways, or at the very least, unfolded within similar institutional and intellectual spaces. This is hardly surprising, given that the circle of those involved in Oriental studies in Russia during the first half and mid-nineteenth century was exceedingly small. All three belonged to the earliest cohort of non-Russian and non-Christian intellectuals who gained recognition within scholarly circles as qualified experts and made significant contributions to the development of Russian Orientology. These figures simultaneously served as mediators between cultural worlds and as intellectuals seeking to carve out a place within the imperial academic system.

Gomboev as a Scholar and Author

Gomboev's period of publication activity coincided with a transformative moment for European scholarship—a shift from knowledge confined to elite institutional circles toward knowledge produced by a broader circle of experts. This transition was facilitated by the emergence in Europe and Russia of voluntary scholarly societies, whose membership was open not only to leading academics but also to enthusiasts and amateurs. Scholarly societies enabled the crossing of boundaries between "informant," "amateur," and "scholar," thereby, in a certain sense, challenging the imperial hierarchy of knowledge (Bradley 2009: 86–92). Gomboev's acquisition of his own scholarly voice opened up opportunities for him to speak about his culture in the "scientific" language of the European scholarly community on his own behalf.

Gomboev's transition from the role of informant to that of author was largely facilitated by his association with one of such voluntary organizations – the Imperial Russian Archaeological Society (IRAS). Following his relocation to St. Petersburg, Gomboev was elected a corresponding member of this society, which recognized his importance and utility as an expert. Status as a corresponding member of the IRAS did not necessarily imply direct involvement in the daily affairs of the Society, but it conferred a certain symbolic capital and provided opportunities for securing funding for scholarly projects. Gomboev, on several occasions, received financial support for his work on translations and articles—a significant factor given his modest income at the university (Istoriia Imperatorskogo 1900, 303-385). As a result of this support, between 1856 and 1863, Gomboev published nine major works, the last of which appeared posthumously. His first publication was in German and dealt with Buryat riddles (Gombojew 1857). His second work consisted of an ethnographic commentary on the *Historia Mongalorum quos nos Tartaros appellamus* by the thirteenth-century Italian Franciscan friar Giovanni del

[9] On Kaium Nasyri, see: Rorlich 1986, 34–42. Nasyri began to publish his works in the 1860s.

Plano Carpini, which had by then been translated into Russian (Sobranie puteshestvii k tataram, 1825). This publication attracted particular attention and is of special significance in relation to the idea of this article.

In his manuscript, Plano Carpini described various customs and practices of the thirteenth-century Mongols, including funeral rites, religious beliefs, rituals of fire and hearth worship, food culture, and so forth. Drawing on his own knowledge, Gomboev offered a comparative historical-ethnographic analysis of the everyday culture of the nineteenth-century Buryats and the thirteenth-century Mongols (Lama Galsan-Gomboev 1859).[10] Gomboev's principal observation was that the contemporary Buryats largely preserved the ancient customs of the Mongols. His text may be classified as auto-ethnographic, although the author deliberately maintains analytical distance from the object of his study. It is evident that, paying homage to the conventions of European scholarship, Gomboev at times adopts the typical orientalist discourse (in Edward Said's sense) of imperial ethnography, noting, for example, at the beginning of his article that "Asians are immobile in their way of life and notions..." (Lama Galsan-Gomboev 1859: 236).[11] Nevertheless, the subsequent sections of the article portray Buryat everyday culture as historically dynamic, composed of diverse cultural layers. Instead of measuring Buryat culture against European civilizational norms, Gomboev proposes an alternative perspective, drawing on Buddhist values as his frame of reference. Thus, in describing ancient rituals and beliefs, he uses terms such as "residues," "superstitions," "prejudices," and "idols," yet does not reject them outright but rather situates them in the past. In assessing Buddhist influence, Gomboev speaks of the "ennobling of morals" among the Mongols, thereby associating cultural refinement with Buddhism (Lama Galsan-Gomboev 1859: 253).

A close reading of his other work, published in 1859, "The Explanations of the Semipalatinsk Antiquities," reveals traces of the same conceptual framework. This article is a cultural analysis of archaeological artifacts—referred to as "antiquities" in the terminology of the time—discovered by archaeologists at the site of an abandoned seventeenth-century Oirat Buddhist monastery in Eastern Kazakhstan, on the banks of the Irtysh River known as *Darqan Dorji-yin Keyid*.[12] The Oirats of the Irtysh region were adherents of Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhism, and were therefore culturally close to the Buryats. As in his earlier work, this article demonstrates Gomboev's effort to interpret archaeological artefacts not through the lens of European science or classical archaeology, but through the prism of Buddhist tradition—its texts, rituals, and symbolism (Lama Galsan-Gomboev 1861). Here, the author acts as a cultural intermediary, translating the meaning of objects from the "language" of Buddhist ritual practice into the language of scholarly description. As in his previous text, Gomboev asserts that Buddhism exerted a moderating influence on the "crude customs" of the Oirats, effectively elevating them to a higher level of culture (Lama Galsan-Gomboev 1861: 219). This Buddhist civilizational perspective, perceptible upon close reading of Gomboev's works, lends itself well to analysis within the theoretical framework of Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of alternative (non-Western) modernities (Chakrabarty 2008: 43). Viewed through this lens, Gomboev's texts can be understood as articulating a vision of historical continuity that links shamanism, the Mongolian traditions of the thirteenth century, and nineteenth-century Buddhist culture. He does not reject archaic practices outright but places them within a hierarchy in which Buddhism serves as the cultural standard, while shamanism represents a primordial stratum interpreted in relation to that standard. Significantly, Gomboev does not orient himself toward European civilization nor define his perspective in opposition to it, though he employs the European academic style and the logic of a detached scholarly description.

[10] Gomboev noted in his article that he consulted the Latin original of the manuscript using the Paris edition by d'Avezac, from which he cites excerpts.

[11] In the notes to his translation of the Indo-Buddhist tales *Siditü kegür*, Gomboev offers other unflattering characterizations of the nomadic Mongols, emphasizing their "natural greed," observing that a poor nomad might "slaughter his last cow merely to eat his fill," as well as noting "the cold indifference of husbands toward their wives" (*Shiddhi-Kur* 1864, 77–78).

[12] The monastery was discovered by Russian soldiers and named Sem' palat (the Seven Chambers). More about the monastery see in: Kukeev 2014, 27-28.

Gomboev's framing of a distinct Buryat modernity can be understood as an expression of a broader hermeneutics developed by Buryat intellectual elites in response to their unique colonial condition—a duality encompassing cultural-religious integration into the Tibeto-Buddhist ecumene and political incorporation into the Russian Empire. The original historiography produced by Buryat literati in the nineteenth century went beyond mere chronicling; it constructed an autonomous narrative of progress. Within this narrative, the adoption of Buddhism was foregrounded as the definitive civilizational rupture—a passage from a state of perceived violence, barbarity and disorder to one founded on ethical and doctrinal order (Badagarov 2022: 165). While chroniclers did note certain instrumental advantages of Russian rule, such as agricultural techniques or mass vaccination, they consistently presented Buddhism—which spread largely independently of, and often in tension with, imperial policy—as the authentic source of high culture and moral-civilizational transformation.[13] As Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz has shown, even representations of pre-Buddhist beliefs were formulated through a hybrid discursive strategy, synthesizing Tibetan Buddhist doxographic accounts with approaches of Russian ethnography (Kollmar-Paulenz 2014: 123–146). This synthesis reflects the formation of an independent value hierarchy that deliberately refused to position Russian-European modernity at the apex of civilizational achievement. Consequently, the Buryat case not only substantiates Dipesh Chakrabarty's thesis of multiple modernities but also refines its conceptual apparatus, demonstrating how an alternative modernity can emerge through the epistemic negotiation of local religious tradition, colonial encounters, and the production of a written historiography that articulates non-Eurocentric criteria for historical development and civilizational legitimacy.

Another distinctive feature of Gomboev's texts is the relatively weak presence of his authorial subjectivity and the near-total absence of an explicit scholarly "I." It is not unlikely that he deliberately avoided direct authorial reflection. While this may be perceived as a lack of personal stance, it can also be interpreted through the lens of Buddhist ethics, where silence, modesty, and a retreat from the center are regarded as virtues. In contrast, the European scholarly style of the nineteenth century emphasized personal authorship, explicit positioning, and open debate. Confronted with these two epistemological traditions, Gomboev appears to have chosen a third path: to serve as the voice of tradition expressed in the language of scholarship, while remaining scarcely visible himself. He was no longer the invisible informant; his authorship was clearly acknowledged. Yet, as an author, he preferred to remain in the background, adopting the role of an impersonal cultural mediator. Meanwhile, specialized studies demonstrate that authorial "I," generalization in the form of "we," and alternation between both forms developed in Russian scholarly literature as early as the 18th century and were subsequently actively used (Kozhina 1994: 231–41).[14]

One of the most effective ways to transmit culture while effacing one's own subjectivity is through translation. Gomboev's remarkable contribution to European Oriental studies lies in his Russian translations of several significant works of Mongolian historiography and literature. In the historiography of Mongolian studies, Gomboev's accomplishments are often listed almost matter-of-factly. However, for the mid-nineteenth century, they represented significant milestones. Prior to Gomboev, the handful of European Mongolists primarily focused on compiling dictionaries, lexicons, readers, teaching materials, and catalogues. Apart from Isaac Jacob Schmidt—the first European Mongolist—no one had been actively introducing Mongolian-language literary works into scholarly circulation.[15] Seen in this context, Gomboev's publication of Russian translations

[13] This original interpretation of civilizational uniqueness, developed by Buryat Buddhist elites, obviously was not shared by Buryats who persisted in adhering to shamanism. As Piotr Sobkowiak recently demonstrated in his analysis of the history of the concept of shamanism, the Buryat elite, while promoting Buddhism, constructed the "religion of shamans" as a category of the "other"— a process analogous to the European colonial production of knowledge (Sobkowiak 2023: 24-25).

[14] An analysis of the works of Gomboev's contemporary, the outstanding Russian sinologist Iakinf Bichurin, demonstrates his free use of the first person pronoun in his scholarly works. (Peijun 2018: 74–75).

[15] Isaak Jakob Schmidt (1779–1847) was a Russo-German Orientalist and the founder of European Mongolian studies. He produced German translations of several historical and religious works written in the Mongolian script. In this context, one should also mention the

of four Mongolian works within just six years must rightly be regarded as a genuine breakthrough in European Mongolian studies.

Galsan Gomboev's translation into Russian of one of the most significant Mongolian historical chronicles—*Altan Tobči* by an anonymous author—stands as his principal achievement as a translator and his most substantial contribution to Mongolian studies.[16] The *Altan Tobči* is one of the key texts in Mongolian literature, ranking alongside *The Secret History of the Mongols*, yet distinguished by its articulation of the post-imperial ideology of Mongolian statehood. Gomboev's translation was published as a separate volume, which also included his translation of the sixteenth-century Oirat epic, *The History of Ubaši Qungtayiji*. Moreover, a brief introduction to the volume, written not by Gomboev himself but by the Arabist and Turkologist Petr Savel'ev, includes, based on Gomboev's account, a description of another important Mongolian work, *Čiqula Kereglegči*, which contains various details of Mongolian history (Altan Tobchi 1858: x-xiv). The fact that this publication was prefaced by Savel'ev rather than Gomboev is itself telling. At the time of the edition's release, Petr Savel'ev was one of Russia's most respected Orientologists, and his introduction was intended to lend scholarly prestige to a work produced by an expert who held no formal academic degree. Savel'ev functioned as editor, scholarly commentator, and author of the preface. The preface offers virtually no insight into Gomboev's motivations for undertaking the translation, his perspective on the texts, or the challenges he faced. Thus, Gomboev is not presented as a fully-fledged author, yet neither is he reduced merely to the status of an informant, which once again highlights his hybrid role as a mediator straddling two cultures. Gomboev's translations are rendered in a narrative style syntactically close to the original, often resulting in sentence constructions uncharacteristic of Russian syntax. His commentary on the texts, while not extensive, reflects his ethnographic approach: he consistently connects the material found in the works with the lived realities of the Selenga Buryats among whom he grew up. Today, these texts, along with others by Gomboev, offer a unique window into the early interplay between traditional knowledge and European scholarly discourse.

Beyond Gomboev's membership in the Imperial Russian Archaeological Society (IRAO), his scholarly productivity was significantly shaped by his personal informal networks. A major influence on his research activity was another prominent Russian Orientologist and member of the Academy of Sciences, Anton Schiefner (1817–1879), one of the most distinguished and influential European scholars of the nineteenth century. Schiefner specialized in Tibetan, Mongolian, and Caucasian studies, as well as Indology. His active mediation between European and Russian scholars played a crucial role in the development of academic Orientology in Europe, as revealed in his recently published extensive correspondence (Der Linguist 2021; Der Linguist 2022). His letters to the German Sanskritologist Theodor Benfey—who was a founding figure in comparative Indology, Buddhology, and especially the scholarly study of folktale motifs—shed light on important aspects of Gomboev's position within the international scholarly network of the 1850s and 1860s. Schiefner and Benfey were partners in constructing a unified cultural map of humanity, grounded in the similarities of folktales, legends, and myths.[17] In tracing the migrations of narrative plots, Schiefner paid particular attention to Tibetan-Mongolian written literature, and Gomboev became an essential mediator for him between European Orientology and Buddhist knowledge.[18]

Beyond his role as an informant, Galsan Gomboev also carried out various scholarly tasks at Schiefner's request, including the copying of manuscripts and the compilation of an annotated catalogue of Mongolian manuscripts housed in the St Petersburg Asiatic Museum. Schiefner further enlisted Gomboev's assistance for work benefitting the Paris Library as well as other European Orientologists, such as the Schlagintweit

descriptions and studies of Mongolian-language Buddhist texts found in the works of Kovalevskii and Bobrovnikov, which date to a period earlier than Gomboev's active publication efforts.

[16] In the preface to the translation, Orientologist Pavel Savel'ev noted that it was Dorzhi Banzarov who had originally planned to translate this chronicle, but the honor ultimately fell to Gomboev (*Altan Tobchi* 1858: vi).

[17] Benfey's principal work, in which he systematically set forth his concepts, was his German translation of *Pañcatantra* (Benfey 1859).

[18] Among his other works, Anton Schiefner is also the author of *Tibetan Tales, Derived from Indian Sources* (Schiefner 1882).

brothers, the Tibetologist Philippe-Édouard Foucaux, and Sinologist Stanislas Julien (Der Linguist 2022: 70, 80; Der Linguist 2021: 71-72). In the case of Emil Schlagintweit, Gomboev's consultations proved particularly crucial during the preparation of the former's renowned book *Buddhism In Tibet. With An Account of the Buddhist Systems Preceding It in India*, published in 1863. In a letter written in 1861, Schiefner recommended Gomboev to Schlagintweit in the following terms:

> He is a treasure trove of information about Buryat life and antiquities. As for the religious and practical aspects of the lama's profession, he is thoroughly informed and can provide better information on such matters than either I or Vasil'ev, who must draw our wisdom from older printed sources. [...] Gomboev will not be able to explain everything—I tell you this in advance—but he will be able to explain a great deal (Der Linguist 2021: 72).

Emil Schlagintweit had only limited command of the Tibetan language, making the assistance provided by Schiefner and Gomboev absolutely indispensable for him. In his book, Schlagintweit mentions that Gomboev produced surveys of the contents of significant Tibetan works, such as *Mani Kambum* (Schlagintweit 1863: 105). Yet Gomboev's contribution to the book was considerably more extensive, for through Schiefner, he provided clarifications on numerous other topics related to Buddhist rituals and Tibetan-language sources and documents. Although Schlagintweit's book received critical reviews, it played an important role in the development of Tibetan studies in Europe, and Gomboev was directly connected to this scholarly achievement.

It would be unfair to conclude, based on the above, that Schiefner merely exploited Gomboev's knowledge. Although their relationship was somewhat asymmetrical, Schiefner did much for Gomboev, who was often in need of financial support. His work for Julien and Schlagintweit was likely undertaken as a means of earning a living. More importantly, Schiefner helped Gomboev publish his translations of the collections of Indo-Buddhist tales *Arji Börji* and *Siditü Kegür* (Ardzhi-Bordzhi 1858; Shiddi-Kur 1864).[19] Ultimately, *Siditü Kegür* appeared posthumously as a separate book, accompanied by a brief preface written by Anton Schiefner. In this preface, he notes that several years prior, material from Gomboev's translation had already been used by Theodor Benfey in his edition of *Pañcatantra* (Shiddi-Kur 1864: 6).[20] During his lifetime, Gomboev conveyed his gratitude to Benfey via Schiefner, thanking him for "making him known abroad" (Der Linguist 2022: 80). Schiefner encouraged Gomboev's translation work, conducted negotiations with publishers on his behalf, and promoted his writings across Europe through his extensive scholarly network.

Galsan Gomboev passed away in the summer of 1863 in his rented lodgings in the village of Lakhta near St. Petersburg. The sources available to us say nothing about the cause of his death, which occurred when he was 45 years old. Newspaper obituaries reported that in recent times he had been planning to return to his homeland (Birzhevye vedomosti 1863). We can only surmise that his modest income prevented him from undertaking the long, costly journey and that his continual side jobs were necessary to save up enough for the trip. Gomboev's death did not produce as significant a public response as that of Dorzhi Banzarov eight years earlier. A brief notice in the *Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti*, apart from providing a few dry biographical facts, included only one warm comment: "Gomboev earned the respect of Orientologists through his conscientious work in the field of Mongolian literature and enjoyed universal affection owing to the purity and simplicity of his character" (Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti 1863).

[19] It is likely that, for this work, Gomboev may have accompanied Schiefner during his trips to his native Reval, since in a brief note titled *Ein seltener Badegast* in the German newspaper *Posener Zeitung* from 1859, I found a mention that Gomboev was spotted in Reval, where he was bathing in the Baltic Sea (Posener Zeitung 1859).

[20] Indeed, in his German edition of *Pañcatantra*, Theodor Benfey mentions that his translations of tales from *Arji-Börji* are based on the Russian translations by Lama Galsan Gomboev (Benfey 1859: 489).

Conclusion

Galsan Gomboev's death passed largely unnoticed in the contemporary scholarly world—a fact that is entirely understandable. Within the hierarchy of the academic establishment, he occupied a modest position and remained, for the intellectual elite, a marginal figure. Even those scholars who respected and sympathized with him, such as Anton Schiefner and Pavel Savel'ev, primarily viewed Gomboev as a bearer of "authentic knowledge," rather than as a fully-fledged participant in scholarly debates. He was the author of several significant works that were cited by European Orientologists, but his writings were often published under the editorial supervision of more established scholars, which blurred the clarity of his individual authorship. Until the end of his life, Gomboev remained a religious figure, consistently signing his name as "Lama Galsan Gomboev," a fact that later hindered his inclusion in the Soviet pantheon of national scholars to a degree comparable to that of his younger colleague and friend Banzarov (Tsyrempilov 2020). Gomboev's name began to attract considerably more attention only in the post-Soviet period, when several outstanding works appeared that were wholly or partially devoted to his life and scholarly contributions (Ulymzhiev 1993; Chimitdorzhiev 1997; Polianskaia 2001; Polianskaia 2019). This article relies extensively on these studies.

A postcolonial perspective on Gomboev's works—and on the unique communicative language he crafted for engaging European audiences—enables us to expand our contemporary understanding of what we mean by "academic scholarship" and "authorship," and to recover forgotten forms of intellectual activity excluded from canonical narratives. From this vantage point, Gomboev emerges not merely as an informant transmitting local knowledge into the sphere of imperial scholarship but as an intellectual mediator deploying hybrid methods at the intersection of Mongolian Buddhist and European scholarly rationalities. This shaped the distinctive scholarly language he developed, interweaving local Buryat traditions, Buddhist religious thought, and culturally informed academic discourse.

This article necessarily lacks Gomboev's own voice—not due to methodological oversight, but because his writings reveal little of a pronounced authorial "I." This should not be interpreted merely as silence or intellectual inadequacy. Rather, it reflects the role he deliberately chose for himself: that of a cultural retransmitter at the frontier between worlds. His "invisibility" may in fact represent part of a strategic hybrid identity that allowed him both to maintain ties to his own tradition and to gain acceptance within the European scholarly community. Gomboev's research texts, still insufficiently appreciated and understood, acquire special significance today, in an era when science is no longer the exclusive domain of Europeans but has become truly global. Today, his works can be studied as early examples of cross-cultural epistemology and as precursors to modern autoethnography. Interest in Gomboev's intellectual legacy should be motivated not merely by a desire to restore historical justice but also by the pursuit of alternative perspectives on intellectual authorship—perspectives rooted in local knowledge yet aspiring to full participation in the shaping of global scholarly discourse.

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