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Traditional indigenous knowledge: local view

Contribution by
Erjen Khamaganova
Chair, Buryat Baikal Center for Indigenous Cultures

We've gathered here with clear understanding that indigenous traditional knowledge is disappearing every day with frightening speed. Despite the importance attached to the knowledge which resides in indigenous cultures, there is no unified understanding regarding the term traditional indigenous knowledge and consequently regarding the measures of its protection and development. In my native Buryat language the term *knowledge* – “medekhe” means not the ability to *know* separate data, facts or information but rather the ability to “*understand*”. The term implies high degree of “processing” information, rather than simply stacks of data and facts. Such inclusive notion implies a high degree of holism, ability to see and understand things in their interconnectedness and interdependence. Most likely such definition of knowledge is characteristic for other indigenous languages. This is not just a linguistic nuance; it is very deep difference in the world outlook by indigenous and mainstream societies. The difference that is underestimated by international bodies that concentrate their efforts on mainly reporting the current state of the knowledge, different types of registers, archival storage, databases etc. For us, indigenous peoples, issues of protection of TIK are a political question, question of our rights to survival, rights for future.

Based on the indigenous definition of knowledge I understand TIK as the entirety of the intellectual and cultural heritage of a group of indigenous people that shapes their distinct identity, is preserved and developed through transmitting from generations to generation in their own distinct ways and is pertaining to and evolving in a distinct physical space. This definition emphasizes the existence of specific epistemological systems of understanding of the world and oneself within this world. These systems include such elements as: ideas (concepts, perceptions, ethics, esthetics), artifacts (terminology, symbol systems, petroglyphs, tools, dance and songs) and sacred sites (both of natural and non-natural origin).

TIK can exist only in particular place in particular community, related to the particular circumstances of livelihoods. Therefore the issues of TIK preservation, maintenance and development are issues of human rights, rights to the land and rights to self-determination. The current political situation in the Russian Federation leaves no space for optimism in these terms. The on-going federal reform seen as the crucial step toward strengthening the Russian state is based on recentralization of federal power vis-à-vis regional and ethnic administrative units and will further limit the rights of native peoples and ethnic minorities on the ground. These processes are not endemic for my country, the dominant development models on the global scale are not favorable to indigenous peoples worldwide. Globalization, commercialization, and ever increasing uniformity present real threat to traditional indigenous knowledge. The misappropriation, misuse, misinterpretation of TIK is a commonplace in today's reality. This is

not simply a list of threats that to my understanding endanger the existence and development of TIK, it is the threats to our identity and survival as indigenous peoples. It is very important to ensure that UN agencies could understand these threats, and in their every-day routine work had paid more attention to the issues of incorporating our concerns in their activities. The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issue being truly our global voice and very influential in articulating our concerns is nevertheless a consultative body and the final state of the affairs is responsibility of the agencies themselves.

Why TIK is for us indeed a political question, a question of survival and rights for our future? There are a broad range of types of ideas as characteristic of TIK: ideas pertaining to environment, livelihoods; pertaining to oneself (health, medicine); pertaining to others (members of a community, ancestors and children); to conflicts, to pedagogy, and esthetics. Ideas as characteristic of TIK are not a collection of articulated biological, ecological, geographic observations and information about nature, society and humans, ideas are the mover of the actions of an indigenous person, they motivate his current activities and provide the means of cultural continuation for his descendants.

Ideas create the foundation of lifestyles that are typical for specific geographical places. They regulate activities, more often prohibiting things rather than permitting them. Setting limits is a distinguishing feature of TIK, adherence to traditional taboos made its way into the genetic memory of native people. TIK provides an individual with the internal governor that controls his interaction with his environment. The environment for an individual with such a governor is not a resource for his individual consumption, but rather a space where each has his own place and equal right to life. The Buryat proverb says “On the laps of the gods there is a place for anyone”.

Ideas as an integral part TIK are closely tied to physical locations, and are inconceivable without a diversity of shapes and expressions. A good illustration of the ‘place-specificity’ of ideas as characteristics of the traditional indigenous knowledge is the ideas pertaining to the genealogy of a particular clan.

This summer my family returned to our native lands to conduct certain ceremonies, during of which we appeal to our ancestral lineage, the ceremony must be conducted on very precise location, the place of the ancestral hearth. We were lucky this year because we still could find this very place. But how the situation will look in the next year, in light of the current reforms when my region will be absorbed by the larger region, when the name of my people will be removed from the title of our land (Ust-Ordynsky Buryat Autonomous Region) and the percentage of total population of Buryats in a new “enlarged” region will drop to the number of less than 1%? What will be situation in the region where all the decision will be done in modern

democratic terms by the dominant majority, who do not support our native views on land and resources? Will we be able to come to this place again?

For us a very significant aspect of the idea of ancestral lineage is the understanding of the actual presence of the past in every moment of the present time.

Today in Buryatia one can observe the emergence of a new shaman 'specialty'. Shamans responsible for the 'awakening' (uthaa sergeehe) of genealogy are now conducting special ceremonies for 'introducing' modern people to their genealogies and spirits of their ancestors. For Buryats the need for such ceremonies is obvious due to the interruption in their culture which occurred during the Soviet period. The popularity of such ceremonies is so great there is even a waiting list for conducting them. As one of the famous Buryat shamanesses tells in her interviews: "people are weak without the support of ancestors, if we do not honor them, if we forgot their names, they are offended". (personal interview 2004). In a special ceremony this shamaness communicates with the spirits of ancestors and conveys their information to the participants of the ceremony.

Another integral part of the TIK system are artifacts that are the expressions of the ideas presented in a multiplicity of various forms, for instance language, particularly using specialized terminology, systems of symbols, tools, petroglyphs, handicrafts, songs, dances, unique skills and customary laws. I would like to illustrate the functions of artifacts as physical characteristics of TIK using the example of traditional dwellings of Buryat-Mongols – the yurts.

As Yi-Fu Tuan subtly notes "in the absence of books and formal instruction, architecture is the key to comprehending reality" (Tuan 1977, p.102) Education in Buryat-Mongolian family began with the simple, children were taught to distinguish accurately different cardinal directions and to recognize the orientation of the yurt with its entrance to the South. Household wares and utensils are located strictly according to the cardinal directions, and according the place of the entry of the sun rays through the smoke hole—the toono. The smoke hole and sun rays functioned like clock. At different times of the day the sun rays will pass around different parts of the yurt. The whole circle of the dwelling is "divided" into 12 parts—hours. Every hour was given a name of an animal, and this hour corresponds with approximately 2 hours in European chronology. The inner design of the yurt, the placement of domestic objects was strongly determined by the passage of time. (See Fig.1)

Such a merger of space and time in the yurt creates a unique spatial and temporal picture. The spatial picture of the microworld in the yurt was a model of the macroworld in the TIK of Buryat-Mongols. The arrangement of the things and objects in the yurt in accordance with the cardinal directions and circular movement of the sun light was very important in the process of

children's education. First of all, it formed in the children's minds a clear understanding of the deterministic principle of the world order, where everything has its cause and consequence. Second, it formed the understanding of the unity of time. And, finally it contributed to deeper understanding of the unity of the micro and macro worlds.

Buryat-Mongols, introducing the distinct order in the arrangements of the yurt, created a specific logic in children's minds, holistic understanding of the world and formed a discipline. The division of the yurt into the male and female halves also had broad significance for developing and educating youth as to the polarities active in the world. The west side is male, and is the storage place for men's tools, saddles, bows, and guns. The east side is female, the storage place for the cooking utensils, cradleboards, and other women's objects. The movements of young women in the yurt was limited, for instance, the daughters-in-law had no right in the yurt of her father-in-law to enter the western part. From early childhood a Buryat-Mongol came to realize the difference of the rights of men and women, which allow them to understand the logic of nature, which divided everything alive into males and females. He came to realize the advantages of men and possibilities of women. Thus, the traditional dwellings being an artifact of TIK historically served as a means of education, preservation and handing down traditional knowledge pertaining to the gender roles, family structures, view of reality and the world, etc. An important aspect of the yurt as part of TIK is the choice of the location for setting up a new yurt; strict traditional taboos exist on the erection of the yurt in certain places. The yurt as an artifact is an important physical characteristic of traditional indigenous knowledge. The modern conditions of manufacturing and commercial use, misuse of yurts, and degradation of the internal meaning in favor of preservation of only external shape of this artifact vividly illustrates vulnerability of TIK.

Sacred sites are the quintessential representation of traditional indigenous knowledge, as the link between material and spiritual realms and among all life-forms. Sacred sites have a multi-layer character in Buryat life. The following aspects represent some portion of the profound, complex and dynamic interactions of Buryats with their own sacred sites and sacred sites of other peoples. Sacred sites ensure a spiritual continuity of successive generations of a nation, and they are a significant factor in the continuous formation of the native way of thinking and native mentality. A sacred site is an area of centuries of native individuals' deep spiritual work in maintaining the richness of the site's biological diversity. Today, for example our sacred site Lake Baikal—the oldest and the deepest lake in the world – is home to more than three thousand species of flora and fauna, almost half of which are endemic to the area. Buryat clans connect their origin directly with Lake Baikal and trace their lineage to natural forefathers — the animals and trees of Baikal. My clan for instance is Khongoodor – Swan clan, my husband's clan is Ekhirit – Nalim Fish from Baikal. The high degree of diversity of

life forms on sacred sites could be explained by the fact that sacred sites are places of origin of certain families or clans, and have been protected because many of these forms were believed to be our ancestors.

For us natives, a sacred site is both an arena and an actor in traditional education and upbringing processes. There are many taboos (being obviously an integral part of TIK) that ensure proper behavior on these places of power. Entering a sacred place, a person who is properly educated and who behaves accordingly, finds himself under the patronage of spiritual owners of the place. A person, being constantly under pressure from everyday routine, upon entering the zone of sacred places finally gets an opportunity to be simply himself. The feeling of finding refuge and protection has a tremendously favorable effect on the human mind and soul. A child, from the time he can realize himself and his environment, has to start memorizing taboos connected with special places, actions, and words. The memorization of the location of sacred places requires deep attention to the environment and to the distinguishing features of the landscape, along with plant composition, that will ultimately be conducive to a respect towards life-forms in their great diversity. Knowing that one could find protection and rest in the zone of sacred places, a child is imbued with the profound respect toward those places. The taboos connected with the sacred places serve to mark native lands, and designate them in the emotional memory. These associations form a spiritual voicing of the special places in the environment.

Sacred sites are not to be approached as mere conservation mechanisms for a particular ecosystem. Originally they were an active space of interconnected events, including family and clan ceremonies, rituals and offerings. The presence and active perception of the place as a holistic unity of all living species, spirits and material world helped people to realize the simple truth that we all are connected, that the wellbeing of a site depends on proper conduct of people and vice versa.

Thus, I have tried to delineate various physical characteristics of TIK using modern “classification” such as ideas, artifacts and sacred sites, their significance for indigenous peoples. Fully realizing that it is an impossible task to cover fully the complex, multifaceted nature of TIK I nevertheless am eager to present some thoughts from the ground about how UN structures could assist in disseminating, maintenance, protection and development of TIK.

1. World Heritage and Indigenous Peoples. In the Russian Federation out of five World Natural Heritage Sites four are sacred sites for the indigenous peoples residing on these territories. For all indigenous peoples during their centuries-old history sacred sites had never been subject and place of conflicts. Quite an opposite, sacred sites were always the places of peace and peaceful conflict resolution. For instance Buryats their ceremonies and rituals on

sacred sites conduct in conditions of peace, tolerance and mutual respect. Until now on sacred sites not only hunting or cutting trees is prohibited, but also loud talks, rudeness and swearing.

UNESCO World Heritage Site status does not help indigenous peoples. It is ironic, indeed indigenous peoples are the ones who saved many of significant sites that now are recognized as world heritage. In today's reality from my own experience I can say that on our World Heritage Sites – Lake Baikal and the Golden Mountain of Altai, existing ecological nihilism of incoming population is “balanced” in many ways only by native traditions and efforts of indigenous population to protect their sacred sites. Indeed the native people are doing everyday constant work to ensure the continuity of own sacred sites, contributing to conservation of biodiversity and ultimately ensuring the future existence of the World Heritage Sites.

It is time to expand the scope of WH concept and include into nomination documents specific provisions related to local indigenous peoples and their knowledge. Establishing of a network of Indigenous knowledge on WH Sites or for WHS is the second step, inclusion and participation of TIK holders into nomination and reporting processes is a “must”.

2. Rights for Traditional Education and Up-bringing. A very important issue of the retention and development of TIK is the issues of education. UNICEF must take a lead role in all the aspects concerning ethnopedagogy, i.e. intergenerational transfer of traditional indigenous knowledge via traditional means, forms and methods of education. The modern teaching methodologies in these terms are not suitable since they will destroy the very essence of TIK. Indigenous children have right to fully acquire the rich wealth of TIK; however, the unique ways of transferring this knowledge are under threat, UNICEF could play a major role in developing Guidelines for the member states regarding the protection and promotion of traditional forms of education. The Guidelines among other things should address the issues of traditional up-bringing processes that forming of skills for TIK acquisition and retention; the issues of empowerment of native communities in community-based approaches to traditional indigenous education. And finally the keystone of the Guidelines should be recognition of the rights of children to know, practice own traditional knowledge, to live in and to protect/develop own culture.

3. Healthy Ways of Life. Every indigenous nation has created its own system of healthy way of life, which incorporates also the methods of physical education of the young generation. Centuries long evolution of these systems shaped their unique forms reflecting the environmental conditions of their respective localities and specificity of human economic life. Traditionally the elders would train and explain to children knowledge about healthy food, healthy mode of life that was based on the harmony with nature and reciprocity in human societies. A lot from this

traditional knowledge has been lost and continue to be further threatened under the pressure of the modern standardized types of physical culture and athletic competitions, and fast food facilities widely promoted by mass media and international athletic organizations. While the universal values of sports are not to be denied, the proper efforts must be done to revive indigenous heritage and knowledge pertaining to strengthening of healthy ways of life, healthy diet, healthy competitions in the forms that are unique and suitable for each particular region, each particular indigenous nation. And to do this work with deep understanding that is the work on promotion and protection of indigenous knowledge we need more coordinated efforts and help from the side of UN Department for Sport and Development, UNSECO and the World Health Organization.

4. Biodiversity related knowledge. The Akwe:Kon voluntary guidelines as global framework for protection of sacred sites and their biodiversity arm local and native communities with very useful tools. The guidelines provides a good system ensuring collaboration of indigenous and local communities in assessment of cultural, spiritual, environmental and social impacts of proposed development on sacred sites. Surely we would love to have a document that is legally bidding our governments to consider indigenous views, but we understand that it will be possible in a distant future; right now Akwe:Kon is one of the very few documents that addresses the issues of indigenous knowledge from truly indigenous perspective. Successful implementation on the ground of Akwe:Kon voluntary guidelines will contribute to the goal of prevention of development's adverse impacts on sacred sites, native identities of local communities, and biodiversity. However, successful implementation depends upon the active position of local and indigenous communities themselves. But how many local and indigenous communities actually are aware of this existing framework? Those who have access to this document published in Russian language may not relate their work on sacred sites and indigenous knowledge protection with these guidelines due to inadequate translation of the title of the document. Instead of "sacred sites" the term "places, where sacred objects are located" is used, but our sacred sites are holy in themselves. It is a minor shift in translation but the shift might have substantial impact. If the title itself excludes straightforward definition of the matter of our concern, it also excludes individuals and communities that potentially would relate themselves to the opportunities provided by the Akwe:Kon.

I experienced instances when during an oral translation, interpreters use instead of indigenous people (*narod*), indigenous "folk" (*narodnost*). The latter term has connotation of retarded, backward people, such translation cannot be tolerated. Or, as one of the Russian

participants noted on one of the meetings the term “access and benefit sharing” was orally interpreted as “beneficial cooperation”.

We all talk about the visibility of the work of UN agencies for indigenous peoples, we all talk about importance of translation of the relevant documents and provisions to our native languages as the ideal, but here we are dealing with one of the official UN languages. The inadequacies of translation occur not because of the lack of professionalism among translators but simply because of different emphasis they put into the text due to their personal background. These hurdles must be resolved.

I conclude my paper with the same issues of words, terms and linguistic differences that this paper is started with. But a word in our native culture is very important; it is expression of ideas that lead us toward action or inaction. To successfully act and work together we need clearly understand the words of each other.