

their invocation of the past as such, than their unfortunate choice of era. They should have gone back to the chronicles of feudal times, not to imperial eagles, where they would have found fellow spirits in plenty.' Pelevin, *Sviashchennaia kniga*, 87.

50. N. Kochetkova, 'Pisatel' Viktor Pelevin: "Vampir v Rossii bol'she, chem vampire", 3 November 2006, www.izvestia.ru/reading/article3098114.

CHAPTER 10

From the USSR to the Orient: national and ethnic symbols in the city text of Elista

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Elista, the capital of Kalmykia, is also the only city in the republic. In 2008 its population stood at 102,000, or one-third of the population of Kalmykia overall. In the post-Soviet years, Elista underwent a crucial process of transformation, which affected toponyms, monuments and major public buildings. This process was at once highly specific – being related to perceptions of the Kalmyks' history and political role – and typical for Soviet urban centres. In what follows, I shall analyse it and set it in context.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Elista's name comes from the Kalmyk word meaning 'sandy'. The first reference to the existence of a settlement on this site goes back to 1865. However, at the start of the twentieth century, the Kalmyks were still a nomadic people, and their steppe territory included no urban settlements. Prior to 1917, Elista had a low administrative status. Between 1888 and 1907 it was a canton (*volost'*) town; from 1907, the centre of the Manychsk *ulus*. After the Revolution the centre of the Kalmyk Autonomous Province (set up in 1920) was at first located in Astrakhan, since there was no settlement in the Kalmyk steppes that was capable of fulfilling the role of an administrative centre. However, in 1927 the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR moved the centre of the province from Astrakhan to Elista. In 1930 a decree of the Presidium of the VTsIK (All-Russian Central Executive Committee) of the RSFSR assigned Elista the status of a city (as opposed to 'settlement' or other such 'populated point'),¹ and in 1935 it became the official capital of the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). In the conditions of the totalitarian Stalinist state, the primary function of the capital of an autonomous republic was to act as the centre for regional administration, a function that was also central to planning. Not

surprisingly, the only building in the city with any pretensions to architectural merit was the House of Soviets, built in 1932 to designs by Il'ya Golosov.

As is well known, the Kalmyks were one of the peoples to suffer deportation en masse in the Stalin years, in retribution for their supposed collaboration with the Nazis during the period of occupation and their disloyalty to Soviet power. On 28 December 1943 the entire Kalmyk population was loaded onto cattle trucks and taken by rail to the Novosibirsk, Omsk, Tomsk and Krasnoyarsk provinces of Siberia. By the summer of 1944 the total of those deported, which now included Kalmyks from the provinces bordering the ASSR and military personnel from the front, had reached 120,000. The ASSR ceased to exist; its territory was partly assigned to the newly formed Astrakhan province, and partly to other provinces in the region.² Elista was occupied by the Germans for five months, and thereafter the city (like the Kalmyks themselves) was subjected to political repression. Its name was changed to Stepnoi (the City of the Steppe), and after the Kalmyks were forcibly exiled it was inhabited exclusively by Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians etc.). The Kalmyk Republic ceased to exist, and its former capital lost its administrative function. Nothing was done even to repair war damage.

The process of restoration of Kalmyk autonomy began in 1956. When the Kalmyks came back to their republic in 1957–8, the town was still in ruins. Though Elista had regained its name and status as capital, the task of reconstruction in a material sense took longer, as fewer than ten public buildings were left. However, the population grew rapidly, and had risen to 23,000 by 1959.³ The return of the Kalmyks from deportation to their original homeland was a process of great significance. Their supposed war guilt was annulled; not only was their capital restored to them, but so were their rights in the broadest sense. The republic was recreated from scratch, along with its capital city. The building boom of the period offered tangible proof that a new life had begun, and it is notable that informants tend to recall the developments in exactly this light: there was no Elista left when they arrived from their banishment, and everything had to be rebuilt from the bottom up: 'When I first came to Elista in 1958, there was nothing here. The Red House was there, that's it';⁴ 'I came here in 1957, there was nothing here then. Not even a sapling, just sand. And the wind – you could hardly open your eyes.'⁵

Many old people remember these years, the late 1950s and early 1960s, as the happiest time in their life, although those who came back to the city had nowhere to live, no jobs and not even enough to eat. Those who had

returned from Siberia – whither they had been exiled 'in perpetuity' – and who had now been declared not guilty of the charges of collaboration, felt a sense of joy that overcame any conflicts in the process of ethnic and civic identity; there was a sense of shared fate in a positive sense. It was easy to create what Benedict Anderson famously described as an 'imagined community'. The community administration revived the old tradition of constructing *saman* (wattle and daub) houses collectively. One weekend people would build somewhere to live for one family, and the next weekend for another. In the early 1960s Aleksei Balakaev's 'Elista Waltz' – a song from an operetta of the same name about the young people building the city – became quite a hit:⁶ 'Enkr Elst zurknd oor, en balgsn – mini zoor' ('My native Elista is in my heart, it seems – this is the city of my dreams'). The ethnic dream about returning home and the lifting of the accusations of treachery had indeed been fulfilled, the myth of freedom and dignity restored. Girls started to be given a new name, Elistina, pointing to the centrality of the city to the restoration of Kalmykia's identity.

In the present day Elista's standing among Kalmyks rests not just on the fact that it is the capital, but also on the fact that it is the only centre of culture and education. Religion returned to the social life of Kalmykia at the end of the 1980s: Buddhist temples and stupas began to be built, regular services were conducted, the *tsam* mystery plays were performed and special ritual objects such as the mandala were brought into use. Along with this, Buddhist clerics of the highest rank – including His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama – made visits in order to lead prayers. All of this has turned Kalmykia (the westernmost centre of Buddhism in the world) into a centre of pilgrimage for Buddhists all over Europe. At the same time the severe economic hardship and high levels of unemployment in the Kalmyk Republic have provoked outmigration by Kalmyks to Moscow and St Petersburg, along with a population drift into Elista from outlying regions. Natives of Elista now complain that they sometimes do not meet anyone they know out walking the streets.⁷ Yet this kind of complaint about a 'deluge' of incomers from the countryside also points to the fact that Elista is acquiring a genuine urban culture.

ARCHITECTURE

The years when Elista started to be built followed the Decree on Architectural Excesses of 1955, which ushered in the drably functional *khrushchoby* (Khrushchev slums), alongside the traditional *saman* houses. The new Elista accordingly mainly consisted of pattern-book new districts

and areas of private building. Micro-districts 1, 3 and 4 were all filled with the nondescript five-storey blocks typical of the day. It was in this period that the general city plan was evolved. Ulitsa Lenina (Lenin Street) was laid down as the main thoroughfare, abutting a square of the same name with the inevitable Lenin statue. In the so-called 'years of stagnation' under Leonid Brezhnev, building continued unabated. The tallest building in the city was constructed at this point – the Party Regional Committee, rising to six storeys. This building was also from a standard pattern-book, as was the city's central hotel (the three-star Rossiia). Elista still had no face of its own and looked as anonymous as any Soviet small town.

In post-Soviet Kalmykia, by contrast, important changes in self-perception have taken place. These were precipitated by the introduction of new forms of governance and the institution of the office of president of the Republic of Kalmykia, by the search for a new post-Soviet national image and for new ways of representing this to the outside world, and also by efforts to rethink local history. The fact that Kalmykia was now a republic with its own president was crucial to this new image. The Mongoloid appearance of the Kalmyks, their traditional songs and dances, and their Buddhist heritage all gained a new prominence and led to a search for new architectural forms. It was essential that the *samobytnost'*, or national specificity, of the Kalmyks be paraded before visitors and investors, and that it be reflected in the fabric of the city. The result was that Elista began to undergo a transformation, and Central Asian and Chinese architectural motifs started to proliferate. For example, Lenin Square was now closed off on two sides by golden gates and by an archway reminiscent of those in 'China Towns' the world over. In fact, structures of this kind had never been traditional in Kalmyk culture, and it was hard even to find a translation for the term 'golden gate', since the word 'gate' itself does not exist in Kalmyk. In the end, the phrase 'Altn Boskh' (Golden Structure) was decided on (Figure 10.1).

Buildings of this kind, which had never existed before but which now had been grafted onto 'Kalmyk culture', also needed an interpretive rationale. In the following example of the official interpretation of the new cultural phenomena, the analytical level recalls less a piece of academic anthropology than the kind of weak play on words of the sort you might expect in a school essay:

The archway is the main entrance to the residence, a symbol of the sacred threshold, a symbol of goodness and prosperity, the creative principle, energy, and power. Anyone who passes through the Golden Gates will be spiritually cleansed and will



Figure 10.1 Golden Gates, Elista.

enter a new path, the path of virtue – the white path. Here, as the bells chime, one's most heartfelt wishes will be realized.⁸

An archaic word from the nomadic era, *stavka* (khan's residence), is used to refer to the presidential residence, transforming it thereby into the residence of the great khan himself. The process of spiritual purification is represented just as superficially: it comes about not as the result of moral struggle, but as the automatic consequence of passing through the Archway. Buddhism is adopted simply in terms of outward behaviour.

Here we have a flourishing Kalmyk example of an invented tradition. Elista was witnessing the wholesale development of architectural forms that mix the 'classical Orient' with a sense of self-presentation that is aimed at the outside world. For this reason, a type of explicitly Western, exoticizing rationale is given – you enter through the gates not just because there is no alternative, but because you can purify your karma. The ruling elite in the city manufactured their own 'cultural brands' from a mixture of well-known Buddhist symbols and key elements of 'classical Oriental' culture, thus creating 'a corner of the Orient in the Occident', and legitimating their power. The republic's first president, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, raising his boyish love of chess to the level of a central affair of state, initiated the building in

Elista of a 'Chess City' ('Siti Chess'),⁹ creating yet another analogy to the serai of the khans. Here the main building, the Chess Palace, is constructed as a modern imitation of the traditional yurt.

However, developments inspired by cultural traditions do not in fact dominate the cityscape of modern Elista. Foremost on the post-Soviet architectural agenda is in fact the resurrection of pre-Soviet traditions. Over the years of the Soviet period, every single Buddhist temple on the current territory of the Republic of Kalmykia was destroyed. The only remaining temple, Khosheut *khurul*, was located in an area that was ceded to Astrakhan province in 1943, and never returned to the Kalmyk Republic.

Kalmykia was one of three Soviet republics whose 'titular nationalities' were by tradition Buddhists. But in Buryatia and Tuva, monasteries were allowed to remain open, and the training of monks continued. Thus, for post-Soviet Kalmykia, the building of a new Buddhist temple was considered a project of the first importance. Accordingly, in 1996, Siakiusn-siume (Holy Refuge) temple was erected, in fulfilment of one of Ilyumzhinov's central promises as part of his election campaign in 1993. The building of what was described as 'the largest Buddhist monastic complex in Europe' was one of the most important symbolic gifts presented by the new regime to the Kalmyk people. Constructed in the severe style of a Tibetan monastery, it lies not far away from Elista, but, as befits a monastery, in a tranquil area (chosen by the Dalai Lama himself). While the temple contains an apartment for His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama, and also an apartment for the first president of the Republic of Kalmykia, it is 'beyond the purview' of Elista, and its distance from the urban hustle of the capital also puts it, so to speak, outside 'political space'.

These considerations led to the initiation of a project to build a Buddhist temple right in the middle of Elista, one that would also be larger and more beautiful than the one previously built. The temple, the Golden Hermitage of Buddha Shakyamuni, was constructed in record time (nine months), and duly became the most imposing structure in the Kalmyk capital (Figure 10.2).

The appearance of this gilded temple, raised above the city on an artificial mound, underlined the 'real presence' of political power in the city. Both the temples, but especially this second one, acted as a visual embodiment of Ilyumzhinov's claims to the role of national leader. At the same time, there are simply not enough priests and monks to staff all the temples that have been built in Kalmykia in recent years; a genuine revival of religious practices in the republic would have had to begin precisely with a dynamic ministry. Buildings are not enough: as the Russian Old Believer saying suggests, 'it's bods not logs that make a church' (i.e. the human factor is



Figure 10.2 The Golden Hermitage of Buddha Shakyamuni, Elista.

more important than the fabric).¹⁰ In the present day, precisely this 'human factor' represents the biggest problem. At the same time, the Golden Temple has an especially favourable position, occupying an entire city block and facing onto two of the city's main streets, so that wherever you go, you end up passing by. It has now become the city's most famous building, appearing on calendars and advertisements everywhere. For example, the Elista-Moscow bus is shown against the background of the temple and the Kremlin. The underdevelopment of city planning in Elista makes Buddhist religious architecture the chief 'brand' of the city by default.

MEMORY AND MONUMENTS

In the Soviet period, collective memory in Kalmykia elided pre-revolutionary names, which were linked in one way or another with the 'reactionary' classes (clergy and landowners), and focused on the supposed fact of Kalmykia's 'voluntary absorption into Russia'. As was generally the case in the Soviet Union, the pre-revolutionary figures who were remembered were those who could be presented as revolutionary or 'forward thinking' (for example, the writers Pushkin and Lermontov, after whom streets were named). Lenin

dismissed the entirety of Kalmyk history as 'an uninterrupted chain of suffering' ('Brother Kalmyks! The fate of your nation is an uninterrupted chain of suffering! Join the Red Army').¹¹ It was not worth being remembered; life was supposed to start afresh.

The selection of monuments in Elista during the Soviet period confirms this principle. There were only four of them: statues of Lenin and of Pushkin, the Memorial to the Heroes of the Civil and Great Patriotic Wars, and the equestrian monument to the Civil War hero Oka Gorodovikov. The pre-eminence of Lenin in the symbolic hierarchy is clear from the central position that his monument was assigned when it was constructed in 1970 (to commemorate the centenary of the leader's birth). Although credited to named artists (the sculptors M. and O. Manizer), it had an identikit look to it, and the positioning was also entirely conventional – as dictated by the norms of the cult in any Soviet town.

One of the most notable places in Elista constructed during the immediate post-Stalin years was the memorial with its communal grave, 'Eternal Flame' and sculptural group in the centre set up to honour the Great Patriotic War and the part played by Kalmyks in the victory (Figure 10.3). Erected in 1965, this structure would have had a central place in any Soviet city, but given the accusations of collaboration made against the Kalmyks in the Stalin era, it was especially important here. It was vital to emphasize the Kalmyks' contribution



Figure 10.3 Great Patriotic War memorial ('To the Fallen Heroes'), Elista.

and thus lay to rest the use of the actions of one group of Kalmyks to blacken the entire ethnic group, who had been deported en masse to Siberia. Accordingly, the task of constructing the monument was assigned to the leading sculptor in the republic – People's Artist of the USSR Nikita Sandzhiev. The gallery of figures included was supposed to symbolize the Kalmyks' place in the Russian Federation and their fidelity to Soviet ideals. The memorial turned out a success, and the citizens of Elista quickly came to love it. They paid visits not just on such official holidays as Victory Day, with its collective wreath-laying, but at other times as well: for example, wedding parties would almost always stop there so the bride and groom could pose for photographs in front of the Eternal Flame. In the 1970s private individuals would often lay flowers there.

In 1976 Nikita Sandzhiev designed another memorial, this time to the Civil War hero Oka Gorodovikov, but as this stood on the outskirts of the city and was hard to reach on foot, it did not make its way into the lives of locals. The choice of Pushkin as the subject of the fourth monument – apart from his *primus inter pares* status in the Soviet literary canon – was motivated by the fact that he had actually mentioned the Kalmyks in his writings. In *The Captain's Daughter* the rebel Pugachev narrates the Kalmyk tale of the raven, while in Pushkin's famous late poem 'I Have Built Myself a Monument', the poet anticipates a time when even 'the friend of the steppes, the Kalmyk' will know and love his work. These images in turn pioneered the Orientalist images of the Kalmyks that were current in Russian culture before and after 1917. Thus we can see that during the final decades of the Soviet Union Elista was being turned into the capital of an autonomous republic, but also into a standard-issue small Soviet town; the ethnic markers in the city text were pared to the minimum at this period.

In post-Soviet Elista, on the other hand, the number of monuments soared, from four to over a hundred. The association in the authorities' minds between the problematics of memory and social power meant that tribute was paid to the most varied events, and a huge range of figures – historical, folkloric, Buddhist, pagan etc. – were commemorated in bronze. This created a historical kaleidoscope, a fusion of different narrative strategies and discourses that could not be simply streamlined into a single, linear 'master text'.¹² As a recent guidebook to Russia has pointed out:

In terms of the number of monuments to the square foot, Elista now appears to top the list right across the Russian Federation. Moreover, these are not works of art in the style of Tsereteli,¹³ they are perfectly tasteful, ranging from quite small objects in side streets right up to huge monuments. You can find them all over the city centre; the biggest concentration is along Lenin Street.¹⁴

One of Kirsan Ilyumzhinov's first acts upon coming to power was to have a statue of Buddha Shakyamuni placed next to Government House (the White House). The sculptor, Vladimir Vas'kin, used white marble and worked in a severe classical style – to the general approval of the Elista population. However, when the sculpture was finished, some activists from the Buddhist community (none of whom had ever seen an actual sculpture of the Buddha, since they had all grown up under Soviet power), began to object: how could the great Teacher be shown sitting stark naked in the middle of a public place? They insisted that the Buddha be masked in marble draperies, which was duly done. This spot has now become one of the most honoured places in Elista, and tourists and locals love to have their picture taken there. The preferred pose is to stand with one's back to the statue (despite the fact that, by tradition, turning one's back on the divinity is an act of disrespect).

In the Soviet period the ideological centre of Elista was the Lenin monument not far away from where the Buddha now is. Lenin faced the building housing the regional committee of the Communist Party, as befitted the statue of the Communist 'God' with reference to the 'cathedral' of his 'server-priests'. After 1991 Lenin of course lost his symbolic power, as did the other tokens of socialism. At the same time, his statue was not dismantled or vandalized, as happened in many other Soviet cities. The reason for this was not Kalmyk fidelity to Communism as such, but the leader's own personal links with the nation (his grandmother Anna Smirnova was a Kalmyk). In 1993, when there was talk of removing Lenin's body from its mausoleum on Red Square, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov proposed giving the mausoleum a home in Elista.

In 1994, after the statue of the Buddha was erected – it stands in an avenue next to Government House – an embarrassing contingency arose: the creation of the new sacred space had ended up making the Buddha face Lenin's back, as though he were walking behind him. Another problem was that Lenin also had his back to the Presidential Administration, which had moved in 1993 into the new building of the regional committee of the Communist Party. Accordingly, the statue of Lenin was rotated by 180 degrees, to reflect the new perceptions of necessary spatial hierarchy. Then, in the autumn of 2004, Lenin was moved 100 metres north, and the site where he had stood used for the Pagoda of Seven Days. The statue of Lenin now faces this pagoda, but the displacement from the symbolic centre of the square has made his role considerably less important.

Alongside Lenin and the Buddha, there is another important monument in central Elista, *The Boy Helping the Dragon to Fly*. Again, this was

one of the earliest commissions made after Kirsan Ilyumzhinov's rise to power, and it has direct associations with him also. This is not just because of its location next to Government House (on the opposite side to Lenin), but because the youth of the figure alludes to Ilyumzhinov's own tender age when he was first elected president (he was only thirty-one at the time), as does the monument's implicit allusion to the Merkit tribe, to which Ilyumzhinov's ancestors belonged. This is one of many different portraits of President Ilyumzhinov (or the head of the Republic of Kalmykia, as his official title was) in the city. For instance, there are billboards all over Elista showing double portraits of Ilyumzhinov with Patriarch Alexy II, the Pope, and indeed portraits of Ilyumzhinov playing football, or, on the other hand, wearing the traditional dress of the khans and surrounded by his suite.

There is, however, another and quite different symbolic portrait of the former president in the capital city – Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov's trickster hero, Ostap Bender. Ilyumzhinov's political opponents commonly referred to Chess City as 'New Vasiuki', thus identifying the Kalmyk head of state with the picaro 'son of a Turkish national'.¹⁵ Ilyumzhinov's government responded to the challenge in monumental terms, creating a statue to honour Ostap Bender, and thus humorously neutralizing an accusation that might otherwise have had subversive force. Once again, the subject of commemoration has been reassessed as a result of the process of commemoration: in the Soviet period, Bender's entrepreneurial instincts were officially regarded as reprehensible, but now the statue to him is a gesture of respect for go-getters and for the possibility of business projects that might even seem risky.

In the Soviet years Lenin Square was always empty on ordinary days. Only on state holidays did this change, with the construction of a tribune on which the leadership of the Kalmyk regional committee of the Communist Party would stand and review the parade. These parades vanished into oblivion after 1991, but the square – still always empty during the daytime – became, from 1993, a popular gathering place for Elista's young people, who would throng there from spring to autumn to listen to concerts and take part in discos. However, the construction of the Pagoda of Seven Days was accompanied by a complete remodelling of the square. The boundaries of this are now marked by kerbstones and benches, and a children's playground and giant chessboard for adults have been constructed alongside. A ceremonial place that was usually empty is now always crowded.

Monuments were also raised to different figures from the Kalmyk past. This was also quite a patchy process, given that 'Soviet history' embraced

not only party leaders and Civil War heroes, but also scholars who had undergone political repression, victims of the wartime deportation to Siberia, and ambiguous figures such as the first president of Kalmykia's eponymous grandfather, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov. The latter had imposed Soviet power on his homeland, but later shot himself, disillusioned by the political system he had so fervently supported.

A special place in Elista's complex 'politics of memory' is occupied by the monument *Exodus and Return* by the world-famous sculptor and former Soviet dissident Ernst Neizvestnyi. The monument is dedicated to the memory of the victims of the repressions of the Stalin years, and its unveiling in 1996 was an event of major importance in Kalmykia. It stands on an ancient burial mound in which, according to local legend, all the secrets and memories in the universe are hidden. *Exodus and Return* lies to the east of the city, and thus the return from the east – the direction of banishment – is also commemorated here. A 'railway', a road of mourning, approaches the monument, and is carried on in the footway that leads directly up to it. The main idea is a synthesis of past and present and a reflection of the spirit of the Kalmyk people, a spirit that should be honoured and celebrated. A monstrous iron social and technocratic machine tries to destroy all life, belief and culture, sucking everyone into its maw, but the Great Spirit gives people the chance to pull down the walls of the system and return to their native land. The monument is well integrated into the surrounding landscape. Its peripheral position relative to the city reflects the marginal status of the deportation, which is commemorated only on one specific day, 28 December. While the monument is emphatically placed on an artificial mound, the path up to it leads from a suitably abject place – one of the cattle wagons in which the Kalmyks were deported along the railway line to Siberia in 1943.

Another important new monument is the figure of Zaya Pandita, the creator of the written Kalmyk language. Sculpted by R. Rokchinskii in 1999, the monument was unveiled on the 400th anniversary of Zaya Pandita's birth, and on the 350th anniversary of his creation of the Oirat script *Todo bichig* ('Clear Script'). In Soviet times a monument could not possibly have been erected to Zaya Pandita, given that he was a priest and thus the representative of a 'reactionary class', in terms of Kalmyk ideology. His achievements were considered irrelevant, particularly since the alphabet he created was rejected by the new regime. The sculpture stands by a building belonging to the Kalmyk State University, and located on the fringes of the city. The inscription is in Zaya Pandita's own Clear Script, but with a Russian translation, because the script is readable only by specialists. This

paradox – that Kalmyks today are proud of having their own alphabet, but cannot read it¹⁶ – is also reflected in the monument itself. While Zaya Pandita is portrayed in the prestigious medium of bronze, the statue is located right on the edge of Elista, in a marginal position.

There is also a bizarre flavour to a statue of the famous early twentieth-century *jangarchi* or singer of epics Eélyan Ovla, who is shown sitting at the edge of the park, holding his *dombra* (a traditional stringed instrument). His pose is that traditionally adopted by a social inferior or junior in the presence of social superiors or seniors, even though everyone knows that the *jangarchi* enjoyed extremely high status, and became the most important person in the auditorium when he took up his instrument to play.

A large number of monuments are devoted to figures from folklore. These include the epic heroes Jangar (the protagonist of the most famous Kalmyk epic, a cycle of stories about warriors performing stirring feats of bravery) and Hongor (one of the warriors in Jangar's train and the second most important figure in Kalmyk legend, credited with saving his land and people from enemies on many occasions). The two sculptures are on a formidable scale (the figure of Jangar is 3 metres high), and are placed on vast pedestals (10 metres high in the case of Jangar, and 7 metres high in the case of Hongor). Originally, they were both located on approach roads into the city from the northern and southern sides, but in 2009 Jangar was moved into the city itself.

One of the favourite sculptural figures in Elista is *Echo*, by the sculptor Nina Evseeva. The figure is seated in the lotus position and holds his *dombra* before him, as he listens to its silence and vacancy. The fact that he is clutching this hollow instrument to his heart points to the cultural losses of the Kalmyk people over history, and also to the scrupulous attitude of those who listen across the vacancy of history to dim resonances and echoes. Interestingly, this statue very quickly found its way into the hearts of the locals and even has a nickname, 'Dotr uga' ('No Insides').

As O. V. Riabov has observed, nations evoke emotions, and are the subject of love and of passionate feeling. Nationalism is an aesthetic as well as a political phenomenon: allegorical representations allow communities not merely to be 'imagined', but to be visualized as well.¹⁷ Representations of the Motherland can be seen all over the former Soviet Union, particularly in the capitals of the various republics. In Kalmykia, however, there is no sculpture of this kind. It is not impossible that this absence is traceable to the ethnically mixed character of Elista's population: a 'Motherland' statue with Russian features would annoy the Kalmyk population, and vice versa. The 400th anniversary of the absorption of Kalmykia into Russia was marked by the construction of what a local

press report described as 'the largest gilded monument in Russia'.¹⁸ It was rather unimaginatively assigned the title of the 'Golden Rider', as a reflection of material and subject matter, though in fact the subject is once more Jangar. Despite the importance of the historical event commemorated by the statue, it was also placed at the city limits – and, what is more, on the southern approach road, the site of the other Jangar statue. As a result, when you drive into Elista from the south, you can now see a double image of the epic hero: first riding a winged horse, and then, a bit further on, standing lost in thought.

The post-Soviet years witnessed not just a bewildering expansion of the number of monuments in Elista, but also a complete breakdown of the tight control over planning which obtained in the Soviet period. As in other Soviet cities, the construction of monuments was a long, slow process accompanied by much bureaucratic fuss and committee work. The rare, lucrative commissions were assigned only to the best-regarded official artists, including nationally renowned figures. Since 1991, commissioning has taken place haphazardly, and no general aesthetic or technical standards have been imposed. Not surprisingly, the results have sometimes been haphazard as well. At the same time, some of the monuments are genuinely popular, including a statue of an old man in central Elista around which a full-scale cult has grown up. The tree and the bush next to him are decorated with hundreds of the multicoloured scraps of rag traditionally used to mark sacred places.

TOPONYMS

In the Soviet period the streets in the centre were assigned revolutionary names – ulitsa (in Kalmyk, *uul'ntse*) Lenina, Pionerskaia, Komsomol'skaia, Revoliutsionnaia, Kommunisticheskaia, Rosa Luxemburg, Valerian Kuibyshev – or alternatively named after Russian writers of 'progressive' credentials (Pushkin, Lermontov). There was also a whole group of streets named after the famous Soviet aviators Leonid Vinogradov, Polina Osipenko and Anatolii Serov. The last case, ulitsa Serova, was to provoke misunderstandings in the post-war era, since the NKVD general who had organized the deportation of the Kalmyks in 1943, I. A. Serov, bore the same surname, and people indignantly assumed that the street had been named in his honour. Alongside these generic dedications, local heroes were also honoured, for example, heroes of the Kalmyk resistance against the Germans such as Iurii Klykov, Tamara Khakhlynova and Volodia Kosiev. In the entire city, there was only one street with a Kalmyk name, commemorating the epic hero Jangar.

The post-Soviet toponyms of Elista, like the monuments, manifest a variety of diverse tendencies. To begin with, streets have been named after Kalmyk poets, writers and scholars (for example, the poets Aksen Suseev, Mikhail Khoninov and David Kugul'tinov). But alongside such manifestations of nationalism pure and simple, there is nostalgic reference to certain Soviet leaders and writers who performed services to the Kalmyk nation. Thus, one of the squares is now 'Khrushchev Square' because Khrushchev annulled the supposed guilt of the Kalmyks for collaboration, and restored Kalmyk statehood. In other words, he is commemorated for returning Elista to the Kalmyks and for returning them to Elista. Elsewhere a street in the city was named after B. B. Gorodovikov, who served for seventeen years as first secretary of the regional committee of the Communist Party, and was the first Kalmyk to hold this position. It was during his tenure of the post that the Kalmyk Republic was revived, and that the station, airport and university were built.

The case of Kirsan Ilyumzhinov Street is particularly interesting. This street was named not after the current head of state, but after his grandfather, who in the Soviet period counted as an unambiguously heroic figure. The documents indicating that he had killed himself out of disgust at the atrocities committed by the Red Army against the Kalmyk civilian population came to light only under perestroika. But, in contrast to some other Soviet heroes, the revelation of the truth actually enhanced Ilyumzhinov's standing in the new social circumstances: now he came to seem a hero of wounded national consciousness. The street accordingly retained its name, becoming a rare case of a politically motivated dedication that seemed just as appropriate in the post-Soviet era as it had before 1991.

One of the new streets in Elista was named in honour of Iuliia Neiman, who translated the Kalmyk poet David Kugul'tinov into Russian. This dedication to a non-Kalmyk figure stands alongside the retention of other non-Kalmyk names for various streets, for example, ulitsa Knakisa, named after Udlis Knakis, a ranger who was shot in the 1980s by poachers while trying to defend a herd of antelopes, or ulitsa Vetkalovoi, named after a nurse of the 28th Army, which liberated Elista from the Germans, as well as St Sergius of Radonezh Street, and streets named after the ethnographers and specialists in Eurasian culture Lev Gumilev and Galina Starovoitova. Moreover, not all the dedications commemorate people. A number of street names also honour the places where the Kalmyks were forcibly resettled in the years after 1943: Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, Kemerovo, Altai. And a few now have Kalmyk, rather than

Russian, names, for example Zulturgan (Chasteberry), Bagchudyn gerl (Light of Youth), Al'mna Tsetsg (Apple Blossom), Urdan (Struggle).

CONCLUSION

Kalmykia's location between Europe and Asia determines the values and priorities of the local population. The post-Soviet period has seen increasing orientation to European cultural values (whether represented by Russian or Western Europe), manifested, for example, in the rise of individualism and the decline of the traditional values of the extended family. The unrivalled dominance of the Russian language, both spoken and written, is one factor in this; even at home, Russian is usually preferred, with many Kalmyks now having a weak or non-existent grasp of their ancestral tongue. In some provincial areas Kalmyk has held out, but you have to make an effort to hear it in the capital. In schools, pupils are often reluctant to study Kalmyk to graduation level because of fears that they will end up with a lower grade average, and this is generally regarded as completely normal and acceptable. Most Elista schoolchildren speak English much better than they do Kalmyk.

It would be fair to say that the current Elista lifestyle is a fusion of traditional and modern, Kalmyk and Russian, Eastern and Western values. The use of the calendar is a good illustration of this. Kalmyks are perfectly at home with the Gregorian calendar, as used internationally, but at the same time major life events, such as courting rituals, marriages and funerals, are organized according to the astrological Buddhist calendar. The high rates of ethnically mixed marriages, local notions that ethnically mixed features are the most attractive and best-looking, and the wide use of Russian first names (or names understood to be Russian, such as David instead of Dava, Bella instead of Kermen)¹⁹ are all symptoms of progressive westernization. At the same time, the Kalmyk physical appearance, with its unbreakable links to the Orient, is reflected in the competing, and constantly developing, local mythology of 'Asian civilization': the Kalmyks are seen as a people with their own sense of statehood and their own version of Buddhist culture. Image and reality interact: people make increasing efforts to live up to the new behaviour ideals, but concepts of tradition also change as values become more Western.

Elista is currently the site of a contest between a variety of different local narratives, all of which together turn the city into an intertextual phenomenon. As in other Russian towns and cities, images and plot motifs from myth act as ways of binding together these motley and diverse fragments,

these sense-defining events, into a larger whole, the contemporary identity of the modern city.²⁰ Pagodas, Buddhist temples, monuments, proliferating memorials to folk heroes and others are all elements in the search for a new national and local identity. At the same time, emphasis on historical figures and events from the period since the Kalmyks became subjects of the Russian Empire is a consistent feature.

One key style that results is what might be termed 'reactive Orientalism' – an eclectic phenomenon that essentially derives from European Orientalism. During the Soviet period the citizens of Elista were forcibly cut off from their religion, their traditional script and the written texts composed in this script. They were educated in the Russian language and trained to adopt Soviet values. As a result they essentially turned into bearers of westernized and 'orientalizing' views. Like the Orient itself, as described by Edward Said, Elista was subjected to the orientalizing gaze not just because its 'Oriental nature' was laid bare, but because it was possible to *make it* Oriental.²¹ At the same time, however, the Kalmyks have also long had a tradition of considering themselves 'European'. It is notable that Kalmyk émigrés traditionally went West rather than East – to the USA, following the path of many Russian émigrés. They see themselves as a people that is 'Asiatic' only in terms of its origins (as with the Finns and the Hungarians).²²

Despite this, orientalization at the local level continues to be important. The obsession with primordial explications of ethnic identity that characterized Soviet culture has made Kalmyks, like other post-Soviet citizens, see a direct link between their culture and physical appearance. The impact of intermarriage on Kalmykia notwithstanding, most people locally still look 'Asiatic'. Yet Soviet culture, while certainly 'socialist in content', was in no real sense 'national in form'. It had little or nothing to do with the pre-Soviet cultures of non-Russian 'nationalities' such as the Kalmyks. Specialists in the visual arts, such as sculpture, architecture and painting, were given no training in local traditions of representation; they studied in Russian institutions according to the canons of neoclassical art. They acquired no expertise whatever in Kalmyk art, for Buddhist architecture, which was both 'Asiatic' and religious, was under a double taboo.

Orientalization at the local level should thus be seen as a reaction to the standardization of Soviet times: to forcible Russification and to the monotonous drabness of town planning and daily life. The emphasis on cultural exclusivity also addresses another, more purely local, problem. In many republics of Russia (for example, Yakutia-Sakha, or Khanty-Mansy) the so-called 'titular nationality' (which provided the state language etc. during Soviet times) could also present itself as the 'original' nationality. But the Kalmyks – whose

national history rested, after all, on the idea of their voluntary absorption into Russia – could not trumpet their ‘aboriginal’ status. Stressing the unique features of their culture hence became a particularly important form of self-definition. Invoking ‘the East’ provided the most obvious answer to questions about what a new post-Soviet identity should involve.

This did not, however, mean that it was the simplest answer. A striking example of the tension is a new theatre in Kalmykia, set up to stage classic plays by Kalmyk, Russian and foreign writers. The fusion of European costumes and Kalmyk faces, European names and Kalmyk intonation, has bizarre effects; in traditional realist terms, these stagings are simply not plausible. The undoubted talents of directors and actors notwithstanding, the effect is uncomfortably close to parody.

‘Reactive Orientalism’ had complex effects in other ways as well, as with the billboard images showing President Ilyumzhinov in the traditional dress of a Kalmyk khan. On the one hand, such images – allied to Ilyumzhinov’s style of highly personalized leadership – appeared to endorse the traditional Western image of ‘the Orient’ as a place of despotic rule and institutionalized corruption. Yet they also offered protection against reprisals on the part of the government of the Russian Federation, by appearing to represent the undemocratic elements in Ilyumzhinov’s rule as an expression of ‘national tradition’. Even Western experts – who tend to shrug their shoulders over ‘Oriental’ peccadilloes where they see these as an ineradicable part of local tradition – were likely to find this kind of self-presentation disarming.

Yet Kalmykia’s lack of significant natural resources and the small size of its population – which deprives the Kalmyks of the ability to present themselves as a powerful voting lobby at federal level – and the republic’s depressed economy empty the sonorous phrases about independence and autonomy (as heard in other autonomous republics of the Russian Federation as well) of real meaning. The Republic of Kalmykia remains ‘Oriental’ in its ‘feminine’ dependence, its near-parasitic status with reference to the Russian Federation as a whole. Hence the conservative representation of Kalmykia’s relations with Russia, and the emphasis on the inalienable ties with the larger nation. One of the two biggest memorial complexes in the city commemorates the comradeship of Kalmyks and Russians in the Civil War and Great Patriotic War. The other represents the forced exile of the Kalmyks – an episode which in some cultures might form the basis of a national separatist drive seeking to right ‘injustice’ – as the source of sorrowing and regret, not of reproach. Renaming in the

post-Soviet period has found room for new Russian names, as well as Kalmyk ones.

The emphasis on Russian-Kalmyk links naturally reached its high point during the celebrations in 2009 of the 400th anniversary of the voluntary absorption of the Kalmyks into Russia. The official slogan was ‘Kalmykia is my Motherland, Russia is my soul’. The selection of such a text – in which Russia was presented as the point of spiritual orientation, and a formerly nomadic people was associated with a fixed ‘Motherland’ – was typical of current attitudes.

Loyalty to Russia may also be the reason why the Kalmyks make no efforts to commemorate Genghis Khan, a cult figure for other ethnic groups in the Mongol world. At the grass-roots level Genghis does enjoy popularity in Kalmykia – almost every school class has a Genghis or two. The trilogy *To the Final Ocean*, by the Soviet writer Vasily Yan, and the study *Genghis Khan As a Military Leader and His Heritage*, by the Eurasianist Erendzhen Khara-Davan, are found in almost every home library in Elista. As soon as private commercial activity was legalized under perestroika, badges and pennants with Genghis Khan’s portrait went on sale. In 1996 the Kalmyk Theatre put on a grandiose production, *Under the Yellow Flag of Genghis Khan*; everyone in Elista knows Sergei Bobrov’s film *Mongol* (2007), which includes Kalmyk songs and snatches of Kalmyk dialogue. But making Genghis a hero runs contrary to the dominant understanding of the rise of the Russian state, according to which the overthrow of the ‘Tatar-Mongol Yoke’ is seen as a vital step in the creation of Russian national identity. Genghis Khan and his grandson Baty Khan are firmly in the enemy camp. Genghis is clearly not going to become a hero of Kalmyk monumental propaganda anytime soon.

All in all, the dominant image of Elista is shaped first and foremost by the political and intellectual elite of Kalmykia, who see ethnic identity primarily as a support of their hegemony. The exoticization of Kalmykia and of Elista as its capital acts as legitimation of the region’s claims to special status and underlines the importance of these. They shore up hopes that Kalmykia can project itself as, and remain, not just a specific region of the North Caucasus, but also a politically autonomous area of the Russian Federation.

Translated by Catriona Kelly

NOTES

1. The word *gorod* is used for both ‘town’ and ‘city’, the next category down being *poselok* (‘settlement’).

2. On the deportation, see N.F. Bugai, *Operatsiia 'Ulusy'* (Elista, 1991); V. B. Ubushaev, *Vyselenie i vozvrashchenie* (Elista, 1991); E.-B. Guchinova, *Pomnit' nelzia zabyt': antropologiya deportatsionnoi travmy kalmykov* (Stuttgart, 2005).
3. www.mccme.ru/putevod/08/Elista/elista.html [accessed 1 February 2007].
4. V. I. Badmaev, interviewed by E. Guchinova, Elista, 2004.
5. M. Ad'ianova, interviewed by E. Guchinova, Elista, 2004.
6. At the start of the twenty-first century, the 'Elista Waltz' made a comeback too, but with the words discarded, and in a jazz cover version. In many social situations Kalmyk has completely fallen out of use, so the words were essentially superfluous. Another very popular song of the post-Soviet period was 'My Little Elista', a song written by local man Viktor Khaptakhanov. Elista is represented here as the town of one's childhood, of personal associations, as one's own little homeland in the wider world.
7. Author's field notes, interview with R. Ivanov, Elista, 2009.
8. Here and below the descriptions of the sculptures and symbols of Elista are taken from the official site of the mayor of Elista, www.gorod-elista.ru: 'The Sights of Elista'.
9. This term is, needless to say, native neither to Kalmyk nor Russian.
10. Iu. M. Lotman, 'Arkitektura v kontekste kul'tury', *Semiosfera* (St Petersburg, 2001), 680.
11. *K istorii obrazovaniia avtomnoi oblasti kalmytskogo naroda (oktiabr' 1917 – noiabr' 1920): sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Elista, 1960), 60.
12. See L. Piskunova and I. Iankov, 'Mifologema "stroitel'noi zhertvy" kak mekhanizm perekodirovki sovetskogo opyta v formirovanii sovremennoi gorodskoi identichnosti', *Miasta nowych ludzi*, vol. 11 (Warsaw, 2007), 61.
13. Zurab Tsereteli is the sculptor responsible for various monuments in Moscow erected in the Luzhkov era that might politely be described as controversial. For many commentators, his work is the epitome of 'flash trash'.
14. 'Putevoditel' po Rossii: Respublika Kalmykiia', www.mccme.ru/putevod/08/Elista/elista.html.
15. Ostap Bender liked to describe himself as 'the son of the Turkish Ambassador'. 'New Vasiuki' is a double joke. Vasiuki was the small town where Bender attempted to pass himself off as an unbeatable chess champion, taking on two-dozen masters simultaneously (after numerous elementary mistakes put him in check all over the place, he was forced to flee the wrath of the paying spectators). A popular Moscow joke of the late 1970s was that after the 1980 Olympics the place would be named New Vasiuki.
16. The classic Kalmyk script was replaced by Latin script in the 1920s; in the 1930s this was then replaced by Cyrillic. The classic script would now be expensive and difficult to reproduce as it follows a vertical sequence.
17. <http://cens.ivanovo.ac.ru/olegia/gendernoe-izmerenie.natsionalizma.htm> [accessed 1 February 2007]. See also Ronald Grigor Suny's article in this collection.
18. K. Shulepov, 'Zolotoi vsadnik vzletel nad Elistoi', *Vesti*, 14 April 2007, www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=115780.

19. The name Kermen means 'squirrel'. During the deportation, girls with this name were renamed Bella (from the Russian *belka*, squirrel).
20. Piskunova and Iankov, 'Mifologema', 61.
21. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979).
22. E.-B. Guchinova, *Ulitsa 'Kalmyk Road': istoriia, kul'tura i identichnosti kalmytskoi obshchiny SShA* (St Petersburg, 2004), 147.