

Notes on a Joint Russian-American Expedition to the  
Semeiskii Old Believers of Transbaikal

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In June-July 2000, a joint Russian-American expedition collected folk songs and recorded religious rituals from the Semeiskii Old Believers of Transbaikal (Zabaikal'e). The expedition was organized by Vladimir Kliauz of the Institute of World Literature and the Institute of Natural and Spiritual Heritage in Moscow, and Prof. Marcus C. Levitt of the University of Southern California (Los Angeles), accompanied by Prof. Richard McIlvery of USC's Thornton School of Music who produced state-of-the-art digital recordings. An Undergraduate Research Grant from USC, with additional special support from the Albert and Elaine Borchard Foundation, funded the expedition. Three USC undergraduate team members were included: Cinema Production major Natalie Ross; Music Industry major Amy Deng; and Art History and Business major Camille Perkins. They helped with the recording and pursued projects of their own. The team also included psychologist Mariia Shchapova, who served as an interpreter, and Liubov' Il'iushenkova, a folklorist from the Oblast' Center of Folklore in Chita.

This expedition can boast of the following "firsts." It was the first to make on-site recordings of Semeiskii folk music with professional quality equipment. (There do exist other recordings of this music, but they were produced in studios in Novosibirsk and Moscow.) Recordings were made under authentic field conditions – around tables in people's homes, in local club buildings or cafeteria, and without time limits. The recordings thus also include the authentic sounds of eating, drinking, coughing, laughing, and occasional arguments over lyrics! A CD of the songs recorded in Ukyr has recently been produced in Moscow. (See the announcement at the end of this article.)

Second, the expedition was the first to record on videotape the unique Semeiskii celebration of Trinity Day in Ukyr. On the morning of Trinity Day, June 18, 2000, a birch tree branch was dressed up in scarves at one end of town, and the next day it was marched to the opposite end of the village and "drowned" in the river – all to the accompaniment of song, dance, and home brew. Third, the expedition recorded – probably for the first time – Semeiskii pominki (funeral meals) in two villages (Kochen and Gutai), thus allowing comparative analysis. Further, the expedition began to investigate the Semeiskii use of and attitudes toward icons (led by

Camille Perkins). The expedition also made a somewhat scandalous discovery – one of the most renowned of the organized, official local Semeiskii choruses from Uruk, which has existed since the 1960s, is not “Semeiskii” at all, but Orthodox. In general, the expedition tried to avoid the official choruses that were set up in the Brezhnev era, and sought older, more authentic local musical traditions. In line with Brezhnev cultural policy, these choruses advertised an explicitly “Semeiskii” ethnic identification – the term itself had been forbidden under Stalin – but forbade any indications of religious adherence, creating a peculiar kind of state-sponsored, ersatz nationality.

During the expedition, we had occasion to make video recordings of a dozen rituals, including various healings, which are discussed in the accompanying article by Vladimir Kliuz.

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My initial reaction on arriving in Transbaikal was mixed. On the one hand, it was a tremendous thrill to have traveled so far and to see this incredibly beautiful part of the world. And our group was met almost everywhere with wide-open arms. On the other hand, we also encountered first hand some very dismal aspects of contemporary Russian life, so that our trip was sobering, disturbing, and even disillusioning in some ways. The Transbaikal region is now the poorest in Russia in per capita income and has been extremely slow in adapting to the post-communist situation. It is one of the most sparsely populated regions in Russia and is in continuing demographic decline. The economy, especially the agricultural sector, is in bad shape and most of the villages we visited were reduced to subsistence farming and animal husbandry. (The situation is such that raising crops and meat for market is unprofitable, given the high cost of fuel for transport and upkeep, among other factors). The government-run state farms, which had served not only as the primary employer, but also as the institution which was basically responsible for the infrastructure of village life – the hub around which transportation, communications, energy (availability of electricity, coal, gas, gasoline), as well as health care, education and cultural life mostly revolved – suddenly disappeared, leaving a gap that still remains.

One of the positive aspects of the new Russia, the new freedom of speech and religion, has sparked a religious revival among many groups in Transbaikal – Orthodox, Old Believer, and Buddhist alike. However, this revival is also subject to the general economic deterioration and in most cases must be financially supported from outside (whether from Moscow, Tibet, or elsewhere). The religious revival seems to be taking place almost from ground zero, not only

economically, but also in the sense that the USSR, it seems, did a highly successful job in eradicating religion. A basic goal of our trip was to collect the remnants of Semeiskii folk culture in their music and local rites.

The roots of the Semeiskii Old Believer community – which may be said to be an ethnic sub-group within the larger Russian ethnos – probably stem back to the schism within the Orthodox Church. “Probably,” because their historical identity was fixed by the fact that they were forcibly re-located to Transbaikal in the 1760s-1780s by Catherine the Great, and their pre-history is shrouded in conjecture. The label “Semeiskii” probably derives from “family” (*sem’ia*) and the fact that they were deported to Siberia not individually as convicts usually were, but as an entire community, in families (Catherine appreciated their value as colonists). They were apparently moved from somewhere in Poland, where they had sought asylum after the schism, but this refuge evaporated as the lands on which they were living were incorporated into the Empire by Catherine’s partitions. Little information survives concerning their origins and relocation; community records, often written into or kept in books, were largely destroyed during the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s and only fragmentary data remains [Bolonev 1994: 48-59].

The special style of Semeiskii singing which we came to record reflects various aspects of their community’s difficult history – in the religious, musical, linguistic, and broader cultural sense – as it retains elements of the folk heritage they preserved from the time before the schism, as well as elements which they brought with them from their late seventeenth to mid-eighteenth-century home in Eastern Europe. Two basic features of Semeiskii singing are almost certainly connected to the traditions of the priestless Old Believers. (The following is based on Uspenskii [1968: 39-40, 61-65], who cites Smolenskii, Potebnia, and Jakobson in correlating phenomena observed in modern singing to those before the schism.) The first is *khomovoe penie* (*khomoniiia, penie po khomoniam*), which refers to using a special pronunciation in church singing by which extra vowels are inserted between consonants and after a final consonant; this is also known as *razdel’norechnoe* and *naonnoe penie* (“na-on” because the reduced vowels, or jers, “ъ” or “ь” were expanded to the full vowels “o” or “e,” harking back to the era before vowel reduction occurred). The official church (as well as some Old Believer groups) rejected this in favor of more ordinary and comprehensible pronunciation (called *narechnoe penie* – from “na-rech” – following speech; this was also known as *istinnorechnoe penie* and as *penie na er*). Priestless Old Believer old-style *khomovoe* singing also incorporated other kinds of complex vocalic – so called glossolalic – inserts. Glossolalic refers to glossolalia, or “speaking in tongues”; the stress here is

on a special sacred method of prayer-singing that is comprehensible to God, but not necessarily to many human beings. In contrast to the Reformation in the West, which aimed to make religion more comprehensible and accessible, the Old Believers in general tended in the opposite direction, that is, to preserve the ways of the past, however obscure.

The second special feature of Semeiskii singing also relates to the issue of comprehensibility raised during the schism – that is the official church’s preference for singing in unison over older forms of complex polyphony, such as the *mnogogolosie* (polyphony) that the Semeiskie use [Dorofeev 1989: 16]. Semeiskii song is never performed solo, but always by two or more singers in complex patterns of leader and responses. Dorofeev describes it this way:

In Semeiskii polyphonic singing (*mnogogolosnyi raspev*), as in south Russia, it is impossible to make out the main melody as it is usually understood, that is, performed by a single voice. The melodic thinking of the folksingers . . . is in its ancient origins polyphonic. In both cases, as a rule, a middle voice initiates, but after this beginning it no longer carries the melody, which is developed as it moves from one voice to another [Dorofeev 1989: 16].

A further element of incomprehensibility for even the Russian-speaking outsider is the fact that Semeiskii singing, like the everyday spoken language, bears traces of old contacts with Polish and Belarusian, which are felt particularly in the pronunciation of certain vowels and consonants. This, however, as Dorofeev [1989: 19] points out, is a different problem from that of inserted vowels, which is “of a purely musical character.” But all of these factors taken together often create the impression “that the song is being performed in a foreign language.”

In any case, the Semeiskii style of singing clearly has complex and ancient roots, and is no way primitive or benighted. The special vocal heritage undoubtedly helped and still helps cement Semeiskii cultural identity. At the same time, I have serious doubts that the singers we heard and recorded had much sense of the specific nature of their musical heritage. No doubt, direct musical connections between older forms of church singing and the Semeiskii music-making that we heard are extremely hard to make, simply for paucity of historical evidence. During our entire trip, we only recorded one religious song (*dukhovnyi stikh*), although we did record several variants of it. This work, "Son Presviatoi Bogoroditsy" [Dream of the Most Holy Mother of God], is among the best known of the *dukhovnye stikhi*, and also exists among the Semeiskie in several other generic variants, including a prayer and an incantation. Dorofeev [1989: 14] states this as follows:

Until the very end of the nineteenth century the main type of Semeiskii singing was liturgical and religious (*kul'tovoe penie i dukhovnyi stikh*), while folk singing, as is known, was proscribed by the elders (*ustavshchik*). At the turn of the century, and particularly after the great October Revolution, religious and folk singing changed places in the Semeiskii cultural paradigm, as folksongs sounded freely and took the main place in the life of the Semeiskii community.

According to some nineteenth-century ethnographers and travelers, the Semeiskie allegedly did not even sing or know any songs. However, we may take this as an indication that they did not perform for outsiders, a reflection of their broader religious sensibility. Religious songs were not meant for those outside the faith, and secular ones, as Dorofeev suggests, may have been discouraged or forbidden. In this sense, while the Revolution persecuted and curtailed religious practice, it also to some degree “liberated” folk singing. (This dilution of the Old Believer heritage also made possible our expedition, participation in Semeiskii life, and the opportunity to make recordings; in general the impulse to preserve folk traditions often marks their imminent demise.) During our trip we did not come across any song books, whether printed or manuscript, which have remained popular among some other Old Believer groups. Baba Tania in Gutai told us that she possessed some, but that they had been borrowed for use in another village.

Most of the Semeiskie in the Transbaikal region, as suggested, apparently belonged traditionally to the priestless Old Believers. Others, as we learnt, came to adhere to Edinoverie (unified faith), a church group whose clergy was educated and sponsored by the official Orthodox Church. It was created in 1800 during a period of relative toleration towards the Old Believers; the official Church hoped that by allowing the members of Edinoverie and their priests to practice the old rite, they could bring the Old Believers back into its sphere of influence if not fully into the church. It was initially very successful [Robson 1995: 17], despite understandable opposition from the priestless Old Believers. However, it came as somewhat of a shock to me to see how very “Sovietized” these Old Believers were, and how they were lacking in elementary notions of religion and of their own heritage. I needed to remind myself that virtually everyone we met (with very few exceptions) was born and raised after 1917. The average life expectancy (for those born today) in Russia for men has gone down to about 56 years and for women about ten years more, and is still declining; the numbers are lower in Siberia. Among the current population (according to recent CIA statistics) men only live to an average of sixty two years, and women to age seventy three; and of the 13% of the Russian population now over sixty five, 68% are women

(they outnumber men over sixty five by 2.2 to 1). (In the 1870's Rovinskii [1873] recorded opposite trends – the greater longevity and population growth of the Semeiskie.) The point here is that the living connection to pre-revolutionary Russia is virtually gone.

The cohort of singers whom we recorded – sixty-three people in seven villages – was almost all women who had an average age of just over seventy years. As the statistics above indicate, their average male counterparts had been dead for about eight years. That put their average date of birth at 1929-30; they were thus were born in Russia during the violent process of collectivization (which affected the entire country), and lived through the other horrific aspects of the Stalin era, including the Second World War. They lived the majority of their adult lives (after age twenty three, on average) under the post-Stalinist Soviet regime (which they generally looked back to with great nostalgia, as a time of security and relative prosperity). Not much of the old way of life could survive these apocalyptic times.

On the other hand, religious persecution in Russia was no new thing, and traditionally the Orthodox and Old Believers alike have both been extremely adept at surviving within an authoritarian context. These were frequently minimalist and grass-roots religious movements, often with little or no obvious external institutional structure to keep them going. The notion of *sobornost'* (of divine collectivity) and of the church as a supra-individual, divinely inspired body - an ideal that persists despite (and perhaps even more strongly in reaction to) persecution - is one continuing reason for this stubborn spiritual and also practical longevity.

I had come to Transbaikal with images of the thriving Old Believer communes in the U.S. and Canada in mind. I certainly did not expect anything so prosperous or well-organized in today's Russia, and I knew that Russia's Old Believer population, which numbers in the hundreds of thousands or even millions (the exact number of Old Believers across Russia is hard to know), had long shed its expectation of imminent apocalypse and adapted to modern Russian life. Still, I was somewhat shocked – and subsequently surprised at myself for being shocked – at the extent to which the old ways are not only gone, but almost completely forgotten. On our first meeting with some villagers from Ukyr, who accompanied us home from Petrovsk-Zabaikalskii, our point of departure, the co-leader of the expedition, Vladimir Kliauz, was quite bemused when I expressed concern about whether the Semeiskie would mind eating with us outsiders, and whether they might find our presence constraining should they want to preface their meal with some sort of prayer of grace. (It turned out to be a very naïve expectation – something like coming to a dining hall in an American University and expecting the students to sit quietly and

say grace before chowing down.) In the course of our stay we heard plenty of toasts, but not one blessing before a meal (excluding explicitly ritual situations, which we had to seek out actively).

In the first group of villages we visited, which were also the most isolated, the Semeiskii people we met did not understand the term “Old Belief.” They think of themselves primarily as Semeiskii, an ethnic rather than confessional grouping. Far from having a sense of the things that differentiate Orthodox from Old Believer, or one Old Believer group from another, those we spoke to here consider themselves simply Orthodox, even though the rite they adhered to, to the extent they had a religious identity at all, was that of the old faith. We could tell this, among other things, by the fact that most of the people we met there made the sign of the cross with two instead of three fingers (one of the signal markers of the old belief). For them this has lost its special semiotic significance; it is simply the way it is done. Folk songs and the semi-religious, semi-secular folkloric rites which we were recording and investigating remain one of the few areas in which some of the older cultural practices and values are reflected.

One of the other broader issues we confronted on our travels – which faces anyone trying to understand “folklore” – was the difficulty of untangling the complexities of this mostly forgotten past. Further confusion arose for me from the simple but disconcerting fact that from village to village the self-image, and the sense of cultural and religious identity were often quite different, making it hard to make to any general conclusions. (Note that I frequently use words such as “seems” and “apparently”). My colleagues in folklore active on the expedition circuit had warned me that traditions and beliefs generally vary greatly from area to area and village to village. This was very much the case in the area we visited. These differences in cultural self-consciousness often seemed to depend upon the specific local history of a village.

For example, in Ukyr, our expedition’s first stop, and the farthest point on our journey (within sight of Mongolia), there was a sharp differentiation between the almost purely Semeiskii population there and the neighboring mostly Cossack settlement of Menza. Menza had been on the side of the Whites during the Civil War, while Ukyr was on the side of the Reds, and had been burned down in 1921 by troops under Baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg (known among villagers as “the Baron”). Ungern-Sternberg, known for his ferocity, rallied retreating anti-Bolshevik forces in Mongolia and wreaked havoc among the Mongolians, Chinese occupiers of Mongolia, and Russian villages across the border. However, the dividing lines between Ukyr and Menza were not only political and confessional, but also economic, as they had competed for generations over hunting grounds, pasture land, and readily tillable soil (that had become

especially scarce in Transbaikal by the end of the nineteenth century). In other areas of Transbaikal, other Semeiskii villages apparently took the side of the Whites (this one of many instances where it is dangerous to generalize about them). In this particular case, Ukyr seems to have been traditionally pro-Soviet, and at both ends of the village stand monuments capped by red stars commemorating the destruction and rebuilding of the village in 1921.

In contrast, the Semeiskie living in larger villages with mixed ethnic and religious populations, especially those we visited in Buriatia or Buriat regions, which have a fair percentage of Buddhists, had a much sharper sense of what separated them from other groups. These concern differences, on the one hand, between Buddhists and Orthodox, and, on the other hand, differences among the various Semeiskii factions and between the priestly and the priestless. They also showed a greater degree of wariness about dealing with outsiders and foreigners. As noted, almost everywhere we went we were greeted with open arms. Yet who we were, or what religion we belonged to, stimulated very little interest, apart from the amazement that we were really from the U. S. and even spoke English! Perhaps they simply could not formulate the questions? The one place where some of us encountered wariness of outsiders was in Bichura, a relatively large village in Buriatia (pop. 14,000) with an historically mixed population. On one occasion, when going visiting, those in our group were asked to wash their hands out in the courtyard before entering the house, and were spit upon as an act of ritual cleansing (the Muscovites among us had to go through this procedure as well; the spitting was not meant as an insult).

In Ukyr, which, as we noted, was razed in 1921, there was no church left standing, and we encountered no religious books and very few icons (those that did exist were mainly metal). The Orthodox Church in neighboring Menza had been turned into a hospital and was subsequently left to fall apart; it is now a ruined shell with cows and pigs grazing inside. This Cossack village had been settled before Ukyr, earlier in the eighteenth century, as an outpost of the empire. In 1998 this area was rededicated as part of the Krasnochikoiskii parish (in the past it had been part of the Urlut District, centered in Urluk). During our journeys in the region we ran into the current priest from the regional center Krasnyi Chikoi, Father Valerii, who was making the rounds of the villages and organizing discussions. He was chaperoned by a businessman also from Krasnyi Chikoi. Their trip combined electioneering with pep talks about local economic and spiritual revitalization.



The Semeiskii population of Ukyr included both priestless Old Believers (whose roots were probably in the community of the Fedoseev sect (*Fedoseevtsy*) in Gutai), and adherents of Edinoverie. (The Fedoseev sect is a radical priestless community, named after its eighteenth-century leader Feodosii Vasil'ev, who traditionally maintained what has been called "ritual apartheid" [Robson 1995: 37], although there was also a rich community in Moscow.) According to Baba Evka (Evgeniia Fedotovna Aref'eva), the former religious leader (*pop* – village priest) of Ukyr, the town church that the Cossacks destroyed had belonged to Edinoverie. (Pop Evka was one of our oldest informants – she was born in 1911 and had a rudimentary church education.)

Kochen was our second stop. The village is also known as Arkhangel'skoe – its official, as opposed to its popular name). This was also a very early settlement and was close to the city of Krasnyi Chikoi. It had eventually extended to a second settlement, Novaia derevnia (official name Maloarkhangel'skoe). Certainly, one should not confuse contemporary village sizes and populations with those of the past, for during the Soviet period there had been several massive forced relocations and village consolidations, with the goal of centralizing of the population to a greater extent. Kochen probably also had a mixed Semeiskii population of members from Edinoverie and of the priestless; the Edinoverie church burned down, probably before 1917, and we heard stories about icons that had been saved from the conflagration. Its religious school continued to function through the 1920's, an influence that is discernible in the singing. Kochen was one of several villages where there had been a very active choral collective in Soviet (and sometimes continuing into post-Soviet) times.

Baba Ania, who helped us organize our recording session there, also aided us in hunting out those who knew the old songs and special Semeiskii style. The old musical traditions were alive in Kochen, where one small group of four women invited us into a courtyard for an impromptu outdoor song session. As Vladimir Kliuz realized later, some of this group's repertory reflected folksong traditions of northern Russia (on this aspect of Semeiskii singing and on the mixing of traditions, see Vladikina-Bochinskaia 1975).

The expedition traveled in a bus that we had rented for the trip; in each village we drove around town picking up the performers, many too weak to walk any distance. For the recordings, we tried to avoid modernized versions of songs, those that had been adapted by the official choruses for stage performance in front of modern audiences. Changing them to fit particular time limits, and standardizing the music for transcription and orchestration altered the basic character of this music.

The leader of the Kochen religious community is Baba Vera, who, unlike Pop Evka, has no special title (most of the older women are referred to as “Baba”); she showed us a variety of prayer books that she had copied out by hand. In Kochen they say that Baba Vera is simply the one who “deaconizes” (*d’iachit*). In general, we observed a variety of types and titles and ways of referring to religious leaders in the various places we visited (such as *pop*, *nastavnik*, or *ustavshchik* – priest, mentor, or elder). These religious leaders also often fulfill the role of a *znakharka* (folk healer or medicine woman). Baba Vera performed a ritual incantation over water to ward the evil eye off Vladimir Kliauz, and in the same village, another woman, Baba Polia (Polina Shekunova), performed a similar healing of Natalie (on these rites and incantations, see Kliauz’s piece that accompanies this article).

In Gutai the population was mixed and the sense of local religious identity mostly gone. There had been three cemeteries in the town, apparently one Old Believer, one Orthodox, and one of some other group, but the townsfolk themselves could not tell us whose. Since the Old Believers here were (or had been) mainly priestless members of the Fedoseev sect, they had had no church, so that Orthodox peasants (we were told) had been forced to go to neighboring Nizhnyi Narym for church services.

Under Stalin Gutai became an active mining town and forced labor site (it is possible that the third cemetery belonged to the *gulag* – concentration camp). The molybdenum mines closed in 1958, leading to the town’s decline. (We arrived in the drunken aftermath of funeral meals [*pominki*], and were told that the young men in the village were systematically dying off due to chemical poisoning . . .) Seven of the nine Gutai singers whom we recorded were not born in the town, which accounted for the somewhat heterogeneous and not fully harmonized songs we recorded. Even the community’s Old Believer religious leader, Baba Tania, who was the daughter of priestless parents, had been away from the town for almost eighteen years (in Petersburg and other places), and had only been practicing there for seven to eight months. The handwritten prayer books she showed us were primitive and inaccurate. She had had no formal religious education and was unable to read Slavonic (the language of Old Believer prayer). The memorial service we observed her lead was not really a service at all, insofar as there were almost no prayers (or inappropriate ones). Rather, she made a series of crossings and bowings before a domestic icon shrine, accompanied by multitudinous repetitions of *Gospodi pomilui* (God, have mercy).

Urluk, our next stop, was one of the most prosperous towns we visited. Its state farm had disobeyed Gorbachev's directive and had not disbanded, and had turned into a private concern called "Agrofirma" after the fall of the USSR. The population, though still down from what it had been, was far greater than in Gutai (pop. 1,900), and we were told that because of the better employment situation there was less alcoholism. Salaries are still often paid in grain rather than cash, but the town has also kept open its rest-house (hotel) and cafeteria (for which we were grateful). I note in passing that we saw plentiful use of alcohol in the places we visited, several times connected to funeral meals or send-offs (*provody* – i.e., of young men into the army; as in times past, still a cause for great sorrow). We also had one brush with violence, when a teenager (also a visitor) was stabbed in the leg near where we were staying. The villages almost all have doctor's assistants (*fel'dshery*) and clinics (*medpunkty*), although for serious procedures one must travel to Krasnyi Chikoi, the regional center, for care. Somewhat surprisingly, there was a complete absence of police in all the villages we visited. There was a small number of police in Krasny Chikoi, where the head man (with whom we had to register) told us that in 1999 there had only been 190 reported crimes in the entire Krasnyi Chikoi region (which is huge but sparsely populated) – largely thefts but also several domestic cases of murder connected with alcohol abuse – and that every one of them had been solved. (Might there have been some exaggeration here?) Traditionally, the Semeiskii communities have been self-policed and this appears to be the continuing practice. The police head said that in contrast, in the Darasunskii area, also within the Chita region, where he had worked before, there had been two thousand or more than ten times more reported crimes over that same period.

Urluk also has a relatively active religious and cultural life. There had once been both Orthodox and Edinoverie Churches here (both were torn down in the 1930's), as well as a local Orthodox Monastery which had boasted a famous local holy man (St Varlaam, who lived in the later nineteenth century). The monastery had also been razed to the ground in the 1930's. Today there seems little apparent differentiation remaining between the Orthodox and Old Believer communities. This was probably due to the pressure on both religious groups on the part of Soviet authorities, which served to level the differences between them. Baba Nastia is the main leader of the Old Believers, presiding over an informal system of elders (here *popy*, "priests"), despite the fact that she was raised Orthodox. She had had some religious education in her youth and had sung in a church choir, so that she knew the prayers; a group of the town's Old Believers had come to her for ministration some time in the 1960's. Baba Nastia told us that a film crew had

come to Urluk from Moscow in 1997 and recorded her Easter Service for TV. She had also received the blessing of an itinerant Old Believer priest for her work. However, this year, when a newly renovated Orthodox Church was about to open in the town (the Il'inskaia Church, scheduled for August 2000), with a newly appointed priest from the new Krasnyi Chikoi parish, her function was about to be superseded. (This was a pattern we saw elsewhere – a young male priest comes into town and displaces the elderly woman who has maintained the religious life of the community, sometimes for decades . . . )

The Orthodox parish authorities in Krasnyi Chikoi chose Urluk the site for a reopened church (the second after the one in Krasnyi Chikoi itself), perhaps because of the reputation of its monastery, which has also attracted the recent interest of church authorities. But curiously, of the two old ruined churches in town, Orthodox and Edinoverie, they chose the Old Believer church for reconstruction. This was probably largely because there was almost nothing left of the old Orthodox Church of the Kazan' Mother of God. However, the fact that a formerly Old Believer Church was chosen for consecration to serve the Orthodox is another indication of the leveling of religious identity here. This was confirmed by other things we observed. For one, the Semeiskie that we met made the sign of the cross with three fingers, and even the local intellectual we met, Il'ia Ivanovich Svistunov, a school teacher, local historian, and collector of icons, did not understand our question about how many fingers one should use in crossing oneself (he used three).

Another peculiarity we encountered in Urluk was that several of the Russian Orthodox Semeiskie we met and interviewed, including the wonderful 93-year-old Baba Nastia, referred to themselves as *khokhlatskii* (from the Ukrainian *khokhol*, peasant – a somewhat denigrating term when employed by modern Russians). We were unable to find out how this term came to be used. Vladimir Kliuz suggests two possibilities, one, that this was a relic of the time when the Semeiskie lived in Poland; they referred to the Catholic Church as the “Polish Church,” and by analogy they may have been called *khokhly* as they were associated with nearby Ukraine. Against this hypothesis is the fact that we did not hear Semeiskie in other villages use the term, and indeed it seems strange that they would adopt this term for themselves. On the other hand, there are some Ukrainianisms in some of the local songs we recorded (especially in Bichura). A second possibility is that some Orthodox peasants from Ukraine had settled in Urluk at some time in the past, and people began to refer to the entire Orthodox community using this term.

The chorus in Uruk was also more professional and cosmopolitan than any we had seen before; it had even had gone on tour and made studio recordings. The chorus had a local composer and accordionist, Ivan Manikovskii, as organizer, and its repertoire in general was more modern than that we were seeking. Among the performers that gathered to perform for us, some were able to sing in the Semeiskii style, but there was obvious tension between the singers and their leader. They ended up taking turns choosing what to sing (as noted earlier, we concluded that this should not even be considered a genuine “Semeiskii” chorus, as even their repertory is basically Orthodox).

Our next stop was Bichura, a large town in the Buriat Republic; we were very pleased that it was big enough to support a hotel, albeit a crumbling old Soviet-style fleabag, but with running water. Bichura dates to the first third of the eighteenth century, and was a regional center, first settled by Cossacks. It was also a religious community before the Revolution, and there had been eight active churches of various denominations (including an Old Believer chapel that had been taken over by the members of the Edinoverie, according to Rovinskii [1873: 114], who noted its minimal following in 1873) and two *datsans* (Buddhist monasteries). On the way into town we passed the still-standing Baldam-Brebun Buddhist monastery, which we were told was once the largest in Russia, with 1000 monks. It had been shut down in the 1930’s, but was reopened in 1991, and in the process of being restored and rebuilt. We found that here in Buriatia the Semeiskie were more divided into religious groupings, and more self-conscious both of their religious identity as Christians and their differences from other Christian groups. (This is the town where strangers had to be cleansed by spitting before entering the house.)

In Bichura our attention was immediately drawn to a brand-new functioning church with a sparkling tin cupola, which turned out to be a newly opened “Ancient-Orthodox” Church (*Drevne-pravoslavnaia tserkov’*). This Old Believer denomination (which we had not heard of before), we learned, had split off from the Belokrinitskii Concord of priestly Old Believers in 1923. The members of the Belokrinitskii Concord have their own hierarchy, including an active episcopate, and they also practice the full range of sacraments. Amvrosii’s controversial practice of consecrating Belokrinitsky clergy on his personal authority as well as other disagreements over sacramental practices led to various fissures within the movement, of which the Ancient-Orthodox Church was evidently a later offshoot (for details of the Belokrinitskii Concord see Robson 1995: 31-32).

Andrei Torshin, the official in charge of the Bichura church and the one who had seen through its construction (there had been various problems, mainly financial, and it had taken four years to complete) bent our ear endlessly with picayune discussions of church doctrine. He was probably particularly sensitive to church regulations because of his distressing personal situation. He had been born locally and gone to a seminary near Moscow, but, as he told us, since he had been divorced and remarried, he was barred from becoming a full-fledged priest. The church had been completed in January, 1999, and was about to receive its first pastor, a priest whose job would include painting an iconostasis for the church.

The land for the church had been donated by Baba Tania (Tatiana Fokeevna Ivanova), whose house had formerly been the venue for a group of the town's Semeiskii Old Believers. (Despite this, Baba Tania expressed reservations about Andrei and the Ancient-Orthodox Church and said privately that she considered the Belokrinitskii practices "more correct.") In Baba Tania's house, in which we held a recording session, there was a ceiling-high cabinet full of ancient Old Believer books (the first printed Old Believer religious books we had seen on our trip), several of which were read from during a prayer meeting at her house. (Andrei read a poem about the life of Archpriest Avvakum from a recent Old Believer magazine published in central Russia.) In a local newsletter (edited by the indefatigable Andrei), Baba Tania recalled the religious life of the Old Believers in Bichura under the Soviet (presumably Stalinist) regime:

Once or twice a year clergymen would come from Moscow to the Old Believer churches to officiate (over baptisms and weddings). But the elders (*ustavshchik*) were responsible for the day to day service (*sluzhba* implies a church service so these were most likely members of the Belokrinitskii Concord – M.L.). On every street lived several elders, who passed down their book knowledge (*gramota*) to worthy people. [But] an elder could take not care of all the needs [of the community] . . . Every church also had elders (*starosta*) who were responsible for its decoration and upkeep. Clergymen from Moscow came regularly before Easter and Christmas for confession, and in the summer to perform marriages. When people heard that a clergyman had been sent for, they all decided to get married. Once, more than 80 couples got married. But that was the last time, because after that the clergymen were arrested. Only the elders were left. But then they started persecuting the elders (quoted in Torshin 2000: 2)

In Bichura we also heard stories and saw evidence of atheist goon squads (including men from the town itself) who had burned, defaced, and done other nasty things to the town's icons in

the 1930's (presumably at the time the churches had been torn down). In the new Ancient-Orthodox Church we saw displayed several examples of these defaced icons, which had been scratched and slashed – this made the ritual of piously lighting candles before them all the more moving. During the Brezhnev period, the Old Believers no longer went in fear of getting arrested, but gathered at “prayer houses” such as Baba Tania's to carry out baptisms, marriages, and burial services – still in secret, for fear now of losing their jobs. The tradition of the elders, we learned, was dying out, because they themselves were dying off. It was unclear to me whether the spanking new church and its over-enthusiastic almost-pastor were going to provide a workable substitute, especially given what seemed to be the absence of any young people in the church.

The one instance of youthful religious initiation we witnessed on our trip was in our next and last stop in the small village of Kuitun, also in Buriatia, where Andrei had recommended us to the new priests of the town's single church, also of the Ancient-Orthodox denomination. The older (but junior) priest, the bearded Father Sergii, had lived in the town and served as an elder before the church was built; the younger, beardless, main priest (also Father Sergii) had been sent to take over and to paint the church's iconostasis. We arrived in town just in time to witness and record the quadruple baptism of an infant, two small children, and a young mother. The service took place on a weekday afternoon. Apart from the priests, the people being baptized, and one adult woman (the mother of one of the children?) we were the only ones in the church. The baptismal party consisted solely of women (apart from the infant boy). The man who had driven them to the church waited the several hours outside in his car; it was not clear if he was a relation or just the driver.

In general, the religious activities we witnessed, including the singing, were almost exclusively female (and not only because there were few menfolk remaining). Of the sixty-three people whose songs we recorded in seven villages, only two were men, and we only met one male elder (at Baba Tania's in Bichura). As in Bichura, the tradition of the elders seems about to be totally displaced (or replaced) by the new church, which also seems to be the prospect for Urluk after Baba Nastia stops her activity. In Kuitun, small enough that religious differences are effaced, the one active church will apparently suffice to serve all. In several homes in this town, we were invited in to see beautiful, in some cases almost wall-length, private iconostases, which had served either as shrines for the priestless, or, more likely, as a substitute for the old closed church. Small though the town is, it enjoys two singing collectives, one of which had even gone on tour to Germany in 1993. Like the chorus in Urluk, the group that gathered to perform for us

(with members of both collectives) was in Vladimir Kliauz's term "concertified" (*okontsertivshiiisia*), and gave a self-conscious performance with several staged numbers for which they got up and danced (as if on stage).

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An audio CD entitled "Pesni semeiskikh Ukyra" [Songs of the Semeiskie of Ukyr] – recordings made by the expedition – was published in Moscow earlier this year (Institute



Nasledie, 2001). It includes fifteen original recordings as well as a liner with the words. A very small quantity of these CDs is available from Prof. Marcus Levitt at \$15 each plus \$1.50 postage. Send a check (payable to him) to: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-4353. E-mail at [Levitt@usc.edu](mailto:Levitt@usc.edu)