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Refiguring the Buryat Photographic Archive: Ethnographic Visuality, Vernacular Montage, and Shamanic Temporality

Abstract

This article examines the Buryat photographic archive as a contested site of visual ethnography, historical trauma, and postcolonial critique. Spanning late Imperial ethnography (1880s), early Soviet ethnographic activism (1910s–1920s), and anthropometric studies (1930s), the archive documents the transformation of Buryat communities under imperial and Soviet regimes. Its dispersed materiality and digital aggregation foreground gaps, absences, and the mediated nature of memory, prompting an approach that combines archival analysis, vernacular photography, and contemporary photographic intervention.

Structured in three parts, the article first analyzes three scopic photographic regimes — Pyotr Shimkevich's imperial anthropology, Bernhard Petri's activist ethnography, and E. G. Shurkin's anthropometry — to trace how Buryat identity was framed through classificatory and visual taxonomies. It then turns to the family album of Sodnom-Dorzhi Badmaev, where historical consciousness emerges through montage, inscription, and personal recollection. Finally, it examines contemporary performative re-enactment, where the artist's body becomes a site of visual and historical reclamation, engaging directly with the colonial archive's anthropometric legacy. In the concluding section, shamanic concepts of memory and temporality provide a methodological lens for foregrounding embodied and affective forms of engaging with fragmented histories. Across these three registers, the study reveals how photography mediates between state surveillance, personal memory, and embodied acts of Indigenous visual sovereignty.

Introduction and Methodological Approach

The Buryats, constituting one of the largest Indigenous groups in Siberia, have historically inhabited the regions around Lake Baikal, spanning the forest-steppe of Zabaikalye and the mountainous taiga of the Eastern Sayan range. Their collective identity emerged from centuries of interaction among Mongolic, Turkic, Tungusic, and Samoyedic groups; local shamanic cosmologies and the northward-spreading Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism; and successive Mongol and Chinese states as well as the expanding frontier of the Russian Empire. What emerged by the nineteenth century was a fractured constellation of several Buryat clans and communities (e.g. Khongodor, Khori, Ekhirit), whose unity was consolidated, often violently, through colonization, dispossession, and the new classificatory languages of the state.[1]

Photography entered the process of the Buryats' ethnocultural formation both as its record and as an instrument of its transformation. Russian ethnographers and administrators deployed the camera to document Buryat people within the scopic regimes that rendered them legible to the imperial and later Soviet state. This practice positioned them as subjects of ethnographic study, serving to broaden European understanding of Siberian Indigenous populations, which were then under the protectorate of the Russian Empire. The notion of the scopic regime was introduced by film theorist Christian Metz to ground a semiotic–psychoanalytic theory of cinema as a specific structure of looking and visual signification, and was later historicized and generalized by Martin Jay, in his account of the scopic regimes of modernity (Cartesian perspectivalism, Baroque madness of vision, etc.).[2] We take this concept as our point of departure, following its analytical use by David Anderson and Craig Campbell,[3] whose work emerged from one of the first extensive projects to locate, classify, digitize, and disseminate photographic images depicting Siberian Indigenous peoples and their lifeways prior to Stalinization.

Within our primary research thread — an attempt to grasp both the collective and lived history of the Buryat people through photography as an active yet silent participant in ethnographic ideology, mediated geographically and thus technologically through the specificity of Siberia and socio-culturally through Russian Imperial and Soviet state formations — Anderson and Campbell's work formed the methodological pivot from which we began. However, their work cannot carry us beyond this legacy or into a productive clash with the more intimate register of photographic practice that followed it: the Soviet family album of the citizen-subject who, at least officially, was no longer bound by colonial relations. Finally, our central question concerned the possibility of contemporary artis-

1)   For an exposition of the historical formation of the Buryats' common identity and culture out of Siberian Mongolic tribes up to the radical Stalinist transformations before, see Melissa Chakars, *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia: Transformation in Buryatia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 17–18, 25–60; and the introduction to D. D. Nimaev, "Buriaty: Etnogenez i etnicheskaia istoriia" (Doctoral diss., Russian Academy of Sciences, 2002), https://www.dissercat.com/content/buryaty-etnogenez-i-etnicheskaya-istoriya.

2)   Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 61–68; Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

3)   David G. Anderson and Craig Campbell, "Picturing Central Siberia: The Digitization and Analysis of Early Twentieth-Century Central Siberian Photographic Collections," *Sibirica* 8, no. 2 (2009), 1–42.

tic intervention within this entanglement — this duet — of history and photography, which together shape the layered experience of a particular people.

Anderson and Campbell situated their project within a growing scholarly interest in the visual archives of colonial situations in North America and Australia. Working within a broadly decolonial orientation, two of their aims were, culturally, to analyze the regimes of classification and control embedded in these archives, and, politically, to facilitate a re-signification of the images by showing them to descendant communities, enabling former subject peoples to reflect on these photographs in the context of land claims and the affirmation of traditional knowledge systems.[4] Of course, these aims are not new. What is new is the Siberian "context," which includes: (1) historically specific photographic technologies from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s, selected and adapted to the harsh cold climate; (2) the particular social functions and institutional mediation of these photographic images; and (3) the distinctive methods of their curating in Soviet state museums and archives. The notion of the scopic regime enabled the authors to interpret the photographs by combining an analysis of culturally and institutionally sedimented forms of looking with the technologically and geographically specific elements of photographic practice: "when trying to understand an image, we might consider the interrelation between photographic chemicals and mechanisms of the camera, the 'eyes' of both the photographer and the audience, as well as the agency of the individual (or even landscape) being photographed."[5]

As Anderson and Campbell explain, by the end of the nineteenth century, photography had become increasingly accessible with the introduction of mass-produced equipment and dry gelatin glass plate negatives, which eliminated the labor-intensive wet-plate process. This innovation allowed photographers to travel greater distances and document more remote places, while improvements in lenses and emulsions enabled shorter exposures and more dynamic, poorly lit, or otherwise challenging scenes — anticipating the style of later journalistic and snapshot photography. Many collections were produced by government-led expeditions, typically headed by an individual leader and supported by a team of porters who hauled expeditionary gear, including the photographic equipment necessary for glass-plate photography. The resulting images were often displayed at public exhibitions or exchanged with other departments or branches of scientific societies.[6] Turn-of-the-century Siberian photography thus developed within local administrative

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4)   Ibid., 1. Anderson and Campbell note that a photograph of an Ostiak-Ket shaman from 1926 was immediately recognized by his descendants during contemporaneous anthropological fieldwork (ibid., 13). Furthermore, many of the photographs shown to Ket and Evenki communities sparked renewed interest in the traditional clothing styles and material culture depicted, as community members compared these early-twentieth-century items with those they continue to make and use today. These authors also speculate that, with further work on the documentary archives, "it is not unconceivable that these collections could provide proof of continual 'traditional nature use' under Federal laws that guarantee preferential access rights to land" (ibid., 11). This speculation depends heavily on the extent to which the North American decolonial model (also encompassing Australia and New Zealand) — shaped by a particular history and experience of settler colonialism — can be applied to Indigeneity in the post-Soviet cultural and political-historical context, which, in our focus on Siberia, exists today within the legal framework of the Russian Federation.

5)   Ibid., 3.

6)   Ibid., 3–4.

and scientific institutions, and due to logistical constraints, technical demands, and the high cost of glass-plate photography, image production was predominantly collective and expeditionary, serving exhibitionary and ethnographic rather than personal purposes. In relation to this exhibitionary function, Anderson and Campbell link the predominant visuality embedded in late Imperial Russian photographic practice to the so-called "genre photographs," which depicted idealized scenes of peasant life focused on labor, material culture, and domestic interiors. Given this shared visual grammar, they regard genre photography as a precursor to ethnographic photography, noting that "photographers were staging ethnographic or genre shots in their studios years before it was feasible to shoot these kinds of photographs in the field."[7]

After the October Revolution, with the nationalization of the photographic industry and the onset of socialist modernization and nation-building projects among formerly Indigenous, nomadic, or semi-nomadic peoples, ethnographic photography's primary exhibition function also increasingly assumed a public pedagogical role within the Soviet regime, serving as a visual agent of socialist transformation. Consequently, after the collapse of the Soviet Union — and, arguably, already following Stalinist industrialization — it has become extremely difficult, if not impossible, in most cases to grasp the concrete historical social life of these photographs, leaving them challenging to interpret. Although massive collections of late Imperial and early Soviet photographs survive in regional archives, museums, and libraries, Anderson and Campbell noted that understanding their circulation through public exhibitions and early publications remains very limited.[8] Thus, the contemporary afterlife of this photographic collection lacks any structural unity which we usually associate with the term "archive."[9] One of the most surprising findings of Anderson and Campbell's research was that glass-plate negatives were far less valued in Siberia than in Western Europe or North America, often remaining uncataloged in their original cardboard boxes on dusty shelves or in basement storerooms. Moreover, the photographs — originally produced through state- or society-sponsored expeditions and included in expedition reports alongside fieldnotes, maps, drawings, and letters — were later categorized by "type" within the late-Soviet archival system. Once removed from their expeditionary context, they were incorporated into the separate photographic sections of individual museums and reclassified typologically under headings such as "The First Five-Year Plan" or "Cadres from the Ranks of Indigenous Peoples of the North."[10] All of these specif-

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7) Ibid., 5.
8) Ibid., 3–4.
9) On the organic connection between the archive — *qua arkhē*, *arkheion*, and *archivum* — and the historical function of solidifying and legitimizing governing institutions, see Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authority in History and the Archives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13–31. As a material vessel of the paradigm of historicism (Leopold von Ranke) since the Enlightenment, this function and authority of the archive have been challenged on multiple fronts throughout the twentieth century. The progressive dissolution of historicism as the dominant ideology of historical experience, together with the digital turn at the century's end, has profoundly problematized what functions and forms archives can assume today, and what alternative models of historical experience they might embody. In the case of our research, the final dissolution of the historicist paradigm is marked by the fall of state socialism and by the mnemonic lacunae that its archival ruins have laid bare.
10) Anderson and Campbell, "Picturing Central Siberia," 6.

icities led the authors to argue that working with Siberian photographic collections requires a collective, on-site effort grounded in informal local networks — individuals with long-standing, tacit knowledge whose ties to archivists and local historians are essential for locating materials and tracing them across museums, archives, and libraries.[11]

In a later article, working with the Krasnoyarsk-based specialist Mikhail Batashev, Anderson and Campbell turn to the photography produced during the so-called "Northern Expedition" of 1938–1939, which surveyed some of the most remote regions of what is now Krasnoyarsk Krai in Central Siberia. The expedition's photographer, Ivan Ivanovich Baluev, becomes the focal point through whom the authors make the images speak: they reconstruct his life as preserved in the Krasnoyarsk Krai Regional Museum where he worked as a staff photographer through the worst years of the Stalinist period, draw on his expedition diary, retrace the expedition's route, and analyse the accompanying report. They also trace the ways in which Baluev's work both inherits and diverges from the visual conventions of ethnographic portraiture established by the Russian Anthropological Society in the nineteenth century.[12] The authors' main claim — which we take up in our own photographic analysis — is that, contrary to the generic understanding of Soviet photographic mediation, particularly under Stalinism, as a form of social falsification and the visualization of make-believe socialism, photographers like Baluev captured real social transformations experienced most acutely at the extreme peripheries of the Soviet state, where the Stalinist drive for modernization, collectivization, and industrialization clashed most sharply with local ways of life. In many of Baluev's images, the authors discern an ironic and conflictual composition that reveals people caught in the midst of difficult social processes — at the very crux of transformations between the old and the new, between the Indigenous and the Soviet, belonging fully to neither.[13] Indeed, one might argue that it is only through the form of ethnographic photography — though it must simultaneously work against its own institutional visual conventions — that such processes of social transformation can be most acutely recorded.

Buryat Photographic Archive as a Contested Site

In the first part of this article, we analyze what we identify as three distinctive scopic regimes within a photographic collection documenting the social transformation of the Buryat way of life from the late nineteenth century to the early 1930s. We attribute to this collection a speculative unity — as an archive — because our aim is not only to identify

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11) Ibid., 2. We must add that this remains a common experience when working with regional state archives and libraries in Russia. It also helps explain why a notion of the *collective* — structured through both on-site and off-site labour — has become so central to the organisation of work in contemporary ecological and Indigenous research-based art practices.

12) David G. Anderson, Mikhail S. Batashev, and Craig Campbell, "The Photographs of Baluev: Capturing the 'Socialist Transformation' of the Krasnoyarsk Northern Frontier, 1938–1939," in *From Dust to Digital: Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme*, ed. Maja Kominko (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 487–530.

13) Ibid., 505–526.

the embedded visual grammar of ethnographic and physical-anthropological photography during this transformative period, but also — as will be addressed in the second part of the article — to situate it in relation to more private and intimate photographic practices associated with the family album. Accordingly, we divide the archive into three distinct visual periods: the 1880s, the 1910s, and the 1930s.

Engaging with this archive today entails confronting a layered field of historical absences, in which processes of cultural transformation intersect with social and political trauma. For the Buryats, the rapid modernization and collectivization of the 1930s ASSR, the systematic disruption of local shamanist and Buddhist institutions, and the imposition of language restrictions throughout the twentieth century represent historical processes that, despite leaving lasting structural effects, have remained largely unarticulated within the Republic. This historical silence continues to shape contemporary cultural identity. In the context of the ongoing Russian military campaign in Ukraine, these dynamics are intensified: the disproportionate conscription of men from national republics such as Buryatia[14] exemplifies the continuation of state strategies that render remote communities especially vulnerable. In this framework, the archive functions as a critical interface in which history, memory, and trauma converge.

The encounter with the archive is primarily mediated through its digitized hosting platforms, such as the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme, the Kunstkamera digital archive, and replicas of photographs collected from different regions' field trips by one of the authors over the past few years. The original photographic plates remain distributed across ethnographic institutions in Russia, Mongolia, and beyond. The selected photographers — Pyotr Shimkevich, Bernhard Petri, and E. G. Shurkin — broadly reflect the prevailing standards of photographic practice within anthropology and ethnography for each respective period. While digitization facilitates access, it does not confer analytical or historical coherence to the material beyond the imperative of preservation. Consequently, the photographic documents we work with are simultaneously materially dispersed across multiple institutions and digitally consolidated. This duality is, in fact, central to the very nature of photographic archives, shaping both their historiographical and methodological significance.

In contrast, the family album of Sodnom-Dorzhi Badmaev[15] — which we explore in the second part of this article — will function as a counter-archive of vernacular photography. Compiled by Sodnom-Dorzhi Badmaev himself in the 1990s, the album chronicles Buryat life from the 1930s to the 1990s, but with a different intent and focus on the domestic setting. It incorporates the visual legacies of Soviet iconography and montage, which it simultaneously reproduces and recontextualizes, producing a representation of Buryats shaped by both personal memory and the broader visual conventions of Soviet photographic practice. Through these strategies, the album provides a point of comparison with

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14) Mariya Vyushkova and Evgeny Sherkhonov, "Ethnic Minority Casualties of the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine: A Data Story from the Free Buryatia Foundation," *Inner Asia* 25, no. 1 (2023), 126–136.

15) Sodnom-Dorzhi Shirapovich Badmaev (1922–2011), relative of Margarita Galandina, was a lawyer, researcher, and journalist in the Buryat-Mongol ASSR; contributor to Buriad Ünen; author of numerous papers on Soviet social sciences and philosophy; and holder of the Candidate of Philosophical Sciences degree.

the ethnographic photography examined in the first part of the article, revealing alternative temporalities, intentions, and visual modalities.

The third section will focus on contemporary photography-based art practice, exploring shamanism and shamanic temporality through a speculative approach to understanding the passage of time specific to the pre-industrial Siberian context. This approach is exemplified by the self-portraiture works of one of the authors, Margarita Galandina, who intervenes in the visual apparatus of the Buryat photographic archive. The aim is to construct a method of grappling with fragmented visual histories that reopens the affective temporality of images. While the theoretical framing and broader visual analysis are jointly authored, this section is written in the first person in order to reflect Galandina's practice-based engagement with the archive.

Three Photographic Regimes: Colonial, Activist, Biometric

The Buryat institutional photographic collections, produced across different anthropological frameworks, ethnographic expeditions, and socio-historical events, do not constitute a coherent or unified record. Rather, they are best understood through distinct scopic regimes, each reflecting a particular moment in the evolving encounter between indigenous life and state knowledge.

We have identified three broad visual periods within these collections: **1880s:** Early ethnographic photography by Pyotr Shimkevich, focusing on the Eastern Buryats (Zabaikalye region); **1900s–1920s:** Ethnographic activism by Bernhard Petri, concentrating on the Western Buryats (Predbaikalye region); **1930s:** Soviet anthropometric photography led by G. I. Petrov and documented by E. G. Shurkin.

Each of these periods exemplifies broader trajectories in ethnographic and colonial photography — practices that evolved within Western visual anthropology and were subsequently taken up, but also shaped by the specific institutional and scientific settings of Russian and Soviet scholarship. In their original context, the photographs were collected during the field trips of various ethnographic expeditions, extensively sponsored and conducted by institutional organisations such as the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Russian Geographical Society, among others.

From 1893 to 1894, on behalf of the Amur Governor, the Russian Geographical Society employed Pyotr Shimkevich (1862–1920) "to study small peoples and develop administrative measures for improving their situation" and to collect data on "the rights of Buryats of Zabaikalye region to their inhabiting lands and methods of serving these lands"[16] in Transbaikal, the Amur Region, and Primorye in southeastern Siberia. Throughout the trip, the ethnographer observed and documented the major Buryat clans in the following regions: Aginsk, Selenge, Kudarinsk, Khori, and Barguzi (Fig. 1). While focused on recording the Buryat population, Shimkevich also visited and photographed more than

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16) V. B. Malakshanova, *Forgotten Journey: Photos by Pyotr Shimkevich: XIX Century: Album of Photographs from the Collections of Museums in Russia and Abroad* (Khabarovsk: Khabarovsk Territory Printing Office, 2021).

30 Buddhist temples (Fig. 2), all of which were destroyed in the 1930s. His images, there-
fore, preserve a rare visual record of Buryat Buddhist architecture prior to the Stalinist
purges.

The majority of Shimkevich's photographic work is now housed at the N. I. Grodekov
Museum in Khabarovsk.[17] Estimates suggest that he took over 1,000 photographs during
the expedition, including original glass plate negatives, some of which were transferred to
the Berlin Museum of Ethnography.[18]

Figs. 1–2: Pyotr Shimkevich, left: Buryat women, young women of the Selenginsk District and Department (*ve-
domstvo*) of the Temnik Valley, dressed in rich traditional attire — nieces of the late Khambo-Lama Gomboev,[19]
right: Barguzin Datsan,[20] its exterior and interior observation with Ombon's (prayer house) in the Barguzin's
steppe[21]

17) Among the materials Shimkevich donated are 120 photographs of the *byt* (everyday life) of the Buryat peo-
ple and 125 photographs depicting Buddhist sites in the Zabaikalye region. These prints are mounted in
white frames, each bearing Shimkevich's stamp of authenticity and annotations on date, location, and con-
text. The remainder of Shimkevich's photographic documentation from his Buryat expeditions is dispersed
across various public and private archives in Russia and Europe.

18) These materials were brought together and systematically identified for the first time in the 2021 grant-fun-
ded project *Forgotten Journey: Photos by Pyotr Shimkevich*, a collaborative effort across multiple institutions.
Unlike the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme, however, this project produced no public
digital repository; instead, its outcomes took the form of a touring exhibition and a printed publication,
which served as the main source for much of the information and archival access referenced here.

19) Shimkevich Pyotr Polykarpovich, Buryat women, young women of the Selenginsk District and Department
(*vedomstvo*) of the Temnik Valley, in rich costumes, nieces of the late Khambo-Lama Gomboev, Khabarovsk
Regional Museum named after N. I. Grodekov (inv. no. KP 10883/56).

20) Shimkevich, Barguzin Datsan, Amur Regional Museum of Local Lore named after G. S. Novikov-Daursky;
State Museum of the History of Religion; Far Eastern State Scientific Library; Russian Museum of Ethnog-
raphy (inv. no. 2450-53).

21) Shimkevich, Ombon (prayer house) in the Barguzin's steppe, Khabarovsk Regional Museum named after

This series of photographs by Shimkevich offers a rare and extensive visual record of the Zabaikalye Buryats at the end of the nineteenth century — a time when the region had already been territorially absorbed into the Russian Empire. Despite this incorporation, Buryat identity, way of life (*byt*), and Buddhist cultural influence remained distinctly present in the eastern part of the region, as evidenced throughout Shimkevich's collection. Today, these images hold particular historical value as visual testimony to cultural forms and religious sites that have since vanished.

The original Shimkevich photographs, likely captured on albumen glass plates, would have had a materially different presence when encountered in situ than through their current digital reproductions. Likewise, the photographs of Bernhard Petri and E. Shurkin, initially encountered as photographic objects, are now perceived through the dematerialized logic of the digital image. This shift in medium transmission foregrounds an essential question: how does the materiality of the photographic object itself affect the historical memory of the event it records?

If observed in its original context as an object, each photograph can be seen as a material relic of the Buryat way of life before collectivization — a documentation of the material culture of Zabaykalye Buryats sealed in the form of a glass plate. In the case of the earlier ethnographic photography of Shimkevich, the original photographs were made with a large-format camera that imposed mobility restrictions on the subject of the photograph, thus creating a static, historicist reading of the image and its portrayal. This is especially evident in one of the most widely circulated portraits today among the Buryat community,[22] the portrait of the Buryat woman (Fig. 3) from the Aginsk Administrative District in the Zabaykalye region.

Zoriktueva is seated amongst a plain "stretched-fabric" background, dressed in a formal female Buryat-Mongol gown, which reflects her status of wealth and attribution to the Aginsk region and Khori clan.[23] Her hand is gracefully resting on her left knee, and her gaze is directed toward the camera. The formal posture is partially dictated by her rank and the complexity of the dress, but also by the aesthetic decision of the photographer to capture her in a fashion reminiscent of the anthropological photography of the late nineteenth century, where staging the portraits as a makeshift studio during the field trips was a common practice. In the archive of Shimkevich's works, this portrait is also accompanied by two additional photographs of Zoriktueva that are taken at full length from the back and front (Fig. 4), which, unlike the first portrait, are not widely circulated and are

N. I. Grodekov (inv. no. KP 7959/168); Amur Regional Museum of Local Lore named after G. S. Novikov-Daursky; State Museum of the History of Religion; Far Eastern State Scientific Library; Russian Museum of Ethnography (inv. no. 245Buryat0-30).

22) Growing up in Buryatia, the portrait of the *Aginsk Woman* — recently attributed to the authorship of Shimkevich — has circulated widely across the Republic: as a national museum postcard referencing traditional costume history, as a digitally modified image incorporated into commercial projects such as souvenir manufacturing, and most recently as an AI-generated animation for an interactive exhibition in Ulaan-Ude. "Ожившие фотографии," accessed September 30, 2025, https://xebxab.space/sainuuger/livephoto.

23) Traditional Buryat-Mogolian dress has an elaborate dress system with different parts of the dress attributing the wearer to a particular klan (*rod*). For more details on the symbolism of Buryat traditional dress, see R. D. Badmaeva, *Buryatskii narodnyi kostium* (Ulan-Ude: Buryat book Publ., 1987).

Fig. 3: Buryat woman Zoriktueva dressed in a rich formal attire. The dress is adorned with silver, corals
(*mozhans*), lapis lazuli, and other precious ornaments[24]

seen only in the limited context of a printed publication and the archive. These portraits
are also isolated by a plain background that further contextualizes and positions the
photographs in the visual logic of ethnographic photography. Compared to the first
portrait, the posture is much more rigid and simplified — instrumental and clear in
displaying Zoriktueva's appearance and details of the dress.

Such representation mediates cultural perception through an ethnographic lens, shap-
ing how the Buryat past is imagined in the present. Adapting Boris Groys's formulation,
one might ask: to what extent does photography, as a culturally coded simulacrum of re-
ality, contribute to — or compromise — the "truth of representation" that anthropology
seeks?[25] This question recalls Walter Benjamin's reflection on photography's paradoxical
claim to authenticity: even in the most staged or artful image, the beholder is drawn to the
minute trace of contingency — the "here and now" that inscribes the photograph with the
mark of lived reality.[26] The collision between mechanical apparatus and lived experience,
what Roland Barthes later terms "sovereign contingency,"[27] deposits a residue of immedi-
acy within the photograph. Yet this immediacy coexists with loss: by fixing reality materi-
ally, photography also arrests the fluidity of memory. In this sense, the photographic

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24) Shimkevich, Khabarovsk Regional Museum named after N. I. Grodkov (inv. no. KP 7959/96); Amur Re-
gional Museum of Local Lore named after G. S. Novikov-Daursky; State Museum of the History of Religion;
Far Eastern State Scientific Library; National Museum of the Republic of Buryatia.
25) Boris Groys, *Logic of Collection* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2021), 125–140.
26) Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street: And Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1997), 280–301.
27) Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
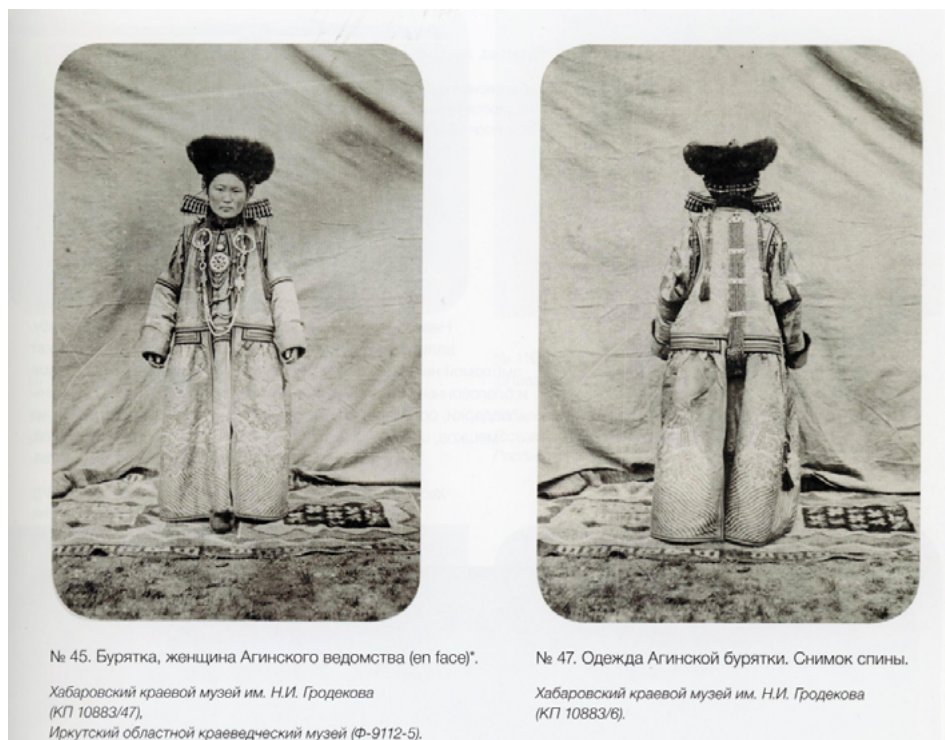
№ 45. Бурятка, женщина Агинского ведомства (en face)*.

Хабаровский краевой музей им. Н.И. Гродекова
(КП 10883/47),
Иркутский областной краеведческий музей (Ф-9112-5).

№ 47. Одежда Агинской бурятки. Снимок спины.

Хабаровский краевой музей им. Н.И. Гродекова
(КП 10883/6).

Fig. 4: left: No. 45, Buryat woman from the Aginsk Administrative District (en face),[28] right: No. 47, Costume of an Aginsk Buryat woman. Rear view[29]

object — through its central temporal and experiential problematic — parallels Buryat shamanic practice, particularly the *Ongon*: a material vessel inhabited by an ancestral spirit, sustaining presence through matter while signifying absence in life.[30]

Photography similarly produces an object saturated with the physical trace of reality while evacuating subjective life. In Groys's reading of Siegfried Kracauer,[31] photography does not overcome death but manifests it. Capturing the body, the photograph becomes evidence of death — a counterpoint to the elusive, living quality of memory before it has been "fixed" into the physical document that constitutes photographic materiality. The photographic object, therefore, reproduces not the truth of the moment, but a mediated replica of it.

28) Pyotr Shimkevich, Buryat woman from the Aginsk Administrative District (en face), Khabarovsk Regional Museum named after N. I. Grodekov (inv. no. KP 10883/47); Irkutsk Regional Museum of Local Lore (inv. no. KP 10883/6).

29) Pyotr Shimkevich, Costume of an Aginsk Buryat woman. Rear view, Khabarovsk Regional Museum named after N. I. Grodekov (inv. no. 10883/6).

30) According to shamanist beliefs, *Ongon* is a material object inhabited by the spirit of an ancestor that conserves their presence through materiality whilst simultaneously reminding its bearer of their absence in the world of the living.

31) Groys, *Logic of Collection*, 130–131.

For Barthes, however, photography possesses its own kind of truth — the truth of the immediate effect of reality. By definition, it cannot lie about reality, for the very subject capable of lying disappears within it.[32] The notion of "photographic truth" thus remains perpetually mediated: an asymptotic pursuit that photography can never fully achieve. Yet through this mediation, the photographic image transforms subjective memory and one's relation to history, generating a liminal space that enables critical reflection and the recovery of historical discontinuities. Within this framework, institutional ethnographic collections become navigational points within these mnemonic gaps, where the material and visual conditions of the medium further complicate the fragile positioning of truth in the contested terrain of Buryat history.

Where Shimkevich's archive captures a world still precariously intact — a visual order stabilized through ethnographic typology and framing,[33] Bernhard Petri's later work, spanning the 1910s to 1930s, confronts a world already in the throes of transformation and cultural disintegration. His photographs and writings mark a decisive shift in the function of ethnography — from static documentation to an active form of mediation and intervention.

As an ethnographer, archaeologist, and advocate, Petri practiced what might be called ethnographic activism: he positioned himself not as a passive recorder but as a cultural mediator, intervening in the historical transition confronting Indigenous Siberian communities such as the Western Buryats and Soyots. While a general distinguishing feature of Soviet ethnography in the 1920s and 1930s was the attempt to align fieldwork with the Marxist-Leninist paradigm — actively participating in the social transformation of traditional lifeways rather than merely typifying, racializing, or exoticizing Indigenous peoples, who were increasingly conceived of as Soviet citizens[34] — Petri's activism exceeded these bounds. In February 1929, Petri petitioned the Irkutsk Committee of the North on behalf of the Soyot people, who lacked the means to send a representative to the Buryat ASSR capital, Ulan-Ude. He highlighted multiple grievances, including excessive taxation on cattle milk, the nonpayment of a promised 5,000-ruble loan, the absence of schools, and restrictions on reindeer trade with Tuva. Petri proposed the creation of a separate Soyot administrative unit to address these issues. The Buryat ASSR authorities, however, denounced his intervention, claiming that he had incited the Soyot kulak elite to assert autonomy, pursue unrestricted trade, and resist Communist policies — demands considered politically unacceptable by the state.[35]

A landscape photograph taken by Petri, most likely during a field trip among the Western Buryats, stands out within the digital collection for its ambiguity and absence of explicit ethnographic framing (Fig. 5). In the lower left corner, the faint outline of Petri

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32) Groys, *Logic of Collection*, 20.

33) Elena Barchatova, ed., *A Portrait of Tsarist Russia: Unknown Photographs from the Soviet Archives* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 81. The *News of the Russian Geographical Society* (1872) instructed photographers to focus on "people's costume, every single pose, tools and household goods … dwellings, settlements, towns, scenes from public life, and pets."

34) Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

35) A. A. Vanov, A. D. Kalikhman, and T. P. Kalikhman, *Б. Э. Петри в истории Саянского перекрестка* [B. E. Petri in the History of the Sayan Crossroads] (Irkutsk: Изд-во «Оттиск», 2008), 72–92.

Fig. 5: Bernhard Eduardovich Petri, Landscape. Buryats, Irkutsk Province (Irkutsk Governorate), Russia. Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. No later than 1913. Stereoscopic glass plate negative. MAE no. 2220-116. Size: 9×14 cm[36]

himself appears, leaning against a tripod while photographing the scene. The photograph's overexposure and apparent spontaneity suggest it may have been captured incidentally, without the deliberate compositional staging characteristic of his other works.

Petri's photographs should be read within the intellectual framework that shaped his ethnographic practice — an emergent Siberian anthropology conceived as a transdisciplinary science that effectively assumed the role of local sociology. In the absence of institutionalized sociology in the Russian Empire and early Soviet Union, anthropology in Siberia was a hybrid field: it fused archaeology, ethnography, physical anthropology, statistics, economics, and medicine into a unified apparatus for studying and managing social life. Petri, trained as a natural scientist and a committed Darwinist, saw cultural life as evolving in close relation to environmental and material conditions. His methodological orientation was toward development, transition, and adaptation — not preservation in any static sense.

By the 1920s, Petri understood that a return to indigenous "tradition" was no longer viable, yet the blunt imposition of Soviet modernization would be culturally catastrophic. His project was to mediate the transition to new forms of life — through cultural bases,[37]

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36) Bernhard Eduardovich Petri, Landscape. Buryats, Irkutsk Province (Irkutsk Governorate), Russia, no later than 1913, Photographic Collection, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. inv. no. MAE 2220–116, accessed April 30, 2025, https://collection.kunstkamera.ru/en/entity/OBJECT/68540.

37) A *kultbaza* (cultural base) was a form of cultural development in the USSR, established in the 1920s–1930s to meet the needs of nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of the Far North. Often mobile or semi-perma-

Fig. 6: Two Buryat women in European dress, Buryats, Irkutsk Province (Irkutsk Governorate), Russia.
Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. No later than 1913. Glass plate negative. MAE no. 2220-6. Size: 9.0×12.0 mm[38)]

education, and land reform — but only if these were radically adapted to the geo-social, economic, and ecological conditions of each community.

The group portrait, now held in the Kunstkamera Museum of Ethnography in St. Petersburg, depicts two Buryat women from the western region of historical Buryatia, Pribaykalye, north of Lake Baikal (Fig. 6). This region experienced earlier and more intense contact with Russian colonizers than Zabaikalye, including forced Christianization, the adoption of Russian names, and a transition from nomadic to sedentary life. In the photograph, the women wear Western-style dresses associated with European settlers and pose before a traditional Russian wooden house, signalling the profound transformation of everyday life. Unlike Shimkevich's portraits, which employ carefully staged backgrounds, Petri's composition appears more immediate and transitory; occasional technical imperfections lend a sense of naturalism, reflecting the rapid social and environmental changes he documented during fieldwork.

His photographs and writings reflect this political and epistemological commitment: they capture not timeless ethnographic "types," but unstable hybrids — shamanic ritual in

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nent, these institutions aimed to educate local populations and raise children, typically including a boarding school with an orphanage, a hospital with an outpatient clinic, a club, and radio and cinema facilities. A *kult-baza* can be understood on the better-known architectural model of the social condenser, originally developed for the metropolitan setting, to suit the specific conditions of northern, semi-nomadic communities.

38) Petri, Two Buryat women in European dress, Photographic Collection, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. Museum no. MAE 2220-6, accessed April 30, 2025, https://collection.kunstkamera.ru/en/entity/OBJECT/68361?person=243&index=18.

Western dress, ancestral earth cults resisting both institutional Buddhism and Soviet secularism, tentative collectivist experiments grafted onto kinship structures. To an extent, Petri's ethnography was a diagnostic map of cultural survival under extreme pressure. His outspoken advocacy for Soyot autonomy rendered him politically suspect; he was executed in 1937 during the Stalinist purges. His legacy endures as a rare case of an ethnographer who understood anthropology not as the study of vanishing cultures, but as a tool for imagining survivable futures.

Yet within a few years, the visual and epistemological premises of ethnography shifted markedly. While Petri's photographs documented the instability of cultural transformation, the subsequent generation of Soviet anthropology — exemplified by E. G. Shurkin's 1931 expedition under G. I. Petrov — focused on the human body itself as a site of measurement and scientific categorization. In 1931, under the direction of G. I. Petrov, the Buryat-Mongolian Anthropological Expedition undertook constitutional studies of Buryat-Mongol and mixed Buryat-Russian populations. The photographic documentation, conducted by E. G. Shurkin, originally encompassed over 600 participants; today, only 50 of these images are digitally accessible in the Kunstkamera Museum of Ethnography's public collection.

Figs. 7–8: E. G. Shurkin, left: Trans-Baikal Métis, young woman (frontal, profile, three-quarter views),[39] right: Trans-Baikal Métis: Posokhova, sixth generation, age 28 (frontal, profile, three-quarter views). Kyakhta District, Troitskosavsky Aimag, Buryat-Mongol ASSR. Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg, 1931. Photo-sensitive layer on glass plate. Sizes: 13.0 × 18.0 × 0.1 cm 40)[40]

Shurkin's photographs adhere to the conventions of anthropometric photography, following protocols established by the British Anthropological Society and the work of Francis Galton. Subjects were systematically recorded in profile, frontal, and three-quarter

39) E. G. Shurkin, Trans-Baikal Métis: young woman (frontal, profile, three-quarter views), Kyakhta District, Troitskosavsky Aimag, Buryat-Mongol ASSR, Russia, 1931. Collector (private): Grigorii Ivanovich Petrov (1903–1941). Museum no. MAE I 1596-19, accessed April 30, 2025, https://collection.kunstkamera.ru/en/entity/OBJECT/63687.

40) E. G. Shurkin, Trans-Baikal Métis: Posokova, sixth generation, age 28 (frontal, profile, three-quarter views), Kyakhta District, Troitskosavsky Aimag, Buryat-Mongol ASSR, Russia, 1931. Collector (private): Grigorii Ivanovich Petrov (1903–1941). Museum no. MAE I 1596-15, accessed April 30, 2025, https://collection.kunstkamera.ru/en/entity/OBJECT/63683.

views, typically against a neutral background. This methodology, first formalized by Jones H. Lamprey in 1869, sought to suppress individual particularities in favor of comparative typologies, thereby transforming embodied subjects into standardized somatic data. Each photograph includes factual annotations, written beneath the images (Figs. 7–8).

Yet, as Christopher Pinney and Elizabeth Edwards highlight, such scientific visualities are "infected[41]" by the aesthetic and ideological demands of their cultural milieu. The visual codes of the images participate in the manipulation and, as a consequence, erasure of the lived singularity of the subject — a presence that, paradoxically, continues to haunt the anthropometric frame.

Shurkin's corpus thus forms part of a longer visual narrative of othering, even as it is reframed within a new ideological project. As Francine Hirsch has demonstrated, Soviet anthropologists sought to dismantle the racial essentialisms of Western eugenics, framing *metizatsiia* (racial mixing) not as degeneration but as a driver of socialist modernity.[42] Studies such as Petrov's, encompassing constitutional measurements and endurance tests of Buryat-Mongol and mixed-heritage workers, aimed to recast biological differences within a dialectical materialist paradigm of social development.

However, despite their nominally emancipatory aims, Soviet researchers remained entangled in the visual episteme of eugenics: the very photographic and tabular protocols they deployed betrayed their complicity with a scientific regime that reduced the social body to anatomical metricity. Petrov's own admission of the expedition's compressed timeline — spanning merely from the spring to the early autumn of 1930 — is legible in the photographic inconsistencies: blurred visages, unorthodox angles, multiple subjects on a single plate, which disrupt the rigid taxonomic ambitions of the archive. The expedition report supplements these visual documents with exhaustive measurements: tables recording height, cranial indices, eye and hair color, blood type, and other biometric data — further sedimenting bodies into numeric abstractions.

Moreover, returning to Benjamin's conception of photography as the searing of an empirical scene onto the photographic substrate, Galton's composite technique — which layers multiple profilmic events into a singular visual schema — can be seen as an effort to thicken and destabilize the photographic instant. Far from undermining photographic indexicality, such methods reveal its reliance on aesthetic construction and its entanglement with regimes of visual control. The anthropometric grid thus functions as a paradoxical site: a project of standardization that simultaneously exposes the instability and spectrality underlying its claims to scientific objectivity.

To conclude this section, each photographic regime — colonial, activist, or biometric — represents a distinct apparatus of seeing. These are not discrete temporal sequences but overlapping strata through which the image of the Buryat has been historically constructed, transformed, and contested. Across these shifts, the photograph's double bind endures: it simultaneously documents and distorts, preserves life while scripting its disappearance. Today, these images circulate across multiple contexts: as digitized files in museum data-

41) Elizabeth Edwards, "Professor Huxley's 'Well-considered Plan'," in Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropologies and Museums* (London: Routledge, 2001), 135.

42) Francine Hirsch, "Race without the Practice of Racial Politics," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002), 30–43.

bases, occasionally reproduced by museums and scientific institutions, and further re-appropriated in commercial, educational, and academic settings.

If the photographic object, across its three key regimes, frames Buryat identity through structures of classification, salvage, and measurement, it simultaneously leaves a residue that resists enclosure. Despite their claims to fixity, these images contain errant traces — gestures, postures, and fragments — that fall outside the grammar of ethnographic capture and institutional taxonomy. Such unruly details invite a different mode of seeing, one less concerned with verification and more attentive to interruptions. It is precisely within these visual fissures that an alternative historical practice emerges: one that does not aim to reconstruct a total image of the past but instead works with its discontinuities, particularly as they materialize in the fragmented photographic record of the Buryat–Mongol borderlands.

This is where the concept of photographic montage begins to matter — not only as a technique of juxtaposition but as a way of thinking about history itself. In the next section, we turn to visual analysis of the Sodnom-Dorzhi Badmaev family album, which includes photographs from 1937 to the late 1990s, with annotations of the Badmaev family's history made in retrospect. The album is an example of vernacular photography in the Buryat-Mongol ASSR and is thus a radically different method of photographic seeing, where social and historical memory is composed through recursive layering, image friction, and temporal recursion.

Montage and Discontinuous Time: The Family Album

As the capacity to sustain memory through embodied ritual diminishes under the pressures of displacement and historical rupture, memory turns to new forms of material mediation. It is through these fractured, technologically inscribed traces that the effort to preserve and reconstitute historical consciousness endures — an effort that finds one of its most poignant sites in the family photo album.

When state-induced trauma reverberates across generations, linear historiography — grounded in formal archival records — comes under scrutiny. This questioning often begins with a personal encounter: the family photo album, dense with intimate traces of ancestral life, appeared irreconcilable with the bureaucratically categorized anthropological records held in institutional archives. From this juxtaposition emerged not only gaps but also tensions between what is remembered and what is allowed to surface as memory. Unlike the orderly, chronologically numbered glass plate negatives of early ethnographic photography, the family photo album operates through a discontinuous visual logic. Photographs are loosely arranged according to individual memory rather than archival taxonomy, with cut-out and glued black-and-white photographs accompanied by multilingual annotations in Russian and Buryat.

The organization of images resists conventional chronology, narrative direction, and structural order typical of standard family albums. Instead, the pages function as visual composites, reflecting the fragmented and selective nature of individual memory. This mode of visual assembling resonates with the dynamics described by Oksana Sarkisova

and Olga Shevchenko in *In Visible Presence: Soviet Afterlives in Family Photos*,[43] where Soviet-era family photographs circulate between public and private domains, producing hybrid temporalities and contingent constellations of identity. Bringing this framework forward helps illuminate how Badmaev's album likewise operates through discontinuity rather than narrative coherence.

The album documents the transformative period of Sovietization, tracing the life of the Sodnom-Dorzhi Badmaev family from the 1920s through the 1990s. A prominent journalist in 1960s Ulaan-Ude, Badmaev contributed regularly to *Buriad-Uneen*, a Buryat-language newspaper, and appeared on Buryat television. While the album reflects his public life and social presence, it is equally infused with intimate family perspectives. Compiled after his retirement in the 1990s, the dark blue, velvety album — nearly twelve centimetres thick — conveys the tactile density of a life retrospectively assembled. Badmaev was the sole creator and contributor to the album, which was intended for circulation within the family. Following his passing in 2011, the album was inherited by his eldest daughter, who continues to preserve it.

Fig. 9: Sodnom-Dorzhi Badmaev's family album, a 1937 family photograph, depicting Sodnom and his Mother, Cyrilla, accompanied by an annotation in Russian. Personal archive of Badmaev's family[44]

The album's earliest photograph (Fig. 9) and accompanying annotation evoke Badmaev's childhood and early adolescence during Soviet collectivization, a period that left an indelible mark on the family. The translation is as follows:

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43) Oksana Sarkisova and Olga Shevchenko, *In Visible Presence: Soviet Afterlives in Family Photos* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2023).

44) The album was digitized by Margarita Galandina in January 2022.

Childhood. Sodnom Dorzhi was happy. Collectivisation began in 1931: one cow re-
mained, then famine. Didn't think about the photo, only how to survive. Badma's
family came out of collectivization with losses. Very beautiful and intelligent sister,
Cirilla, passed away, born in 1917. The mother, Khandama Tsyrenova, found it in-
creasingly hard to cope with the loss of her only daughter. This shot was taken in the
year of the death of my beloved sister, when my brother, Tsydyp, was serving in
Khara-Nurrei, in the cavalry. Taken in the village of Shiringe, 13 August 1937. —
Sodnom Dorzhi Badmaev.

Badmaev was born in 1922 in the Buryat village of Turkhul, Eastern Buryatia, which
was later dissolved and incorporated into the newly formed Sosnovo-Ozersk district in
the present-day Yaruuna Region. The family was forcibly relocated in the 1930s, losing
their pre-collectivization semi-nomadic way of life, based on herding. At just thirteen,
Badmaev's older sister died of hunger following the family's dispossession and relocation.

The album does not directly document these disruptive events, likely because their
magnitude made them difficult to capture photographically, as Badmaev himself noted.
Yet the presence of loss remains palpable — articulated through absence. These gaps and
silences thus become defining features of the album's unorthodox historical narrative.

Figs. 10–11: Sodnom-Dorzhi Badmaev's family album, personal archive, left: photographic collage combining
the family's passport photos, and portraits of Badmaev's wife, mother-in-law, children and himself taken at dif-
ferent points in time, right: photographic collage featuring the family's gatherings, studio portraits, and holiday
snapshots in Buryatia's regional sanatorium. Some photos have years annotated

The album interweaves three generations of the family within the same page (Fig. 10),
collapsing temporal distinctions. Fragmented memories of Sodnom-Dorzhi emerge
through annotations in both Buryat and Russian, offering an intimate, multilayered expe-

rience of time. Formal passport photographs sit alongside informal snapshots of family gatherings or countryside vacations (Fig. 11). Sarkisova and Shevchenko note that in Soviet family albums, such formal photographs frequently circulated from public domains into private life, highlighting the entanglement of personal and social identities.[45] Badmaev's album similarly juxtaposes images of himself, his children, and his wife at different points in their lives. The effect is striking: the youngest son in his forties faces his father in his twenties, and vice versa. The album suspends linear historicity, presenting a visual model of memory in which past and present coexist in recursive, personal flashes.

The structure of the album echoes practices found in 1920s–1950s Mongolian photomontage posters, particularly from the Mongolian Archive of Cinema and Sound, such as the one seen in figure 12. For the newly established Soviet scopic regime, photomontages offered a new mode of historical cognition that both factographically captured and actively produced historical reality. They promised a multi-perspectival vision and a reconfiguration of past, present, and future, constructing relationships between historical events, socio-economic processes, technical objects, and personal lives.

Fig. 12: Endangered Archives Project (EAP) No. 264, printed materials [1930s–1950s]. Preserved at archives for cinema and sound recording, Mongolia[46]

This raises the question of how the fragmentary and emotionally charged character of such albums might offer a different mode of engaging with memory — one not bound by

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45) Sarkisova and Shevchenko, *In Visible Presence*, 56.
46) "EAP264/1/1/7: Album of Photographs of Buriat People," *Endangered Archives Programme*, accessed April 30, 2025, https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP264-1- 1-7.

linearity, biographical closure, or the aesthetic pacification of experience. For the Soviet avant-garde, montage carried a revolutionary promise: to think through images alone. It served as an organon for a new historical experience, for a new collective "We" as the subjects of world history.[47] Following the historical failure of the Soviet modernization project, however, the constructive essence of montage assumed a deconstructive orientation: not the subsumption of the personal within the collective, but the negative expression of the collective within the personal. If the critical, social reception of cultural objects retroactively acts on their being, Sodnom-Dorzhi's photographic album today may be understood as a counter-archive of collective social memory.

Speculatively, for family members, the album performs a shamanic function — not in a literal ritual sense, but as a mediatory device that navigates between temporal layers and ancestral presences. In Buryat cosmology, the shaman moves between worlds, retrieving fragments of knowledge and memory otherwise inaccessible. The album enacts a secular analog to this process: it accesses lost memories by moving through a constellation of photographs produced at different historical moments, binding together ruptures produced by collectivization, forced resettlement, and the dissolution of semi-nomadic lifeworlds across Eastern Buryatia. In this sense, its "shamanic" dimension emerges from a specifically regional history of dispossession, where recollection must be pieced together across discontinuous temporal registers.

Following Hal Foster's notion of the "archival impulse" is productive only to a point.[48] While Foster's framework attends to gaps, losses, and fragmentary histories within contemporary art, the discontinuities in the Sodnom-Dorzhi album are of a different order: they arise from collectivization-induced famine, the erasure of Turkhul village, the death of a sister from hunger, and the fracturing of kinship networks under Sovietization. The album's gaps and juxtapositions, therefore, do not simply resist historical totalization in an abstract theoretical sense; they articulate the specific violence of Soviet agrarian reforms in the Buryat-Mongol borderlands. These fractures become productive not because they mirror the formal strategies Foster identifies, but because they register a history that exceeds conventional archival logic altogether.

This distinction between public and private image regimes raises the question of how montage functions at the margins of institutional photographic practice. In the Soviet context, formal portraits, passport photographs, and studio images circulated widely between public infrastructures and private life, while informal snapshots carried the weight of intimate memory. The Sodnom-Dorzhi album activates montage precisely at this juncture: by bringing state-produced photographic forms into proximity with personal images, it reorganizes visual evidence in ways that challenge the state's epistemologies of vision and time.

Allan Sekula's schema of photography as a double archive — honor and surveillance, portrait and mugshot[49] — offers a point of departure, but the Sodnom-Dorzhi album slips

47) Serguei Oushakine, *A Medium for the Masses: Photomontage and the Optical Turn in Early Soviet Russia* (Moscow: GARAGE, 2020).

48) Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, no. 110 (2004), 3–22.

49) Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, no. 39 (1986), 3–64.

past these categories. It is neither an instrument of discipline nor an assertion of civic re-
spectability. Although it resonates with what Sekula terms the "shadow archive," its logic
is not merely oppositional. Instead, the album constructs a vernacular, borderland photo-
montage practice grounded in Buryat familial memory, Indigenous temporal recursion,
and Sovietized visual repertoires. Montage here becomes a method of re-assembling a life
dislocated by collectivisation and migration, producing a visual sensibility that Western
theoretical frameworks only partially apprehend. In this periphery, images remain errant,
contingent, and affective, but they also enact a region-specific form of historical cognition
where past and present fold into one another in ways closer to shamanic mediation than
to Western archival paradigms. It is this locally situated montage, rather than a universal-
ized "archival impulse" that structures the album's interpretive horizon.

The album's vernacular montage extends beyond visual organization into its linguistic
and material layers. Annotation, handwriting, and language choice become additional
sites where ruptures, displacements, and returns are hidden.

Fig. 13: Sodnom-Dorzhi Badmaev's family album, personal archive, left: Image composite featuring Badmaev
in different decades, accompanied by a photograph of his two grandchildren, right: A series of photographs of
Badmaev and his cousin Munko Tsybikov — Pandito Khambo Lambo taken in Ivolginsk Datsan during Dalai
Lama XIV's visit to Buryatia in 1992, accompanied by annotation in Buryat

It is unclear whether the choice to annotate some photographs in Buryat and others in
Russian was intentional. Over the last century, many Buryat families underwent a com-
plete linguistic transition from Buryat to Russian, sometimes resulting in the total loss of
the former language, as was the case for Badmaev's children and grandchildren. Conse-
quently, parts of the album remained inaccessible to the immediate family for decades,

highlighting how linguistic loss becomes an archival condition: a form of silence inscribed in the material of memory itself.

For example, in figure 13, Badmaev notes that Pandito Khambo Lama Munko Tsybikov Zodboevich, his older cousin, received an audience with the Dalai Lama in 1992. However, the immediate family did not recognize the familial connection until 2023, when a librarian fluent in Buryat translated the annotation in the birthplace of Sodnom-Dorzhi, long after Badmaev's passing. Following the 1930s Stalinist purges in the Buryat-Mongol ASSR, Buddhist lamas were primary targets of repression: many were executed, and others were imprisoned in labor camps. Tsybikov survived eighteen years in the Kolyma camp located in modern Magadan oblast and later became the 21st Pandito Khamba Lama in 1989.[50]

Building on Sarkisova and Shevchenko's account of how Soviet photographic practices entangled public visibility and private memory, Badmaev's life reveals a more complex, regionally specific version of this duality.[51] Outwardly, he inhabited the role of a successful Soviet journalist and public intellectual; inwardly, he maintained ties to a repressed Buddhist cousin, bringing his grandchildren to the Ivolginsk Datsan while withholding the familial connection for their safety. In this expanded context, the album holds the tension between public and private but also the layered negotiations of Buryat identity — between Russian and Buryat languages, Soviet secular modernity and Buddhist lineage, official narratives and concealed kinship histories. The album thus becomes a repository of both spoken and deliberately unspoken memories, shaped by the constraints and possibilities of multilingual, borderland life where selective silence was itself a strategy of survival and remembrance.

The family album thus reveals a history constructed through a dispersed constellation of images and inscriptions that resist linear historicist reading. Its visual language — montaged, multilingual, recursive, and discontinuous — mirrors the historical conditions it records: loss, displacement, and the ruptures shaping Buryatia over the past century. It enacts a lived practice of editing and reassembling memory across fractured histories. In the following section, photographic re-enactment and self-portraiture render this disruption performative, activating new relations between body, history, and photographic surface, and critically engaging with the logic of earlier anthropometric photography.

50) *Khambo Lama* (Tibetan: མཁན་པོ་བླམ; Mongolian: Хамба лам; Russian: Хамбо-лама) is the title for the senior lama of a Buddhist monastery in Mongolia and Russia, equivalent to an abbot. It also denotes the spiritual leader of Buddhists in Buryatia (since the eighteenth century) and the heads of Buddhist communities in Tuva and Altai, deriving from the monastic title *Khenpo*. For more information on Buddhism in Russia see G. G. Chimitdorzhin, *Institut Pandito Khambo Lam: 1764–2004: Sbornik biograficheskoi informatsii* (Ulan-Ude: Izd-vo buddiiskogo in-ta "Dashi Choinkhorlin," 2004). The cousins Tsybikov and Badmaev exemplify two contrasting career models: the lama, widely accepted pre-Soviet but marginalized under Soviet rule, and the journalist, aligned with the Soviet Buryat state's modernizing ideals. See Melissa Chakars, *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia: Transformation in Buryatia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 15–16.

51) Sarkisova and Shevchenko, *In Visible Presence*, 32.

Performative Photographic Intervention and Shamanic Temporality

As the previous chapter explored montage as a logic of disrupted continuity in the context of the family photo album, this section turns toward the body itself as a site where archival intervention is enacted. The photographic practice takes the form of performative engagement with the archive, specifically through a re-enactment and reconfiguration of the scopic regime of Shurkin's anthropometric photography. Here, I (Margarita Galandina) explore how the body becomes a conduit through which fragmented histories are translated and reconstituted, echoing the temporalities embedded in Buryat shamanic practice. The re-enactment that follows can also be read as a contemporary continuation of shamanic temporality — an embodied method of entering, translating, and performing history. Just as the Buryat shaman mediates between ancestral voices and the living, the artist's body becomes a conduit through which the silent residues of the archive are reanimated.

Shamanic temporality offers a different cognition of history. In her research on the Buryat diaspora of Dornon province in Mongolia,[52] Manduhai Buyandelger highlights a specific verb to define Buryat shamanism's understanding of history: *tuukhe*. Its direct translation is to "gather" or "collect," presuming that knowledge is compiled from external sources. But for the Buryats, it is not only history that can be gathered; memory can be gathered as well, via the body of the shaman. In trance, the shaman gathers and performs history through fragmented, mobile, embodied narratives told by the origin spirits.[53]

In this way, the photographic act carries both forensic and ritual significance: it exposes the wound of history while simultaneously attempting to inhabit its echoes. Memory in Buryat cosmology is not fixed within linear succession but enacted through the body. Buyandelger describes this through the term *hanah* — "to remember" and "to miss" — signalling the affective and performative dimensions of recollection.[54] The shaman's task is to traverse the dispersed field of ancestral voices, gather fragments of the forgotten, and make them audible again. Within this framework, forgetting in itself becomes a form of haunting. The *uheer*[55] — the unnamed ancestral spirit — is not merely a lost soul, but an embodiment of the gap within historical consciousness, a sign of memory displaced or withheld. Through naming and invocation, the shaman transforms the *uheer* into origin spirits, re-establishing continuity between the living and the dead. The act of photographic re-enactment draws from this same temporality: it reactivates what is lost by performing its absence. The image summons dispersed traces of the origin into a material plate, allowing history to be gathered, enacted, and remembered through the body.

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52) Manduhai Buyandelger, *Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 17.

53) The term *origin spirit* that Buyandelger refers to in her research, is used to mark a spirit of an ancestor, that upon passing, with the right burial procedure and departure from the world of the living, enables the *soul* to return to the realm of *origin spirits* that may support or disrupt the livelihoods of the living members of the kin. Hence the need to perform rituals in appeasing the origin spirits by means of shamanism and its ability to mediate between such worlds.

54) Buyandelger, *Tragic Spirits*, 17.

55) Ibid., 87.

The juxtaposition of Siberian shamanic practice with modern art is not new. Art historian Peg Weiss's analysis of early Kandinsky[56] positioned the artist as both ethnographer and shaman, drawing extensive visual parallels between shamanic experience: the traversal of three worlds, the shamanic illness preceding initiation, the use of ritual paraphernalia, and the artist's imaginative transformation of vision, as seen in works such as *The Blue Rider* or *St. George III*. Weiss highlighted the multitemporal nature of shamanic experience, its capacity to transform and to generate new forms of knowledge and perception. "The artist is perhaps in a position, albeit only partially and by chance, to summon up within himself these states of inspiration by artificial means," Kandinsky writes. "Moreover, he can qualify the nature of those states which arise within him of their own volition. All the experience and knowledge that relate to this area are but one of the elements of consciousness."[57]

Whereas Weiss situates shamanism within a modernist aesthetic of transcendence, treating it as a metaphorical resource for artistic vision, the approach taken here recontextualizes this relation through an Indigenous epistemology in which embodiment is genealogically rooted in ancestral lineage, intergenerational memory, and embodied forms of historical transmission rather than symbolic analogy.[58] In this framework, the influential interpretation of shamanism as a technique for producing ecstatic states, advanced by Mircea Eliade,[59] proves unhelpful. As the French anthropologist Charles Stépanoff explains: "Shamanism is not an 'archaic technique of ecstasy,' as Mircea Eliade has it, but an innovative reflexive art of mental travel."[60] Roberte Hamayon similarly observes that "the Buryat shaman engaged in behaviors similar in form to possession, but not in meaning."[61] Hamayon's anthropological study of play situates shamanic practice within the problematic field between ritual, theatre, and performance, seeking to understand it through the concept of simulation, which operates by reinventing through mimicry. As she writes, "The shaman's mode of action, which I have called simulation, and which generated the 'presence effect' of the spirits, and gave a form of reality to the actions exerted upon them,

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56) Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 72–94. The connections between the "ethnographic turn" in late-twentieth-century art and the contemporaneous "archival turn" are significant, though neither is entirely new; both can be traced to the historical avant-garde. For example, regarding the shift from museum to archive, see Stepanova, cited in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 261.

57) Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1913), XVI; and *Collected Writings* (1913 and 1918), in Lenk and Vivier, eds. (1982), 370 and 892, no. 54, 55, 57; cited in Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia*, 79.

58) Kandinsky's father was born in Kyakhta — at the border of Buryatia and Mongolia, an important trade centre linking Russia, Mongolia, and China — to a mother allegedly of Buryat-Mongolian descent. Cited in Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia*, 8.

59) Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

60) Stépanoff continues: "It is in this sense that we are all potential shamans. To free the shamanic arts from this pathological image means finding a way to avoid neutralizing their subversive potential as a truly human form of communication with the world, on a par with those forms that are more familiar to us and which we tend to take to be the only legitimate ones." Charles Stépanoff, *Journeys into the Invisible: Shamanic Technologies of the Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025), 368.

61) Roberte Hamayon, *Why We Play: An Anthropological Study*, trans. Damien Simon (Chicago: Hau Books, 2016), 178.

was, in this sense, more than theatre as well. Performing an epic had a similar power of action."[62]

Hamayon's emphasis on simulation as an embodied mode of producing presence underscores how performance can generate its own form of reality. This attention to the body as a site where meaning is enacted provides a conceptual hinge to Pia Arke's articulation of ethno-aesthetics, which shifts the attention to the "ethnic condition:" the simultaneous hyper-visibility and marginalization of Indigenous subjects within dominant aesthetic regimes. Arke developed the term ethno-aesthetics to define the existential limitations indigeneity imposes as a colonial construct, while also acknowledging it as a context that flared up her imagination.[63] Her insistence on making colonial history personal becomes a generative point of departure for my work, shifting away from the escapism of colonial, visually controlling patterns of seeing, and instead inhabiting and subverting them. Thus, the semiotic violence of the photograph is deflected back into a subjective practice that reinvents and activates the process of defamiliarization.

Fig. 14: Self-Portrait: Trans-Baikal Métis: female, 23 years old, third generation, 2022. Material: collage, photosensitive paper

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62) Ibid., 179. Hamayon clarifies "Simulation builds the field of ritual as a fictional frame, as a play, and gives a form of existence to immaterial beings. This fictional frame does not monitor regulated games, but other acts of simulation, namely other plays, to which it grants the status of genuine action (genuinely carried out) within the realm of play," (Hamayon, *Why We Play*, 111).

63) Pia Arke, "Ethno-Aesthetics," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 44 (2017), 4–11.

Building on these frameworks, my photographic practice enacts shamanic temporality and ethno-aesthetics via performative engagement with archival imagery. Through the strategic use of self-portraiture, the work foregrounds perceptual subjectivity, reversing the anthropological gaze and interrogating the position of the "native informant" — all while simultaneously employing and subverting the visual tropes of colonial anthropometric photography.

I interpret the term photographic intervention as a performative act that reconfigures archival material through contemporary methods, particularly by restaging archival imagery within a personal photographic practice. As part of the ongoing *Ovoo* project, a series of self-portraits (Fig. 14 and 15) was produced that mimics the visual patterns found in photographs from the Kunstkamera collection and from personal family archives, subsequently placing these contemporary images in direct dialogue with their historical counterparts.

This process extends into a composite triptych that incorporates fragments of archival imagery directly into its visual structure:

Fig. 15: Self-Portrait: Dissected Identities, Triptych, 2024. Material: collaged archive cutouts on photosensitive paper

The triptych is a further exploration of the legacy of Shurkin's 1931 field study on mixed-race Siberian genetic health through photographic intervention. The study's aim — documenting and displaying shifting ethnicities of Siberia in Buryatia — echoes my family's history and multi-ethnic background. These photographs offer a hidden historical precedent: physical evidence of the complex and often fraught relationship between Indigenous Siberian communities and the Imperial Russian and later Soviet state.

When initially displayed throughout various exhibitions across the UK, the audience generally presumed the photographed subjects were prisoners, due to visual elements such as the numbers pinned to their chests and the rigid posing instructions. For this self-portrait triptych, the original front/side/three-quarter photographs of the participants were manually cut to remove the numbers from their images. The self-portraits were then taken to mimic these original postures, placing the numbers onto the artist's own body, thus constructing a garment referencing the restrictive shape of a historic Western-style corset.

In this sense, the photo-archival intervention can be understood as a forensic act — an excavation of truth, seeking traces of something that no longer exists. The deliberate pro-

cess of ordering, printing, juxtaposing, and physically dissecting Shurkin's images, removing the numbers assigned to the original sitters and reattaching them onto my own body, transforms these archival remnants into living reflections. By pinning this visual language onto my body, I can viscerally internalize a subjective, deeply personal understanding of history, wherein the body becomes a measuring tool of trauma. By positioning myself as the primary subject of ethnographic inquiry, the aim is to rupture the composition of the archival photographs, dissecting their structure and the anthropometric logic embedded in numerical classification.

Therefore, Arke's insistence on turning the colonial archive back toward the body resonates with the shamanic gesture of invocation. To restage the anthropological photograph through one's own body is to reanimate the archive through lived experience, allowing its latent histories to speak through a transformed presence. The research and practice presented here suggest that the photographic image, far from being a fixed document of truth, constitutes a liminal medium through which the traces of historical trauma and Indigenous subjectivity may be reactivated. The archive, both institutional and familial, becomes a site where discontinuous temporalities converge, and where the gestures of montage and re-enactment operate as strategies of critical re-inscription.

Conclusion

Across the three registers explored in this study — the institutional archive, the family album, and contemporary photographic re-enactment — photography emerges as a medium through which Buryat history is continually reconfigured. Shimkevich's imperial anthropology, Petri's activist ethnography, and Shurkin's biometric images reveal how Buryat subjects were framed through the classificatory visual regimes inaugurated by photography. The Sodnom-Dorzhi family album, by contrast, demonstrates how montage, inscription, and vernacular arrangement produce a counter-archive grounded in familial memory and Indigenous survivance. Contemporary re-enactment extends this trajectory, using the artist's body to intervene directly in the colonial archive's anthropometric legacy and to reanimate its temporal residues.

The condition of distance, both geographic and historical, remains integral to this inquiry. To engage with Buryat identity from afar, and from a position of mixed heritage, inevitably shapes the interpretative lens through which history is approached. The aim, however, has not been to speak on behalf of those living within contemporary Buryatia, but to articulate a subjective trajectory through which the photographic archive might be reimagined as a living continuum of relations. The ongoing war in Ukraine, and its reverberations within Russia's national republics, further foreground the urgency of such reflection, rendering visible the unresolved legacies that continue to shape Indigenous and postcolonial subjectivities across Siberia.

Within this constellation, shamanic temporality provides a methodological framework for approaching history as recursive and relational rather than linear; for understanding memory as embodied and genealogical; and for acknowledging the co-presence

of past and present as a lived condition rather than an aesthetic abstraction.[64] Unlike modernist appropriations of shamanism, which render it symbolic or transcendent, the approach here situates it within Buryat epistemologies in which embodiment is tied to lineage, intergenerational transmission, and the ongoing negotiation of loss. Shamanic temporality, therefore, enables a mode of archival reading attuned to rupture, return, and continuity across dispersed historical fragments.

The state of in-betweenness that defines hybrid identity casts a persistent shadow over attempts to comprehend collective history, yet it also provides a generative vantage from which to interrogate the processes of remembering and forgetting. Through sustained engagement with photographic objects — whether drawn from institutional holdings or personal collections — the act of archival excavation becomes a process of assembling scattered remnants of the past into new constellations of meaning.

When refracted through shamanic temporality and embodied re-enactment, the photographic image emerges as both a medium of mourning and a medium of renewal — a space in which the documented and the forgotten may briefly converge.

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64) Effectively, we are dealing with the desire for an epic (both collective and restorative) form of experience amid the escalating ruptures of capitalist modernity — a concern that permeates the work of many artists across ecological and Indigenous art practices, spanning both performative and cartographic dimensions. See the filmic work of Saodat Ismailova and Davra Collective, *A Seed Under Our Tongue* (Venice: Marsilio Arte, 2025).

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Biography

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