



Siberian Buddhism, Siberian Shamanism and the Politics of Memory — Karl Pohrt Interviews Anthropologist/ Filmmaker Anya Bernstein

U-M Assistant Professor of Anthropology Anya Bernstein

“For 70 years, during the Soviet era, religion and many of the traditional practices were suppressed in this region...They believed cultures and peoples should have traditions, but not religions...And when the Soviet Union fell apart, people could remember again. But was there anything to remember?”

By Karl Pohrt
Photo by Susan Ayer

Anya Bernstein arrived in Ann Arbor a year and a half ago. She is a cultural anthropologist and documentary filmmaker, and she teaches Anthropology and Asian Cultures at the University of Michigan. She is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the University of Michigan’s Society of Fellows and a U-M Assistant Professor of Anthropology. She grew up in Russia, attended Moscow State University, received an M.A. in Visual Anthropology from the University of Manchester and a Ph.D. in Anthropology from New York University. She also holds an undergraduate degree in Linguistics from Georgetown University. She has worked and studied in Russia, England, France, India, and the U.S. while conducting multiple research trips to both North and South Asia for her fieldwork and films. Her two films have been screened at film festivals around the world. For information on her films, see www.der.org/films/in-pursuit-of-siberian-shaman.html and www.der.org/films/join-me-in-shambhala.html. This past fall she taught a course entitled “The Anthropology of Death and the Afterlife.”

Karl Pohrt: You have made two films that explore religious behavior in the Russian Republic of Buryatia, which borders on Lake Baikal in Southern Siberia. *Join Me In Shambhala* (2002) is a film about Yeshe Lodro Rinpoche, a Tibetan Lama who lives in Buryatia, and his attendant Tenzin Tsering. *In Pursuit of the Siberian Shaman* (2006) is a documentary on Valentin Khagdaev, a Buryat Shaman. Why did you pick these subjects? Do you have a personal interest in these specific religious expressions?

Anya Bernstein: As an anthropologist I have a very broad interest in the human condition and in the ways people make meaning in their lives. I’ve always thought religion was an interesting avenue into that. I am interested in the specific case of Buryatia and the issue of memory. Buryats are an indigenous people who have lived in southern Siberia for many centuries. They have been incorporated into various large state projects. Some of them were part of the Mongolian Empire. Later they became part of the Russian Empire and more recently the Soviet Union.

For 70 years, during the Soviet era, religion and many of the traditional practices were suppressed in this region. A lot of Buryats — counter to what people might

imagine now — embraced Communist values. They embraced the Communist ideology. There was a lot of social engineering done with memory. They were first told to forget their culture. Then they were told to remember certain parts of it but not others. The Soviets liked the idea of ethnic diversity. They believed cultures and peoples should have traditions, but not religions. They suppressed not just Shamanism and Buddhism, but also Russian Orthodoxy, Islam and Judaism. Everything. And when the Soviet Union fell apart, people could remember again. But was there anything to remember? I was really interested in what happened to all of these pieces of shattered ideologies.

The indigenous Siberians in Buryatia are very different in northern and southern Siberia. Northern groups are closer to Inuits, while in the south there live Mongolian and Turkic groups. Buryats see themselves as part of this great Mongolian civilization. And they have been Buddhists for a few centuries, which is a source of pride. By the time I made these films they had experienced 70 years of socialism and then 10 years of capitalism. What happened to all these ideologies? Obviously, religion was resurgent. I wanted to see how it all played out. I was interested in how these people create meaning in their everyday lives, in everything from financial to existential and personal issues.

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— Anya Bernstein on Yeshe Lodro Rinpoche and the interconnectedness of Shamanism and Buddhism in Siberia

Karl Pohrt: Do you see Shamanism as a world religion? It seems to me that in the West the public’s interest in Shamanism is connected to our sense that something crucial is missing or broken in our relationship with the powers inherent in the natural world. The problem — or at least I see it as a problem — is that there isn’t a cultural context for Shamanism in the urban West.

Anya Bernstein: There are some Buryat Shamans who would like to say that Shamanism is a world religion because this advances a certain political position. Anthropologists usually don’t want to claim that Shamanism is a religion, but that is a point of academic and semantic debate. Shamanism is a Siberian

phenomenon. It has its roots in Paleolithic Siberian cultures, in hunting and gathering societies, but it's such a malleable practice. It has been transformed and it's evolved with every political, social, and cultural regime that's swept through this area.

Then there is Mircea Eliade's famous definition that Shamanism is an archaic technique of ecstasy. That's a very narrow definition. Shamanism is much more than that. Eliade wrote that Shamanism is characterized by flight to the spirit worlds, that magical flight is a quintessential feature of Shamanism. However, it has been shown in many cultures, including those in Buryatia, that it's the spirits that come to the people. I would prefer to define Shamanism very loosely. To me, a Shaman is a person who communicates with the supernatural to benefit the community. It's very much a community phenomenon.

Right now Shamanism is embedded in the global forces of politics, tourism, the media, and indigenous rights. If Shamans in Buryatia want to represent Shamanism as a world religion, it is because it serves a very particular purpose for them. They live in the contemporary world and if they want to be recognized, they must have sacred sites. They need to form associations. It is said that in ancient times Shamans used to engage in violent spiritual warfare with each other, but now they form associations. They need to get some legal status if they want to establish their legitimacy. They don't have temples, so a lot of Shamans would say, for example, "Look at this rock. This is our temple. We don't go into a church and desecrate it. You must help us protect this sacred rock."

And Shamanism is also absolutely about *place*. This is essential. Much more than magic flying, Shamanism is about the relationship with place and with the local spirits. That's why a lot of Shamans have made such good allies with environmentalists by joining the global environmental movement.

In traditional communities Shamanism is essentially a public phenomenon. It's not about self transformation. It's about using supernatural forces for practical goals, to help people. Shamans work as psychotherapists, as family counselors, and as healers among other things. I'm not really keen on arguing about definitions, but in the West what we call Shamanism is something quite different. Shamanism has become psychologized. Whatever you call this phenomenon, it is a kind of psychology that deals with self transformation. It's much more of an individualistic enterprise. It's about causing change in the self. So it's interiorized in that sense. It's not a religion, but more like a psychology. It also has a certain view of politics because it assumes that by inducing a change in the self, society will eventually be transformed.

I think that is what has happened in the West. In Siberia it's more about the community and meeting its specific and particular goals. For example, local people who come to Shamanic séances aren't interested in the trance experience. A lot of Westerners are really interested in trance and don't come for the experience of community.

However, there is this robust feedback loop. Siberian Shamans traveled to the U.S. to meet Native Americans and Western Shamans have traveled to Siberia. Michael Harner, the famous Western Shaman, went to Tuva and trained some Tuvan Shamans in the Western techniques and they enjoyed it. So there's a lot of cross-fertilization of ideas these days. It goes back and forth and there's a lot of imitation. I think that's normal. That's how culture is usually formed.

Karl Pohrt: You use the anthropological phrase *local object ideology* in a recent essay. Could you talk about *local object ideology* — investing the natural world or local objects with meaning — and Shamanism?

Anya Bernstein: I used the term in an article I wrote on Buryat Buddhism but it is also true for Shamanism. I was writing that Buryats have specific beliefs about sacred objects. They believe these objects have links to the intentions of previous famous Lamas. They don't just appear for no reason. Recently people have been finding sacred objects in the ground. Who knows why they appear where they do? There is no explanation except a magical one. They are always linked to famous Lamas who either lived or meditated in the place where the objects appear. Essentially this functions as a reconsecration of the landscape. The landscape was neutral but now it is Buddhist because someone found a so-called self-arisen image, a non-man-made image of a goddess or a god on a stone. It just revealed itself because this famous Lama in a past century meditated there and he actually planned it so the image would appear now.

I found this process structurally very similar to what happened in Tibet with the *Terma* or Treasure Texts. As Don Lopez has said, when Tibetans were no longer able to travel to India, they began to discover sacred texts buried in the local soil. Donald Lopez has written about this in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*.

What this means for a lot of Buryats is that Buddhism has really come back. It's found its *place* — like Shamanism, right? — in the land. Buryatia is not some secondary site linked to India through Mongolia through Tibet. Now it's actually the center of the Buddhist world (or so the argument goes). Buddhism is being revealed there right now. It's a process of continuous revelation.

KP: In *Join Me In Shambhala* you show a connection between Shamanism and Buddhism.

AB: Yes. Absolutely. They are very interconnected in Siberia, but especially in Buryatia. Since Buddhism was introduced to Buryatia by Tibetan and Mongolian Lamas in the late 17th century, relations have sometimes been hostile but usually they have mutually pollinated each other. Buddhism incorporated the local deities in Buryatia. The more orthodox Buddhists incorporated them into the lower ranks of the Buddhist hierarchy. It's the same thing that happened in Tibet. The more orthodox Buddhists will tell you that they converted the local spirits and made them into protectors of Buddhism. On the other hand, the local deities are really central in the lives of most people. It's not the transcendent ones that are central.

I was very interested in this when I made my first film with the Tibetan Lama in Buryatia because you could see that even the highest incarnate Lamas have to recognize the local spirits. He's the highest Lama in Buryatia because he is a Tibetan incarnate Lama, but if you can't establish peaceful relationships with the local spirits you don't have legitimacy in Buryatia. There is a ritual in the film where he makes an offering to the water spirits. They read Tibetan texts during the ritual because in Tibet they have similar spirits, but these are local Buryat spirits. They are not really trying to pacify them, but they just want to establish peaceful relations. They believe that the spirits are mischievous. These spirits can cause illness because they're not quite enlightened. They both give and take. They can cause good or bad things to happen.

Some of Yeshe Lodro Rinpoche's root teachers were Buryat Buddhists, which means he has these quasi-kinship links to his Buryat predecessors, because in Tibetan Buddhism the master-disciple

relationship is often stronger than that between a father and son. So some people feel that Rinpoche has a little bit of Buryat in him. This has given him a certain legitimacy. Some Buryats believe that you really have to have some kind of special connection to the place. Not just any Lama can deal with the local spirits.

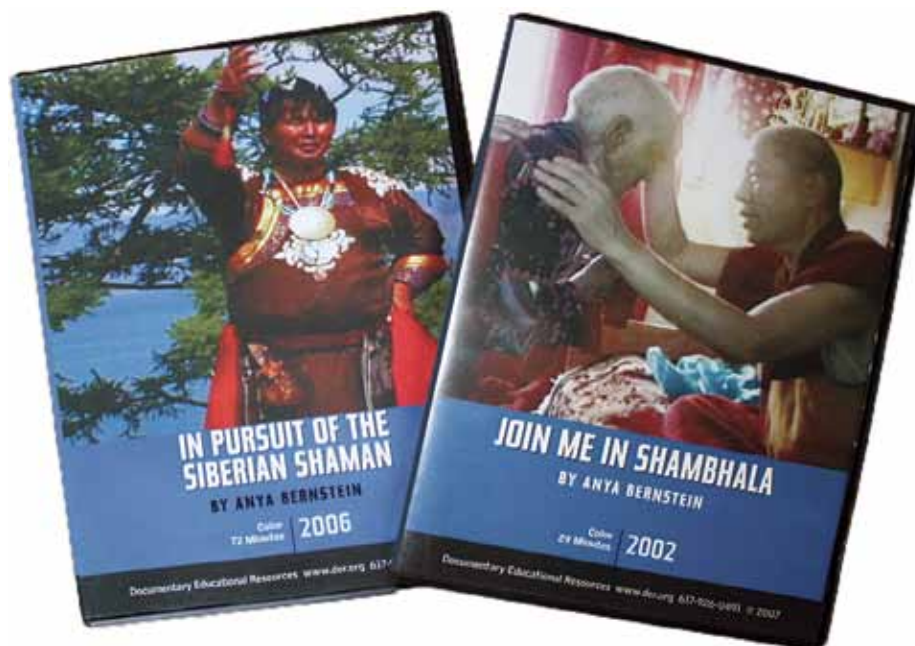
KP: Yeshe Lodro Rinpoche honors that special connection with the local spirits and yet at the same time — at the end of the film — he talks about Emptiness. I thought his speech is orthodox Mahayana Buddhism, straight out of the book. It is a beautiful speech.

AB: Yes. It is right out of the book. I was very interested in these Buddhist texts at the time I made the film. I prompted Yeshe Lodro Rinpoche to talk about Emptiness and he used very classic Buddhist images like *phantom*, *a dream* and *a flash of lightning*. These metaphors come from the Buddhist Sutras. Of course, he knows all of them by heart, so it was very easy for him to speak about it.

KP: At the end of the film we see Yeshe Lodro Rinpoche meditating in a field. Suddenly a train moves past, briefly interrupting our view of him.

AB: I was experimenting with montage techniques and juxtaposing the two different realities. Trains always appeared during my journey. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I took the famous Trans-Siberian train from Moscow to Siberia. Yeshe Lodro Rinpoche and Tenzin Tsering were meditating on the train at the start of the film. At the time, I thought it was strange that the Lamas were meditating in their train compartment. This was because I was a newcomer in the field ten years ago. I wanted *Join Me In Shambhala* to have a circular structure with images of trains at the beginning and the end of the film.

Continued on page 34



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— Anya Bernstein on teaching *Shamans, Nomads and Commissars: Introduction to North Asia* at University of Michigan

Karl Pohrt Interviews Anthropologist/ Filmmaker Anya Bernstein

Continued from page 33

KP: Recently you've written about Siberian Buddhism and necropolitics. In 2002, Buryat Buddhist monks exhumed the body of the last head Lama during the Russian Empire. According to witnesses, the Lama's body had not deteriorated and it was found sitting in a meditation position. This incident reminded me of that moment in *The Brothers Karamazov* when the Russian Orthodox monks speculate that Father Zosima's body would not decay after his death because he was so holy. It seems most religious cultures associate holiness with the purity of the body. The use of dead bodies to legitimate certain religious and political positions seems fairly universal.

AB: Of course, Buddhism has a very peculiar relationship with death. Death is one of the four main forms of suffering in Buddhist thought, along with birth, old age and sickness; and, therefore, one should aspire to overcome death. In the specific case of that Lama there are multiple rival theories about what happened to his body after his death. There is no consensus. Some people say he did not die at all, that he conquered death. There is this motif in Buddhism that you can conquer death. You can *attain to the deathless*, as they say. Some people believe he achieved that. Others think that he's in some kind of deep meditation state. Yet others say no, of course he did die, but he was such an advanced practitioner that he deliberately left his incorruptible body behind to benefit future generations, to inspire faith in these difficult transition times when Buddhism is being revived in Buryatia.

KP: You are a documentary filmmaker and an anthropologist. How do these very different vocations inform — or enrich — each other in your work?

AB: Well, I see the two as complementary. I actually started out as a visual anthropologist. I did a special program that trained anthropologists in how to make films because I was interested in combining both mediums. I see them both as ways of transmitting anthropological knowledge. However, they are very different mediums. They are complementary but each has its advantages and disadvantages. I think the films I make have essentially the same themes as my writing, but the films are much more narrative driven. They are much more visceral. They provide a certain kind of synesthetic experience that you don't get from writing. On the other hand, films are also not without their disadvantages. While they can show some of the non-verbal dynamics that don't really come through in a text, they can also be deceptive. A text is more analytic. You can explain certain things that are taken for granted in a film. You can unpack certain ideas in a text. Finally, of course, there is the question of audience. Academic writing usually has a small readership, whereas my films have been circulated pretty widely and that is very appealing to me.

The use of the camera in anthropological work has been really enriching for me. I used the camera as a point of entry in the field when I first arrived there as a student in visual anthropology. Everything I have done is contrary to the more orthodox rules of visual anthropology. I was taught that the field worker, the anthropologist, has to arrive in the field and spend many years with people, with the ethnic groups. They have to get used to you before you pull out the camera. Only then can you film.

Everything I have done — and a lot of people have done this recently — has been completely the opposite. When I arrived in a community, I would pull out the camera and this drew me into a chain of social relationships immediately. When you're holding a camera you are never a passive onlooker. Immediately it drives you into a kind of reciprocity because people are interested in the film. They might be able to use the film — which I encourage — for their own purposes.

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KP: There is a scene in *Join Me In Shambhala* that you must have shot through the front window of a car. We see horsemen racing in front of you. It's a beautiful moment, filled with kinetic excitement and great poetic energy. It evoked in me a sense that human beings are simultaneously living in multiple worlds at this moment in our history. This is the 21st century and here we are arriving in a small village of recently nomadic people. I thought this was something that couldn't be described as effectively in a narrative text. This was something a film could do much better.

AB: Exactly. It was just one of these serendipitous moments that you often encounter when filming. I was riding in the car and I knew I had to film it. When the Lama arrived in a village people wanted to honor the occasion so they would send out teenagers on horseback. This is one of the traditional sources of pride. Horse riding, archery and wrestling — these are called 'the three manly sports.' It was an impromptu ritual. They would send these horsemen to greet us. When

we got out of the car they would serve us a fermented milk drink that was considered sacred food.

KP: You taught a course last winter at the University of Michigan called *Shamans, Nomads and Commissars: Introduction to North Asia*. How did your students respond to the material in the course?

AB: Students were fascinated that Shamans are such a vital part of everyday life and that they are part of modernity. These people who are so remote incorporate Shamanism as part of their everyday lives. I think it took them a while to wrap their minds around it and view Shamanism not as something exotic and scholarly, but as something real and practical and vital. I think they got it.

KP: You grew up in Moscow and you did graduate work in New York. What is your sense of Ann Arbor?

AB: I've lived most of my life in big cosmopolitan centers. I grew up in Moscow and spent a couple of years in France and England before coming to the U.S. And I lived in India and Siberia during my fieldwork. Ann Arbor is as cosmopolitan as any of the other places I've lived, but it's much smaller and that's really interesting to me. It's very exotic in its own way.

Michigan, especially Northern Michigan, looks more like Europe and Central Russia than anywhere else I've been in the U.S. I was really excited when I went to Northern Michigan to see birch trees, because Russia is all about birch trees. There are not as many of them in Ann Arbor, but here I can see trees and plants that I recognize.

The only thing I knew about Ann Arbor before moving here was that it was the center of Russian dissident publishing in the seventies. The Ardis Publishers printed books by Brodsky and a lot of the exiled and dissident Russian writers. This publisher had a great impact on my parents' generation. My mother and father would read these books. Ardis Publishers and Ann Arbor were always special for them.

KP: They read the Ardis books in Moscow? They didn't have trouble getting hold of these books?

AB: Ardis books were smuggled back into the Soviet Union, ironically, often by Soviet diplomats. Most people read them in hand-made copies. It became part of *samizdat* — illegal literature. A lot of stuff was banned, but people read it anyway. It was somewhat difficult to get hold of, but illegal literature was always circulated.

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*Anya Bernstein's website is at: www.cinetrance.com.
The interviewer, Karl Pohrt, was the founder and long-time owner of Shaman Drum Bookshop, an Ann Arbor literary institution for 29 years.*

Further Reading on Siberia:



***The Shaman's Coat: A Native History of Siberia*, Anna Reid**
Walker & Co. \$13.00

An overview of the last 400 years of Siberian history from the perspective of the indigenous peoples of Siberia, with a chapter on the Buryat people.



***Dersu The Trapper*, V.K. Arseniew**
McPherson & Co. \$16.00

A memoir by a Soviet geographer working in the Russian Far East in 1906-1908 of his friendship with a hunter from the Goldi tribe. In 1975, the great Japanese director Akira Kurosawa teamed up with Soviet filmmakers to make ***Dersu Uzala***, a feature film from the book that won an Academy Award.



***The Reindeer People: Living With Animals and Spirits in Siberia*, Piers Vitebsky**
Mariner \$26.95

A memoir by an anthropologist who lived with Eveny Reindeer Herders in northern Siberia during the late Soviet and post-Soviet eras. The term *Shaman* comes from the language group (Tungus) of the Eveny people.



***The Chukchi Bible*, Yuri Rytkeu**
Archipelago Books \$16.00

The Chukchi live on the northern edge of the Bering Sea, and the Chukchi author's grandfather was the last Shaman in his village. ***The Chukchi Bible***, like ***Genesis***, begins with the creation of the world, in this case brought about by Raven.

These books are available through Crazy Wisdom Bookstore