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Japanese Motifs in Poems of Namzhil Nimbuev: A Transcultural Perspective

Since more and more authors are writing beyond the limits of one culture and one national landscape, what grows in importance in literary studies is transcultural approach that examines manners in which writers transcend dominant culture in search for their own identity. In this article, I analyze the poems of Buryat author Namzhil Nimbuev from a transcultural perspective, focusing on the influence of Japanese verse on Nimbuev's poetry. Although such influence has already been noticed by Buryat literary critics (Dampilova, Hamgushkeeva, Chan), so far there has been no transcultural analysis of Nimbuev's poems. What I claim is that the adaptation of Japanese literary motifs by Nimbuev was a mode of expression of his Buryat identity and a possibility to transcend the limitations of dominating Russian literary tradition. In a broader sense, the example of Nimbuev shows that there is a variety of transcultural writers: he himself was a poet who used Russian as a transcultural language, adopted Japanese motifs, although never visited Japan, and whose poetry expressed longing for his Buryat ethnic roots. I argue that Nimbuev is a special case of a transcultural writer who crosses the borders between cultures in order to explore his own ethnic identity. My analysis of Namzhil Nimbuev's poetry is preceded by definitions of the key notions, namely transculture and transcultural literature, which are followed by a brief survey of Buryat national literature. Seeking to understand the reasons of Nimbuev's identity searching and his predilection for Japanese culture, I present his biography. Finally, I analyze his poems focusing on Japanese elements such as suggestion, irregularity, perishability and 'double mood', in order to prove transcultural character of Nimbuev's poetry.

The term 'transculturation' first appeared in the 1940s in the analysis of the influence of tobacco and sugar on Cuban society when the sociologist Fernando Ortiz introduced it as a notion of merging and converging cultures

(Ortiz 102). Yet, in my article, I refer to the understanding of ‘transculture’ developed by Mikhail Epstein in 1999. According to Epstein, transculture is a model of cultural development, an alternative to both globalism and multiculturalism. While globalism and multiculturalism share a common feature – determinism, understood as a dependence on dominant global culture or fixed local identities –, transculture presupposes the openness and mutual interference of different cultures. It transcends the borders of traditional cultures (ethnic, national, racial, religious, gender, sexual, and professional), proclaiming the freedom from culture in which one was born and raised (Epstein 330). In other words, for Epstein, transculture amounts to the state of belonging to more than one culture.

Transcultural theorizations have been further introduced to literary studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the 2006, for instance, Anders Peterson noticed that “inasmuch as literature serves as a repository of and a window on cultural histories, intercultural understanding in the literary field is now more indispensable than ever before” (Peterson IX). In 2013, Arianna Dagnino in “Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s)” provided an overview of existing transcultural literary theories. The one developed in Germany by a group of literary scholars (Frank Schulze-Engler, Sissy Helff, Sabrina Brancato, and others) initiated the field of transcultural English Studies, focusing on the study of Anglophone literature and directing special attention to “New Literatures in English” (Schulze-Engler 20–32). As Dagnino observed such transnational and transcultural perspective is capable of “encompassing both the literary practice of writers who can no longer be related to one particular ‘national literary space’ and the complex articulations that link individual works of literature not only to local or regional modernities ... but also to the worldwide field of English-language literatures and specific forms of communicative interaction and political conflict engendered by it” (Dagnino 2). Thus, such approach can be adopted for the study of a work of literature in any other language, which makes the transcultural methodology suitable and inherent to the analysis of Russophone literature. From this perspective, Russian language, along English and French, functions as a global language for plenty of nationalities, including the Siberian ones.

The issue of transcultural literature written in Russian language was examined in the doctoral dissertation of Zhanna Burtseva *Транскультурная модель якутской русскоязычной литературы: художественно-эстетические особенности* (“Transcultural Model of Yakut Literature in

Russian: Artistic and Aesthetic Features”), where she argues that “Russophone creativity of Yakut writers is a transcultural (frontier) phenomenon within the Yakut literary tradition” (Burtseva 10). Here, the specificity of Russophone Yakut literature is defined as the result of cultural synthesis of Yakut and Russian elements. Yet, the choice of language for creative self-expression of a writer does not amount to the choice of national identity. Moreover, what results from the contradiction of language and nationality is the search for identity, which becomes the main subject of Russophone Yakut writing. As for the Buryat literature in Russian, despite of numerous articles and monographs devoted to the literary creation of Russian-speaking Buryat writers, only few of them adapt transcultural approach. Olesya Baranova in her PhD thesis *Русско-бурятское литературное пограничье: теоретический и эстетический аспекты* (“The Russian-Buryat Literary Frontier: Theoretical and Aesthetic Aspects”) applies the notion of ‘frontier’ to the Buryat literature in Russian and maintains that the phenomenon of frontier literature results from transcultural interactions. Thus, both of the above mentioned works consider the transcultural approach to be a synthesis of two cultures – national, in this case Yakut or Buryat, and Russian.

Since, as Dagnino notices, transcultural writers may have in their background a migrant, diasporic, exilian, transnational or postcolonial experience that led them to diverge and adopt an innovative transcultural attitude, I want to go further in defining the transcultural character of Siberian writers. I regard Namzhil Nimbuev as a transcultural poet not just because in his literary creation he combines national Buryat and dominant Russian cultures, but because he broadens the possibilities of adopting cultures by applying Japanese motifs. The postcolonial context of Buryat literature widens, as the new centers, such as Japan, become implied into the cultural context of a Buryat man and shape his transcultural identity.

Ethnic Buryatia is a region in Siberia located around Lake Baikal. It became a part of Russian Empire in the late 17th century. Until the 1917 Buryat literature was produced solely in the Buryat language, in the old-Mongol writing system. The majority of texts concerned Buddhist topics. At the beginning of the Soviet period, secular Buryat national literature started to be influenced by the classics of Russian literature. In the 1920s, the first Buryat works in the Russian language were criticized for its nationalism and the low level of expressiveness (Bajartuev, Zhapov 525). The policy of

nation-building in the USSR was concentrated on the creation of a new 'Soviet man' free of ethnic background (Chakars). This ambitious project resulted in several decades of acculturation most dramatically endured by non-Russian ethnic groups. Beginning from the 1950s–1960s, the national languages were gradually replaced by Russian in the spheres of politics, culture and education as the official language and new social model were considered to be the only possible path of general progress. Thereafter, Russian language started to dominate on the vast territories – from the Far East through the Central Asia to the Eastern borders of Europe. In 1960s–1970s, young Buryat writers and poets who wrote in Russian, the so called 'third wave' of Buryat literature, started to be viewed as an achievement of Buryat national literature and, wider, as an impact on the Russian literature. Instructive tone and pathos of the poetry of the 1950s was replaced with personal, intimate issues. As Tsyrenova observes, "Buryat poets started to pay close attention to trifles that provoked sudden surprise or revelation. The aspiration to comprehend each fact of life results in concentrating on a detail, the figurative tension of phrase, the density of thought" (Tsyrenova 11).

One of the brightest Buryat poets of that period was Namzhil Nimbuev. He wrote: "The most important thing in poetry is the thought; the epoch of formalism has ended. Any poem is evaluated according to the intensity of impression, isn't it?" (Nimbuev 6). He has applied this idea in his literary creation – his thoughts, his emotions, the whole inner world was reflected in his poems. His poetry instantaneously captivated his contemporaries and even now Nimbuev still remains one of the favorite Buryat poets. In 2003, his only book of poems *Стреноженные молнии* ("Harnessed Lightnings") was republished in commemoration of his 55th anniversary. In the same year, the poetic tournament celebrating the name of Nimbuev was organized and since that time has been held three times, giving a chance to young poets from Buryatia and other regions of Russia, Mongolia and even China to demonstrate their skills. In February 2014, the ballet 'Namzhil' based on the Nimbuev's poetry was performed in the Opera and Ballet House in Buryatia's Ulan-Ude.

In order to understand the poetry of Nimbuev and his use of Japanese motifs, it is necessary to trace his biography. Nimbuev had a very short life. He was born in 1948 in the family of the famous Buryat poet, Shirab Nimbuev. Since early childhood he had been writing verses. While attending school, he participated in various literary competitions and took first prizes

for the best poems. After graduating from school, he worked as a news-writer for the “*Molodyozh Buryatii*” (“Youth of Buryatia”) newspaper. In 1968, he entered the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow. He finished three years of higher education and died suddenly in October 1971. A book of his poems *Стреноженные молнии* (“Harnessed Lightnings”) was published posthumously the following year.

The childhood and youth of Nimbuev demonstrate the hybridity of his Buryat-Russian identity. On the one hand, Namzhil has been growing up within Buryat traditional culture since early childhood. His parents originated from a very picturesque region – Yeravna, which later on became a subject of many of his poems. Yeravna has always been one of the Buddhist centers of Buryatia. Journeys to the native land of his ancestors, close contacts with grandparents who were born in the pre-Soviet era, could not but influence his world perception. On the other hand, Nimbuev absorbed the influence of sovietization and russification while living in Ulan-Ude, the capital of the republic of Buryatia. Ulan-Ude was the heart of the Soviet modernization and acculturation projects. It is there where the first generations of urban Russian-speaking Buryats, who were brought up with little competence in their native culture, appeared. Although Namzhil knew his native language, we can still associate him with this new urban world. He even used to call himself “a child of city window ledges” (Nimbuev 80).

Another important period of his life is connected with Moscow. And indeed, most of his works were written while he was studying at the institute. Moscow had a significant influence on his poetic style. Bair Dugarov notices: “Namzhil started with writing ordinary rhymed poems. In general, they were quite smooth verses of a young man who was making his first steps in poetry. Then, only in 2–3 years his style changed remarkably. When you think of the causes for such a huge step forward, you tend to think that it is Moscow, study at Literary Institute, and the poetic environment which surrounded the poet that played a big role. Seeds laid down in a fertile field and bore fruits soon” (Dugarov 300). Moscow gave him the opportunity to get acquainted with people of different cultures and backgrounds. He had many friends who were young poets and came from other parts of the USSR. This environment strongly influenced Nimbuev. And moreover, being a Buryat in a big city made him realize his otherness; there he saw himself on the borderland between West and East, Russian and Buryat traditions.

Searching for his own identity and returning to his roots became the primary topic of his poems. Nimbuev wrote in one of his letters: “For a non-Russian poet who writes in Russian I think it is more important not to follow the Russian literary tradition, but to use creatively the great powerful language, because only in a free verse it is possible to express the very national soul of the people” (Nimbuev 6). In order to express his ‘national soul’, he began searching for inspiration in other Eastern literary traditions. Tulohonov has already noticed that among Buryat writers “...from the middle of the 1960s and in the 1970s interest in Eastern poetry, its national traditions is felt. For example, in poetry of Japan, Mongolia, India, Tibet” (Tulohonov 164). As for Namzhil Nimbuev, he admired Japanese poetry and regarded such authors as Matsuo Bashō, Ishikawa Takuboku as his masters (Hamgushkeeva 95). Nimbuev even devotes one of his poems to Bashō, the most famous Japanese haiku poet (Nimbuev 86):

Басё

Три строчки я в книге твоей прочитал
 О мудрый японец, молчи!
 Дай мне убежать на некошенный луг
 И, лежа в трезвоне цикад неумолчных,
 Безумно на небо смотреть.

Bashō

I read three lines in your book
 Oh, wise Japanese, be silent!
 Let me escape to an unmown meadow
 And, lying in the ringing of irrepressible cicadas,
 Madly to gaze at the sky¹.

Although Nimbuev could not read Japanese and has never visited Japan, Japanese culture attracted him. We cannot judge how thoroughly he learned the spirit of Japanese literature, but he certainly expressed it in his poems. According to Irina Bulgutova, the interest in Eastern cultures among Buryat poets can be explained by their “searching of typological similarity, attempting to define the spiritual sources, to comprehend national identity” (Bulgutova). The analysis of Namzhil Nimbuev’s poetry will allow us to observe Japanese traits of his poems and relate them to the Buryat culture.

Donald Keene, an American-born Japanese scholar, proposes

1 Here and elsewhere word-for-word translation made by me.

irregularity as one of the main characteristics of Japanese aesthetics. Irregularity can be expressed not only by incompleteness but also asymmetry. In Japanese culture one can see it almost everywhere: in calligraphy, where a symmetrical character is considered ‘dead’, in paintings and ceramics, gardens and flower arrangements. The 14th century Japanese poet Yoshida Kenko, quoted by Keene, explains: “In everything, no matter what it may be, uniformity is undesirable. Leaving something incomplete makes it interesting, and gives one the feeling that there is room for growth” (Keene 10). Donald Keene illustrates irregularity with the example drawn from the comparison between Sistine Chapel and the garden of the Ryoan-ji. The first one is magnificent, but it asks for our admiration rather than our participation; while the second one with its stones, irregularity in shape and position, allows us to participate in the creation of the garden, and thus may move us even more. Irregularity is noticeable in literary style as well: “Japanese writing ... avoids parallelism, and the standard verse forms are in irregular numbers of lines – five for the tanka, three for the haiku. This is in marked contrast to quatrains that are typical poetic forms ... throughout most of the world” (Keene 11).

The principle of irregularity is similarly widespread in Buryat culture. Vasily Mihailov writes that for Buryats numbers serve not only as quantitative, but also qualitative indicators. The first ten numbers are divided in odd and even ones, and correspondingly in male and female, favorable and unfavorable, pure and dirty, ours and theirs etc. (Mihailov 104). Thus, all odd, irregular, numbers were considered male, favorable, and pure. Irregularity is also reflected in traditional forms of Buryat poetry. One of the most popular genre of Buryat riddles is a three-lined verse “*yurtemse-iin gurban*” (“three things of the universe”). The riddle poses a question, which has a three-lined answer². The answer joins three different images that can be related to one quality or object (Gympilova 239–243). With the beginning of Soviet times, the Buryat national literature, as any other literature of peoples of Siberia, suffered a rupture with pre-October tradition. For many years, traditional genres and topics, oral and written, literary monuments were expelled beyond the frontiers of official Soviet literary space (Baldanmaksarova 150–153).

2 Here is an example of a riddle-triplet: What are the three fast things in the world?
When you shoot, the arrow is fast,
When you think, the thought is fast,
When you look, the eyes are fast.

In this regard, it seems that Nimbuev considered the irregularity of Japanese tanka as the most appropriate form to express the Buryat perception of the world. 49 out of 159 non-rhymed poems are five-lined. Nimbuev himself writes in one of his letters that he uses the Japanese genre of tanka: “A great event: on Sunday the first snow fell down and I wrote three poems that day – about the Earth and the human life. One of them is in form of Japanese tanka” (Nimbuev 6). Further on the author reflects about its form: “Infixing in five lines a piece of life, its strong signal, and when you are writing a pentastich, the rhyme is the most fatal. To rhyme a pentastich is to kill it” (Nimbuev 6). The five lines of tanka and the absence of rhyme allow Nimbuev to “infix a piece of life” in a poem. In other words, the structural irregularity of Japanese poetry gives him the opportunity to show his feelings more expressively. Of course, the pentastiches of Nimbuev cannot be considered as classical Japanese tankas, as they do not fit in its syllabic structure, which seems quite difficult to achieve in Russian language. It is certain, however, that the five-lined irregular form of his poems was undoubtedly borrowed from tanka.

The classical Japanese tanka is structured according to the following principle: the first three lines describe a phenomenon in nature and the last two lines express man’s feelings evoked by that phenomenon. We can see the same structure in Nimbuev’s pentastiches (176):

Деревенские голуби
уронили помет
на окошко моей канцелярии...
Одиноко и грустно вдруг стало,
словно сердце в дверях прищемили.

Rural pigeons
dropped the dung
on a window of my office ...
I suddenly felt lonely and sad,
as if my heart was pinched in the door.

In this poem one can trace a classical structure of Japanese tanka with two unequal parts – three lines of an outer situation and two lines of its outcome viewed by the poet. What is more, “rural pigeons” in this context symbolize the external objective reality which is opposed to the internal reality presented by the phrase “my office”, by which the poet represents not

only his workplace, but also his verses and his poetic world in general. The eternity of natural objective life is opposed to the perishability and temporariness of the inner world of a human being. Thus, in the first part the outer situation poses a question regarding the value of poet's works in the context of eternity. What is more, the situation shows some indignity to poet's activities – "rural pigeons dropped the dung on a window of my office". The lyrical part of the pentastich describes the emotional pain caused by the sudden acknowledgment of this truth, and is expressed through painful emotions – "felt lonely and sad". The word "heart" in this poem not only refers to the part of human body but also describes the poetry as something most intimate and dear.

Another characteristic of Japanese aesthetics according to Donald Keene is *perishability*. He emphasizes: "The Japanese were perhaps the first to discover the special pleasure of impermanence, and Kenko especially believed that impermanence was a necessary element in beauty. Japanese poet wrote in his *Essays in Idleness*, 'If man were never to fade away like the dew of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, but lingered on door ever in this world, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty'" (Keene 20). The topic of perishability and impermanence is common throughout East Asia and is present in Buryat tradition as well. This similarity can be rooted in Buddhist philosophy. Despite different schools and branches of Buddhism, the fundamental principle of cosmology and world order is based on the shared conception of Abhidharma. Abhidharma texts form the third part of Buddhist canon together with Vinaya Pitaka and Sutta Pitaka. In comparison with the latter, Abhidharma is neither a sermon nor words of Buddha, but the description of the world that is inside and around the man (Zhukovskaja 28). Thus, we can identify similar views on how the universe is organized and functions both in Japanese and Buryat culture. But perhaps being raised under harsh sovietization measures, Nimbuev found it easier to express the perishability and cyclic movement of the world through Japanese motifs (Nimbuev 175):

Наверное, скоро
Умрет моя бабка:
Все чаще и чаще
Далекую юность
Она вспоминает.

Probably soon
 will die my grandma:
 More and more often
 She recalls
 Her bygone youth.

The quoted poem is based on noticing of an ordinary fact. Frequent memories of youth are subjectively interpreted as a presage of death. Poet's reflection derives from understanding life as a circle, in which death amounts to the return to sources. Thus, when memory evokes the beginning of life, it is the signal that the circle is almost complete. Both Japanese and Buryats share the belief in the cycle of life due to common Buddhist traditions. The next pentastich (Nimbuev 146) shows the Buddhist consciousness of the poet:

Тем утром весенним,
 Когда
 Вдруг умер столетний табунщик,
 Меж ставен его пятистенки
 Грачонок разбил скорлупу.

That spring morning,
 When
 Suddenly died a centenary tabunshchik³
 Between shutters at his house
 A young rook broke his shell.

Just as in the previous example, the interconnection between death and life is understood from the Buddhist point of view as an alternation of two continuous phenomena. The balance of the universe is always kept. The death of a living being is compensated by the birth of another one. It appears though that Nimbuev approaches philosophically the topic of perishability. At first, it may seem that the general mood of the poem is sorrowful since it concerns the death of an old man. However, it is not so. At the end of the poem the mood changes gradually: new life gives the sense of peace and relief.

The topic of perishability, and especially of the impermanence of time,

3 The word 'табунщик' means 'groom' or 'wrangler'.

is one of the most frequent in Nimbuev's poetry. In the poem quoted below (Nimbuev 61), the author admires a charming moment reflecting all its beauty. Yet, the time never stops, and the moment is gone. When the author realizes it, he feels sorrowful. It is interesting that Nimbuev uses an image of a horse to symbolize time. The image of a horse plays an important role in nomadic cultures such as Buryat, where horse symbolizes movement, shift of events, and even time.

О, это было прелестное,
трепетное мгновение!
Но его безвозвратно
унесла на своем крупе
лошадь времени...

Oh, it was a charming,
reverent moment!
But it was irrevocably
carried away on its croup
by a horse of time...

The cited pentastich shows also another characteristic of Japanese poetry, namely *'double mood'*. Makoto Ueda, a professor emeritus of Japanese literature, explains: "The double mood refers to a structure in which two different, often contrasting tones are used in successive or alternating literary units. A poem with a lyrical mood may suddenly take a sarcastic turn in midcourse, or an elegant love story featuring a nobleman and a court lady may be interspersed with bawdy scenes involving people of the lower class" (Ueda 91). As he explains, the effect of such technique varies depending on the interrelation of the two tones. Their combination may involve either surprise, humor, and irony, or a sense of indecision and insecurity. In the poem above, we can see that the first two lines express admiration to the "charming, reverent moment" of time. However, the last three lines bring the realization of its impermanence and thus change the mood from cheerful to mournful. Such ending and the method of double mood in general help to express vividly the idea of perishability and temporality of existence – one of the basic Buddhist principles.

Another example of using the double mood by Nimbuev is the poem about a well (125):

Однажды еще карапузом,
 в колодец, смеясь, заглянул я:
 и стало так жутко и странно,
 как будто я в гулкой прохладе
 бессмертья увидел лицо.

Once still a tiny little child,
 I glanced, laughing, in a well:
 and felt so terrible and strange,
 as though in a booming cool
 I saw the face of immortality.

The first two lines show the lightheartedness of a small child, while the last three lines dramatically change the mood to disquietude: “I felt so terrible and strange”. The method of double mood emphasizes the contrast between joyful child and the deep dark well, which he gazes at. What is more, the images of the child and the well suggest more generalized symbols of a man and immortality. From this perspective, the sudden change of the mood can be seen as a technique of provoking reader’s philosophical reflection concerning the perishability of human being, which derives from the opposition of man’s life and the eternity of the universe.

Finally, the poetry of Nimbuev possesses the main characteristic of Japanese aesthetics which is *suggestion*. Donald Keene explains this principle on the example of a moon or a tree blossom: “The Japanese seem to have been aware that the full moon (or the full flowering of a tree), however lovely, blocks the play of the imagination. The full moon or the cherry blossoms at their peak do not suggest the crescent or the buds (or the waning moon and the strewn flowers), but the crescent and the buds do suggest full flowering. Beginnings that suggest what is to come, or ends that suggest what has been, allow the imagination room to expand beyond the literal facts to the limits of the capacities of the reader of the poem...” (Keene 8–9). In Japanese poetry this principle is realized with a few lines, which capture a moment of life, evoke an image or mood, and render possible more profound reflection. The same can be said about the poetry of Nimbuev. All the above mentioned poems were suggesting more than just the images described, whether it is the case of the death of tabunshchik or the well. They all provoke their reader to think of the deeper issues, such as the construction of the universe, time impermanence, or immortality.

My analysis indicates that Namzhil Nimbuev went further than other contemporary Buryat poets who wrote in Russian. He went beyond acquiring the Russian literary tradition in order to search for a new way of expressing his Buryat identity. Nimbuev can be considered as a transcultural poet, as he deliberately crossed the borders between cultures managing to apply the Japanese motifs to his poems. Moreover, the case of Nimbuev contributes to transcultural literary studies in general. A Buryat poet who expressed rich and distinctive character of his culture in the Russian language by adopting Japanese motifs indicates the variety of transcultural writers around the world. More precisely, because of Nimbuev the scale of the phenomenon of transcultural writing increased comprising Russian language along with English or French. Furthermore, it proves that in order to become a transcultural writer it is not obligatory to go abroad or migrate, for example to Japan. Finally, his example presents the variety of reasons for crossing the borders between cultures, such as when writer feels that he cannot fully express himself within his culture, or when one crosses the borders between cultures in order to search for his or her ethnic identity, as in case of Nimbuev.

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