

## ETHNOLOGY

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### **BICHURA VILLAGE (TRANSBAIKALIA): FOUNDATION AND POPULATION GROWTH (18th–Late 20th Century)**

*Based on archival and field data, the early history of the largest eastern Siberian village, Bichura, is reconstructed. Initial colonization, the life of the pioneers, and their relations with the native, local population are described. The growth of the village population is traced over nearly two and a half centuries.*

*Keywords: Siberia, Old Believers, population growth, agriculture, colonization, migrations.*

Bichura is the largest Old Believer village not only in Transbaikalia, but in the whole of eastern Siberia. Currently it is the center of the Bichursky Region of the Republic of Buryatia. The village is stretched for about 20 km along the banks of the Bichurka River, a tributary of the Khilok. The appearance of villages of this size and the rapid growth of their population did not go unnoticed by well-known explorers and travelers, both Russian and foreign. G.F. Müller mentioned Bichura in 1735 and P.S. Pallas wrote of it in 1772. M.I. Orfanov, a writer, essayist and ethnographer, K. Mikhailov, a researcher of community life, and Yu.D. Talko-Gryntsevich, a Professor of Krakow University, physician, archaeologist and ethnographer, wrote insightfully about the village. Writer and ethnographer S. Maksimov visited Bichura in January of 1861. In 1871 a major scholar in Slavic Studies, P.A. Rovinsky lived there, and in 1890, a well-known physician and researcher, N.V. Kirillov did as well.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the French traveler Paul Labbé, who was staying with the Bichura dweller, Mikhail Petrov, wrote about the village.

For various reasons Bichura was also remembered by officials. Thus, Governor-General of eastern Siberia, N.N. Muraviev-Amursky came to the village on horseback from Irkutsk in connection with a riot of the Semeiskie Old Believers against the closure of their church and the “hiding” of their fugitive priest in the village. Interesting observations of the village were left by the police chief V. Glukhovtsev and many missionaries who tried to fight the Old Believers’ faith.

Despite the richness of historical and ethnographic descriptions, the initial stage of settlement and agricultural development in the Khilok Votchina (estate) of Transbaikalia, where in the early 18th century Bichura was founded, has still remained understudied. This issue was touched upon in the works of E.M. Zalkind,

V.I. Shunkov, L.V. Mashanova, M.M. Shmulevich, and F.F. Bolonev. These scholars wrote that the settlement in Transbaikalia, which played an important role in the economic life of eastern Siberia, occurred from the 17th–early 19th century and was largely spontaneous. It was a relatively troublesome area where the plowland peasants were surrounded by nomadic indigenous peoples and did not feel completely safe. Some general stability in Transbaikalia occurred only after the conclusion of the Bura Treatise in 1727, inaugurating more active Russian agricultural colonization of the region, laying the groundwork for the convergence of the Russian and local population, and for carrying out joint economic activities. The newly baptized Buryats and peoples paying the *yasak* tribute were adopting new methods of arable farming, taking over Russian customs, and changing to a sedentary lifestyle, while peasants and Cossacks were becoming familiarized with the economy of the nomadic breeders.

The Trinity-Selenginsky Monastery played an important role in the development of the territory and the emergence of settlements in the area. In 1704 the monastery received in possession the richest and largest estate on the river of Khilok – the Khilok Votchina. The establishment of Russian settlements in the votchina dates back to the first quarter of the 18th century. According to the archival data, eleven households were present in 1723 in the village of Kunaleiskaya, six households in the village of Buiszkaya, and ten households in the village of Elanskaya; by 1731 Topkinskaya village consisted of fourteen households (Mashanova, 1973: 154; Shmulevich, 1985: 9). In 1729 the monastery received extensive hay meadows between the rivers of Chika and Khilok. In 1720 the monastery acquired the Upper Khilok village of Bui. In the same year the Selenginsky Zemstvo Administration issued a decree by which the arable lands and pastures on the left bank of the Khilok up to the rivers of Bichura and Kiret passed into possession of the Trinity-Selenginsky Monastery (Shmulevich, 1982: 19). More active settlement in these rich areas began.

The historian, A.Kh. Elert discovered a document entitled “Russian villages of the Selenginsky administration, that is, along the Khilok” among the materials of G.F. Müller related to 1735\*. It listed 12 settlements, including “Elan of the Trinity Monastery, Bichyurskaya of the same monastery on the left side about 5 versts\*\* from the bank and 15 versts from Elan village up the Bichyura River which runs into the Khilok; Kunaleiskaya of the same monastery on the left

side about 15 versts from Bichyurskaya village.” The document mentions villages such as Krasnaya Sloboda, Monastyrsky Dvoret, Buiszkaya, etc. As we can see, the village of Bichyura (Bichura), apparently, existed as a part of the system of Khilok settlements since the beginning of the 1730s.

F.F. Bolonev found an interesting document mentioning a monastery peasant Stefan Vasilievich Novokreschenov. In the “Inquiry,” Stefan said, “I am the son of a deceased former peasant of the Trinity Monastery, Vasily Novokreschenov; I am thirteen years from birth, and in the current year of 1736 in the same Trinity Monastery I was recorded to be in the votchina on the Khilok among the peasantry of the village of Bichurskaya, and in the capitation payment to be listed in place of my deceased peasant brother Kalina Mityashin and to pay capitation money in the aforesaid monastery in this year of 1736 in full... and should I, Stefan, have said anything false or have concealed anything in this report, I shall receive due penalty according to His Imperial Majesty’s decree” (State Archives of the Republic of Buryatia. F. 262, Inv. 1, D. 13, fol. 4v). Two important points for our research in this testimony are that the last name of Novokreschenov is mentioned, which means that its bearer was newly baptized from among the Buryats, and there can be found information about the resettlement of the young man from the Trinity Monastery to Bichurskaya and his enrolment in peasantry, in capitation payment in 1736. Therefore, Bichura village must have existed prior to 1736.

According to the archival data found by L.V. Mashanova, in 1737 the peasants of Bichura lived in six households which might have been ascribed to the Trinity-Selenginsky Monastery (Mashanova, 1973: 154), since the lands along the Khilok were the monastery’s estate. The first households of Russian peasants appeared on this land in the place which is now called Old Bichura, beyond the Rock (now Kirova Street). Thus, the documents confirm that Bichura already existed in the early 1730s.

What was the composition of the peasant population in the above mentioned monastery villages along the Khilok? By 1723, 56 plowland peasants from among vagrant people were settled in the villages (Ibid.: 155); they mostly were natives of towns and *uezds* of the region adjacent to the White Sea. A significant part of the population included baptized Buryats and the exiled. Thus, the village of Elanskaya was inhabited by newly baptized plowland Buryats. Baptized Buryats were also numerous in other villages, such as Maly Kunalei and Bichura. It is noteworthy that 17 villages along the rivers of Khilok and Chikoi were founded by the residents of Selenginsk. Initially these settlements consisted of one to three households. Later, with the influx of people their population gradually began to grow, which was typical for most settlements of Transbaikalia.

\*A photocopy of the document was kindly provided by A.Kh. Elert, for which we are genuinely grateful. Currently the copy of the document is kept in the personal archive of F.F. Bolonev.

\*\**Versta*, an obsolete Russian unit of length equivalent to about 1.067 km.

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