

Stupas and their Consecration in Contemporary Kalmykia



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Foreword

This work is the result of my interest in Buddhism over the last five or more years and the completion of my fieldwork in Kalmykia. The thesis would not have been written if it had not been for the help of people I met in the process of working on this topic.

First of all I want to thank my supervisor, Per Kvaerne, for constant inspiration, for encouraging me to realize my project and to do this fieldwork, and for helping me with Tibetan. I am very grateful to his valuable comments on my research during the time I had the honour of studying with him.

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I would like to give my gratitude to the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture for granting me money without which my fieldwork would not have been possible.

I also want to thank all the people I met in Kalmykia for their friendship and hospitality, especially the monks from the central *khurul* in Kalmykia for giving me the necessary information and letting me observe their rituals. I am deeply grateful to the abbot of the central *khurul* in Elista, Andzha-gelong; to Tupten Shakya and Geshe Dugda, the main ritual experts in Kalmykia who explained the rituals of consecration to me; to the *emchi* working in the central *khurul*, Sanal Kukuev; to the abbot of the *khurul* in Iki-Burul, Padma Sherab and his wife Larisa; to Baatr Mangaev, the head of the Kalmyk Buddhist centre Tilopa; and to Mingyan, a Kalmyk *gelong*. Without the help of all these people this project would not have been completed.

Introduction

The thesis is devoted to the revival of Tibetan Buddhism in Kalmykia beginning from the early 1990s. The main aim of the thesis is to describe the practice of relic deposition and the consecration of stupas in contemporary Kalmykia, as well as to discuss the position of the stupa in Kalmyk religious life.

The stupa (Tib. *mchod rten*) is a Buddhist religious monument of a definite structure, containing relics of different types; it is one of the main visual representations of Buddhist culture.¹ In Kalmykia stupas are usually referred to by the Mongolian word *suburgan*. In present day Kalmykia there is a widespread construction of stupas by members of different Tibetan Buddhist sects. The construction and consecration of stupas is a vivid manifestation of religious revival in the republic.

Along with Buryatia and Tuva Kalmykia is one of the three Buddhist republics of the Russian Federation. It is situated in the southeast of the European part of Russia, bordering on the Astrakhan region to in the east, the republic of Dagestan to in the south, the Stavropol territory in the southwest, and the Rostov and Volgograd regions in the west and northwest respectively.

The territory of contemporary Kalmykia, also known as the Kalmyk steppe, is about 76,000 square kilometers. In the south-east it is washed by the Caspian Sea. The greater part of the territory of Kalmykia is steppe and semi-desert. The westernmost area is characterized by fertile soil, being suitable not only for stock-breeding but also for agriculture.

Due to the fact that Kalmykia is situated far from oceans, the climate is continental. Summers are hot with the average temperature of 25 – 30 °C. Winter temperature is generally minus 10°C, though it can often drop to minus 30 °C.

The population of Kalmykia is about 330,000. Of these Kalmyks comprise 45.4%, Russians 37.7%, Dargins 4.8%, and other minorities constitute the remainder.

The Kalmyks became the first ethnic Buddhist community in Europe. Even today, in spite of the westward expansion of Buddhism, Kalmykia remains the only Buddhist republic in Europe and at the same time it is a federal republic of Russia, where Orthodox Christianity is the main religion. Therefore, the unique culture of contemporary Kalmykia is the result of two major influences: Tibeto-Mongolian and Russian.

¹ See Snellgrove, Richardson 1980: 80; Snodgrass 1985; Tucci 1988; Dallapiccola 1980.

Ethnically the Kalmyks are of Mongolian origin; their language belongs to the Mongolian group of languages. In 1992 both Kalmyk and Russian were stated to be the official languages of Kalmykia. However, at the present moment a substantial part of the Kalmyk population does not speak their native language; the Kalmyks communicate primarily in Russian. Nevertheless, there is an attempt to revive the Kalmyk language: local media is in Kalmyk, a number of schools have been opened with tuition in Kalmyk, and moreover, the year 2008 was announced the year of the Kalmyk language by the president of Kalmykia, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov. The ritual language of Buddhism in Kalmykia is Tibetan. Kalmyk Buddhist terminology comes from Indian and Tibetan Buddhism; it also comprises Classical Mongolian terms and Russian words.

After almost seventy years of severe persecution of Buddhism and rupture with other Buddhist centers, religious institutions and practices are being restored in Kalmykia. This process of reconstruction of the national identity in Kalmykia deserves attention. Few studies have been devoted to the revival of Buddhism in Kalmykia including the Kalmyk tradition of suburgan building and consecration.

The thesis is mainly based on data collected through fieldwork, carried out in June and July 2008 in Elista (the capital of Kalmykia) and settlements around the capital. Three *khuruls*² in different settlements were visited: the largest *khurul*, Burkhn Bagshin Altn Syume (The Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni)³ in Elista, Syakyusn Syume *khurul* in the village of Arshan; and the *khurul* in Iki-Burul, a small settlement 75 kilometers south of Elista.

During the time of my fieldwork fifteen interviews were made; of these six are structured and the rest are open. In order to get a full picture of the contemporary religious situation in Kalmykia ordained monks, ritual experts as well as lay people and folk religious practitioners were interviewed. Kalmyks are quite open in expressing their opinion about the present day religious situation in the republic. Not all Kalmyks are Buddhists; nevertheless none of them will deny that Buddhism is a constituent part of their national culture and identity.

² *Khurul* is a Kalmyk word for monasteries as well as for temples and prayer houses.

³ Buddha Shakyamuni in the Kalmyk language is Burkhn Bagshi.

Most of the monks in Kalmykia I talked to belong to the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and work in the central *khurul* in Elista. However, monks from the central *khurul* can perform religious services in other *khuruls* in different settlements throughout Kalmykia.

Much information about the practice of the stupa construction, the deposition of relics, the preparation of texts for the installation, and the consecration of stupas was obtained from interviews with the abbot of the central *khurul*, Andzha-gelong, a Kalmyk monk who received his monastic education in the reconstructed Drepung Gomang monastery in Karnataka State in India.

Of special importance for the project are interviews with the main ritual experts from the central *khurul*: a Tibetan monk Tupten Shakya and Geshe Dugda, the oldest Tibetan monk with the degree of *lha ram pa* (the highest degree in monastic education) who has been living in Kalmykia for more than thirteen years. Since I do not speak Tibetan, the interviews with Tibetan monks were conducted with the help of an interpreter, a Kalmyk Master student in Buddhist studies, Chakdyr Sangzhiev.

I was honoured to have a conversation with the Shadzhin Lama of Kalmykia (the head of the Kalmyk Buddhists) Telo Tulku Rinpoche, a reincarnation of Tilopa, the 11th century outstanding Indian yogi and the precursor of the Tibetan Kagyu tradition.

Useful and interesting information was provided by the head of the Buddhist center Tilopa, Baatr Mangaev, a lay believer who organizes the construction of stupas throughout Kalmykia.

Though Gelugpa is the most widespread and important tradition in Kalmykia, other schools of Tibetan Buddhism are popular as well. I had an interview with a Kalmyk lama, Padma Sherab, the abbot of the Nyingma *khurul* in Iki-Burul.

I also had the opportunity to observe the deposition of relics within a stupa. At the time of my fieldwork The Stupa of Harmony and Accord was constructed in Elista, therefore I was able to witness the process of relic installation of the second and third levels of the stupa. A separate chapter (chapter 4) is devoted to the description of this process. This observation helped me to define the concept of relics in contemporary Kalmykia, which is of primary importance for the thesis.

The thesis begins with a presentation of the historical background of Kalmykia. The first chapter describes the formation of the Kalmyk people and the crucial events in their history. The second chapter discusses how the canonical Buddhist tradition was embedded in the local context of Kalmykia. It shows the main stages of the integration of Buddhism in the

Kalmyk society, and discloses the development and main peculiarities of Kalmyk Buddhism before the Soviet period.

The main part of the thesis (chapters 3-5) discusses the peculiarities of the structure, symbolic meaning and content of Buddhist sacred receptacles constructed in present day Kalmykia. The tradition of Kalmyk suburgan building before the Soviet epoch is compared with the types of stupas built after the 1980s.

The fifth chapter is devoted to the role of Tibetan religious scriptures in the relic cult and the stupa consecration in contemporary Kalmykia. This chapter surveys the particular texts installed, analyses the importance of these Tibetan texts for Kalmyk Buddhism, and describes the process of their installation. The final chapter presents the description and analysis of the major consecration rituals that accompany the construction of a stupa in Kalmykia.

It should be mentioned that up to the present time almost all literature on Kalmykia and the Kalmyks has been written mainly in Russian by Kalmyk and Russian scholars. Thus the first substantial study of the Mongol monasteries was published by Aleksey Pozdneev in 1887;⁴ it was republished more than a hundred years later in 1993. The first fundamental work on the general history, ethnography and traditional culture of the Kalmyks (from the 11th up to the beginning of the 20th century) was written by Uryubdzhur Erdniev.⁵ This book was first published in 1970 and then republished three times.

A contemporary Kalmyk ethnographer and anthropologist, Elza Bakaeva, has published several works on Buddhism in Kalmykia, touching upon the contemporary religious situation, as well as discussing pre-Buddhist indigenous traditions and beliefs. Her book *Буддизм в Калмыкии (Buddhism in Kalmykia)* published in 1994 in Elista⁶ is the most detailed presentation so far of the development of Kalmyk Buddhism before the Soviet period. In her study, she deals extensively with Buddhist cults, rituals and festivals in pre-revolutionary Kalmykia.

Important contributions to the study of Kalmyk architecture and art have been made by such contemporary scholars as Jangar Pyurveev and Svetlana Batyreva. The work of

⁴ Pozdneev, Aleksey. 1887. *Очерки быта буддийских монастырей и буддийского духовенства в Монголии в связи с отношениями сего последнего к народу* [*Essays on the way of life in Buddhist monasteries and the Buddhist sangha in Mongolia*]. St Petersburg.

⁵ Erdniev, Uryubdzhur. 1970. *Калмыки* [*The Kalmyks*]. Elista: Kalmytskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo.

⁶ Bakaeva, Elza. 1994. *Буддизм в Калмыкии* [*Buddhism in Kalmykia*]. Elista: Kalmytskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo.

Pyurveev, *Архитектура Калмыкии (The Architecture of Kalmykia)*,⁷ is a fundamental account of the development of Kalmyk architecture from the nomad period up to the middle of the 20th century; a chapter in this book is devoted to the Buddhist cultic constructions in Kalmykia before the Soviet epoch.

None of the works mentioned above have been translated from Russian. In fact, very few works on the Kalmyks have been published in other languages than Russian. Until recently the most fundamental and perhaps the only study of the Kalmyk culture and society written in English was *The Kalmyk Mongols: a study in continuity and change* by Paula G. Rubel, which was published in 1967.⁸ The most recent and detailed account in English of present day Kalmykia and its cultural heritage is to be found in a monograph, *The Kalmyks* by Elza-Bair Guchinova.⁹ It was translated by David C. Lewis and published in 2006. The author provides an overview of Kalmyk history, ethnical background, traditional economy and culture.

Although consecration rituals and the concept of relics in Kalmykia have not been studied so far, a few works have been devoted to the Tibetan perception of relics. Of great importance are the works of Yael Bentor. Her book *Consecration of Images and Stupas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism*¹⁰ is a comprehensive and thorough presentation of the essence, structure and types of Tibetan Buddhist consecration rituals. To a large extent Bentor's study has determined the direction of my research, providing a source of comparison, as the same questions and theoretical categories that she deals with can be studied in the Kalmyk form of Tibetan Buddhism.

⁷ Pyurveev, Jangar. 1975. *Архитектура Калмыкии [The Architecture of Kalmykia]*. Moscow: Stroyizdat.

⁸ Rubel, Paula G. 1967. *The Kalmyk Mongols: a Study in Continuity and Change*. Bloomington: Uralic and Altaic Series.

⁹ Guchinova, Elza-Bair. 2006. *The Kalmyks* translated by David C. Lewis. London and New York: Routledge.

¹⁰ Bentor, Yael. 1996. *Consecration of Images and Stupas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism*. Leiden; New York; Köln: Brill.

Chapter 1

The Historical Background of Kalmykia

The Oirats – ancestors of the Kalmyks

In the 11th – 12th centuries A.D. the ethnonym Kalmyk did not exist. The direct ancestors of the Kalmyks were known as Oirats (Oyrats) and comprised several West Mongol tribes that lived in the south part of Siberia.

The earliest period of Oirat history described in historical literature is the 12th century AD. The oldest written sources that include information on the West Mongols date to the 13th – 14th centuries. The most widely studied sources are two historical works. The first one is the *Secret History of the Mongols* compiled in 1240.¹¹

The second major source is *Compendium of Histories* written by a Persian administrator, physician and historian Rashid-ad-Din Fadl' Allah (1247-1318). This work is a very valuable account of the early history of the Mongols. Until the middle of the 20th century there was no complete translation of Rashid-ad-Din's text in any western language. The exception was the translation of some parts of the history of the tribes and the career of Chingis by I. N. Berezin into Russian in 1858-68.¹² However, in the middle of the 20th century a new translation of Rashid-ad-Din was published, it comprises three volumes.¹³

According to these sources, in the 11th century the Oirats populated the lands of the upper Yenisei River and around the west side of Lake Baikal. At the beginning of the 13th century the Oirats occupied a larger territory, having moved westward to the Altai Mountains.¹⁴

¹¹ *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*. Translated with a historical and philological commentary by Igor de Rachewiltz (2 volumes). Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006.

¹² Berezin, П.А. 1958. *Сборник летописей, история монголов, сочинение Рашид-Эддина* [*Collection of chronicles, the history of the Mongols, the work of Rashid-ad-Din*], v.5. St. Petersburg.

Berezin, П.А. 1868. *Рашид-Эддин, История Чингис-хана до восшествия его на престол* [Rashid-ad-Din, *The History of Chingis Khan before the Enthronement*], v. 13. St. Petersburg.

Berezin, П.А. 1888. *Рашид-Эддин, История Чингис-хана от восшествия его на престол до кончины* [Rashid-ad-Din, *The History of Chingis Khan from the enthronement until death*], v. 15. St. Petersburg.

¹³ Рашид-ад-дин, *Сборник летописей* [Rashid-ad-Din, *Collection of Chronicles*], v.1. Translated by Khetagurov and Smirnova. Moscow, Leningrad 1952.

Рашид-ад-дин, *Сборник летописей* [Rashid-ad-Din, *Collection of Chronicles*], v. 2. Translated by Verkhovskiy. Moscow Leningrad, 1952. The third volume was translated in 1939 by Arends and published only in 1946, see *Рашид-ад-дин Сборник летописей* [Rashid-ad-Din, *Collection of Chronicles*] v. 3. Moscow, Leningrad, 1946.

¹⁴ Erdniev 2007: 29- 32.

The ethnic composition of the Oirats is a complicated and debatable question among the Mongolists. As has already been mentioned, in the 12th – 13th centuries the Oirats consisted of several ethnically and linguistically related tribes and clans.¹⁵

The question of the term “Oirat” is another important issue in the history of the West Mongols. Why were these tribes referred to as “Oirat tribes”? Erdniev argues that the existence of the term “Oirat” indicates that in the alliance of the West Mongols had been an ancient core, i.e. some powerful and superior tribe or clan that united other ethnically and linguistically related tribes and became the main body.¹⁶ Therefore, some ancient historians could refer to all the tribes in this alliance as the Oirats. In Central Asia in the period of transition from the primitive-communal system to the society of feudal relations it was fairly common to give the name of the superior aristocratic clan to the tribes or peoples in its dependence.

The Oirats differed from other Mongolian tribes in culture and language. These distinctions were determined by geographical conditions. Forest, mountains, valleys isolated the Oirats from the rest of the Mongols. Rashid-ad-Din often referred to the Oirats as “forest people” or “forest Mongols” in contrast to the eastern or “steppe Mongols”. This territorial isolation led to the administrative and partly economic independence of the Oirat tribes. Living on the periphery of the Mongol empire, the Oirats were also in constant cultural interaction and trade contacts with Turkic-speaking and Tungusic-speaking tribes of eastern Siberia. Thus the Oirat Mongolian language absorbed many Turkic and Tungusic linguistic elements.¹⁷

After the Oirats had been subdued by Chinggis Khan during 1207 – 1218, they became the subjects of his empire and formed the right wing (*barungar*) in the Mongol army. They took active part in the Mongol campaigns in the Middle East, i.e. in Iran, Syria, Palestine, etc.¹⁸

In the empire of Chingis Khan the Oirats had a relative independence from the central authority. They were governed by their own khans, whose power was hereditary.¹⁹

¹⁵ Erdniev makes the assumption that the ancient Oirats comprised the following tribes: the Tsoroses, Sharyads, Sharnuts, Zamuds, Kharnuts, Batuts, Baguts, Khoits, Choroses, Kharyats, Elets, Khosheuts, Torguts, Jungars, Tuktuns, Zets (Ibid: 30).

¹⁶ Ibid: 30-32.

¹⁷ Ibid: 33-34.

¹⁸ Baskhaev, Dyakieva 2007: 27-29.

¹⁹ Guchinova 2006: 5-6.

At the end of the 14th century a union of four Oirat tribes or the “Union of Four Allies” was formed; this union is often termed the “Derben Oirats” in historical literature.²⁰ According to a well-established view, the four ethnic components were the Derbets, Khosheuts, Torguts and Jungars or northern Elets.²¹

In the epoch of the disintegration of the Chingisid Empire and feudal fragmentation of Mongolia (14th century), the “union of four Oirats” rose against the eastern Mongols. In contrast to the east Mongolian clans, who were at that time in a constant struggle for power, Oirats were consolidated, better militarily organized and economically stronger. And in the first half of the 15th century the Oirats managed to establish their supremacy throughout all of Mongolia. By 1434 the Western and Eastern Mongolia were united under the power of the Oirat *noyon* (‘feudal lord’) Togon-taishi.²²

The authority of the Oirats over all Mongolia reached its climax in the reign of Togon-taishi’s son Esen, who proclaimed himself the supreme Mongolian Khan in 1451.²³ He also had great success in a military campaign in China against the Ming dynasty in 1449; the Chinese Emperor Pinyin was even taken his prisoner.²⁴ Esen Khan was killed in 1455 in the struggle with the mutinous Mongol *noyons* who were opposed to his centralized authority. After his death the process of disintegration of Mongolia continued, and by the beginning of the 16th century Mongolia consisted of several larger and smaller independent polities (*khanates*).²⁵

The Oirat exodus to the Russian Empire. The formation of the Kalmyk nationality

At the beginning of the 17th century the main part of the Torgut Oirat tribe under Ho-Orluk Khan and some of the Derbets led by their ruler Dalai-Baatyr went north-west along the banks of the Irtysh River and reached the Russian border.²⁶

²⁰ Rubel 1967: 12.

²¹ See Guchinova 2006: 9-10. However, medieval chronicles mention more tribes, therefore in contemporary academic circles opinions vary with regard to the particular four tribes that served as the basis of the “union of four Oirats” (see Kitinov 1996: 35; Rubel 1967: 12).

²² Erdniev 2007: 35.

²³ Baskhaev, Dyakieva 2007: 31.

²⁴ Ibid: 31-32.

²⁵ Ibid: 32-33.

²⁶ Erdniev 2007: 43.

There were several reasons for the Oirat exodus to Russia. The beginning of the 17th century was a period of economic and political crisis for the majority of the Oirats. One of the main motives of the exodus was a shortage of pasture land created by continuous subdivision of the feudal domains (*ulus*). A contemporary ethnographer Guchinova, following the opinion of a prominent researcher of this period in Oirat-Kalmyk history, Kichikov, explains that this splitting of the Oirat *ulus* was caused by an “increase in the number of members of the families of feudal lords”.²⁷ Feudal lords or *noyon* divided their hereditary estates between their sons; thus the extent of pasture land was diminishing, but the number of livestock in herds continued to increase.²⁸

Another important reason for the Oirat migration to Russia was the unstable political situation among the Mongol tribes at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries.²⁹ The shortage of pastureland led to numerous conflicts. Not only were the West Mongolian clans struggling for power and lands with one another, but they were also in a constant strife with the neighboring Kazakh khanate and the Kyrgyz. The need for new pastures and military defeats forced some Oirat *noyons* to search for new areas. The West of the Urals and the Volga region appeared to be a very suitable territory for nomadizing. The sparse population density of that area and the opportunity of stable trade with the Russians attracted the West Mongol nomads.³⁰

The official date of the Oirat-Russian relationship is considered to be September 20, 1606 when the envoys of Ho-Orluk Khan came to the Russian town of Taru for the legal permission to nomadize and trade within the upper reaches of Irtysh and the environs of the Ishim and Tobol rivers.³¹ Three years later on the 20th of August, 1609 a legal contract (charter) between the representatives of the Russian Tsar Vasiliy Shuyskiy and the Oirat Khans (Ho-Orluk and Dalai-Baatyr) was signed, and the Oirats became subjects of the Russian Empire.³²

At that time the Oirats that had migrated to the Russian Empire were called Kalmyks. The term *kalmyk* is found in Russian historical sources as well as in all the legal documents of that period. *Kalmyk* is a word of Turkish origin and means ‘remnant’, ‘remainder’,

²⁷ Guchinova 2006: 12.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kichikov 1966: 40-75.

³¹ Erdniev 2007: 45.

³² Ibid: 46.

‘piece’ or ‘rest’.³³ However, there are different interpretations of the semantics of this term. Thus, Bergman, a researcher of the Kalmyk folklore, gave the following explanation: initially the Tatars and Mongols were shamanists, but when some Mongols adopted Buddhism the Tatars began to call them *kalmyks* or ‘apostates’.³⁴

A number of Mongolists, such as Bartol, Nomihanov, and Guchinova, connect this term with the process of Islamization of the Golden Horde in the 14th century. According to their opinion, *kalmyk* was the name given by the Muslim Turks to the tribes who did not adopt Islam and remained loyal to their indigenous religion.³⁵

There is another hypothesis that the word *kalmyk* is of Mongolian origin and means ‘impetuous’, reflecting the nomadic way of life of the Kalmyk tribes.³⁶

A. Pozdnev believed that the term *kalmyk* originated from the Tatar word *kalmak*, which means ‘separated’, ‘remnant’, ‘remaining’. This name was applied to the western Mongols who left their original lands in the South Siberia and moved to the steppes between the Volga and the Don rivers.³⁷ Erdniev supports this view and points out that only the Oirats that had become the subjects of Russia were called Kalmyks; the Oirats in Jungaria have never been referred to by this name. Erdniev also suggests that this name was given to the Oirats in Russia by their Turkish-speaking neighbors.³⁸ Consequently, it is possible to conclude that the Kalmyk nationality was formed by the Oirats who had moved to the lower reaches of the Volga and the Don at the very beginning of the 17th century.

The Kalmyk khanate

It took the Kalmyks about half a century to settle in the location of present day Kalmykia. By the charters of 1655, 1657 and 1661 the northern Caspian steppes on both sides of the Volga near Astrakhan to Samara and Tsaritsyno and the steppes near the Don River were officially allotted to the Kalmyks.³⁹ The Kalmyks received Russian citizenship,

³³ See Guchinova 2006: 11; Erdniev 2007: 98-99.

³⁴ Erdniev 2007: 97.

³⁵ Guchinova 2006: 98.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Erdniev 2007: 98.

³⁸ Ibid: 98-100.

³⁹ Erdniev 2007: 54-57.

they were allowed to nomadize within this area and conduct a tax-free trade.⁴⁰ In 1664 this territory received the status of the autonomous Kalmyk khanate.⁴¹

Russia was interested economically and politically in the Kalmyk entry.⁴² Firstly, trade with the Kalmyks provided the Russian army with horses. The peasant and manorial economy benefitted from the supply of natural resources: livestock and draught animals⁴³. Secondly, the Russian state needed additional military forces in its southern areas. In the 17th century the international situation to the south of the Russian Empire was very unstable due to contacts, unfavorable for Russia, with Turkey and the Crimea khanate. Moreover, at the beginning of the 1650s Russia was preparing for war with Poland over the Ukraine and Belorussia.⁴⁴

After becoming the subjects of Russia the Kalmyks were obliged to provide military service, i.e. to protect the southern borders of the Russian Empire and to participate in military campaigns on behalf of Russia. The Russian state in its turn guaranteed protection and relative autonomy of the Kalmyk khanate;⁴⁵ and did not object to the entry of new Oirat groups from Jungaria.⁴⁶

Until the middle of the 18th century the Kalmyk khanate remained practically autonomous in Tsarist Russia, and had strong cultural and political connections with Tibet.⁴⁷ Buddhism in its Gelugpa variant was the official religion of the Kalmyk khanate. The Kalmyk khanate existed for about 100 years, from 1664 to 1771.⁴⁸ However, due to a serious economic crisis and famine in the khanate in the middle of the 18th century⁴⁹ some Kalmyk rulers wanted to abandon the Volga steppe and return to Western Mongolia. And in 1771 most of the Torguts (more than 30,000 tents with their wagons) led by the governor-general Ubashi, the son of Khan Donduk-Dashi, set off for Jungaria. This exodus had tragic results for the Kalmyks who had left with Ubashi, as well as for the Kalmyk khanate in general.⁵⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid: 57.

⁴¹ Baskhaev, Dyakieva 2007: 42.

⁴² See Erdniev 2007: 46-53.

⁴³ Baskhaev, Dyakieva 2007: 40-41.

⁴⁴ Ibid: 42; see also Erdniev 2007: 46-53.

⁴⁵ Erdniev 2007: 50.

⁴⁶ Baskhaev, Dyakieva 2007: 42.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Guchinova 2006: 13.

⁴⁹ In winter 1767-1768 murrain began in the Kalmyk khanate (Baskhaev, Dyakieva 2007: 98). Moreover, in 1768 the Russian government prohibited nomadizing on the left side of the Volga, which led to the exhaustion of pastureland in the khanate and, consequently, to the aggravation of famine (ibid).

⁵⁰ Erdniev 2007: 153-156.

The Russian tsarist government was afraid that more Kalmyks would follow the example of Ubashi and leave Russia for Jungaria. And on the 19th of October 1771 the Russian Queen Catherine the Great (Ekaterina II) issued a decree on the abolishment of the independence of the Kalmyk khanate.⁵¹ According to this decree, the titles of “khan” and “governor-general” were abolished. All the *noyons* became subordinate to the governor of Astrakhan. Russian police-officers were appointed to every Kalmyk *ulus*. Thus, the Kalmyk khanate as an autonomous subject of the Russian Empire came to an end.⁵² Moreover, Catherine the Great prohibited any relations between the Kalmyks and Tibet.⁵³ The abolition of the Kalmyk khanate and the imposed rupture with Buddhist centers (Tibet and Mongolia) had a great influence on the development of the Kalmyk culture, society and religion.

During the 19th century the Kalmyks underwent a gradual transition to a more settled way of life under the influence of the tsarist policy.⁵⁴ By a number of Homestead Acts the Russian government restricted the usage of pastureland for the Kalmyks.⁵⁵

Kalmykia in the 20th century

The 20th century was the most difficult and dramatic period in the history of the Kalmyk nation. After the revolution of 1917 Kalmykia became the Kalmyk People’s Autonomous Region, but in 1935 it was redefined as an autonomous republic with the city of Elista being its capital.⁵⁶

The pre-war years (the 1920s-1930s) are characterized by the forced transition of the Kalmyks to a settled way of life. The Communist Party aimed to reorganize the Kalmyk traditional economy and way of life. By the beginning of the 20th century some Kalmyks had adopted a semi-nomadic way of life, but the Soviet policy made all Kalmyks live in stationary dwellings in fixed settlements.⁵⁷

The 1920s and 1930s also witnessed a severe repression of the Buddhist sangha. According to the resolution of the 22nd Congress of the Communist party in 1923, there was

⁵¹ Ibid: 156.

⁵² Ibid; also see Baskhaev, Dyakieva 2007: 101-102.

⁵³ Kitinov 1996: 40.

⁵⁴ Rubel 1967: 16.

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Guchinova 2006: 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid: 16-17.

no place for any religion in a communist society.⁵⁸ The epic tradition of Kalmykia, however, received support from the Soviet authorities; in 1940 the Kalmyks celebrated the 500th anniversary of their folk epic *Jangar*.⁵⁹

When the Soviet Union entered the Second World War, the Special Kalmyk Cavalry Division was formed; it participated in the battles on the Don, in northern Caucasus and in Stalingrad.⁶⁰

Oppression in Kalmykia was especially severe towards the end of the WWII. During the Nazi occupation of Kalmykia (1942 – 1943) several Buddhist monasteries began to function again.⁶¹ Moreover, when the Germans retreated from Kalmykia, about five thousand Kalmyks joined the retreat: some went voluntarily; others were forced by the Germans.⁶² These facts led to the suspicion that the Kalmyks supported the Nazis. As a result, in 1943 after the Soviet liberation of Kalmykia its entire population was exiled to Siberia.⁶³ By a decree of the Supreme Soviet the Kalmyk autonomous republic ceased to exist on the 27th of December, 1943.⁶⁴ This deportation of 1943 was the most tragic event in the history of the Kalmyk people, the nation suffered great cultural losses as well.

Only in 1957 did the Kalmyks get the right to return to their original home on the steppes of the Volga and the Don. And in 1958 Kalmykia was again recognized as an autonomous republic within the USSR.⁶⁵

At the present time Kalmykia has a status of a republic with a presidential form of government within the Russian Federation. The republic has its own state flag, hymn and emblem. Along with the Constitution of the Russian Federation the basic law of Kalmykia is the Code of the Steppe. The head of the republic is its president K. Ilyumzhinov, who has occupied this post since 1990, having been reelected three times. The highest legislative and representative organ of authority in Kalmykia is the People's *Khural* or Parliament, which consists of 27 deputies.

⁵⁸ Bělka 2002: 18.

⁵⁹ Guchinova 2006: 17.

⁶⁰ Ibid: 18.

⁶¹ Bakaeva 1994: 19.

⁶² Rubel 1967: 19.

⁶³ Ibid; Terentyev 1996: 61; Guchinova 2006: 18.

⁶⁴ Bakaeva 1994: 20; Guchinova 2006: 18.

⁶⁵ Guchinova 2006: 18.

Chapter 2

The History of Buddhism in Kalmykia

The Kalmyks adhere to the Tibetan variant of Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism arose in the 1st – 2nd centuries A.D. in Northern India and was introduced in Tibet in the middle of the 7th century. The theory and practice of Tibetan Buddhism is embodied in the Kangyur.⁶⁶ Now there are four main schools of Buddhism in Tibet: Nyingma, Kagyu, Gelug and Sakya. Though these four traditions differ in some doctrines and spiritual practices, all of them venerate the canon.

Historically the Kalmyks belong to the Gelugpa school. The Gelugpa (*dge lugs pa*) tradition or the order of the ‘model of virtue’ is also known in the West as the ‘Yellow Hat’ sect. It arose in the late 14th century based on the teachings of the Tibetan monk Blo bzang Grags pa, better known by the name of his place of birth, Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa).⁶⁷ However, at the present moment other schools of Tibetan Buddhism are represented in contemporary Kalmykia, though on a lesser scale.

Any religious tradition is in a state of constant evolving and transformation. Thus the development of Kalmyk Buddhism is closely connected with the political history of Kalmykia.

Localization of Buddhism among the Oirat Mongols

According to one school of thought, the spread of Buddhism among the Mongols has had two principal stages.⁶⁸ Thus the Mongols including the Oirats became acquainted with Buddhism for the first time at the beginning of the 13th century during the epoch of Chingis Khan, who was rather tolerant to all religions.⁶⁹ The second stage of the spread of Buddhism in Mongolian communities was at the end of the 16th century⁷⁰.

⁶⁶ The Kangyur or the Tibetan canon includes: the Hinayana sutras, corresponding to the Pali canon; the Mahayana sutras, which are much more numerous, and Tantras. The Tanguyr consists of the commentaries, explaining sutras and *vinaya* texts.

⁶⁷ Snellgrove, Richardson 1980:175-176.

⁶⁸ See Bakaeva 1994: 11 or Nadneeva 1994: 28.

⁶⁹ Dordzhieva 1972: 5. According to one Mongol chronicle, Chingis Khan during his military campaign in the northern China took two Chinese Buddhist monks prisoners. These monks taught Buddhist doctrines to the future emperor Kublai (Bakaeva 1994: 11).

⁷⁰ Bakaeva 1994: 12.

However, there is another well-established opinion that the Oirats came into contact with Buddhism as early as the end of the 8th or the middle of the 9th century through the neighbouring Turkic peoples, the Sogdians and Uighurs, who at that time were influenced by the missionary activities of Indian monks.⁷¹ Therefore, there could be three waves of Buddhism in Mongolian communities.

The successors of Chingis Khan added to the spread of Buddhism among the Mongols.⁷² The position of Buddhism was considerably strengthened during the reign of the emperor Kublai Khan (1260 – 1294), the founder of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China. At that time Buddhism was proclaimed the state religion of Mongolia.⁷³

In spite of the governmental support of Buddhism in the 13th century, shamanism was deeply rooted among the Mongols.⁷⁴ After the fall of the Yuan dynasty in 1368 the prestige of Buddhism weakened considerably, though it remained the dominant religion for the Mongol khans and feudal authorities.⁷⁵

The second wave of Buddhist penetration in Mongolian society began at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century.⁷⁶ The crucial event took place in 1576 when Altan Khan, the chief of the Tumed branch of the Mongols, invited the high Tibetan lama Sodnam Gyamtsho (Bsod nams Rgya mtsho) to visit Mongolia; they met in 1578 near Kokonor.⁷⁷ This meeting can be regarded as the renewal of contact between Tibet and Mongolia and the revitalization of Buddhism in Mongolia.

At the meeting, Sodnam Gyamtsho received the title of Dalai (*Tale*)⁷⁸ from the Tumed Khan. Thus Sodnam Gyamtsho became the third Dalai Lama, because he was the third reincarnation in his line.⁷⁹ Though in fact, he was the first to receive this title.⁸⁰ After the death of the third Dalai Lama in 1588 his reincarnation was found in Yondon Gyamtsho

⁷¹ See Batyreva 2005: 31; Kitinov 1996: 35-36.

⁷² Thus Godan Khan (years of reign 1229 – 1241) supported the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism and built several monasteries in Mongolia (Bakaeva 1994: 11).

⁷³ It was mainly the Sakya tradition that was spread in Mongolia at that time, though the Kagyu school was also known there (ibid: 11-12).

⁷⁴ Bakaeva 2005: 126.

⁷⁵ Dordzhieva 1972: 6.

⁷⁶ Bakaeva 1994: 12-13.

⁷⁷ See Snellgrove, Richardson 1980:183-184 or Bakaeva 1994: 12.

⁷⁸ The word *Tale* means ‘ocean’, as does the Tibetan word *rgya mtsho* (Snellgrove, Richardson 1980:184; Kapstein 2006: 133).

⁷⁹ The first in this line was Dge ‘dun grub (1391-1475), a follower of Tsongkhapa; his successor and reincarnation was Dge ‘dun Rgya mtsho (1475-1543) (see ibid: 182-183; Kapstein 2006: 129-131).

⁸⁰ Snellgrove, Richardson 1980:184.

(Yon tan Rgya mtsho), a great-grandson of Altan Khan.⁸¹ As a result of this recognition, the ties between Mongolia and Tibet grew stronger, and the Gelugpa order gained the support of the Mongol authorities.⁸²

The first Buddhist teachers among the Mongols were Oirat lamas, the greatest contribution to the spread of Buddhism in Mongolia being made by a Torgut, Neyiji Toyin (1557 – 1653) and a Khoshut, Zaya Pandita (1599 – 1662).⁸³

Zaya Pandita was especially popular among the Kalmyks, because he added tremendously to Oirat-Kalmyk culture.⁸⁴ Zaya Pandita's greatest achievement and gift to the Kalmyks was the creation of the script called *Todo bichig* ('clear writing') for the Oirat language in 1648.⁸⁵ With the advent of the Oirat writing and the translation activity⁸⁶ of monks, Buddhist scriptures became known to a wider audience in the Oirat-Kalmyk communities.⁸⁷ By the middle of the 17th century most Oirat tribes including the Kalmyks in the Volga steppe had become staunch adherents of the Gelugpa doctrine.

In Tibet the first half of the 17th century was a period of feudal constant struggles between different religious orders. These conflicts resulted in the war between the Gelug and Karmapa school.⁸⁸ By the 1630s the Gelugpa side was experiencing a series of defeats, because the Kagyu had a strong support from the Khalkha and Chadar tribes. Therefore, in 1637 the leaders of Gelugpas sent envoys to the Oirats asking for help. During the following three years the Oirats under the leadership of Gushri Khan defeated the enemies of the fifth Dalai Lama.⁸⁹ In 1642 Gushri Khan proclaimed the Dalai Lama the supreme religious leader and the highest secular ruler of the whole of Tibet⁹⁰.

The military campaign of Gushri Khan in Tibet had tremendous influence on the political history of Tibet and on the history of Buddhism in Mongolia. This victory asserted the dominance of the Gelugpa order in Tibet and Mongolia, and maintained the power of the

⁸¹ Ibid; Kapstein 2006: 134; Bakaeva 1994: 12.

⁸² At that time blood sacrifices and the worship of ancestors was forbidden for the first time in Mongolia (Snellgrove, Richardson 1980: 184).

⁸³ See Baskaev 2007: 47-50; Bakaeva 1994: 13-15.

⁸⁴ Dordzhieva 1972: 7.

⁸⁵ Bakaeva 1994: 14. The 'Clear script' (*Todo bichig*) was used in Kalmykia until 1924, and then it was replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet (Baskaev 2007: 64).

⁸⁶ Mainly from Tibetan and Sanskrit (ibid: 49-50).

⁸⁷ Zaya Pandita translated from Tibetan into *Todo bichig* more than 180 works of classical Buddhist literature (ibid: 49-50).

⁸⁸ Snellgrove, Richardson 1980:193.

⁸⁹ Kapstein 2006: 136-137.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Dalai Lama both as spiritual and governmental leader of Tibet. Closer cultural and political connections were established between Tibet and the Mongolian world.⁹¹

The development of Buddhism in the Kalmyk khanate

Now I present a brief description of the development of Buddhism in the Kalmyk khanate. Of special importance for my discussion are the peculiarities of Kalmyk Buddhism that had been formed under the influence of shamanism.

When the Kalmyks became subjects of the Russian Empire, they brought Buddhism as their main spiritual tradition. Thus the Kalmyks became the first Buddhist community in Europe.

In 1640 a meeting of the Mongol and Oirat *noyons* took place in Jungaria. The Kalmyk khan Ho-Urluk participated in this important event where Buddhism was proclaimed the official religion of the Oirats, Mongols, and Kalmyks.⁹² Buddhism in its Gelugpa variant became the overall religion of the Kalmyk khanate.⁹³

Until the second half of the 18th century the Kalmyks had very close ties with Buddhist centers: Tibet, Mongolia, and Jungaria. Religious policy of the khanate was conducted under the leadership of Tibet; Lhasa was the spiritual center for the Kalmyks. Moreover, the Kalmyk khans were appointed by the Dalai Lama from 1690 until the abolition of the Kalmyk khanate.⁹⁴

The 17th – 18th centuries witnessed the formation of the main religious institutions in Kalmykia.⁹⁵ This stage was also characterized by an intensive struggle with shamanism, which was still widespread among the Kalmyks. At the Mongol meeting of 1640 legal measures to fight shamanism were adopted. This political decision is reflected in the corpus of laws known as the ‘Great Code’ (Iki Tsaazhin Bichig).⁹⁶ According to this code, heavy

⁹¹ Tibetan lamas were encouraged to spread Dharma among the Mongols, because the Chinese believed that Mongol militancy could be softened by Buddhism. The Mongol and Oirat students went to Tibetan monasteries to study; most frequently they came to ‘Bras spungs (Drepung), the center of the Gelugpa school (Snellgrove, Richardson 1980: 199).

⁹² See Batyreva 2005: 31; Dordzhieva 1972: 9.

⁹³ Bakaeva 1994: 18

⁹⁴ The first Kalmyk khan who received his title from the Dalai Lama in 1690 was Ayuka Khan (Dordzhieva 1972: 11).

⁹⁵ Guchinova 2006: 165.

⁹⁶ Dordzhieva 1972: 9-10.

punishments and fines were imposed not only on shamans, but also on lay people who resorted to the services of shamans.⁹⁷

As a result of this persecution shamanism in Kalmykia acquired new forms of existence.⁹⁸ There developed a level of “folk” or popular Buddhism, which was a combination of Buddhist doctrines and pre-Buddhist practices.⁹⁹ Moreover, some cults and practices of the Kalmyk *bō* (‘male shamans’) and *udugun* (female shamans) were absorbed into the institutionalized form of Kalmyk Buddhism.¹⁰⁰ These developments formed the basic distinguishing characteristics of Kalmyk Buddhism.

One peculiarity of Buddhism in the Kalmyk khanate consisted in the fact that various protective rituals¹⁰¹ of pre-Buddhist shamanic origin and the ancient Mongol annual ceremonies¹⁰² were conducted not only by folk religious practitioners but also by monks in *khuruls* on a regular basis.

The most important festivals of Kalmykia, *Zul* (New Year),¹⁰³ *Tsagan Sar* (‘the White Month’, spring festival)¹⁰⁴ and the summer festival of *Urus Sar*,¹⁰⁵ also presented the combination of Buddhist and pre-Buddhist folk-religious beliefs.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁷ For instance, a horse could be taken away both from a shaman and his lay client (ibid: 10).

⁹⁸ Bakaeva 2005: 125-127.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ For example, until the beginning of the 20th century one of the main functions of shamans, i.e. the magic influence on weather, was performed in Kalmykia by a special type of *khavaraks* called *zadch*. These monks, in contrast to shamans were treated with great respect (Bakaeva 2005: 126).

¹⁰¹ Examples of Kalmyk protective rituals are ‘the redemption of life force’ (*amin dzolikh*), ‘cutting off the evil tongue’ (*khar kel utlkh*), ‘calling back the life-force’ (*syums duudulkh*) (see Bakaeva 1994: 113-115). According to Bakaeva, protective rituals or “magic ceremonies” are intended to defend a person from supernatural evil forces and to bring good fortune or health (ibid: 109).

¹⁰² The main annual ceremonies in Kalmykia were *gal tjalgn* or ‘the offering to the fire’, *usn arshan* or ‘water consecration’, and *usn tjalgn* or ‘sacrifice to the water’ were conducted both by monks in *khuruls* and by folk religious practitioners. Even animal sacrifice could be performed during these ceremonies as the main offering (ibid: 84 – 87).

¹⁰³ *Zul* is the traditional Kalmyk New Year, celebrated on the twenty-fifth day of the first winter month (November). There is a custom of lighting altar lamps (called *zul* in Kalmyk) on this day. A similar holiday exists in Tibet, Mongolia and Buryatia, but only in Kalmykia it is the traditional New Year (ibid: 53-60).

¹⁰⁴ *Tsagan Sar* (the ‘White Month’) begins on the first day of the first spring month in accordance with the traditional Kalmyk calendar (which is approximately in February) and lasts the whole month. *Tsagan Sar* is a traditional festival for the New Year in Mongolia and Buryatia; in Kalmykia, however, the traditional New Year is *Zul*. Before the adoption of Buddhism in the nomadic societies of the Mongols *Tsagan Sar* symbolized the welcoming of spring and indicated the beginning of migration into new pastures (Bakaeva 1994: 57; Guchinova 2006: 175). After the establishment of Buddhism *Tsagan Sar* continued to be the main event among the Mongols, but acquired new religious meanings. It became associated with the Tibetan Great Prayer Festival (*Smon lam*) introduced in 1409 by Tsongkhapa. For a detailed description of this festival see Bakaeva 1994: 60-64.

¹⁰⁵ *Urus Sar* starts on the day of the full moon in the first summer month (May) and lasts for a month. Before Buddhism it was a celebration of the renewal of nature and the movement from spring to summer pastures. The time of *Urus Sar* coincided with the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and his entering *parinirvana* (ibid: 81-84).

An important characteristic feature of Kalmyk and Mongolian Buddhism is the incorporation of the main pre-Buddhist deities into the Buddhist pantheon. The principal deity for the Oirats and later for the Kalmyks was the White Old Man (Tsagan aav or Tsagan ovgen).¹⁰⁷ The Oirats believed in the existence of numerous spirits: the owners of land, water, mountains, etc. However, in course of time their individual names were forgotten, and the cults of various local deities merged into one cult of the White Old Man, the owner of the land and water.¹⁰⁸ The White Old Man was perceived by the Kalmyks not only as the protector of animals and nature, but also as the Master of time and the universe.¹⁰⁹

In the 18th century Tsagan aav was included in the Buddhist pantheon in Kalmykia with the function of a *dharmapla*, a defender of the Buddhist faith, who rewards people for taking refuge in the Three Jewels.¹¹⁰ This characteristic of Tsagan aav is reflected in text called the *Sutra of the White Old Man (Tsagan-ebugen sudur)*, narrating about his encounter with the Buddha.¹¹¹ For folk-religious practitioners in Kalmykia, the White Old Man has always been the principal deity bestowing magical powers.¹¹² In pre-revolutionary *khuruls* the image of this deity was placed on the wall by the entrance, but never inside (*ibid.*).

Another important pre-Buddhist deity that was incorporated in the Buddhist pantheon of Kalmykia, Buryatia and Mongolia is Okon Tengri (the 'Sky Maiden'), the ancient goddess of fire and fertility.¹¹³ In Kalmyk Buddhism Okon Tengri acquired the characteristics of the Tibetan female deity Palden Lhamo (Dpal ldan lha mo).¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁶ See Bakaeva 1994: 53-84; Guchinova 2006: 174-179.

¹⁰⁷ Bakaeva 1997a. The cult of the White Old Man is popular among the Mongols and the Buryats; a similar deity with the same functions is present in Tibet (Sgam po dkar po) (Heissig 1980: 76).

¹⁰⁸ Bakaeva 2003.

¹⁰⁹ Bakaeva 1997a: 78-79.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ It is a short text in the form of a sutra; there is a Russian translation of this text in Pozdneev 1993: 84-84, note 1. There exist the Mongol and the Oirat variants of this text, but the characteristics and the image of the White Old Man are analogous (see Bakaeva 1997a: 78-79).

¹¹² Bakaeva 2005: 124.

¹¹³ Guchinova 2006: 172.

¹¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of Palden Lhamo see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 22-37.

Buddhism in Kalmykia from 1771 to the beginning of the 20th century

After the abolition of the Kalmyk khanate, the Tsarist government imposed administrative control over the Kalmyk steppe. A number of measures to limit the influence of Buddhism in Kalmykia were implemented.¹¹⁵ Contact with other Buddhist centers was prohibited. The Russian government feared that close ties between Kalmykia and Tibet could weaken the ties with Russia.¹¹⁶ Since 1690 the head of the Kalmyk Buddhist sangha had been appointed by the Dalai Lama, but after 1771 this practice was interrupted. Catherine the Great established the post of “Chief of Kalmyk Buddhists”, appointed directly by the Tsarist government.¹¹⁷

During this period the process of Christianization increased.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, the majority of Kalmyks remained loyal to Buddhism. Even baptized Kalmyks continued to follow the Dharma, recited mantras and had Buddhist altars at home.¹¹⁹

In the beginning of the 19th century the Russian administration attempted to reduce the number of Buddhist monasteries and monks in Kalmykia.¹²⁰ In spite of the efforts of the Russian government to weaken the ideological and political power of Buddhism in Kalmykia, the number of *khuruls* from the end of the 18th to the beginning of the 20th century increased leading to a considerable growth of the sangha.¹²¹ At the beginning of the 20th century there were 105 *khuruls* in Kalmykia with 5,270 residents.¹²² It should be mentioned that Buddhist nunneries had never existed in Kalmykia.¹²³

Isolated from other Buddhist centers, Kalmyk Buddhism developed a number of characteristic features, one of its main peculiarities being the absence of the institute of *tulkus* until the end of the 20th century.¹²⁴ Another distinguishing feature of Kalmyk

¹¹⁵ Nadneeva 1994: 35-39.

¹¹⁶ Ibid: 36.

¹¹⁷ Kitinov 1996: 40.

¹¹⁸ Christian missionary activity had been imposed on the Kalmyks by the Tsarist government since the second half of the 17th century. A number of measures to interest the Kalmyks in Orthodox Christianity were used: money was offered, liberation from serfdom was promised, debts were forgiven, and even release from imprisonment was guaranteed. Mostly the Don and Orenburg Kalmyks were converted to Christianity (Baskhaev 2007: 86-88).

¹¹⁹ Erdniev 2007: 374-375.

¹²⁰ See Bakaeva 1994: 24-25; Nadneeva 1994: 36-39.

¹²¹ Bakaeva 1994: 18.

¹²² Terentyev 1996: 61.

¹²³ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

¹²⁴ Bakaeva 1994: 45.

Buddhism of the 18th and 19th centuries is the popularity of the institute of *shabiners* or serf monks dependent on a particular *khurul*.¹²⁵

A very important event for Kalmyk Buddhism is the foundation of Buddhist philosophical schools Tsannid Chyorya, in 1907-1908.¹²⁶ Choyrya schools had departments of philosophy and medicine, the course of studies lasted 13 years.¹²⁷

The first two decades of the 20th century witnessed the renewal of Buddhism in Kalmykia. Moreover, contacts with Buryatia and Mongolia were resumed.¹²⁸

Kalmyk *khuruls* and the organization of Buddhist clergy before the Soviet period

The Oirats had movable as well as stationary temples. The earliest Oirat stationary monastery was built in 1616 on the eastern side of the Irtysh. It was called Sem Palat, which means ‘seven chambers’, due to the number of buildings in this architectural complex.¹²⁹ Other well-known early Oirat stationary monasteries included Ablain-kit (1654) and Boshoktukhan-kit (1670).

The Kalmyks had only mobile monasteries until the end of the 18th century. A Kalmyk mobile temple, called *khurla ger*, was accommodated in a tent or *kibitka* (*yurt*). Architecturally such worship *kibitkas* were distinguished by a *ganjir*, a Buddhist symbol in the form of a spire on top of the tent. Nomadic monasteries were circular in design. The tents of the monks formed the outer circle. In the middle a few prayer *kibitkas* and a tent of a senior lama were situated.¹³⁰

In Kalmykia both monasteries and temples are called *khuruls*. However, the exact meaning of the word *khurul* is ‘assembly’.¹³¹ But by the end of the 18th century in various documents the word *khurul* began to be used in reference to Kalmyk temples, monasteries and prayer houses. At the same time the term ‘*small khurul*’ was introduced to distinguish

¹²⁵ Ibid: 46.

¹²⁶ These schools were established in two *uluses*, Maloderbetovskiy and Ikitsohirovskiy (ibid: 43).

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Ibid: 18.

¹²⁹ Ibid: 21.

¹³⁰ Bakaeva 1994: 24. By the end of the 18th century there were approximately 14 monasteries in Kalmykia (ibid).

¹³¹ A monastery in Kalmyk is *kit* or *kyurya*. Prayer houses and temples can be also called *syume* (ibid: 24-25).

prayer houses from monasteries. Almost all ‘*small khuruls*’ were devoted to a particular deity or practice. In the 1850s there existed 77 big and small *khuruls*.¹³²

The first Kalmyk stationary *khurul* was built in 1798, and by the end of the 19th century there were 11 stone and 151 wooden *khuruls* on the territory of Kalmykia.¹³³ Kalmyk Buddhist architecture was based on nomadic principles. First stationary *khuruls* resembled *kibitkas*, because they were symmetrical and had eight sides.¹³⁴ A typical *khurul* was a two or three-tier building in a shape of a stepped pyramid. Lower levels were monumental in contrast to lighter and brightly decorated upper levels. The corners of the roof were slightly lifted.¹³⁵ The main peculiarity of Kalmyk Buddhist architecture is the decorating of *khurul* roof with *suburgans* (stupas).¹³⁶

After the rupture with other Buddhist centers Buddhist architecture in Kalmykia changed under the influence of Russian Orthodox style. Thus the curvilinear contour of roofs gradually disappeared. Also some necessary components of Mongolian Buddhist temples (*ganjur*, prayer wheels, etc) were no longer constructed by the end of the 19th century.¹³⁷ Moreover, elements typical of Russian orthodox churches, such as porches with circular arches, were added to *khuruls*.¹³⁸

The organization of Kalmyk Buddhist clergy conformed to the Tibetan Gelugpa tradition, though there were some peculiarities. Only the head of Kalmyk Buddhists had the title of “Lama”,¹³⁹ all other monks were called *khuvarak*.¹⁴⁰ In Kalmyk monasteries monks differed according to their ranking and according to their allotted duties. The monastic hierarchy included three ranks; therefore, monastic education consisted of three stages. Only in Kalmykia the monks of the lowest rank were called *manji* (‘students’).¹⁴¹ After studying for five years *manji* received the vows of *getsul* (‘novice’). The second stage of monastic education lasted for eight years, and then after a serious examination the ordination of

¹³² The majority was semi-nomadic i.e. roaming in summer with mobile prayer tents and stationary in winter (ibid: 27).

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Pyurveev 1975: 59-61.

¹³⁵ Ibid

¹³⁶ The number of suburgans was either one or five (one big in the centre and four smaller stupas on each corner of the gallery or roof). See Batyreva 2005: 67 or Pyurveev 1975: 62.

¹³⁷ Pyurveev 1975: 69

¹³⁸ Batyreva 2005: 67.

¹³⁹ Terentyev 1996: 60.

¹⁴⁰ In Mongolia the term *khuvarak* was applied only to the monks of low degree of ordination (Bakaeva 1994: 40).

¹⁴¹ *Manji* were boys from the age of seven or nine studying in monasteries (ibid: 41).

gelong could be received. Then *gelong* had to study for five or seven more years. Later the institute of *surgulin kevyud* or ‘*khurul* students’ was introduced, because the Tsarist administration prohibited children under 16 to live in monasteries.¹⁴²

In Kalmyk monasteries monks had specialized duties: for example, the *nirva* managed the financial matters of the monastery, the *zama* was responsible for the monks’ food and diet, the *gunzud* started the recitation of each prayer, the *emchi* was a doctor of Tibetan medicine, the *gonir* was in charge of ritual objects necessary for the services, the *zurachi* or artist painted the images of deities and decorated *khuruls*, the *zyrkhachi* worked as astrologer, etc. The abbot was called *baksha*, it was the highest administrative rank in a monastery. Another very important post was that of a *tsorzhi* who conducted ceremonies, supervised the study of ritual texts, and appointed monks to perform different rituals.¹⁴³

The “non-religious” period in Kalmykia

The period from 1930s to 1980s is called “non-religious” in the history of Kalmykia, because during this time Buddhism was persecuted by the Soviet government, and not a single *khurul* functioned in Kalmykia.¹⁴⁴

According to the resolution of the 22nd Congress of the Communist party in 1923, there was no place for religion in a communist society. In this way Buddhism was prohibited in Kalmykia, the majority of monks were arrested, some even murdered, and monastic property was confiscated and destroyed.¹⁴⁵ Any activities connected with Buddhism, including academic studies, were forbidden. By the beginning of the Second World War all the *khuruls* in Kalmykia had ceased to exist. During the Soviet epoch Buddhism could be practiced only in Buryatia.¹⁴⁶

The repression of Kalmyk Buddhism was especially strong during the years of deportation (1943 – 1957). But even after the Kalmyks were permitted to return to the Volga steppe and the republic was officially restored, the question of religious revival was not

¹⁴² Ibid: 41-42.

¹⁴³ Guchinova 2006: 169-170.

¹⁴⁴ See Bakaeva 1994: 38.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid: 19.

¹⁴⁶ Kitinov 1996: 41.

raised.¹⁴⁷ However, unofficial Buddhist centers were formed in the places of residence of former monks.¹⁴⁸

During the years of 1957 – 1988 not a single *khurul* was built in Kalmykia, and new generations of monks were not trained. There arose a serious threat to the continuity of the Kalmyk religious tradition.¹⁴⁹

Religious revival in Kalmykia after 1988

The restoration of institutionalized Buddhism

On 25 October 1990 the Russian Federal Law on “The freedom of consciousness and religious organizations” was passed, opening the way to the revival of official religious structures.¹⁵⁰ After the new law had been passed, the president of the Kalmyk republic declared Buddhism and Christianity to be the state religions of Kalmykia.¹⁵¹



Sakyush Syume (the first *khurul* built in Kalmykia after the Soviet period)

The first Kalmyk Buddhist community was registered in October 1988 in Elista, and the first prayer house was opened in 1989.¹⁵²

Since the beginning of the 1990s there has been a boom of religious revival in the republic: *khuruls* have been opened in almost every town and Dharma centers have been established in many settlements. The first *khurul* (Syaksyun Syume) was built in Arshan village outside Elista in 1996.¹⁵³ The biggest *khurul* in Kalmykia, which is also the biggest Buddhist temple in Europe, was constructed in nine

¹⁴⁷ Guchinova 2006: 166.

¹⁴⁸ The most important center was the village of Tsagan Aman, where lama Dordzhiev lived until 1980 (Bakaeva 1994: 20).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Bělka 2002.

¹⁵¹ Terentyev 1996: 61-62.

¹⁵² Bakaeva 1994: 4.

¹⁵³ Guchinova 2006: 166.

months of 2005. This temple received the name Burkhn Bagshi Altn Syume (The Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni).¹⁵⁴



Burkhn Bagshi Altn Syume (The Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni)

Religious calendar events and festivals are also reestablished. Nowadays the Kalmyks officially celebrate *Zul*, *Tsagan Sar*, and *Urus Sar*. An important Kalmyk Buddhist tradition of *matsg* days has been restored. According to this tradition, the 8th, the 16th and the 30th days in every month are the days of fast or *matsg*.¹⁵⁵ In *khuruls* special rituals for *matsg* days are conducted. These rituals are connected with the cult of the most popular Buddhist deities in Kalmykia. Thus on the 8th day of a month the rituals for Green and White Taras are performed, while the 30th day is associated with Okon Tengri.¹⁵⁶ Ritual prayers are primarily in Tibetan, but there are also prayers in Kalmyk.

The revival of Buddhism in Kalmykia, as well as in other Russian Buddhist republics, is much influenced by the Tibetan government in exile. The 14th Dalai Lama himself visited Kalmykia for the first time in 1991. As the head of the Kalmyk Buddhists Telo Tulku Rinpoche said, “One of the main reasons why the revival is taking place in Kalmykia is

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Telo Tulku Rinpoche, the head of the Kalmyk Buddhists, June 2008, Elista.

¹⁵⁵ On these days it is prohibited to eat meat (interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista).

¹⁵⁶ Other important deities in Kalmykia are Buddha Shakyamuni, Yamantaka. Of especial influence in Kalmykia is the cult of White Mahakala, the defender of faith and of the purity of teaching. It's believed that Mahakala can help in spreading success on the Kalmyk land (ibid).

because of the inspiration of the Dalai Lama. His first visit was the opening door for people to come out and say that they are Buddhists and not afraid of it".¹⁵⁷ So far His Holiness has been to the republic three times. During his second visit in 1992 the Dalai Lama donated money for the building of Laganskyi Khurul and consecrated the area for the future temple. The Dalai Lama's third visit was in 2004.¹⁵⁸

There is a need for trained monks in Kalmykia. In the period between 1940 and 1988 there were neither functioning *khuruls*, nor legally practicing monks. At the present moment in the centralized Kalmyk Buddhist monastery Gede Shedduo Choi Corling 22 monks are working,¹⁵⁹ most of them are Tibetans. However, new generations of Kalmyks receive their monastic education abroad. The usual place for the training of Kalmyk monks is Drepung Gomang Dratsang monastery in India.¹⁶⁰ Thus in the 1990s about 25 young men from Kalmykia were sent to be educated there, and there is a group of students receiving their religious education there now.

A prominent change in religious authority is the establishment of the institute of *tulku* (a recognized reincarnation of an important religious personality or bodhisattva). The Shadzhin Lama or the head of Kalmyk Buddhists Telo Tulku Rinpoche was recognized as an incarnation of Tilopa by the 14th Dalai Lama.¹⁶¹ Before the Bolshevik revolution the institute of *tulku* did not exist in Kalmykia.¹⁶² The establishment of *tulku* indicates a significant change in religious authority in Kalmykia under the influence of Tibetan Buddhism. Shadzhin Lama TeloTulku Rinpoche¹⁶³ was born in the USA and educated in India. Now he is the president of the Kalmyk Buddhist Union (KBU). This organization comprises all Kalmyk Buddhist communities. As a result of the introduction of the institute of *tulku*, the head lama acquired additional power in the eyes of all the believers.¹⁶⁴

Apart from the Gelugpa order, other schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Kagyü, Sakya, and Nyingma) are present in contemporary Kalmykia. Thus in 1995 a branch of the Karmapa

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Telo Tulku Rinpoche, June 2008, Elista.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Most Kalmyk monks live in *khurul* precincts. However some of them, especially those of higher ranks, live in separate apartments or houses due to the lack of room in monasteries.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Telo Tulku Rinpoche was elected to be the Shandzhin Lama of Kalmykia in 1992.

¹⁶² The tradition of recognized reincarnations was lost in Kalmykia already in the 17th century (Bakayeva 1994: 45).

¹⁶³ His surname is Ambadykov.

¹⁶⁴ Guchinova 2006: 166.

institute of the Kagyu school was founded in Elista.¹⁶⁵ The Western Karma Kagyu branch of Ole Nydahl is also functioning in the republic. After the “non-religious” period the first stupa in Kalmykia (The Stupa of Enlightenment in Elista) was erected under the supervision of the Karma Kagyu school of Ole Nydahl in July 1999.¹⁶⁶ Ole Nydahl has visited Kalmykia several times; his last visit was in summer 2008. The Kalmyk Nyingma center is the *khurul* in Iki-Burul. The head of this *khurul* is a Kalmyk married lama, Padma Sherab (Pad ma Shes Rab). In 2004 on the territory of Iki-Burulskyi *khurul* the highest stupa in Europe was constructed.¹⁶⁷



The *khurul* in Iki-Burul

The revival of traditional spiritual institutions has brought changes in domestic religiosity. In recent years in many Kalmyk houses one can see the images of the Buddha and photographs of the 14th Dalai Lama. Some families even have home altars. Many lay believers, especially members of older generation, visit *khuruls* regularly and perform special rites for all members of their families. The most pious lay Buddhists observe *matsg* days fast. Circumambulation of stupas and *khuruls* is a constant practice for the Kalmyk laity of every generation. Most Kalmyks wear protective amulets (*bu*) and multicolored threads with “knots of happiness”. Interest in Buddhist philosophy has also increased. Lay

¹⁶⁵ Ibid

¹⁶⁶ *Izvestiya Kalmykii*, 28 July 1999.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Padma Sherab, July 2008, Iki-Burul.

people of all ages attend lectures given regularly by high lamas in *khuruls*. Some lay people even study Tibetan.¹⁶⁸

The revival of folk Buddhism

Popular or folk Buddhism¹⁶⁹ is also reviving among the Kalmyks. In the Soviet period folk religious practices were not heavily persecuted. Due to their unofficial character folk Buddhist specialists were not regarded as dangerous as *khurul* Buddhism.¹⁷⁰

Folk Buddhism is combined with the elements of Kalmyk pre-Buddhist spiritual traditions,¹⁷¹ and is represented by religious experts who perform various rituals for the benefit of lay people.¹⁷² Now there are several terms used to refer to folk Buddhist specialists. The most common are *medlgchi*, a Kalmyk word meaning ‘knowledgeable, wise, sage’, and *sakusta* or *sakusta kun*, which means ‘having the patronage of a guardian deity’. The old words *bö* and *udagan* are sometimes also used. All these terms are interchangeable in modern Kalmykia.¹⁷³

Folk religious specialists consider themselves to be Buddhists and do not distinguish the elements of ancient spiritual traditions in their activity.¹⁷⁴ They recite Buddhist mantras and prayers and have Buddhist altars and scriptures.¹⁷⁵ However, *medlgchi* or *sakusta* do not have monastic education, but receive their knowledge and power from their guardian deities of Buddhist¹⁷⁶ as well as pre-Buddhist origin.¹⁷⁷ Some *sakusta* may have only one guardian deity, others have several. There exist certain taboos: thus the names of some deities and

¹⁶⁸ In the central *khurul* there is a free course of Tibetan, the teacher is a young Kalmyk monk, Mingyangelong.

¹⁶⁹ Bakaeva uses the expressions *бытовой буддизм* or *народный буддизм* (see Bakaeva 2001 or Bakaeva 1997b).

¹⁷⁰ Guchinova 2006: 163.

¹⁷¹ According to a well-established opinion before adopting Buddhism the Oirats had two main religious traditions: shamanism and tengrism (Bakaeva 2005: 126). Some scholars don't separate these traditions due to numerous similarities in cosmological views, but refer to the Oirat-Kalmyk pre-Buddhist cults and beliefs as “the black faith” without distinguishing individual systems (Bicheev 2004: 6).

¹⁷² Bakaeva 2001.

¹⁷³ Ibid: 175. According to Bakaeva, the word *sakusta kun* can be applied to all types of folk religious specialists (ibid.). However, my fieldwork showed that the term *medlgchi* is more popular. From the emic point of view, no difference is made between these two terms and categories of practitioners.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid: 176.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Ulanova, a Kalmyk *medlgchi*, June 2008 Elista.

¹⁷⁶ The most common Buddhist guardian deities are White and Green Taras, Avalokiteshvara, Manjusri, Mahakala, Amitayus, Vajrapani, and even Tsongkhapa functions in this role (Bakaeva 2003: 178).

¹⁷⁷ The principal pre-Buddhist deities are the White Old Man and Okon Tengri (ibid.).

spirits cannot be pronounced. *Sakusta* communicate with deities, but never invite spirits into their bodies as shamans did.¹⁷⁸

A very important element in Kalmyk folk Buddhism is the vocation of ritual specialists. *Sakusta* have to apprehend that they are chosen by gods, and then they have to receive initiation and start practicing.¹⁷⁹

Folk Buddhist specialists tell fortune, remove curses, carry out love magic rites and calendar rituals,¹⁸⁰ and heal illnesses with the help of prayers and Buddhist mantras. They perform some rituals that are also conducted by monks in *khuruls*.¹⁸¹

Medlgchi have to follow an ethical code: not to eat pork and chicken, not to drink alcohol or smoke. They are not supposed to ask for money or demand rewards for their ritual services, but accept what people offer them.¹⁸²

It is difficult to state the exact number of folk Buddhist practitioners in contemporary Kalmykia because of their unofficial status.¹⁸³ According to Guchinova, there are at least several dozens of *medlgchi*.¹⁸⁴

The revitalization of Kalmyk oral epic tradition

The Kalmyk sense of ethnic identity is inseparable from oral folklore, the culmination of which is the *Jangar* epic. *Jangar* is a cycle of songs about the great deeds of Khan Jangar, the glorious ruler of Bumba, an ideal country of justice, harmony, eternal youth and immortality.¹⁸⁵ Other principal characters in the epic are the 12 foremost warriors in Jangar's army, who obey him unquestioningly and protect holy Bumba.¹⁸⁶

In many respects *Jangar* is similar to Tibetan *Gesar* epic. The main idea in both cycles is the unification of all kingdoms under one universal ruler. Jangar Khan is of heavenly

¹⁷⁸ Bakaeva 2001: 175-176.

¹⁷⁹ See Guchinova 2006: 163; Bakaeva 2001: 177; Bakaeva 2005: 123.

¹⁸⁰ For example, *gal tjalgn* or 'the offering to the fire', *usn arshan* or 'water consecration', and *usn tjalgn* or 'sacrifice to the water' (Bakaeva 2001: 177).

¹⁸¹ For example, *nasan uttilkh* or 'the prolongation of life', the ritual of 'opening the way' and of 'removal of impediments' (fieldwork research).

¹⁸² Interview with Ulanova, a Kalmyk *medlgchi*, June 2008 Elista.

¹⁸³ During my fieldwork I met three *medlgchi*, all live in Elista.

¹⁸⁴ Guchinova 2006: 163.

¹⁸⁵ There are different national versions of *Jangar*. Apart from the Kalmyk variant there are Mongolian and Xinjiang Oirat versions, as well as Altai and Buryat tales about Jangar khan (ibid: 190).

¹⁸⁶ Khan Jangar has an army of 6012 warriors or *batyrs* (*Jangar* 1989).

origin; he possesses magic powers and is predestined by gods to be the universal sovereign.¹⁸⁷

The *Jangar* epic was brought to the Kalmyk steppe by the Oirats. It is difficult to state the exact date when the first songs were created. Erdniev, basing his opinion on archeological evidence, states that the first episodes of *Jangar* were composed as early as the second half the first millennium AD during the heroic epoch of Central Asia and Southern Siberia. The final formation of the epic cycle was completed at the end of the 16th century.¹⁸⁸

It is also difficult to estimate the exact number of *Jangar* songs. The bards mainly perform ten or twelve; however, in 1978 two volumes with 25 songs were published by Kichikov.¹⁸⁹ And according to Mikhailov, there are about thirty songs of the *Jangariad* (Erdniev 2007: 336).



A Kalmyk woman playing *dombra*

Jangar is sung to the accompaniment of Kalmyk folk string instruments, the *dombra* or the *tovshur*. In Kalmykia there always existed special singers of *Jangar* called *jangarchi*.¹⁹⁰ Similar to the Tibetan epic tradition is the idea of a bard in an altered state of consciousness. *Jangarchi* were thought to be in trance or possessed by spirits that imparted the songs to

them.¹⁹¹ Thus, in the performance some shamanic elements can be distinguished. However, with the spread of Buddhism many Buddhist elements were added to *Jangar*.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ The idea of universal ruler is reflected in the semantics of *Jangar*'s name. According to Vladimirtsov, 'jangar' is short from 'jakhangir', which means 'the conqueror of the world'. *Jangar* is also called *ezen* ('lord', 'sovereign') and *bogdo*, which means 'holy' (Erdniev 2007: 336).

¹⁸⁸ Erdniev connects this date with the period when all the West Mongols were united under one ruler (ibid: 337-338).

¹⁸⁹ Ibid: 336.

¹⁹⁰ See Erdniev: 334-335; Guchinova: 190.

¹⁹¹ Guchinova 2006: 191.

¹⁹² Thus, Buddhist lamas with magic powers are constant characters; the names of Buddhist deities are also frequently mentioned. For example, Tara is portrayed in the epic as the bride of the *batyr*, and she presents to her bridegroom the volumes of the *Kangyur* and the *Tanguyr* (Bordzhanova 1999: 116).

In the Soviet period *Jangar* was not forbidden,¹⁹³ however, it was popularized as a literary text but not as oral epic, and the Russian translation was much better known than the original Kalmyk version. In the present epoch of spiritual revival the art of *jangarchi* is also being restored. In 1990 the 550th anniversary of the *Jangar* epic cycle was celebrated in the republic. And for the first time after many decades guests from Kalmyk diasporas in the USA, France and Germany came to attend this event.¹⁹⁴

What is more important for the restoration of the national epic is *Jangariada* festival held annually in Elista since 1997. This event is devoted to folk arts and ethnic sports (such as archery, horse racing, Kalmyk wrestling, etc.) described in *Jangar*. Musicians, bards (*jangarchi*) and sportsmen from every district of the republic take part in this festival. One of the most popular young *jangarchi* nowadays is Tsagan Khaalg.

Concluding considerations on the character of the religious situation in Kalmykia

The religious situation in contemporary Kalmykia is characterized by the revival of two separate levels of Buddhism. The first level is institutionalized or “*khurul*” Buddhism; it is represented by a community of monks. The Shadzhin Lama of Kalmykia supports the tendency of unification of spiritual practice and orientation towards Tibet. This level overcomes ethnic borders.

The other level is popular or folk Buddhism, which existed before the “non-religious” period and is revitalizing nowadays. This level is not institutionalized. The history of Buddhism in Kalmykia shows that religion can exist outside monasteries and hierarchical organization of sangha. Kalmyk folk Buddhism is ethnic in its origin, because it preserves ethnic peculiarities of Kalmyk spiritual traditions.

The two levels of Buddhism are separated and do not interpenetrate. The laity is in between these two religious layers. Very often from the emic side of lay Kalmyk believers the distinction between institutionalized and popular Buddhism is not made. Some lay people go only to *khuruls*, others resort to the services of *medlgchi*, and some go to both.¹⁹⁵ For contemporary Kalmyks Buddhism in all its dimensions has become the focus of national identity.

¹⁹³ In 1940 the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the *Jangar* epic was held with the support of the Party (Guchinova 2006: 192).

¹⁹⁴ Ibid: 199.

¹⁹⁵ The choice depends on family traditions; some Kalmyks have “family” *medlgchi*.

Chapter 3

The Origin and Functions of the Stupa, its Position in Kalmyk Religious Life

The construction of stupas in contemporary Kalmykia is a vivid manifestation of the revival of Buddhism in the republic. In all Buddhist communities a stupa (Tib. *mchod rten*; Mon., Kalm. *suburgan*¹⁹⁶) is a cultic architectural construction, the object of deep religious veneration. It is one of the main symbolic representations of Buddhism¹⁹⁷ and an essential element of Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist monasteries.

However, stupas have not always been exclusively Buddhist monuments. Thus there existed stupas in the Jain tradition.¹⁹⁸ Stupas or *aidukas* are also described and referred to in *Mahabharata*.¹⁹⁹ Nevertheless, it is in Buddhism that stupas acquired additional functions and a complexity of symbolic meanings.

The meaning of the word stupa, *mchod rten*, and *suburgan*

As Chandra writes, Tibetan '*mchod rten*' is based on "a folk etymology of the word stupa": *mchod* means 'offering' and *rten*²⁰⁰ is 'support, hold, receptacle'.²⁰¹ There is an opinion, according to which, the Sanskrit word *stupa* consists of *stu*, which means 'to pray, to worship' and *pa* meaning 'guarding, protecting'.²⁰² The fact that the Tibetans translated the term "stupa" implying the meaning of 'a holder of offerings' reflects the primary function that stupas have in Tibetan Buddhism, i.e. that of a relic-shrine, a receptacle of sacred objects.

However, the word stupa had several other meanings.²⁰³ In its earlier Vedic usage the term stupa meant 'a tuft or topknot of hair, top, summit',²⁰⁴ later it began to imply a hairdo

¹⁹⁶ In contemporary Kalmykia the words stupa and *suburgan* are widely used, whereas the Tibetan word *mchod rten* is not as commonly used.

¹⁹⁷ Snellgrove, Richardson 1980: 80; Snodgrass 1985; Tucci 1988; Dallapiccola 1980.

¹⁹⁸ Thus Goswamy recounts a popular Jain story about King Kanishka who had paid homage to a heretical stupa by mistake (Goswamy 1980: 2).

¹⁹⁹ Ibid: 2-7.

²⁰⁰ In Tibetan-English dictionary by H.A. Jäschke the following meanings of the word *rten* are given: 'support, hold', 'receptacle', 'seat abode, shrine' and also "a statue or figure of Buddha or other divine beings, which the pious may take hold of, and to which their devotions are more immediately directed". The latter meaning was probably added later and is connected with the tradition of relic installation in stupas and statues.

²⁰¹ See Chandra 1988: vii or Tucci 1988: 13.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Chandra 1980: xiii-xiv; Goswamy 1980: 1.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

of a sovereign, a crown. Thus stupa came to symbolize authority and supremacy of the order.²⁰⁵ The second usage is ‘heap or pile of earth’; ‘heaped up, piled up’, suggesting the notion of monument.²⁰⁶ It also means ‘stem, tree, pillar, post’ as the symbol of stability.²⁰⁷ Consequently, in earlier times stupas symbolized the supremacy and stability of the order, both royal and religious. Scholars draw attention to the links between stupa worship and the kingship cult.²⁰⁸ Supremacy and stability are the characteristics of Cakravartin (a universal sovereign); therefore, stupa “asserts the dominion of Cakravartin”.

The earliest Buddhist stupas

Various historical sources depict the Buddha as a cakravartin.²⁰⁹ A cakravartin is the one “who sets the wheel in motion”;²¹⁰ the wheel was the first of the seventh jewels of a universal monarch. The Buddha became the conqueror of the spiritual real. The expression “the Buddha set in motion the Wheel of Dharma” is a metaphor frequently used to refer to the Buddha’s first sermon.²¹¹

The Buddha told his disciple Ananda to treat his (the Buddha’s) physical remains according to the custom appropriate for an emperor,²¹² i.e. to construct a stupa at the four crossroads.²¹³ The Buddha gave further instructions concerning the structure of a stupa and funeral rites.²¹⁴ However, it is the lay people who were supposed to construct and venerate stupas, because they manifest their faith and devotion through the worship of relics. Therefore, relic worship and stupa construction should not be the concern of the *sangha*.²¹⁵

²⁰⁵ Chandra 1988: xiii.

²⁰⁶ Goswamy 1980:1.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Trainor 1997: 32-34; Chandra 1988: xxiii-xxvi.

²⁰⁹ For example, it is written that the Buddha was born with 32 special signs of the superman, cakravartin; see Bu-ston *History of Buddhism*. Part II *The History of Buddhism in India and Tibet*. Translated from Tibetan by Dr. E. Obermiller 1932: 14.

²¹⁰ Trainor 1997: 33; Chandra 1988: xxv.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² “Like those of a universal monarch”. This quotation is taken from Bu-ston 1932: 59.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ According to the *History of Buddhism in India and Tibet* by Bu-ston, the Buddha’s body had to be wrapped in a cotton-wool cloth and put in an iron coffin filled with oil; fire should be quenched with milk; the bones and ashes should be collected in a golden urn; a monument should be erected at the four crossroads and then people should worship and feast (ibid).

²¹⁵ The Pali tradition *vinaya* does not even include sections on stupa construction and consecration (Roth 1980: 183-186).

Chandra narrates about two Buddhist stupas erected during the life-time of the Buddha.²¹⁶ According to one story, the Buddha gave eight hairs from his head to be placed in a stupa in the city of Asitanjana. The other story is about the Buddha giving his hair and nail cuttings as the objects of religious worship to two merchants, showing them the model for the relic receptacle (i.e. a stupa).²¹⁷

After the Buddha's death (i.e. his entering *parinirvana*) his body was cremated according to his own instructions. The ashes were divided by the Brahmin priest Drona²¹⁸ between the eight kings who had been fighting over the possession of the Buddha's relics. Each king constructed a stupa²¹⁹ in his country to enshrine a portion of the Buddha's ashes; the ninth monument was built by Drona to enclose the golden urn in which the ashes had been kept; one more receptacle was built for the embers of the cremation fire.²²⁰ Thus at that time there were ten Buddhist relic stupas.²²¹

A very important figure in the history of Buddhism is the Indian emperor Ashoka (years of reign 273-231 BC). After several military campaigns Ashoka conquered most of present-day India; his empire stretched from Afghanistan in the west to the Ganges delta in the east.²²² Ashoka added greatly to the propagation of Buddhism across Asia, transforming Buddhism into a world religion.²²³

A number of Pali sources, for instance the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*, narrate that Ashoka built 84,000 stupas all over his vast domain.²²⁴ According to Buddhism, stupas are not merely reliquary monuments, but are identified with the Buddha and his teaching (i.e. the Dharma).²²⁵ Stupas are perceived as the architectural embodiment of the Dharma, i.e. as *dharma-kaya* or 'the body of the Law'.²²⁶ Thus 84,000 is the number of sections in the *Tripitaka* (the Pali canon), consequently, each stupa built on the orders of Ashoka contained

²¹⁶ Chandra 1988: xxvi-xxvii.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Bu-ston 1932: 64-67.

²¹⁹ In Bu-ston the word "monument" is used.

²²⁰ Ibid: 64-67.

²²¹ Bu-ston also mentions four eye-teeth monuments of the Buddha (ibid: 66).

²²² See Batchelor 1994: 8.

²²³ Ashoka also sent Buddhist missionaries in many directions, even to the Greek kings, thus Buddhism became the first missionary religion (ibid: 9).

²²⁴ Trainor 1997: 40-41. There also exists a legend that Ashoka took the Buddha's relics from the serpent deities (*naga*), divided it into 84,000 parts to enclose in stupas (Snodgrass 1985: 353).

²²⁵ See Snodgrass 1985: 360-371; Tucci 1988: 27, 39-50.

²²⁶ Tucci 1988: 27. On the question of the identity of the stupa and the Dharma see also Snodgrass 1985:366.

one of the chapters of the Pali Canon.²²⁷ These stupas were intended to propagate Buddhism and to indicate the legitimization of the spiritual order. One of the main functions of a Buddhist stupa is to assert the doctrine of the Buddha. As Tucci wrote, “to build a stupa (*mchod rten*) would mean to renew the preaching of the Law”.²²⁸ The relics enshrined in the 84,000 stupas were used to localize Buddhism and to secure political authority.

In Tibet, stupas began to be erected with the introduction of Buddhism in the 7th century AD;²²⁹ Tibetan stupas retained their reliquary character, containing various sacred objects (corporeal relics of prominent Buddhist figures, religious scriptures, images, mandalas, etc.).²³⁰ However, Tucci argues that most Tibetan stupas generally “have no funerary character” but function as commemorative and votive architectural structures.²³¹ Snodgrass distinguishes three primary functions of Buddhist stupas: that of a receptacle with the remains of great lamas and other sacred objects representing the Buddhist faith; the function of creating merit for all the sentient beings; and the function of a memorial monument commemorating great events in the history of Buddhism.²³²

According to Tucci, Tibetan stupas are all based on the principles and techniques developed in India.²³³ In Tibet stupas are classified into eight types, each type being associated with one of the eight glorious events from the Buddha’s life.²³⁴ These eight Indian stupas were accepted as the models for the stupas in Tibetan. Tucci points out that these eight stupas commemorating the events from the Buddha’s life should not be confused with the first eight stupas built to contain the Buddha’s relics.²³⁵

Thus Chandra lists the following eight types of Tibetan stupas: the stupa of “descent from heaven” (*lha babs mchod rten*) commemorating the Buddha’s descent from the Tushita Heaven after preaching to his mother; “of many doors” (*sgo mang mchod rten*) devoted to the first Buddhist sermon in Varanasi; “of the conquest of Mara” (*bdud ‘dul mchod rten*);

²²⁷ Trainor 1997: 40-41; Snodgrass 1985, 366.

²²⁸ Tucci 1988:28.

²²⁹ Snellgrove, Richardson 1980: 80.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Tucci 1988: 24.

²³² Snodgrass 1985: 353-359.

²³³ Tucci 1988: 19.

²³⁴ The crucial events are the Buddha’s birth, his attainment of Enlightenment, his preaching the first sermon, his entry into parinirvana. In the *Mahaparinibanna Sutta* the Buddha indicates the places where these events happened and says that stupas should be built there to commemorate those (Snodgrass 1985: 357). Later the four sites of great miracles performed by the Buddha were added, thus the eight types were defined. See Tucci 1988: 21-24; Chandra *Buddhist Iconography* vol. 2, 1987: 397-398; Snodgrass 1985: 357.

²³⁵ Tucci 1988: 23.

“of enlightenment” or “grand illumination” (*byang chub mchod rten*); “of heaped lotuses” (*pad spungs mchod rten*) symbolizing the birth of Shakyamuni; “of great miracles” (*cho phrul mchod rten*); “of complete victory” (*rnam rgyal mchod rten*) commemorating the Buddha’s prolongation of his life for the good of sentient beings; “of nirvana” (*myang ‘das mchod rten*) built in honour of the Buddha’s entry into *parinirvana*.²³⁶

Tucci gives two lists of the eight types of Tibetan stupas, drawn from the text of Blo gros bzang po and from that of the *Vaidurya g.yah sel*.²³⁷ In Tucci’s work the stupa “of the conquest of Mara”²³⁸ is not mentioned, but he lists the stupa “of reconciliation or brilliant”, which commemorates the unification of the Buddhist sangha after the difficulties caused by the Buddha’s cousin Devadatta, and the stupa “of preaching” built in Varanasi by Brahmadata.²³⁹

The types and structural elements of Mongolian and Kalmyk suburgans

The tradition of stupa building came to the Mongols together with Buddhism from Tibet. In the Mongolian languages a stupa is called *suburgan*. Pozdnev²⁴⁰ wrote that Mongolian suburgans were smaller images of Indian stupas; they were usually made of bronze and erected on the northern side of temples.²⁴¹ The functions, structure and symbolism of suburgans in Mongolia was in accordance with the Tibetan tradition.²⁴²

Pozdnev emphasized repeatedly the common character of Buddhism (its doctrinal, ritual and architectural sides) in Mongolia, Siberia and in the Kalmyk steppe at the end of the 19th century. Hence the Mongols, the Kalmyks and the Buryats shared similar principles regarding the form, functions and types of the stupa at least until the end of the 19th century.²⁴³

²³⁶Chandra 1987: 397-398, plates 1074-1081. See also Terentyev 2004: 128-129.

²³⁷ Tucci 1988: 21-22.

²³⁸ This stupa is said to have been built by Kiing Bimbisara to commemorate the Buddha’s victory over the hordes of Mara under the Bodhi tree. According to Terentyev, this type is often combined with that “of enlightenment”, then the stupa “of reconciliation” commemorating the agreement in the *sangha* becomes the eighth type (Terentyev 2004: 128).

²³⁹ Tucci 1988: 22-23.

²⁴⁰ Aleksey Pozdnev (1851-1920) was a Russian anthropologist, a researcher of Buddhism in Mongolia and ethnic Mongolian republics on the territory of the Russian state.

²⁴¹ Pozdnev 1993: 58.

²⁴² See Bakaeva 2000.

²⁴³ Pozdnev 1993: xiii.

Mongolian suburgans, being quite similar in form, differ with regard to names and historical significance attached to them.²⁴⁴ In the tradition of Mongolian Buddhism there existed several types of suburgans. In the pre-revolutionary period scholars distinguish from 8 to 10 types,²⁴⁵ corresponding to the types of stupas in Tibet.

Thus according to Pozdneev, the main types of Mongolian suburgans²⁴⁶ were “of many doors”, “of the holy bodhi”,²⁴⁷ “of death or nirvana”, “of disagreeing *khuvarks*”,²⁴⁸ “of miraculous transformation” (or “of grand miracles”), “of the absolute victory”, “of the descent from heaven”, “of preaching” built for the first time in Varanasi by the Indian king Sambo when the Buddha was preaching in Varanasi²⁴⁹. Pozdneev does not mention “the lotus stupa” type, which symbolizes the Buddha’s birth, though he writes about the suburgan “of the taming of the Mara”, which corresponds to that “of the conquest of Mara”. Bakaeva gives similar list of suburgan types in pre-revolutionary Kalmykia, though she does not mention the suburgan “of the taming of Mara”.²⁵⁰ Suburgans of all these types can be found in the Erdeni Dzu monastery in Mongolia.²⁵¹ It should be noted that the stupa “of nirvana” is never built separately, but only together with all the other types.²⁵²

Pozdneev noticed that Mongolian as well as Kalmyk suburgans were practically identical in form, though there were some slight architectural peculiarities of each type mentioned above.²⁵³ Mongolian suburgans were built according to the Tibetan manuals; consequently, the structure and symbolism attached to it corresponded to that of Tibetan *mchod rten*.²⁵⁴ Kalmyk suburgans were also built according to the canon, though as a rule they were smaller in size than suburgans in big Mongolian monasteries.²⁵⁵ A stupa is a canonical monument; therefore contemporary suburgans built during the process of religious

²⁴⁴ Ibid: 58; Bakaeva 2000: 118.

²⁴⁵ Bakaeva mentions 8 types (Bakaeva 2000: 118-119), whereas Pozdneev describes 10 (Pozdneev 1993: 60-61).

²⁴⁶ Pozdneev 1993: 60-61.

²⁴⁷ Pozdneev explains that this stupa was built for the first time in Magadha to commemorate the Buddha’s conquest over Mara and becoming enlightened (ibid: 60).

²⁴⁸ This type corresponds to the stupa “of reconciliation”, according to Tucci (Tucci 1988:22).

²⁴⁹ This type of stupa is listed by Tucci (ibid: 22).

²⁵⁰ Bakaeva 2000: 118.

²⁵¹ Ibid: 119.

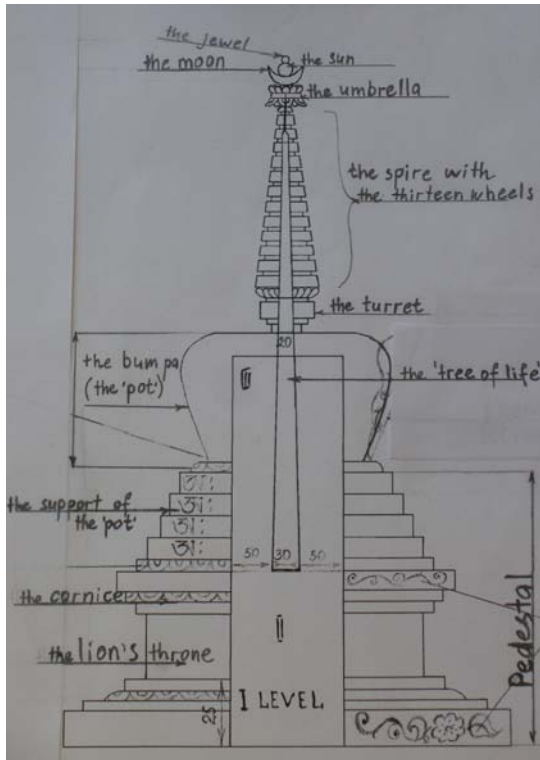
²⁵² Interview with Andzha-gelong, the abbot of Altn Syume *khurul* in Elista, July 2008.

²⁵³ Pozdneev 1993: 58-60.

²⁵⁴ For a detailed description of the structure and symbolism of *mchod rten* see Tucci 1988: 41-50 or Roth 1980: 186-193.

²⁵⁵ Bakaeva 2000: 119.

revival in Mongolia and Buddhist republics on the territory of the Russian Federation include exactly the same architectural elements as pre-revolutionary Mongolian suburgans.



Tibeto-Mongolian stupas consist of a rectangular pedestal, which in its turn can be divided into the base, the lion's throne, the cornice and the support of the 'pot'; the 'pot' or 'treasure vase' known in Kalmykia and Mongolia by the Tibetan term *bum pa*; and the upper part or the spire. The upper part includes the turret (*harmika*), thirteen wheels of the spire, the umbrella crowned with an emblem consisting of the sun, the moon and the jewel (or as it is also called the flaming fire of wisdom).²⁵⁶ In pre-revolutionary Kalmykia the treasure vase could have the form of a bell; this type of suburgan was called *khonkho*, which in Kalmyk means

'bell'. *Bum pa* could also be in the shape of a vessel or pot; in Kalmyk it was called *bombo*, which is the same as *bum pa*.²⁵⁷ Pyurveev in *The Architecture of Kalmykia* includes the pictures of these two structural types of pre-revolutionary Kalmyk suburgans.²⁵⁸ In contemporary Kalmykia only the *bombo* type suburgans have been constructed so far.

The architectonic structure of a suburgan reflects the religious beliefs, with each of its elements possessing symbolic meanings. All the communities that have Tibetan Buddhism as their main spiritual tradition share the ideas of the symbolism of stupas. The symbolism of the Kalmyk suburgan is complex²⁵⁹, as it is in accordance with the Tibetan tradition. In Kalmyk Buddhism the structure of a suburgan symbolizes, first of all, the Buddhist path to enlightenment: from the moral praxis and fundamental virtues to the miraculous powers and coefficients of supreme illumination.²⁶⁰ Thus the pedestal symbolizes moral virtues and Buddhist precepts, the treasure vase embodies the seven

²⁵⁶ This description of the structure of Mongolian suburgans is taken from Pozdnev 1993: 59-60. See also Batyreva 2005: 67-68.

²⁵⁷ Ibid: 67.

²⁵⁸ Pyurveev 1975: 78.

²⁵⁹ Bakaeva 2000: 119.

elements of enlightenment, and the turret (*harmika*) symbolizes the eightfold path.²⁶¹ The upper part of a suburgan embodies the effects achieved through the precepts, virtues and practices of the path: the wheels symbolize the Buddha's powers; the umbrella symbolizes compassion; the moon, *boddhichitta*;²⁶² the sun, wisdom (*prajna*); while the jewel stands for the enlightenment.²⁶³

As in Tibet,²⁶⁴ in Kalmykia the stupa is also perceived as a representation of the universe.²⁶⁵ In Tibetan Buddhism there is a strict correspondence between “the macrocosm and the microcosm”, therefore the stupa also symbolizes the human body, i.e. of the Buddha.²⁶⁶ Each of the main elements of a suburgan correlates with one of the five elements, a geometrical figure, a part of the Buddha's body, a mystical center in the human body (*cakra*), and a colour.²⁶⁷ Thus the pedestal corresponds to a square, the earth, the yellow colour and the Buddha's legs; the treasure vase – to a circle, the water, white, the torso; the turret together with the wheels correlate with a triangle, the fire, the red colour, the head and the crown (*ushnisha*); the umbrella – with a half-circle, the wind, black, the *cakra* above eyelash; and the *gandjur* (the moon-sun emblem) – with the space, half-circle²⁶⁸ or no form,²⁶⁹ multicolor, the *cakra* on the head.²⁷⁰

Suburgans in Kalmykia before the Soviet period

In pre-revolutionary Kalmykia suburgans were not as numerous as in Mongolia or Tibet.²⁷¹ According to Pyurveev, suburgans in Kalmykia were used mainly as architectural elements i.e. as turrets or pinnacles of *syume* (‘temples’).²⁷² Decorating of the upper levels and roofs of *khuruls* with suburgans was a distinguishing peculiarity of Kalmyk Buddhist

²⁶⁰ Batyreva 2005: 68. The same symbolism is attributed to stupas in Tibet (see Tucci 1988: 40-48 or Snodgrass 1985).

²⁶¹ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

²⁶² *Boddhichitta* (Tib. *byang chub sems*) is an aspiration to reach Enlightenment for the benefit of sentient beings (Samuel 1993: 233).

²⁶³ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

²⁶⁴ Snodgrass 1985: 360.

²⁶⁵ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July, 2008, Elista.

²⁶⁶ Snodgrass 1985: 360-362.

²⁶⁷ Bakaeva 2000: 119; Tucci 1988: 49; Snodgrass 1985: 361.

²⁶⁸ This interpretation is found in Tucci (Tucci 1988: 49).

²⁶⁹ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

²⁷⁰ Ibid. Also see Tucci 1988: 49.

²⁷¹ See Pyurveev 1975: 74 or Batyreva 2005: 67.

²⁷² Pyurveev 1975: 74.

architecture.²⁷³ The number of suburgan turrets was either one in the middle of the roof, or most usually five, with one bigger suburgan²⁷⁴ in the centre and four smaller turrets on each corner of the gallery or roof.²⁷⁵ Such pinnacle suburgans were hollow inside and filled with relics.²⁷⁶ The most popular pre-revolutionary Kalmyk *syume* with five stupa pinnacles were the wooden *syume* of Bagachonovskiy *khurul*²⁷⁷ and the main wooden *syume* of Dundu *khurul*²⁷⁸.

The idea of a stupa as a pinnacle of a temple is rooted in Buddhist cosmology, according to which, the abode of deities i.e. the three-storied palace (*kutagara*) atop the Sumeru Mountain²⁷⁹ is crowned with a stupa.²⁸⁰ Moreover, one of the meanings of the word “stupa” is “top”, “pinnacle”.²⁸¹

Using stupas as pinnacles of Buddhist temples is not an exclusively Kalmyk tradition. This architectural peculiarity is characteristic of Thai monasteries,²⁸² though it is not typical of Tibet, Mongolia, or Buryatia.

There existed several suburgans as separate monuments in the Kalmyk steppe and on the territory of *khuruls*. In Kalmyk nomad temples, there were smaller movable suburgans, which were rather miniatures of Indian stupas.²⁸³ Bakaeva describes a famous suburgan from the nomad mobile monastery called The Dalai Lama *Khurul*.²⁸⁴ This small wooden suburgan was decorated with carvings of Buddhist motives;²⁸⁵ and it was believed that this suburgan contained the Buddha's relics.²⁸⁶

Some Kalmyk stationary *khuruls* had suburgans as part of the *khurul* complex. Most suburgans in Kalmykia had a commemorative character, having been built in honour of

²⁷³ Batyreva 2005: 67.

²⁷⁴ The central suburgan turret was twice as big as the other four (Pyrveev 1975: 62).

²⁷⁵ Ibid: 62.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Pyurveev gives a detailed description of its structure (ibid: 62-63).

²⁷⁸ Ibid: 63-66.

²⁷⁹ In Tibetan Buddhism Sumeru mountain (also called Mount Meru) is considered to be the centre of the universe, with its summit being the heaven and the abode of gods (*kutagara*); all the planets are believed to revolve around it (Chandra 1988: xvii). The visualization of Mount Sumeru and the generation of *kutagara* is a very important Tantric practice, used in consecration rituals and mandala construction (ibid: xxi-xxii).

²⁸⁰ Ibid: xxii.

²⁸¹ Ibid; Goswamy 1980: 1

²⁸² Chandra 1988: xxii.

²⁸³ Bakaeva 2000: 120.

²⁸⁴ Its Tibetan name was Bkra shis lhun po; according to a half-legendary account, this *khurul* was founded in 1681 in Tibet and brought to Kalmykia by Ayuka Khan (Bakaeva 2000: 120-121).

²⁸⁵ Bakaeva writes that such technique was typical of the old Indian tradition of stupa making (Bakaeva 2000: 120).

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

some prominent *gelong* or *baksha*, some were erected above the grave or burial place of the person it was devoted to. Thus around the main *syume* of the first Kalmyk stationary monastery *khurul* Lam rim lin in Tsagan-Aman²⁸⁷ five suburgans were erected, the most venerable being the suburgan built in honour of Orchi Lama²⁸⁸ (the builder of the first *khurul*) and that of the Shadzhin Lama of the Kalmyks Zodbo Samtanov (1873-1885).²⁸⁹

Before the Soviet period Kalmyk (as well as Mongolian) suburgans had never lost their reliquary function, and most of them enshrined corporeal relics. Of great interest is the old stone suburgan with the relics of Bakshi Tsyuryum Arba, the abbot of Sera-ratsan Khurul built in 1871. Bakshi Tsyuryum Arba died in 1855 and was buried “in the air”;²⁹⁰ above his dead body a chapel with an inspection window was built. Eventually it appeared that the body did not undergo decay, therefore a suburgan was constructed to enshrine this imperishable relic.²⁹¹

Suburgans also existed among the Don Kalmyks, one of the most popular being that of the Bakshi-Lama of the Don Kalmyks (i.e. the religious leader of the Don Kalmyks) Arkada Chubanov, who died in 1894. This suburgan contained a small pyramid or *tsha-tsha* made of the *baksha*'s ashes mixed with clay.²⁹²

In Kalmykia, in order to enshrine relics not only suburgans but also movable temples in *kibitkas* could be put up and even stationary *syume* were constructed.²⁹³ Corporeal remains of lay people could also be enclosed in suburgans in Kalmykia,²⁹⁴ for example in the popular Erdnievskiy Khurul founded by Anddzatan-gelong²⁹⁵ in 1696 a chapel was constructed above the grave of the *noyon* (lay Kalmyk feudal lords or landowners)

²⁸⁷ Its main wooden *syume* built in 1798 by Orchi Lama, was the first stationary temple in Kalmykia (Bakaeva 2000: 121)

²⁸⁸ Orchi Lama was the builder of the first *syume* in Kalmykia (ibid).

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ It means that his dead body was placed on a special wooden platform without having been previously embalmed. Until the beginning of the 20th century the Kalmyks, following the Tibetan tradition, left corpses in the steppe to be eaten by wild animals. Cremation was used for deceased monks and Kalmyk nobility, burial in water was also practiced (Guchinova 2006: 127). From the 1930s the Kalmyks began to bury their dead (Sharaeva 2005: 206).

²⁹¹ Bakaeva 2000: 122.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ In Tibet it was also a custom to deposit the ashes or some other corporeal remains of lay relatives or friends (Snellgrove, Richardson 1980: 80).

²⁹⁵ Anddzatan *gelong* studied in Tibet for 27 years; he brought from Tibet to Kalmykia sacred relics (a *tangkha* of the Buddha and eight paintings) presented to him by the Fifth Dalai-Lama (Bakaeva 2000: 121).

Dugarov.²⁹⁶ In 1902 a suburgan was erected on the grave of the *zaisang* (lower-level nobility) Dondukov.²⁹⁷

In Kalmykia, as in Tibetan communities,²⁹⁸ it was believed that construction of suburgans added greatly to the spiritual well-being of the builder of suburgans and all his relatives. Suburgans in Kalmykia were often erected for the protection and well-being of the local population: thus in 1914 in the Don *khurul* Bkra shis lhun po a suburgan to ward off wars and other misfortunes was erected; financial support for its construction was provided by the Don *kozaks*.²⁹⁹

Suburgans have always been revered in Kalmykia, and circumambulating stupas and making offerings were usual practices among the Kalmyk laity.³⁰⁰ However, some suburgans were of special religious importance. One of such sacred monuments was the Suburgan of Baaza-bakshi, built in 1903 in Oran Buluk on the grave of Baaza-bakshi.³⁰¹

It is the only Buddhist monument in Kalmykia that partially survived the Soviet period.³⁰² The only existing photographs of this suburgan and of Baaza-bakshi are the ones published by a Scandinavian anthropologist G. J. Ramstedt in 1944.³⁰³

The revival of the tradition of suburgan construction in contemporary Kalmykia

In contemporary Kalmykia, which is in the process of vigorous religious revitalization, the tradition of suburgan building is also being revived. Since the end of the

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Borisenko 1994.

²⁹⁸ Tucci 1988:24.

²⁹⁹ Bakaeva 2000: 123.

³⁰⁰ The most common offerings were coins, sweets, milk, butter, flowers, etc (interview with Baatr Mangaev, July 2008, Elista).

³⁰¹ Baaza-bakshi (*bakshi* means ‘teacher’) (1846-1893) was the abbot of Dundu *khurul*; In 1891-1893 he made a pilgrimage trip to Tibet, during his journey he wrote a diary in *todo bichig* (‘clear writing’, the old Kalmyk script created by Zaya Pandita). Three years later A. Pozdneev during one of his fieldwork expeditions to Kalmykia was able to obtain this diary from Baaza-bakshi. In 1897 it was translated into Russian and published by Pozdneev (Aleekseeva, “Известия Калмыкии” (*Izvestiya Kalmykii* [Kalmykia news]) 18 December 2007).

³⁰² Batyreva 2005: 67. I was told a story about an attempt to destroy this monument: after the revolution it was planned to demolish the Suburgan of Baaza-bakshi, but when the tractor driver was trying to level the monument, he was killed by lightning. In this way some part of the suburgan survived. This half-destroyed pre-revolutionary Buddhist monument is the most popular pilgrimage site in contemporary Kalmykia (interview with Baatr Mangaev, a lay builder of suburgans, July 2008, Elista).

³⁰³ Ramstedt *Seitsemän retkeä itään* (‘Seven Trips to the Orient’), Helsinki-Porvoo: W. Söderström Co 1944.

1990s stupas have been erected in most settlements of the republic. At the present moment there are at least 40 stupas in Kalmykia.³⁰⁴

The first suburgan in post-Soviet Kalmykia, i.e. The Stupa of Enlightenment, which is also the first stupa on the territory of the Russian Federation after the Soviet period, was



The Stupa of Enlightenment in Elista, the first stupa built in Kalmykia after the Soviet period

built in 1999 in Elista.³⁰⁵ It was constructed on the initiative of the Karma Kagyu center, which had been established in Elista in 1993. The main sponsors of this project were Shamar Rinpoche, the leader of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, and Ole

Nydal.³⁰⁶ The architectural scheme of the stupa was designed by a German architect V. Kosovskiy.³⁰⁷ The main peculiarity of this 11-meter suburgan is an altar room with a prayer drum inside its lower level.

The suburgans erected in Kalmykia after the Soviet period conform in structure to the Tibetan tradition of stupa building. As has been pointed out in the second chapter, the Shadzhin Lama of Kalmykia supports the tendency of unification of spiritual practice and orientation towards Tibet. Thus the architecture of contemporary Kalmyk stupas is practically identical to that of the pre-revolutionary Mongolian or Kalmyk suburgans, the main elements being a rectangular pedestal, a round treasure vase or *bumba*, and a spire consisting of thirteen wheels crowned with *naran sar* or *gandjur*.³⁰⁸ Architecturally all

³⁰⁴ According to the official site of the monastery Gede Sheddup Choi Corling www.buddhisminkalmykia.ru, 12 October 2008.

³⁰⁵ *Izvestiya Kalmykii*, 28 июля 1999.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Kosovskiy also made drafts for stupas in Germany, Spain and Poland. A Kalmyk architect V. Gilyandikov also took part in the projecting of the monument (ibid).

³⁰⁸ The terms *naran sar* and *gandjur* are used in Kalmykia to refer to the sun, the moon and the jewel construction on top of a stupa (interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista).

contemporary suburgans in Kalmykia are similar, though the height varies from four to twelve meters. The highest stupa in Kalmykia (12 m), The Stupa of Enlightenment and Suppression of Negative Energy was constructed in Iki-Burul in 2004.³⁰⁹ This monument



The Stupa of Enlightenment and Suppression of Negative Energy in Iki-Burul

differs from other Kalmyk stupas because it is built in accordance with the Nepalese Nyingma tradition with the eyes painted on each side of the *harmika*.³¹⁰

All the stupas in Kalmykia have a small statue of a Buddhist deity (as a rule Buddha Shakyamuni) placed in the opening of the *bum pa* on the southern side.³¹¹ Some suburgans have a statue of a different deity on each side of the *bum pa*.³¹²

Some Kalmyk suburgans function as shrines, having an altar room inside, examples of such constructions being the Stupa of Enlightenment in Elista and the suburgan in Yuzhnyi. A few stupas, for example The Stupa of Victory in the village of Shin-Mer and the Stupa of Enlightenment in Elista, even contain prayer wheels (*kurde*)

in the altar room.³¹³

The stupas built in the republic before 2008 do not have any ornament; the pedestals and treasure vases of these monuments are plastered and painted white. As was explained by the abbot of the central *khurul* The Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, there were no

³⁰⁹ The *khurul* in Iki-Burul (this settlement is in three-hour drive south from the capital of Kalmykia) is the center of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism in Kalmykia. Interview with Padma Sherab (Pad ma Shes rab) the abbot of the *khurul* in Iki-Burul (July 2008, Iki-Burul).

³¹⁰ According to Padma Sherab, the eyes painted on the stupa represent the Buddha of compassion Avalokiteshvara (Sryan ras gzigs) (ibid). Snodgrass wrote that these eyes symbolize the eyes of the Adi Buddha (Snodgrass 1985: 361).

³¹¹ According to the Mongolian cosmological views, the front entrance to prayer houses as well as the front gate of monasteries is also always in the south (Pyrveev 1975: 60).

³¹² For example the suburgan in the settlement Yuzhnyi has the statues of Buddha Shakyamuni, Avalokiteshvara, Vajrapani and Manjusri (Borisenko 1994).

³¹³ Fieldwork observation.

specialists in Kalmykia who could decorate stupas with ornament in accordance with the canonical tradition.³¹⁴ However, the latest suburgans (i.e. those erected in the second half of 2008) have brightly decorated pedestals,³¹⁵ as the artists from India have been invited to Kalmykia to decorate these monuments.

As has been mentioned above, the architectural peculiarities of suburgans depend on which type they represent. The most common type in contemporary Kalmykia is the stupa “of enlightenment” or “of Bodhi”. Tucci mentioned that this type (in his work he calls it the stupa of the “great illumination”) is the most wide-spread one in Western Tibet and in Ladakh.³¹⁶ However, some types are also present in Kalmykia; thus in June 2007 The Stupa of Victory (Rnam rgyal mchod rten) was built in the settlement of Shin-Mer.³¹⁷ In November 2008 The Stupa of Many Doors (Sgo mang mchod rten) was opened in the settlement Komsomolskiy.³¹⁸ This stupa differs from other suburgans in Kalmykia, being characterized by the image of small doors on each of the four steps of the *bum pa* base.³¹⁹



A stupa of “great miracles” on the fence of the central *khurul*

The revival of the traditional Kalmyk Buddhist architecture is embodied in the design of the largest *khurul* complex The Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni (Burkhn Bagshi Altn Syume) built in 2005 in Elista. Following the principles of pre-revolutionary Kalmyk Buddhist architecture, stupas are used as constituent parts of the *khurul*. The territory of the *khurul* complex is surrounded by a rectangular fence decorated with 108³²⁰ small suburgans each about one metre high. These small suburgans are of three types: of “the descent from the god realm” (*lha babs mchod rten*), of “accumulated lotuses” (*pad spungs mchod rten*), and of “great miracles” (*cho 'phrul mchod rten*). Each type has structural peculiarities, thus the

³¹⁴ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

³¹⁵ For example The Stupa of Harmony and Accord in Elista, The Stupa of Many Doors in Komsomolskiy (a settlement in the south-west of Kalmykia).

³¹⁶ Tucci 1988: 51.

³¹⁷ *Izvestiya Kalmykii*, 15 June 2007.

³¹⁸ *Izvestiya Kalmykii*, 27 November 2008.

³¹⁹ Terentyev 2004: 128.

³²⁰ There are 108 beads in a rosary; a mantra should be repeated 108 times in order to be efficient, the Tangyur includes ritualistic treatises for the construction of 108 stupas, therefore in Western Tibet in ancient centers there are lines of 108 stupas (Tucci 1988: 50). Tucci connects the sacred character of the number 108 with

stupa of “descent from heaven” has central projection with steps, the lotus-stupa is characterized by circular lotus-shaped steps of the *bumba* base, and that of “great miracles” has projecting central sections of the *bum pa* steps.³²¹ These suburgans are not ornamented, but just painted white. The two fence stupas on each side of the central gate have small statues of Buddha Shakyamuni in the opening of the *bum pa*.

The main *syume* of the *khurul* complex is the biggest Buddhist temple in Europe. It is a seven-level building, the fourth level of which is an open gallery decorated with four suburgans, one on each corner. The old Kalmyk tradition of decorating *khuruls* and *syume* with suburgans has been resumed; nevertheless, The Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni is the only temple decorated with suburgans in contemporary Kalmykia.



One of the four suburgans on the upper level on Burkhan Bagshi Altn Syume

The four pinnacle suburgans have images of four Buddhist deities on each side of the *bum pa*. The same deities are portrayed on all the four stupas: Buddha Shakyamuni and three deities of longevity (*tshe ring lha rnam gsum*). The image of Buddha Shakyamuni is on the southern side facing the front gate of the *khurul*. On the northern side, the three-faced and eight-armed goddess of Supreme Victory Ushnishavijaya (Rnam rgyal ma) is depicted. The images of White Tara (Sgrol dkar) and Amitayus (Tshe dpag med) face the East and the West respectively.

These four stupas on the gallery of the *khurul* are devoted to the four Oirat-Kalmyk clans, i.e. the “union of four Oirats”. Therefore on each side of the suburgans above the images of the deities there is an emblem “of four Oirat tribes”: four interlocking circles. The four stupas are consecrated and contain relics (mainly weapons and scriptures). The

astrology, arguing that 108 is received when 12 (i.e. the number of zodiacal signs) is multiplied by 9 (i.e. the number of planets in the system) (ibid.).

³²¹ The conclusions are drawn from the fieldwork observation. See also Terentyev 2004: 128-129.

portrayal of the three Buddhas of longevity is believed to grant long and prosperous life to the Kalmyk nation.³²²

Some present day Kalmyk stupas are built in honour of a Buddhist deity or teacher. Thus the suburgan in Baga-Burul is devoted to the goddess of Victory and long life Ushnishavijaya (Rnam rgyal ma); in the village Priyutnoe a stupa for the longevity of the 14th Dalai-Lama was constructed³²³. The Stupa of Victory in Shin-Mer in Western Kalmykia was erected to immortalize the name of Geshe Vangyal, a Kalmyk lama, one of the founders of the first Buddhist monastery in the USA.³²⁴

A few stupas are erected to commemorate some noble Kalmyk family clan (*arvan*), for example, in the northern part of the republic on the border with the Volgograd region a suburgan in honour of the Tundutovs clan is being built.³²⁵



The Stupa of Enlightenment in Arshan

The construction of a stupa is regarded in Kalmykia as an act of great merit. Moreover, in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism the building of stupas is believed to transmit merit to all the creatures that come in contact with the stupa.³²⁶ Suburgans are believed to fill the world with spiritual well-being and peace and to protect from misfortunes, illnesses and conflicts.

In 2008 The Stupa of Harmony and Accord was constructed in Elista in order to stop constant fights between criminal teenage gangs.³²⁷

The cult of stupa defines the focus of Kalmyk religious and national identity, because, as has been pointed out in the previous chapter, in contemporary Kalmykia national identity is created through religious ideology.

³²² Interview with the *emchi* of the central *khurul*, Sanal Kukuev, June 2008, Elista.

³²³ Ibid. See also Borisenko 1994.

³²⁴ *Izvestiya Kalmykii*, 15 June 2007.

³²⁵ Interview with a Kalmyk *medlgchi* Ulanova, July 2008, Elista.

³²⁶ Tucci 1988: 24; Snodgrass 1985: 358-359; Snellgrove, Richardson 1980: 80.

³²⁷ *Izvestiya Kalmykii* 12 October 2008.

Chapter 4

The concept of relics and the content of stupas (built since the 1990s) in Kalmykia

The concept of relics in Tibetan Buddhism

In Tibetan Buddhism a stupa receives its sacred character only after it has been consecrated. The consecration consists of the deposition of relics and the final consecration (*rab gnas*).³²⁸ Only after the completion of these two stages the presence of Buddhas and *yi dam* (tutelary deity) is believed to be active in a receptacle.³²⁹ Since a statue is a representation of the Buddha's body, and stupas are also identified with the Buddha's body, the consecration of statues includes the same two stages; moreover, the same objects are deposited in them and the same consecration rituals are performed.³³⁰

Relics are items which possess great religious importance by being connected with the Buddha or some important religious character; relics locate the Buddha in this world, providing the possibility of interaction with the enlightened mind.³³¹ Relics are traditionally subdivided into relics of the Buddha's body (images, statues, physical remains), of the Buddha's speech (religious texts), and of the Buddha's mind (miniature stupas and *tsha tsha*).³³² The entire space of Tibetan stupas is filled with relics of different types; the place of relics in a receptacle and the order of their deposition show the hierarchical order of religious value attached to the relics.³³³

In Buddhism the notion of relics was based on the cult of the physical remains of Buddha Shakyamuni.³³⁴ In the earliest Buddhist period in India the cult of bodily relics predominated.³³⁵ However, different opinions existed regarding the cult of bodily relics and the presence of the Buddha in *samsara*. Thus according to one school of thought, the

³²⁸ Bentor 2003: 22.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Interview with the abbot of the central *khurul* in Elista Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

³³¹ Bentor 1994: 16.

³³² See Bentor 2003: 28. *Tsha tshas* are miniature stupas, usually made of clay. The term *tsha tsha* will be discussed further in the chapter.

³³³ Bentor 2003.

³³⁴ As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, the first Buddhist stupas were built to enshrine the Buddha's corporeal remains and the objects that had been used by the Buddha (see Snodgrass 1985: 354; Bu-ston *The History of Buddhism in India and Tibet*. Translated from Tibetan by Dr. E. Obermiller 1932: 59; Chandra 1988: xxvi-xxvii).

³³⁵ The corporeal remains of other prominent Buddhist characters, e.g. the Buddha's disciples, were also worshiped as relics (Bentor 2003: 22).

Buddha, having passed into *nirvana*, left nothing behind; others stated that the Buddha was present in his corporeal remains.³³⁶ These contradictory views were reconciled by the theory of the multiple bodies of the Buddha, according to which the Buddha's physical body was distinguished from his body of teaching, i.e. the Dharma.³³⁷

Religious scriptures in the form of sutras and *dharanis*³³⁸ were also enclosed in stupas in the early Buddhist period, because according to certain doctrinal precepts,³³⁹ the presence of the Buddha is regarded as being located in his teachings.³⁴⁰ Therefore, Mahayana Buddhism is characterized by the cult of book.³⁴¹

The Tibetan concept of relics was derived from the Indian Buddhist tradition.³⁴² However, in Tibet this concept was further developed.³⁴³ According to Yael Bentor, Tibetan written sources give threefold,³⁴⁴ fourfold,³⁴⁵ and fivefold classifications of relics.³⁴⁶

The most frequently used Tibetan term for the notion of 'relics' is *ring bsrel*. Jäschke translates *ring bsrel* as "things which are to be preserved for a long time", "relics of a Buddha or a saint", "small, hard particles, the remnants of burnt bones".³⁴⁷ Thus the expression *ring bsrel* has general and specific meanings. In its general meaning, *ring bsrel* is a collective name for all types of relics; in its narrower specific usage it is short for *yungs 'bru lta bu'i ring bsrel* or 'relics which are like mustard seeds', these constitute a separate category.³⁴⁸ 'Mustard-sees-like' relics are small round substances, which are said to appear

³³⁶ For a more detailed discussion see Bentor 1995: 249-250.

³³⁷ The doctrine of three main bodies of the Buddha, according to which the Buddha has the Dharma-body (*dharmakaya*), the Glorious Body (*sambhogakaya*) "in which Buddhas teach in pure Buddha realms", and the Transformation Body (*nirmanakaya*), i.e. the assumed physical form (Snellgrove 1987: 116).

³³⁸ *Dharanis* (*gzungs*) are longer mantras used in different rituals, meditation practices and relic cults etc. (Snellgrove 87: 122). The practice of the installation of *dharani* and its role in stupa consecration is discussed in the next chapter.

³³⁹ Thus according to some Buddhist sutras, for e.g. the *Suvarnaprabhasottama Sutra*, the true nature of the Buddha is the body of his teachings, i.e. *dharmakaya* (Bentor 2003: 25).

³⁴⁰ Bentor 1995: 250-256.

³⁴¹ See Schopen 1975. The cult of book and the role of Buddhist scriptures in consecration rituals will be discussed in the following chapter.

³⁴² Bentor 1994: 16.

³⁴³ Bentor 2003: 35. There are not many discrepancies in the concept of relics and in the practices of their insertion between different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Moreover, similar practices of depositing relics in stupas are found in other Buddhist countries (e.g. in China, Korea, Japan), see *ibid*: 26.

³⁴⁴ A threefold classification of relics was given by Mkhas grub rje (1385-1438) (Bentor 1994: 16-17).

³⁴⁵ This classification is more common in Tibetan literature since the 13th century, for instance in the works of the Fifth Dalai Lama, the First Panchen Lama, etc (*ibid*).

³⁴⁶ For a detailed description and comparison of these classifications see Bentor 1994 or Bentor 2003: 24-26.

³⁴⁷ *Tibetan-English Dictionary* by Jäschke 1934: 529.

³⁴⁸ Bentor 1994: 17.

on other relics or sacred objects.³⁴⁹ These substances³⁵⁰ are characterized by the capacity to multiply, and therefore there is a possibility to enshrine the relics of late teachers in receptacles constructed nowadays. This type of relics must be deposited in the upper part of the stupa.³⁵¹ Bentor assumes that this category of relics did not have precedents in India.³⁵²

‘Relics which are like mustard seeds’ are distinguished from the category of bodily relics (*sku gdung*), which comprises the physical remains of the Buddha and of other important Buddhist personages.³⁵³

Another type is ‘relics of contact and association’ (*sku bal gyi ring bsrel*)³⁵⁴, which include hair, nails, teeth, objects that came in contact or were used by a holy person (e.g. clothes, towels, sitting cushions, handprints, etc.) and blessed substances (such as pill or pellets blessed by superior lamas).³⁵⁵ The relics of contact are installed in accordance with the parts of the body they came in contact with.³⁵⁶

Among the relics of association are stones, wood, earth, and water from the holy Buddhist places (e.g. in India, Tibet, and Mongolia). Parts or ruins of sacred stupas, temples, statues as well as destroyed scriptures are also enshrined in receptacles as relics of association.³⁵⁷ Bentor includes statues, images, *thangkas*, and mandalas in this category.³⁵⁸

A very important category are the Dharma-relics (*chos kyī ring bsrel*).³⁵⁹ This includes scriptures of Sutras and Tantras, commentaries by Indian and Tibetan teachers, *dharanis* (*gzungs*), mantras (*sngags*), the verse of Interdependent Origination,³⁶⁰ and ‘name mantras’ (*mtshan sngags*) rendering the essence of Buddhas and lamas.³⁶¹ Most of the

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ According to the abbot of Iki-Burul *khurul* Padma Sherab, mustard-seed-like relics, also called *shariram*, are believed to be “the crystallized, hardened energy of Enlightenment”. *Shariram* can be of five colours, but most often they are white or yellow (interview with Padma Sherab, July 2008 Iki-Burul).

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Bentor 1995: 258.

³⁵³ Bentor 2003: 27-28. The status of lamas in Tibet is considered to be equal to that of the Buddha; therefore the physical remains of lamas are also considered to be bodily relics (ibid: 27).

³⁵⁴ These relics are also called ‘relics of the garb’ (Bentor 1994: 16-17).

³⁵⁵ Bentor 2003: 28.

³⁵⁶ Ibid: 29.

³⁵⁷ Thus in The Stupa of Harmony and Accord in Elista was deposited a fragment of the lotus seat of a destroyed stupa in Erdeni Dzu (fieldwork observation).

³⁵⁸ Bentor 2003: 29-30.

³⁵⁹ In threefold and fourfold Tibetan classifications these relics are called the *dharmakaya* relics (*chos sku'i ring bsrel*). Though in fivefold classifications this category is further divided into the Dharma-relics (scriptures and mantras) and the relics of *dharmakaya* (smaller stupas and *tsha tsha*) (Bentor 1994: 16-18).

³⁶⁰ For the Sanskrit variant and English translation of the verse of Interdependent Origination see Boucher 1991: 11.

³⁶¹ ‘Name mantras’ of Tibetan lamas present “the Sanskrit equivalent of their Tibetan name” (Bentor 2003: 39).

interior space of Tibetan stupas and statues is filled with these relics.³⁶² In Tibetan stupas, the scriptures are placed according to their canonical hierarchy.³⁶³ Moreover, damaged religious books should not be thrown away, but installed in receptacles.³⁶⁴

Another category of relics distinguished in the fivefold classifications includes smaller stupas and *tsha tshas*. This category is called ‘relics of the *dharmakaya*’ (*chos kyi sku'i ring bsrel*),³⁶⁵ because stupas and *tsha tsha* symbolize the *dharmakaya*.³⁶⁶

Jäschke translated the word *tsha tsha* as “little images of Buddha, and conical figures, moulded of clay and used at sacrifices”.³⁶⁷ Bentor defines *tsha tshas* as “miniature stupas made of clay with the help of a mould”.³⁶⁸ Tucci quotes several definitions of this term.³⁶⁹ According to Tucci, *tsha tshas* are small images made of earth and water, which can be mixed with barley or wheat for the purpose of good harvest or simply because these grains are used in consecration of these images.³⁷⁰ *Tsha tsha* can have the form of a stupa or can be of a roundish shape with a seal pressed of it, as a rule this seal has an image of a stupa or a Buddhist deity.³⁷¹ Sometimes physical remains are mixed with clay and made into *tsha tsha*, in this case *tsha tsha* is also a reliquary of bodily relics.³⁷² Moreover, *tsha tsha* is also a receptacle of the Dharma-relics, because mantras are either impressed on them with a seal or attached to them.³⁷³

The practice of installation of *tsha tshas* in receptacles began about the seventh century in India and was adopted in Tibet (ibid: 26). Tucci, following Foucher, connects the spread of *tsha tsha* with the Buddhist tradition of pilgrimage to sacred places, assuming that *tsha tshas* were made as souvenirs for pilgrims in remembrance of holy places or the sacred Buddhist monuments.³⁷⁴ However, Tucci suggests other possible origins of *tsha tsha* in

³⁶² Ibid: 31.

³⁶³ Thus Tantras and commentaries of the Highest Yoga Tantra are deposited above the heart in the upper part of stupas, the Lower Tantras are placed below the heart, Sutras and *Vinaya* scriptures are placed in the crossed legs part. *Dharanis* and mantras are placed in *bum pa* (‘the treasure vase’) according to their function and the ranking of the teaching to which they belong (ibid: 31-32).

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Bentor 1994: 21.

³⁶⁶ Bentor 2003: 25.

³⁶⁷ Jäschke *Tibetan-English Dictionary* 1934: 443.

³⁶⁸ Bentor 2003: 25.

³⁶⁹ Tucci 1988: 53-54.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Ibid: 60-61.

³⁷² Bentor 2003: 28.

³⁷³ Tucci 1988: 57.

³⁷⁴ Ibid: 55-57, 61.

Tibet: they could be made to create merit if there was no possibility and means for monuments of larger size.³⁷⁵

In Tibetan literature³⁷⁶ relics are ranked as high, middle and low.³⁷⁷ The most important relics are considered to be the bodily relics and the Dharma-relics.³⁷⁸ However, Mkhas grub rje, the author of the threefold classification of relics and the Gelugpa authors ranked the relics of the Dharma as the highest.³⁷⁹ In some cases the Tibetan word *gzungs*³⁸⁰ is used to refer to all types of relics.³⁸¹ This usage reflects the significance that *dharanis* or *gzungs* possess in the Tibetan tradition of relic cult and stupa consecration.

All the above-mentioned categories of relics are installed in the *bum pa* ('the vase') or in the upper part of a receptacle. The lower part of stupas, i.e. the pedestals, also contains deposits: various substances, such as herbs, stones, grains, food, wool, etc. Being necessary elements of the stupa content, the deposits of the pedestals are not considered to be relics, but function as offerings to deities and spirits or as 'omens' for pragmatic benefits.³⁸²

The content of stupas built in Kalmykia after the Soviet period

Nowadays the Kalmyks are actively indulged in extensive construction of stupas and statues, which have become so popular in contemporary Kalmykia that even some lay people erect stupas in their yards. Since the Gelugpa is the most important school of Buddhism in Kalmykia, most suburgans are built under the Gelugpa supervision. Nevertheless, other schools of Tibetan Buddhism also construct suburgans. Though the present analysis is mainly based on the Gelugpa suburgans, the sacred monuments of other Tibetan Buddhist schools are also discussed.

³⁷⁵ Ibid: 57. It is also believed that merit can be created even by drawing a stupa or making its miniature copy (ibid: 32).

³⁷⁶ For example, in the *Byang chub Snying po Rgyan*, which is regarded as the main authority for relic classifications in Tibet (Bentor 1994: 20-23)

³⁷⁷ Ibid: 16.

³⁷⁸ Ibid: 20. In the early Buddhist period Indian receptacles contained these types of relics (see also Bentor 1995: 258).

³⁷⁹ See Bentor 1994: 16, 19. Tucci, having investigated hundreds of stupas in Tibet, came to the conclusion that Tibetan stupas "have no funerary character", because he did not find stupas constructed on the bodily relics (Tucci 1988: 26).

³⁸⁰ In its specific meaning *gzungs* means the same as *dharani*, i.e. "spells, magic sentences; they are for the most part short, and always end in a string of Sanskrit syllables" (*Tibetan-English Dictionary* by Jäschke 1934: 495).

³⁸¹ The examples of this usage can be seen in the names of some rituals such as *gzungs gzhug* 'the insertion of relics' (Bentor 1994: 19) or *gzungs sgrub* 'the empowerment of relics' (interviews with ritual experts in Kalmykia, June-July 2008).

The concept of relics and the content of suburgans in contemporary Kalmykia are modeled on the Tibetan Buddhist tradition however, there are some minor peculiarities.

The construction of a suburgan consists of three stages, each stage being accompanied by the installation of items: hence there are three levels of relic installation. The ingredients deposited in the first two levels are not considered to be relics, but regarded as offerings to various landscape deities, such as earth deities (*sa yi lha*), serpent deities (*naga, klu*), and wealth deities (*nor lha*).³⁸³ The deposits of the pedestals are perceived as ‘omens’ for mundane purposes, such as wealth, good health and harvest, communal luck or fortune, etc.³⁸⁴

The content of suburgans in present day Kalmykia and the process of relic deposition will be described and analyzed on the example of The Stupa of Harmony and Accord, which was built in Elista in 2008 with the aim to stop constant fights between the city gangs. This suburgan is a typical example of contemporary Kalmyk Buddhist architecture. It belongs to “the stupa of enlightenment” type; it is about 6.5 m high; the pedestal is decorated with the traditional ornament.



The Stupa of Harmony and Accord in Elista³⁸⁵

The construction of the suburgan began in May 2008; the final consecration (*rab gnas*) and the opening of the monument took place on October 12, 2008. During the time of my fieldwork in Kalmykia (June-July 2008), I was able to observe the process of relics installation of the first and the second levels. The deposition of relics (*gzungs gzhus* or

³⁸² See Bantor 1994: 27 or Bantor 2003: 33-34.

³⁸³ For a detailed classification of landscape deities see Samuel 1993: 176.

³⁸⁴ Bantor 2003: 33-34.

gzungs 'bul) was performed by the Gelugpa monks from the central *khurul*, The Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni in Elista. The ritual master in charge of this suburgan was Tupten Shakya (Thub bstan Shakya), a Tibetan monk working in the central *khurul* in Elista.

I will follow the construction of this stupa level by level, describing the items for installation, the ceremony, and providing the explanation of the functions of the deposited items.³⁸⁶

The first level of the installation of relics

The installation of relics in the first level of The Stupa of Harmony and Accord in Elista took place in May; consequently I was not able to observe this ceremony. However, from the interviews with Tupten Shakya, with Baatr Mangaev, the head of the Kalmyk Buddhist center “Tilopa”, who assisted in the construction of the suburgan and with Dordzhinov, one of the sponsors of the construction, I learned that in the first level of The Stupa of Harmony and Accord the following items were deposited: three ‘treasure vases’ (*g.yang bum*) with earth, sand and pebbles from the Erdeni Dzu monastery in Mongolia and from Dharamsala; weapons (a bow, arrows, a saber, and a rifle); farming tools (a spade and a rake); five jars with five types of wool (of horse, dog, cow, sheep, and goat); five types of grains (rice, lentil, sunflower seeds, barley and peas) and incense.

The first level of the suburgan comprises the foundation of the monument and the first base up to the ‘lion throne’.³⁸⁷ At the base of the suburgan three ‘treasure vases’ (*g.yang bum*) are deposited.³⁸⁸ The ingredients of these vases are meant to subdue the local deities.³⁸⁹ Thus in The Stupa of Harmony and Accord these vases of the first level are filled with soil, sand, and pebbles from the Erdeni Dzu monastery in Mongolia and from Dharamsala, because these places are viewed as holy.

The first level of most Kalmyk suburgans contains weapons. As a rule these are traditional weapons that had been used among the Mongols, such as bows, arrows, spears, and sabres. Thus in the four pinnacle suburgans on the gallery of The Golden Abode of

³⁸⁵ This picture was taken from the site www.buddhisminkalmykia.ru

³⁸⁶ Most information with regard to the symbolism and functions of the deposited items was given to me by the ritual expert in charge of the stupa, Tupten (Thub bstan) Shakya and the abbot of The Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni Khurul, Andzha-gelong during several interviews in June-July 2008.

³⁸⁷ Interviews with Andzha-gelong and with Baatr Mangaev, July 2008, Elista.

³⁸⁸ Similar practice is observed in Tibet; see Bentor 2003: 33.

³⁸⁹ Interview with Baatr Mangaev, July 2008, Elista.

Buddha Shakyamuni Khurul there are Mongolian and Dagestan sabres decorated with precious stones presented by the president of Kalmykia, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov.³⁹⁰ In Kalmykia, the weapons installed in suburgans are perceived as offering to the warriors of Bumba.³⁹¹ Sometimes contemporary guns and rifles are deposited. Thus the first level of The Stupa of Harmony and Accord contains a rifle. The weapons placed under the suburgans are perceived as omens for peace, protecting from wars and conflicts.³⁹² Bentor also mentions the practice of depositing weapons under stupas in Tibet, explaining that the use of weapons is “neutralized under the weight of the stupa”.³⁹³

Farming tools and implements, such as spades, shovels, rakes, hoes, etc. are usually deposited in the first level for obtaining good harvest.³⁹⁴

According to an old Kalmyk custom, the first level of a suburgan must contain five jars with five types of wool: of horse, dog, cow, sheep, and goat. Kalmykia is a steppe, and a person is considered to be wealthy if he has all these five kinds of animals. Therefore, five types of wool are installed as offerings to the local deities and as omens for prosperity and healthy livestock.³⁹⁵ Though Kalmykia has always been famous for camel breeding, the camel wool is not deposited in suburgans.³⁹⁶

Five types of groats are obligatory deposits for the Kalmyk suburgans. The usual grains for deposition in Kalmykia are wheat, barley, mustard, rye, rice, buckwheat, dried peas, sunflower seeds, or lentil, of which only five are selected for deposition. In Kalmyk stupas grain can be placed either in the first or the second level. Grain is believed to be an omen of good harvest and fertility, it is meant to ward off crop failure and famine.³⁹⁷ In the first level of a suburgan groats can also function as offerings to the local deities, mainly ‘earth-owner’ spirits (*sa bdag*).³⁹⁸

³⁹⁰ Interview with Sanal Kukuev, the *emchi* of the central *khurul*, June 2008, Elista.

³⁹¹ Bumba is the legendary country in the Kalmyk epos, the Kalmyk variant of Shambhala (ibid.).

³⁹² Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

³⁹³ Bentor 2003: 34.

³⁹⁴ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista. Bentor also mentions about the installation of “farming utensils for increasing crops” in Tibet (see Bentor 2003: 34).

³⁹⁵ Interview with Baatr Mangaev, June, 2008, Elista.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ According to the observation of the second level of relic installation and an interview with Dorzhinov, one of the lay sponsors of the project, July 2008, Elista.

³⁹⁸ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

As I was told,³⁹⁹ each level is usually strewed with herbs,⁴⁰⁰ herbal incense is believed to pacify the local deities and to purify and bless the interior space of the stupa.

The second level of the installation of relics

Fieldwork observation of the installation of relics within the second level of The Stupa of Harmony and Accord, June 19, 2008

The relics installation in the second level in The Stupa of Harmony and Accord took place on June 19, 2008. The ceremony began at 10 am. Three monks performed the ritual of depositing the relics; and about ten lay people assisted in the process, among them was the sponsor of the construction, Dordzhinov. Lay believers also gathered at the site of the construction.

Each stage of the installation of ingredients in a stupa receives lively attention from the local media, being treated as a big festive event in the republic. Thus journalists from



The president of Kalmykia, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, with lay believers on the site of the ceremony

local radio stations, newspapers and television arrived to observe the relic deposition. The same evening a report about the ceremony was broadcasted on the local TV channel.

The president of Kalmykia, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, also attended this event and even participated in the process of the relic installation. The president of Kalmykia takes active part in

important religious events of Kalmykia.

A wooden table was put on the pedestal of the future stupa, it was covered with a red cloth and the ingredients for deposition were placed on the table. These ingredients included: five ‘treasure vases’ (*g.yang bum*) filled with precious substances (pearls, turquoise, copper,

³⁹⁹ Interview with Baatr Mangaev, June 2008, Elista.

⁴⁰⁰ In Kalmykia this herbal incense is called *sangin idan*.

silver and aluminium),⁴⁰¹ several glass jars with food (salt, sugar, honey, dried fruit, and sunflower seeds), fresh fruit (bananas, pineapples), and a plastic bag with herbs (a mixture of quitch grass, kusha grass, and wormwood grass). Dordzhinov showed me a fragment of the ‘lotus seat’ from the destroyed suburgan in Erdeni Dzu monastery, this item was also brought for installation.

When all the ingredients were ready on the table, the monks sat on the cornice around the opening in the stupa in which the deposits should be put. Lay assistants were passing objects to the monks and the monks were placing the items inside the stupa. After each category of objects (jars with food, ‘treasure vases’, etc) was inserted, the monks chanted; each chanting lasted approximately twenty minutes.

Dordzhinov passed a glass jar in which lay believers put money; this jar was also deposited in the lotus seat the same day. Some people even gave jewellery to be placed in the stupa. Among lay Kalmyks there is a belief that if a person puts some money or any item



of his belongings in the ‘lion throne’ of a suburgan, the ‘refund’ will be tenfold.⁴⁰²

When all the items for the second level were deposited, the monks, still sitting on the cornice, chanted for about twenty minutes. The whole process of installation occupied about three hours.

At the end of the ceremony a table with refreshments was laid for all who were present. Girls in traditional Kalmyk costumes served Kalmyk tea (boiled in milk with butter, salt and pepper) and *borts* (small buns fried in fat).

⁴⁰¹ Interview with Dordzhinov, June 2008, Elista.

⁴⁰² Though as the abbot of the central *khurul*, Andzha-gelong said, such selfish intentions of laity are wrong, because when assisting in stupa construction people should think about the benefit for all sentient beings on the

Explanation

The second level of suburgans includes the ‘lion throne’ and the cornice up to the support of the *bum pa*.⁴⁰³ All the ingredients of the second level are meant to bring prosperity through the increase in all of these deposited items for the builders and sponsors of the stupa as well as for all the worshippers and the entire community.⁴⁰⁴

Five ‘treasure vases’ (*g.yang bum*)⁴⁰⁵ with five precious substances (*rin po che lnga*) should be installed at this stage. The five precious substances (gold, silver, turquoise, pearls, and copper; sometimes aluminium instead of gold or silver) are deposited in the ‘lion throne’ as offerings to the deities of wealth (*nor lha*) in order to bring well-being and prosperity to the whole community.⁴⁰⁶ The number five is not accidental;⁴⁰⁷ scholars of Tibetan Buddhism described the practice of depositing five kinds of five different substances (*lnga tshan lnga*) in Tibetan stupas: five kinds of precious gems, metals, herbs, grains, scents.⁴⁰⁸ In Kalmykia, though, it does not necessarily have to be five times five. As a rule several jars with salt, sugar, honey, dried fruit, and spices are placed at the second level. Herbs are also added to this level, placed either in glass jars or powdered on top of the other ingredients. As a rule these are the Kalmyk steppe herbs, as well as quitch grass and kusha grass.⁴⁰⁹

The second level of Kalmyk suburgans can contain not only items functioning as offerings and omens, but the relics proper. Usually these are the relics of contact and association. Thus the ‘lion throne’ of The Stupa of Harmony and Accord contains the ‘lotus seat’ fragment of the destroyed suburgan from Erdeni Dzu monastery.⁴¹⁰ However, the

way to enlightenment; it is the right motivation that is the most important (interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008).

⁴⁰³ The support of the *bum pa*, i.e. the ‘unchanging base’, belongs to the third level.

⁴⁰⁴ This corresponds to the Tibetan customs (see Bentor 2003: 33-34).

⁴⁰⁵ These ‘treasure vases’ are usually made of clay, copper, ceramics, or glass.

⁴⁰⁶ Interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁴⁰⁷ In Vajrayana Buddhism this number has complex symbolism. There is a connection between five elements, five directions, five centers (chakras) in the human body, five colours, five parts of the stupa, etc. The symbolism of five is connected with the cult of the Five Supreme Buddhas (the Five Tathagatas), which is crucial in most of Mahayana rituals, especially in the consecration of receptacles (see Dasgupta 1974: 84- 88, 166-167; Tucci 1988: 50; Snodgrass 1985: 135-140). This correspondence will be explained further in this chapter.

⁴⁰⁸ See Snellgrove 1987: 224, n.171; Bentor 2003: 34.

⁴⁰⁹ Quitch grass (Tib. *ram pa*) and kusha grass (Tib. *ku sha*) are considered to be sacred in Tibet, Mongolia, and Kalmykia, being used not only as deposits in cultic receptacles, but also in various religious ceremonies (interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista). The symbolism of these two herbs with regard to the tree of life will be discussed further in the chapter.

⁴¹⁰ Interview with a lay sponsor of The Stupa of Harmony and Accord, Dorzhinov, June 2008, Elista.

deposition of relics in pedestals contradicts Tibetan tradition, according to which the relics proper should be separated from the content of the pedestals.⁴¹¹

The third level of the installation of relics

Fieldwork observation of the installation of relics within the third level of The Stupa of Harmony and Accord, July 3, 2008

The installation of relics in the third level of The Stupa of Harmony and Accord took place on July 3, 2008, i.e. two weeks after the second level had been filled. The ceremony began at 10 am. As usually, reporters from the local television arrived at the construction site. This time the president did not attend the ceremony, however, the president's twenty-year-old son was assisting in the process. The ritual of relics deposition was performed by four monks with Tupten Shakya in charge.

The items for deposition were placed on the table in front of the suburgan. Among the objects for installation I could see a pile of books in Tibetan style (*dpe cha*), i.e. made of long unbound strips of paper in imitation of Indian and Tibetan manuscripts. I was allowed to see these books; they included about ten copies of the *Diamond sutra* in Old Kalmyk, Modern Kalmyk and Russian and several copies of the *Refuge vow* in Old Kalmyk. I also saw western type volumes of the *Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lam rim chen mo)* by Tsongkhapa in Russian. Several CDs with commentaries on the *Refuge vow* by Shalva Gegan were prepared for the deposition. A great number of plastic bags and carton boxes with paper scrolls wrapped in yellow cloth were brought; these were the *dharanis* for the installation.



The preparation of the 'tree of life'

The ceremony began with the preparation of the 'tree of life' or *srog shing*: a thin wooden pole about three meters long; it has four sides narrowing towards the top; its summit is pointed. The tree was painted dark red and covered with inscriptions in golden paint and pictures of stupas. Before its deposition the 'tree of life' was

⁴¹¹ Bentor 2003: 33.

wrapped in red material,⁴¹² the threads of five colours (red, green, white, blue, and yellow) were wound around the tree, and two long blades of grass (*ku sha* and *ram pa*) were attached to it from two different sides. During the preparation some lay people paid homage to the *srog shing* by bowing and saying the six-syllable mantra (*Om ma ni pad me hum*). Then several scrolls with mantras were taped in ten rows around the ‘life-tree’ from the middle upwards. A white silk offering scarf (*kha bdags*) was tied on the ‘life-tree’ above the scrolls. Then the monks chanted, blessing the *srog shing*.

The first items deposited in the third level were paper circles (about 1m in diameter



Wheels (*'khor lo*) smeared with honey and tied together for the deposition

each) with various depictions. In Kalmykia these round drawings are called mandalas or ‘wheels’ (*'khor lo*). The first ‘wheel’ had crossed vajras drawn on it, the second had the depiction of the eight auspicious signs, and the third had the image of Ganesha (*Tshogs bdag*). The paper circles put on top were glued together; consequently it was impossible to see the images portrayed on them. As I was told,

these were the mandalas of

Vaishravana (*Gnod sbyin pho*) and his consort (*Gnod spyin mo*) smeared with honey and fixed together in such a way that the deities face each other.⁴¹³

The ‘tree of life’ was placed on the wheels in the center of the receptacle from the ‘lotus seat’ up to the umbrella.



The monks chanting

⁴¹² According to Tupten Shakya, the tree must be “dressed” in the same colour as the clothes of the monks (interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista).

⁴¹³ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

The monks, sitting on the *bum pa* base, chanted for about 15 minutes over the *srog shing*. After the tree had been installed, the texts were placed inside the *bum pa* base in accordance with the proper order.⁴¹⁴ When all texts were installed, the monks chanted for 15 minutes.

Then 5 000 *tsha tshas* with the stamped depiction of Tsongkhapa painted in red were deposited. The same suburgan contains 5 000 *tsha tshas* in the shape of stupa. Dordzhinov gave me one of these stupa shaped *tsha tshas* as



The *tsha tsha*
given to me by
Dordzhinov

a souvenir; therefore it is possible to give its detailed description. It is about ten centimeters high; on the sides of the *tsha tsha* there are 108 small images of all



Tsha tsha with
the depiction
of Tsongkhapa

the eight fundamental types of stupas, placed along the four lines. Hence, there are 32 small stupas depicted in the first line from the bottom, 30 in the second, 26 in the third, and 20 in the fourth. On the top there are eight bigger figures of stupas of the eight types. At the bottom there is an

inscription in Tibetan. This description coincides with the description of the *tsha tshas* from Western Tibet given by Tucci.⁴¹⁵ Hence, the *tshas tsha* deposited in Kalmyk suburgans are moulded in accordance with the Tibetan tradition of *tsha tsha* making.

The stupa shaped *tsha tshas* were of five colours: red, blue, green, yellow, and white, the same colours as those of the threads wound around the ‘tree of life’. All the white *tsha tshas* were placed in the middle, the *tsha tshas* of other colours were put on the sides, each colour occupying a particular side. All the space left after the deposition of relics was filled with herbs powdered on top of *tsha tshas*. This was followed by the monks chanting.

At the end of the ceremony it began to drizzle, which was treated by the ritual master, Tupten Shakya, as a very auspicious sign. After the process of relic deposition was over,

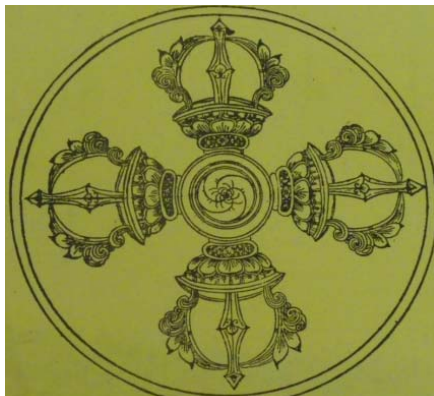
⁴¹⁴ The order of the texts within a receptacle is discussed in the next chapter.

⁴¹⁵ Tucci 1988: 106, No. 148, Pl. XLI.

traditional Kalmyk tea and pastry was served as usually. The whole ceremony lasted for about four hours.

Explanation

The third level consists of the base of the *bum pa*, the *bum pa* and the uppermost part of the stupa. It is the level where the relics proper are deposited in accordance with the tradition of Tantric Buddhism. As has been observed, the relic installation of the third level begins with the deposition of the ‘wheels’ or mandalas (*‘khor lo*) in the ‘lotus throne’. These ‘wheels’ function as auspicious omens for mundane purposes, increasing that which is desired and warding off whatever is inauspicious and undesired. The ‘wheels’ are inserted in



The ‘wheel’ of crossed
vajras

every stupa and statue regardless of the size of a receptacle. In Kalmyk stupas constructed under the supervision of the Gelugpa monks, five ‘wheels’ drawn on paper are placed under the ‘tree of life’.⁴¹⁶

Firstly, the ‘wheel’ of crossed vajras (*rdo rje rgya gram’khor*) is placed. Double or cross-formed vajra is perceived in Kalmykia as the symbol of firmness and indestructibility, therefore having been installed in a receptacle, the wheel of crossed vajras⁴¹⁷ transmits its indestructibility to the receptacle.⁴¹⁸

Secondly, the ‘wheel’ of the eight auspicious signs (*bkra shis rtags brgyad*)⁴¹⁹ is inserted, on top of which the ‘wheel’ of Ganesha (*Tshogs bdag ‘khor lo*) is placed. Ganesha performs several functions in the pantheon of Tibetan Buddhism, acting as a worldly deity of

⁴¹⁶ Though Padma Sherab, the abbot of the Nyingma *khurul* in the Kalmyk settlement of Iki-Burul, said that in the stupa on the territory of his *khurul* three ‘wheels’ were inserted (the ‘wheels’ of Vaishravana, his consort, and the ‘wheel’ of Ganesha). He emphasized that these ‘wheels’ are not paper, but made of zinc. (Interview with Padma Sherab, July 2008, Iki-Burul).

⁴¹⁷ *Vajra* was translated into Tibetan as *rdo rje*, which literally means ‘lord of stones’ (Snellgrove 1987: 131). Having been adopted from Hinduism, where it designates the weapon of the Vedic god Indra, in Tibetan Buddhism, *rdo rje* is the indestructible diamond eliminating ignorance and other obstacles on the way to Enlightenment (Snodgrass 1985: 174). For a detailed discussion of the symbolic meanings of *rdo rje* in Tibetan Buddhism see, for example, Snodgrass 1985: 174-177; Dasgupta 1974; Snellgrove 1987: 131-134.

⁴¹⁸ This interpretation was given by Mingyan-gelong, a Kalmyk monk from the central *khurul*, The Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni (interview, July 2008, Elista).

⁴¹⁹ The eight auspicious signs are the white parasol, the two golden fish, the lotus, the vase, the ‘knot of eternity’, the white conch, the victory banner, the wheel of the Dharma.

wealth and prosperity (in this function Tshogs bdag is similar to Vaishravana) and also as a deity of wisdom destroying obstacles on the path to Enlightenment.⁴²⁰

Finally, the wheel of Vaishravana (Gnod sbyin pho 'khor lo) glued together with the wheel of Vaishravana's consort (Gnod spyin mo) is put on top of the other wheels. Vaishravana, known in the three divine variants as Vaishravana, Kubera, and Jambhala,⁴²¹ is a Buddhist god of wealth, who is believed to guard and bestow treasures and prosperity (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 68). The front sides of the male and female 'wheels' are glued together with honey. Often all the 'wheels' are smeared with honey and tied with five threads of different colours (white, red, blue, yellow, and green).⁴²²



The 'life-trees'
(*srog shing*)

The most important element of the stupas, statues, and prayer drums is the 'tree of life' (*srog shing*). It is installed in the centre of a receptacle from the lotus seat up to the umbrella. The length of the 'tree of life' depends on the height of a receptacle, but even very small stupas must have a *srog shing*.⁴²³ All the 'life force' (*srog*) and sacred power of the stupa is believed to be concentrated in the 'tree of life'. According to Tibetan views, a person consists of five factors: *srog* or the 'life essence', *bla* or the 'spirit essence', *lus* or the body, *dbang tang* or the 'power of destiny' and luck or *rlung rta*; death is understood as the destruction of the 'life force' or *srog*.⁴²⁴ Hence the *srog shing* can

be compared to the heart of the stupa.⁴²⁵ The stupa structure is equated with the Buddhist path to Enlightenment and the enlightened mind of the Buddha.⁴²⁶ Hence, the 'tree of life' symbolizes "the ten knowledges" that constitute the essence of the enlightened mind.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁰ Interview with Baatr Mangaev, July 2008, Elista. Also see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 80.

⁴²¹ For a detailed description of the complex of the Buddhist deities of wealth see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 68-81.

⁴²² The symbolism of these five colours will be discussed further in this chapter.

⁴²³ Interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁴²⁴ See Mumford 1989: 156. According to the Kalmyk folk-religious views, a person consists of three elements: the 'life force' (*amn*), the body and the consciousness (*sumsn*) (see Bakaeva 2003).

⁴²⁵ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁴²⁶ See Tucci 1988: 39-44.

⁴²⁷ The ten knowledges are "knowledge of law, of others' thought, of connection, empiric knowledge, knowledge of suffering, of its origin, of its cessation, of the way conducive to such a cessation, knowledge of things doomed to disappearance, knowledge of non-production of things" (Tucci 1988: 42).

The *srog shing* is made of coniferous wood, which must be dried and painted one colour (as a rule the colour is either brown or dark red). Each side of the ‘tree of life’ corresponds to one of the four directions of space; that is why it is necessary to mark the eastern side when a tree is felled.⁴²⁸ Each side of the *srog shing* is covered with texts written in gold paint or golden, depending on the sponsors. Moreover, different texts are inscribed on each of the four sides, because the texts should correspond with the direction they face, i.e. there are particular texts for the North, the South, the East, and the West.⁴²⁹ At the bottom of each side a *vajra* as a symbol of indestructibility is depicted; at the top of each side the stupa of Rnam rgyal ma (Ushnishavijaya) is drawn.

As has already been mentioned, in Tantric Buddhism the stupa can be identified, on the one hand, with the body of the universe, and on the other hand, the stupa is identified with the Buddha’s body (and also with the human body). Thus microcosmically, the ‘tree of life’ and the two blades of grass (*ku sha* and *ram pa*) tied to it from different sides correspond to the three channels or nerves (Tib. *rtsa*) in the body.⁴³⁰ The *srog shing* stands for the central channel or the pneumatic spine of a person. In Tibetan the central channel or vein is called *rtsa dbu ma*, it is believed to be light blue. The left channel is called *rkyang ma*, it is white (male); and the right-side vein is *ro ma*, which is red (female).⁴³¹

Macrocosmically, the tree of life symbolizes Mount Meru.⁴³² According to Buddhist cosmology, the ‘wheels’ (*‘khor lo*) under the ‘tree of life’ symbolize the plane of earth,⁴³³ which explains why the ‘wheels’ serve mainly mundane purposes, while the sun on the summit of the stupa is perceived as the pure realms.⁴³⁴

Of special importance for the consecration of the Buddhist receptacles in contemporary Kalmykia are the Dharma-relics, i.e. religious scriptures and *gzungs* (mantras,

⁴²⁸ The sides of the *srog shing* should coincide with the directions that the conifer had before it was cut down (interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista).

⁴²⁹ Ibid. The discussion of the texts inscribed on the ‘tree of life’ is included in the following chapter.

⁴³⁰ Interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁴³¹ See Dasgupta 1974: 153-158.

⁴³² Snodgrass 1985: 179. For a detailed discussion of the symbolism of the center pillar see Snodgrass 1985: 163-188.

⁴³³ Microcosmically, the ‘wheels’ (*‘khor lo*) are identified with the lowest cakra (Snodgrass 1985: 179).

⁴³⁴ Ibid: 179-182.

dharanis).⁴³⁵ The texts are deposited together with the *srog shing*; a very strict order of text installation must be observed.⁴³⁶

The relics of the *dharmakaya* are always deposited in Kalmyk Buddhist receptacles. In contemporary Kalmykia *tsha tshas* of two types are installed: in the shape of stupa and of a roundish shape impressed with an image of a Buddhist deity. The latter type is sometimes called *mird* or *mirde*, though in the Kalmyk language *mird* originally means ‘amulet’ or ‘talisman’.⁴³⁷ The number of the installed *tsha tshas* depends on the size of a receptacle, because all the space of the third level left after the deposition of other relics must be filled with *tsha tshas*. In the Kalmyk Gelugpa tradition *tsha tshas* with the impressed images of Tsongkhapa and Tara are the most common.

As has been observed at the site of the relic installation, before being installed, the *tsha tshas* are painted in five colours (red, blue, white, yellow, and green). The colour symbolism is connected with the Five Tathagatas. The stupas built by the schools of Tibetan Buddhism are identified with a mandala, i.e. they express the mandala of the Five Supreme Buddhas.⁴³⁸ The Five Tathagatas emanate from the five kinds of knowledge of Vajrasattva.⁴³⁹ These five Supreme Buddhas are described in the Tantras with their consorts.⁴⁴⁰ Each Tathagata Buddha presides over one of the five aggregates; each has a particular colour, a particular Bodhisattva, a human Buddha, a mantra; each is associated with one of the five sense-organs; each rules over a particular direction, etc.⁴⁴¹

Thus Vairocana (‘the Brilliant’)⁴⁴² is in the centre and has the white colour; Akshobhya (‘the Unshakable’) rules over the East and has the blue colour; Ratnasambhava (‘Jewel Birth’) is yellow and is in the South; Amitabha (‘Infinite Light’) is red and presides in the West; and Amoghasiddhi (‘Attainment that is not Void’) is green and rules in the North.⁴⁴³

⁴³⁵ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁴³⁶ The next chapter is devoted to a detailed discussion of the religious texts deposited in contemporary Kalmyk stupas.

⁴³⁷ *Калмыцко-русский словарь*, ред. Минуев 1977: 353 [Kalmyk-Russian dictionary, edited by Minuev 1977: 353].

⁴³⁸ Snodgrass 1985: 135. The five Tathagatas are also called the *Jina* Buddhas (‘the Buddhas of Victory’) (ibid).

⁴³⁹ Dasgupta 1974: 84-85.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid: 86.

⁴⁴¹ This associative list is rather long and complicated. See the table of correspondences in Dasgupta 1974: 87.

⁴⁴² The translation of the names of the five deities is taken from Snodgrass 1985: 135.

⁴⁴³ See Dasgupta 1974: 87; Snodgrass 1985: 135.

In correspondence with the Supreme Buddhas, the red *tsha tsha* are placed in the West, the green in the North, the yellow in the South, the blue in the East, and the white are deposited in the centre of the receptacles. In this way the presence of the Tathagatas is located in the stupa.

Concluding considerations on the concept of relics in present day Kalmykia

We can assume that the same relic categories distinguished by Bentor in the Tibetan tradition can be found in Kalmykia. However, the content of the Kalmyk receptacles varies from monument to monument, depending on the possibilities of the community. The more money is invested in the stupa building project, the more relics can be obtained.⁴⁴⁴

Some stupas in Kalmykia enshrine all categories of relics. Thus The Stupa of Enlightenment in Elista⁴⁴⁵ constructed in 1999 by the Karma Kagyu branch contains some mustard-seed like relics (*yungs 'bru lta bu'i ring bsrel*) of Buddha Kasyapa.⁴⁴⁶ This suburgan also enshrines many valuable relics of contact and association, such as a piece of material in which the *Prajnaparamita* texts brought to people by Nagarjuna from the land of *nagas* had been wrapped; a bead from the rosary of the 14th Karma-pa; a hair of the 15th Karma-pa; a piece of the garment of the 16th Karma-pa; some soil from Lumbini.⁴⁴⁷ This construction project had several foreign sponsors⁴⁴⁸ who provided the possibility to obtain all these valuable relics.

The Stupa of Enlightenment and Suppression of Negative Energy in Iki-Burul built in 2004 by the Kalmyk branch of the Nyingma school also contains bodily relics, even the mustard-seed-like relics of Buddha Shakyamuni from the stupa in Vaisali.⁴⁴⁹ These relics were brought to Kalmykia from Japan and presented to the abbot of Iki-Burul *khurul* to be

⁴⁴⁴ It is mainly the laity who is responsible for the financial side (interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista).

⁴⁴⁵ It is the first stupa erected on the territory of the Russian Federation after the “non-religious” period.

⁴⁴⁶ Interview with Baatr Mangaev, July 2008, Elista.

⁴⁴⁷ Lumbini is the Buddha’s birthplace, situated at the foothills of the Himalayas in modern Nepal. The information about the content of the Stupa of Enlightenment in Elista was obtained from the interview with Baatr Mangaev, the head of the Buddhist centre “Tilopa” in Elista, July 2008.

⁴⁴⁸ Among the sponsors of the construction of this suburgan were Ole Nydal and Shamar Rinpoche (*Izvestiya Kalmykii* 28 July 1999.)

⁴⁴⁹ This stupa is one of the eight stupas with the corporeal remains of the Buddha.

enclosed in a suburgan.⁴⁵⁰ The stupa in Iki-Burul contains the bodily relics of other important Buddhist personages: e.g. the mustard-seed-like relics of Buddha Kashyapa and of ‘Phags-pa Lama.⁴⁵¹

Many contemporary Kalmyk suburgans (i.e. built after the 1990s) do not contain bodily relics, as they are difficult to acquire. Therefore, the most important relics in the stupa consecration in Kalmykia are religious scriptures and mantras. However, if a suburgan does not enclose all types of relics, it is not regarded as less powerful or less sacred. All Kalmyk Buddhist monuments are viewed as objects of deep veneration and the focus of worship.⁴⁵²

⁴⁵⁰ According to the account given by the *khurul* abbot Padma Sherab, the stupa in Vaisali was partially destroyed during the Arab invasion in India; nevertheless, the *shariram* was saved by the descendants of the Shakya clan and presented to a Japanese monk. Thus the relics came to Japan (interview with Padma Sherab, July 2008, Iki-Burul).

⁴⁵¹ The Sakya master ‘Phags-pa Lama (1235-80) was the Mongol’s vassal ruler of Tibet under Kublai Khan (Snellgrove, Richardson 1980: 148-149).

⁴⁵² Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

Chapter 5

The practice of depositing Tibetan religious texts in stupas and images in contemporary Kalmykia and its Indo-Tibetan origin

The Mahayana cult of the book inherited by the Kalmyk Mongols

The veneration of scriptures as relics is rooted in Mahayana Buddhism. Though this chapter is primarily devoted to the practice of depositing religious texts in stupas and statues in Kalmykia after the Soviet period, it seems necessary to give a brief overview of the Mahayana cult of the book.

In the early Buddhist period the cult of bodily relics dominated,⁴⁵³ however, Mahayana brought important cultic innovations based on the corpus of Mahayana literature.⁴⁵⁴ Gregory Schopen has analyzed a number of the early and middle Mahayana sutras⁴⁵⁵ and noticed that all these texts consist for the most part of self-praise, describing their own sacred power and the great benefit gained by reciting, writing, copying and venerating them.⁴⁵⁶

These sutras proclaim their own significance by locating the presence of the Buddha in the text of his teachings. The scriptures are regarded as the true body of the Buddha, because the Buddha attained Enlightenment through his teachings.⁴⁵⁷ Thus the *Lotus Sutra* equates its text with the presence of “the entire Tathagata-body” and recommends enshrining copies of the sutra in stupas.⁴⁵⁸ Moreover, according to the *Lotus Sutra*, bodily relics are not necessarily to be deposited in the stupa if it contains a copy the sutra, as it is the equivalent of corporeal relics.⁴⁵⁹ In some Mahayana sutras the cult of the book is presented as being superior to the cult of bodily relics⁴⁶⁰ and the merit gained from the worship of scriptures is

⁴⁵³ Bendor 2003: 22; Schopen 2005: 42.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid. See also Gombrich 1990: 29; Lopez 1995: 41.

⁴⁵⁵ Of special importance for his analysis are *Vajracchedika* or the *Diamond Sutra*; *Saddharmapundarika* or the *Lotus Sutra*; *Astahasrika* (see Schopen 2005).

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid: 35.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid: 41; Bendor 2003: 21; Bendor 1995: 250.

⁴⁵⁸ For a detailed analysis of the quotations from the sutra see Schopen 2005: 38-42.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid: 41.

⁴⁶⁰ Schopen bases the idea of the superiority of the cult of the book on the example of the *Astahasrika-Prajnaparamita Sutra*. He points out that the Mahayana cult of the book was modeled on the cult of bodily relics, the activities commended for the book worship being the same as those prescribed for the worship of the physical remains (Schopen 2005: 44).

said to be much greater than that accruing from the veneration of corporeal remains installed in stupas.⁴⁶¹

This idea is especially prominent in the *dharani* sutras,⁴⁶² according to which the deposition of either the entire text of a *dharani* sutra or of the mantras taught in it creates the presence of the Buddha, because mantras are believed to encapsulate the entire teaching and are thus a substitute for bodily relics.⁴⁶³

Schopen states that the Mahayana cult of the book had two stages: during the first stage (reflected in *Vajracchedika*) the emphasis was on the oral transmission of sutras, whereas the second stage (reflected in *Astasahasrika* and *Saddharmapundarika*) puts stress on the book in written form.⁴⁶⁴ So eventually it was the book as a physical object that should be worshipped with incense, perfumes, offerings, etc.⁴⁶⁵

Consequently, religious scriptures began to be used in consecration rituals; and it is the physical presence of a sacred volume that sanctifies a receptacle, monument, or building.

The treatment of scriptures as the source of sacred power in Tibetan Buddhism was adopted by the Kalmyks.⁴⁶⁶

With the creation of the Old Kalmyk script *Todo bichig* ('clear writing') by Zaya Pandita in 1648⁴⁶⁷ the Kalmyks were able to get acquainted with Indo-Tibetan Buddhist literature, and Oirat and Kalmyk monks translated sutras, mainly from Tibetan.⁴⁶⁸ The Kalmyk Buddhist literary heritage is substantial. In the archives of the St. Petersburg branch of the Institute of Oriental studies there are some 400 manuscripts translated into the Kalmyk language.⁴⁶⁹ In Germany about 150 Kalmyk manuscripts of the 17th-18th centuries are to be found.⁴⁷⁰

For the Mongols, writing, copying, learning by heart and reciting the Buddhist sutras was considered highly meritorious.⁴⁷¹ Different texts were copied by the Mongol and

⁴⁶¹ Ibid: 43.

⁴⁶² It is the genre of Buddhist Mahayana literature dating the middle of the 1st millennium C.E. The examples of such texts are the *Guhyadhatu*, the *Vimaloshnisha*, etc (see Bentor 1995: 252).

⁴⁶³ Ibid: 252-253.

⁴⁶⁴ Schopen 2005: 42.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid: 35.

⁴⁶⁶ Muzraeva 2006: 153-155.

⁴⁶⁷ Erdniev 2007: 327.

⁴⁶⁸ Thus Zaya Pandita translated into *Todo bichig* more than 180 volumes of Buddhist literature (Baskhaev, Dyakieva 2007: 50).

⁴⁶⁹ Erdniev 2007: 327-328.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid: 328.

⁴⁷¹ Muzraeva 2006: 153.

Kalmyk monks; some texts were up to 300 or 400 pages.⁴⁷² It was even believed that copying and studying the sutras (for example the *Diamond Sutra*) could prevent a person from being reborn in the three lower realms.⁴⁷³

Thus Pozdneev was surprised to find hundreds of copies of the same religious text in some Mongolian and Kalmyk monasteries in the 19th century.⁴⁷⁴ The reason for this multitude of copies was the fact that it was written in the sutra that he who copied it would be reborn in the heavenly realm.⁴⁷⁵ The merit was believed to be equally gained by having somebody else write the text, therefore almost every well-to-do Mongol commissioned monks to copy the sacred text on his behalf.⁴⁷⁶

The deposition of religious texts and mantras in suburgans was also practiced in pre-revolutionary Kalmykia. Even the pinnacle suburgans in *khuruls* contained sutras and mantras; especially frequent was the mantra *Om ma ni pad me hum*.⁴⁷⁷

The deposition of texts in suburgans in present day Kalmykia

The Buddhist canonical scriptures⁴⁷⁸ constitute the most important and numerous deposits in modern Kalmyk suburgans and statues. Different types of canonical texts can be installed: sutras (*mdo*),⁴⁷⁹ tantras (*rgyud*),⁴⁸⁰ commentaries, verses of auspiciousness, mantras (*sngags*),⁴⁸¹ *dharanis* (*gzungs*),⁴⁸² etc.

⁴⁷² Pozdneev 1993: 177.

⁴⁷³ This belief is reflected in the Kalmyk legends (*Семь звезд: калмыцкие легенды и предания* [Seven stars: the Kalmyk legends] 2007: 56-58).

⁴⁷⁴ Pozdneev 1993: 16.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid: 16-17.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid: 17. Though Pozdneev did not state what sutra it was, it may be assumed that it was either the *Diamond Sutra* or the *Golden Light Sutra*, as these two texts were the most widely diffused among Mongol Buddhists.

⁴⁷⁷ Pyurveev 1975: 62.

⁴⁷⁸ The Kalmyk Buddhist canon is the Tibetan *bKa' gyur* and *bsTan gyur* (commentaries and treatises of Indian and Tibetan monks and lamas). For a discussion of the contents and history of the Tibetan Buddhist canon see Harrison 1996; Cabezon, Jackson 1996: 22-28.

⁴⁷⁹ *Sutras* (*mdo*) are discourses delivered by the Buddha or his disciples; these texts are usually in the form of a dialogue between the Buddha and his disciples (such as Ananda, Subhuti, Shariputra) (Harrison 1996: 70).

⁴⁸⁰ *Tantras* (*rgyud*) are religious texts describing methods and practices for the realization of the supreme goal of enlightenment (Dasgupta 1974: 8).

⁴⁸¹ Mantra is a common term covering a wide range of short pronouncements and ejaculations which from the emic point of view produce particular effect in proper ritual context (Snellgrove 1987: 122). Some of mantras can be translated; some present a string of unintelligible words and syllables. The use of mantras is based on the belief in the power of sounds, signs, and words beyond the conventional semantics (Dasgupta 1974: 54-55). It is the form, the correct pronunciation of sounds and the correct writing of the signs that is the most significant (ibid). For a detailed discussion of the nature of mantras see Dasgupta 1974: 54-62.

⁴⁸² *Dharanis* (*gzungs*) are longer mantras used in rituals and meditation practices etc. (Snellgrove 1987: 122). According to Dasgupta, *dharani* literally means "that by which something is sustained or kept up (*dharyate anaya iti*)" (Dasgupta 1974: 56).

In the Mongolian languages including Kalmyk all Buddhist literature is called *nom*.⁴⁸³ This word is used in contemporary Kalmykia in reference to any type of religious text; serious attention to the theoretical distinction between the terms “mantra”, “*dharani*”, and “prayer” is not paid in Kalmykia.⁴⁸⁴

Buddhist books that are most frequently installed in Kalmyk suburgans

Buddhist sutras and canonical treatises are always installed in stupas in Kalmykia, whereas prayer wheels contain only mantras and dharanis.

It is considered especially auspicious if all 108 volumes of the *bKa’ gyur* are deposited. However, very few stupas in Kalmykia contain the whole canon, because due to various financial reasons the possibility to obtain and prepare 108 volumes is quite rare.⁴⁸⁵

There are Buddhist texts that have been traditionally worshiped and honoured by the sangha and laity in Kalmykia, consequently, these books are very popular for installation in contemporary stupas.

One of the most revered Buddhist texts in Kalmykia is the *Diamond Sutra* or *Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra*. The Kalmyks got acquainted with this text in the 17th century, when it was translated from Tibetan into the Old Kalmyk script by Zaya-Pandita.⁴⁸⁶ By the 19th century the *Diamond Sutra* had become so popular in Kalmykia that a copy of this text could be found in every house. Though very few people could read *Todo bichig* or Tibetan, the sutra was worshipped as the embodiment of the Buddha’s word.⁴⁸⁷

In 1993 with the advent of religious revival the *Diamond Sutra* was published in Kalmykia in three languages: Old Kalmyk, Modern Kalmyk, and Russian. Several copies of the 1993 edition⁴⁸⁸ are deposited in almost every suburgan on the territory of the republic, especially in the receptacles built under the auspices of the Gelugpa school. Thus in the Stupa of Harmony and Accord about ten copies of the *Diamond Sutra* have been installed.

Another very popular Buddhist sutra in Kalmykia is the *Golden Light Sutra* or *Suvarnaprabhasottama sutra*. This text was also introduced among the Kalmyks in the 17th

⁴⁸³ See Pozdneev 1993: 16.

⁴⁸⁴ In this thesis the terms *mantra* and *dharani* are for the most part interchangeable.

⁴⁸⁵ As far as I was informed, the stupa in Iki-Burul has all the 108 volumes of the *bKa’ gyur* (interview with the abbot of Iki-Burul *khurul* Padma Sherab, July 2008, Iki-Burul).

⁴⁸⁶ *Izvestiya Kalmykii*, 16 October 1993.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁸ This edition is in the Tibetan book style (*dpe cha*) and includes all three translations.

century, after it had been translated from Tibetan by Zaya-Pandita.⁴⁸⁹ The *Golden Light Sutra* is deposited in Tibetan and Russian versions in many Kalmyk stupas.⁴⁹⁰

From an interview with Baatr Mongaev I learned that the *Heart Sutra* (the *Prajnaparamita Hrdaya*) is soon to be published in Kalmyk and Russian, which means that it will be available for the deposition in suburgans.⁴⁹¹

The text of the *Refuge vow* is also very often put in Kalmyk receptacles. Refuge wording is believed to be the first text translated into the Kalmyk language by Zaya-Pandita. A hand copy of this translation used to be in the house of every Kalmyk Buddhist before the persecution of religion in the Soviet period.⁴⁹² In contemporary Kalmykia this text symbolizes the essence of Buddhism. As a rule it is put into a receptacle in the old Kalmyk script, sometimes Russian translation is also installed.⁴⁹³

Since the Gelugpa school is very influential in Kalmykia, a very important Buddhist text is considered to be the *Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lam rim chen mo)* by Tsongkhapa. This work was published in five volumes in Russian in the 1990s. These volumes are frequently installed in stupas and placed on the *khurul* altars as the representation of the Buddha's word. In Kalmykia *Lam rim chen mo* is believed to possess great power. Thus I was told by monks that this text should be learned by heart in order to improve one's karma; moreover, if at the moment of death this text is put on the head of a dying person, this person is said to be reborn in the pure realms.⁴⁹⁴ Therefore, it is highly recommended to worship this scripture and even to make offerings to it; and it is considered very inauspicious to put it on the floor or under any other objects even if it is a statue of the Buddha.⁴⁹⁵

The above-mentioned texts are at the same time the ones that are the most easily available in Kalmykia, which is another reason why they are so frequently installed in suburgans.

As was explained to me by Andzha-gelong, any Buddhist text can be deposited in a stupa; and it does not have to be paper book. CDs, memory sticks and similar devices with

⁴⁸⁹ Interview with Baatr Mangaev, June 2008, Elista.

⁴⁹⁰ However, The Stupa of Harmony and Accord does not contain this text.

⁴⁹¹ Interview with Baatr Mangaev, July 2008, Elista.

⁴⁹² Bicheev 2004.

⁴⁹³ In The Stupa of Harmony and Accord several copies of the *Refuge in Todo bichig* were installed.

⁴⁹⁴ Interview with Arshi Chongonov, a monk from the central *khurul*, June 2008.

⁴⁹⁵ Chongonov 2008: 13.

recorded canonical texts can be put in stupas with an equal degree of religious reverence.⁴⁹⁶ What matters most is the motivation of the people participating in stupa construction; it is the belief in the sacred nature of the text that plays a crucial role. A memory stick with 108 volumes of the Tibetan *bKa' 'gyur* is regarded as efficient and merit producing as all the 108 paper volumes of the canon.⁴⁹⁷ This approach can be an indication of a broadening of the concept of relics prompted by the overall technological development. It should be pointed out that mantras and *dharanis* require special installation, which will be discussed below.

According to my fieldwork observation, all the texts are placed in the *bum pa* and the upper part of the stupa together with the 'tree of life' (*srog shing*). Books are usually wrapped in yellow cotton material and placed in the 'lotus seat' or in the 'vase'. The location within a receptacle and the way of depositing mantras and *dharani* is different; however mantras occupy most of the upper part of a receptacle: some mantras are rolled around the 'life-tree', some are deposited in the 'vase', and some in the 'lotus seat'. What is more, the whole surface of the 'life-tree' is covered by painted inscriptions in Tibetan. The texts written on the 'tree of life' are distinguished from those deposited inside.

The texts written on the 'tree of life' (*srog shing*)

The texts painted on the tree of life are indispensable for the stupa consecration. I had an opportunity to see the texts painted on the 'life-tree'. The inscriptions on the 'life-tree' must be written in gold or yellow (as the imitation of gold) paint, because gold paint functions as the offering to the deities so that they will abide in the stupa.⁴⁹⁸ Each side of the tree is divided into five sections by the syllables *O*, *Ā*, *HŪ*, *TRĀ*, and *HR* in Tibetan script. In Tantric Buddhism the stupa is identified with the body consequently, the 'tree of life' represents the spinal cord and the five syllables on the tree are the mantras representing the five chakras or 'wheels' in the body.⁴⁹⁹ These wheels are described as lotuses, each has different number of petals, different colour, each is represented by a syllable, etc. Concerning the theory of chakras in Tantric Buddhism, the number, description, location in the body, etc vary according to different sources.⁵⁰⁰ Thus Dasgupta,

⁴⁹⁶ Thus in the Stupa of Harmony and Accord CDs with the commentaries on the *Refuge vow* were installed.

⁴⁹⁷ Interview with Andzha-gelong July 2008, Elista.

⁴⁹⁸ Interview with Baatr Mangaev, July 2008, Elista.

⁴⁹⁹ Interviews with Andzha-gelong and Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁰⁰ For a description of chakras and a discussion of the discrepancies in the theory of chakras in Tantric Buddhism see Dasgupta 1974: 147-153.

referring to the *Heruka-Sri-samputa-and Hevajra-tatntra*, states that there are four chakras in the body.⁵⁰¹ However, in other texts the number of chakras in the body can vary; sometimes five and even six ‘wheels’ are distinguished.⁵⁰²

The *khurul* ritual specialists in Kalmykia⁵⁰³ adhere to the theory of five chakras in the body: the highest one is the head chakra, situated on the crown of the head and represented by the syllable *O*□; the next is the throat chakra with the mantra *Ā*□; the third is the heart chakra represented by *HŪ*□; the fourth is in the navel region, its syllable being *TRĀ*□; and the lowest chakra is situated at the perineum and is represented by *HR*□□.⁵⁰⁴

The mantras on each side of the ‘life-tree’ must correspond to the direction that this side faces. Therefore, particular mantras must be written under each of the five syllable-mantras on every side of the ‘life-tree’, though sometimes all four sides of the tree require the same inscriptions.⁵⁰⁵

Under the head chakra syllable *O*□ the mantra of Great knowledge, *O*□ *sarvavidyā svāhā*, is written on each side of the ‘life-tree’. According to Tibetan ritual texts,⁵⁰⁶ this mantra must be written or inserted in the upper part or the ‘head’ of the stupa.

For the throat the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet in Tibetan transliteration are inscribed. These letters represent the sacred sounds of speech and the sacred letters, because the Sanskrit alphabet is considered to be of divine origin.⁵⁰⁷ The letters function as mantras.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰¹ According to this theory, the lowest chakra is situated in the navel region, the next is in the heart, the third chakra is below the neck, and the last one, which is the most important, called *Ushnisha-kamala* (‘the head lotus’) is in the head (Dasgupta 1974: 147). The three chakras below the ‘head lotus’ represent the three bodies of the Buddha; thus the lowest chakra is identified with the *Nirmana-kaya* or the Transformation body, the heart chakra is considered to be the *Dharma-kaya*, and the throat chakra represents the *Sambhoga-kaya* or the Body of Great Bliss (see Dasgupta 1974: 148; Snellgrove 1987: 251).

⁵⁰² See Snellgrove 1987: 251. Tucci also mentions five chakras, drawing the parallels between the chakras in the body and the elements of the stupa (Tucci 1988: 49). According to Hindu Tantric tradition, there are seven chakras (see Dasgupta 1974: 147-148).

⁵⁰³ Nowadays the best tantric specialists in Kalmykia are Tibetan monks (mainly the Gelugpa school of Buddhism) who live and work there on the permanent basis.

⁵⁰⁴ Interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁰⁵ Interview with the abbot of the central *khurul*, July 2008 Elista.

⁵⁰⁶ For example *Arga'i Cho ga Dang Rab tu Gnas Don Gsal ba* (Bentor 1995: 256).

⁵⁰⁷ Interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁰⁸ Dasgupta discusses the cases of the transformation of letters into mantras (Dasgupta 1974: 60-61). The practice of placing the vowels and consonants of the Sanskrit alphabet as relics is also mentioned in Bentor 2003: 32.

Below the Sanskrit alphabet *Oṃ vajra āyurṃ e svâhâ* is written. It is the mantra of a firm ‘life-tree’, which must be inscribed on the four sides of the tree.⁵⁰⁹ This mantra is said to bestow longevity and good health to the body of the stupa and to the worshippers.⁵¹⁰

For the heart chakra under the syllable *HŪṃ* different *dharanis* are written on each side of the *srog shing*. In the East the *dharani* called *Gtsug tor rnam rgyal gzungs* is written; *Gtsug tor dri med* is inscribed on the southern side; on the northern side of the tree *Byang chub rgyan ‘bum gzungs* is written; and *Gsang ba ring bsrel gzungs* must be on the western side.⁵¹¹ These four *dharanis* are classified by the Tibetan tradition as the Five Great Dharanis (*gzungs chen sde lnga*); they come from the *dharanisutras*, which prescribe that these texts should be placed in receptacles.⁵¹² According to Bentor, these *dharanis* are very frequently deposited in stupas and inscribed on stone tablets in different Buddhist communities.⁵¹³

Under the syllable *TRĀṃ* on the four sides of the ‘life-tree’, the verse of Interdependent Origination (*Rten ‘brel snying po*) is written. In Kalmykia only the Tibetan translation of the verse is inscribed on the *srog shing* and inserted in stupas. The Tibetan translation was obtained from Mingyan-gelong, a Kalmyk monk from the central *khurul*. The Tibetan variant is:

*chos rnams thams cad rgyu las byung/
de rgyu de bzhin gshegs pas gsungs/
rgyu la dgog pa gang yin pa/
dge sbyong chen pos ‘di skad gsungs⁵¹⁴/*

This stanza is the *hrdaya* of the *Pratītyasamutpāda Sūtra*; scholars usually refer to this verse as the *Ye dharma* by its first words.⁵¹⁵ The verse is said to contain the entire Buddhist teachings and is regarded as the essence of the Dharma and the Buddha.⁵¹⁶

⁵⁰⁹ *Arga’i Cho ga Dang Rab tu Gnas Don Gsal ba* (Bentor 1995: 256).

⁵¹⁰ Interview with a Kalmyk *gelong* Mingyan who inscribes *srog shing* with texts, July 2008, Elista.

⁵¹¹ This information comes from interviews with Andzha-gelong and with Mingyan, and from the papers obtained in the central *khurul* in Elista.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

⁵¹³ See Bentor 1995: 254. The fifth component of the Five Great Dharanis is the verse of Interdependent Origination (*ibid.*).

⁵¹⁴ “Those *dharmas* which arise from a cause, the *Tathagata* has declared their cause. And that which is the cessation of them, thus the great renunciant has taught” (Boucher 1991: 11).

⁵¹⁵ Boucher 1991: 11-15; Bentor 1995: 251; Bentor 2003: 23-24; Scherrer-Schaub 1994: 715.

⁵¹⁶ Bentor 1995: 251; Bentor 2003: 23-24; Scherrer-Schaub 1994: 715.

Therefore, the *Pratityasamutpada Sutra* prescribes depositing this verse in stupas not only as an equivalent of bodily relics, but also as an alternative to the insertion of corporeal remains.⁵¹⁷ The verse of Interdependent Origination was the most common Buddhist text installed in Indian stupas, which rarely contained entire scriptures.⁵¹⁸

All the space under the lowest syllable down to the image of *vajra* is filled with the consecration mantra *Oṃ su pra tishatha vajra ye svâhâ*, taken from the text of consecration *Rab gnas mdor bsdus* ('Brief consecration'). This consecration prayer is included in the collection of ritual texts, *Chos spyod rab gnas*, used by the monks of the central *khurul*.

Mantras and *dharanis* deposited in stupas and statues in Kalmykia

In contemporary Kalmyk Gelugpa *khuruls* 28 Tibetan mantras are used as relics, being installed in stupas, statues and other cult constructions. All these mantras are numbered, so each text has a particular number "1" through "28", and the monks remember the texts by these names and numbers.⁵¹⁹ The list of mantras was obtained from the abbot of the central *khurul* in Elista.

1 *dbu gzungs* – the head mantra

2 *mgrin gzungs* – the throat mantra

3 *thugs gzungs* – the heart mantra

4 *bla med* – the *dharani*-mantra of the Highest Yoga Tantra

5 *gong sa mchog* – the Dalai lama glorification mantra

6 *yongs 'dzin rnam gnyis* – the glorification of the lineage of teachers⁵²⁰

7 *thub mtshan* – the Buddha name mantra

8 *rje'i mtshan* – Tsongkhapa name mantra or the mantra praising Tsongkhapa's name⁵²¹

9 *badzra gu ru* – the root mantra of Padmasambhava

10 mani mantra (*om ma ni pad me hum*) – the most popular mantra, the root mantra of Avalokiteshvara

11 *rnal spyod rgyud* – the *dharani*-mantra of the Performance Tantra (Carya Tantra)

⁵¹⁷ Bentor 1995: 251-252.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid: 251.

⁵¹⁹ Interview with the abbot of the central *khurul*, July 2008, Elista. According to the abbot, in Tibetan Buddhist practice 34 mantras are used.

⁵²⁰ This refers to the two teachers of the Dalai Lama.

⁵²¹ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

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- 12 *bya rgyud* – the dharani-mantra of the Action Tantra (Kriya Tantra)
- 13 *sgrol ma dkar ljang* – the root mantra for the White and Green Taras
- 14 *tshe lha rnam gsum* – the root mantra of the three Buddhas of longevity (White Tara, Namgyalma and Amitayus)
- 15 *sde lnga* or *gzungs chen sde lnga* – the five great dharanis (*gtsug tor rnam rgyal gzungs*, *gtsug tor dri med*, *byang chub rgyan 'bum gzungs*, *gsang ba ring bsrel gzungs*, and *rten 'brel snying po*)
- 16 *mdo gzungs* – the dharani-mantras from the Sutra section
- 17 *rten 'brel snying po* – the verse of Interdependent Origination or the Essence of causation mantra “*Ye dharma...*”
- 18 *gso sbyong* – the purification mantra (the pure vow), the mantra/ prayer from the ritual for mending vows and purifying breaches (Skt. *poshada*)
- 19 *'dod gsol* – asking for wishes mantra
- 20 *dmigs brtse ma* – a prayer to Tsongkhapa, aiming at Loving Kindness⁵²²
- 21 *shis brjod* – verses of auspiciousness
- 22 *bkra shis* – the verse of auspiciousness, blessing
- 23 *nor lha* – the mantra of Vaishravana, a deity of wealth
- 24 *chos skyong* – the mantra to dharmapalas
- 25 *'khrugs sel* – the mantra removing disorders and conflicts
- 26 *yig brgya* – the hundred syllable mantra (the mantra of Vajrasattva)
- 27 *pad gzungs* – the lotus mantra
- 28 *'od dpag med* – the mantra of Amitabha

The preparation of scrolls⁵²³

All the mantras are printed on paper in the Tibetan script and book style (*dpe cha*). The *khuruls* order the texts to be printed in printing houses. Then the pages are tightly rolled up on a stick and wrapped in yellow cotton. The yellow colour is symbolic: originally it

⁵²² This mantra addresses Tsongkhapa as the embodiment of all deities (ibid).

⁵²³ The information about the preparation of mantras for installation was obtained from an interview with Andzha-gelong in July 2008 in Elista.

represented the colour of *bhikshu*; the colour of the Buddha. However, later this colour acquired new meanings, being now immediately associated with the Gelugpa tradition.⁵²⁴

The size of the scrolls depends on the place in the stupa to which they belong. The number of scrolls with one mantra depends on the size of a receptacle and the ‘life-wood’. Lay volunteers can also participate in text rolling.



Scrolls with mantras

Scrolls with mantras must be inserted in a vertical position; they are pressed against one another and should never be placed upside down. That is why the top of each scroll is always marked with the number of the mantra.

In spite of their intrinsic sacred

character the scrolls with mantras as well as any other text or item for deposition must be consecrated separately before being installed.⁵²⁵

The order in which mantras are installed⁵²⁶

All the mantras are deposited in different parts of the stupa, in strict accordance with their ranking or significance. The monks divide mantras and *dharanis* according to their place in the stupa into the lotus texts (mantras installed in the ‘lotus seat’), the *srog shing* mantras (the mantras tied around the ‘life-tree’) and *the bum pa* texts which are installed in the dome above the ‘lotus seat’.⁵²⁷ In the upper part of the stupa are placed the texts of higher hierarchy.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ This consecration ritual is called *gzungs sgrub* or the ‘empowerment of *dharanis*’, it will be discussed in the following chapter. Also see Bentor 2003: 34-35.

⁵²⁶ The information about the order in which mantras are deposited in stupas was provided to me by Tupten Shakya, the ritual specialist in charge of the stupa consecration (interview, July 2008, Elista).

⁵²⁷ Ibid.



The 'life-tree' with mantras tied around it

The deposition of texts begins with the preparation of the *srog shing*, because certain mantras should be tied around the 'tree of life'.⁵²⁸ The first three mantras *dbu gzungs* 'the head mantra', *mgrin gzungs* 'the throat mantra', and *thugs gzungs* 'the heart mantra' are rolled around the corresponding chakra syllables drawn on the tree. Then the 'name mantras' and the 'Tantra mantras' are tied to the *srog shing* in the upper part of the stupa. The 'name mantra' (*mtshan sngags*) or the root mantra embodies the essence of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and lamas.⁵²⁹ The Buddha name mantra (*thub mtshan*) and the *dharani*-mantra of the Highest Yoga Tantra (*bla med*) are fixed above the throat chakra.

The 'name mantras' of the lineage lamas are tied between the throat and the heart mantras. This section includes the Dalai Lama glorification mantra (*gong sa mchog*), the glorification of the lineage of teachers (*yongs 'dzin rnam*), Tsongkhapa name mantra (*rje'i mtshan*), the root mantra of Padmasambhava (*badzra gu ru*). Consequently, the first ten mantras from the list above are tied to the *srog shing*.

The root mantras of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas: the root mantra of Avalokiteshvara (*om ma ni pad me hum*), the mantra for the White and Green Taras (*sgrol ma dkar ljang*), the root mantra of the three deities of longevity (*tshe lha rnam gsum*), etc. are placed in the 'vase', and do not have to be fixed on the 'life-tree'.

Below the heart are the mantras of the other Tantras (*rnal spyod rgyud*, *bya rgyud*), the Five Great dharanis (*sde lnga*) and the verse of Interdependent Origination (*rten snying*).

The 'lotus seat' contains the Sutra mantras (*mdo gzungs*), the mantras of the Dharma protectors (*chos skyong*), the mantras of wealth deities (*nor lha*), mantras and verses of auspiciousness (*shis brjod*, *bkra shis*), aspiration mantras for the fulfillment of wishes (*'dod gsol*), the mantra removing disorders (*'khrugs sel*), and the lotus mantra *pad gzungs*.

In different receptacles different mantras from the list above can be installed. I was told by monks and lamas that the choice of texts (mantras in scrolls as well as Buddhist

⁵²⁸ All the *srog shing* of the stupa in Iki-Burul *khurul* is covered with scrolls (interview with Padma Sherab, July 2008, Iki-Burul).

sacred texts) for deposition depends on the function of a stupa, on the deity or lama to which it is devoted, and on the school of Buddhism in charge of the construction.

If a stupa is dedicated to a particular Buddha or deity, scrolls with the root mantras of this deity are numerous. If a stupa is built in honour of a lama, then most of the upper part will be filled with the 'name mantras' of this lama and the 'name mantras' of his lineage of teachers.

The 'name mantras' of Tsongkhapa and the Dalai Lama are essential for the Gelugpa suburgans; whereas the suburgans built under the directorship of the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions must contain the mantra of Guru Rinpoche. The abbot of the Nyingma *khurul* said that the suburgan in his *khurul* does not enshrine the name mantras of the Dalai Lama and Tsongkhapa.

Nevertheless, it is considered especially auspicious if all the 28 mantras are installed. For example, in The Stupa of Harmony and Accord all the 28 mantras (500 copies each) were installed.

As was explained to me by the abbot of the central *khurul*, in the Gelug tradition there are mantras and *dharanis* that must be deposited in every stupa or statue no matter what Buddha or lama it is built for. Among these obligatory textual deposits are the first three chakra *dharanis* (*dbu gzungs*, *mgrin gzungs* and *thugs gzungs*) tied around the corresponding syllables on the 'life-tree'; the five great *dharanis* (*sde lnga*), the verse of Interdependent Origination (*rten snying*).⁵²⁹ As for the lotus mantras, special attention is paid to the mantra removing disorders ('*khruugs sel*), the *dharani* of the Dharma protectors (*chos skyong*), the hundred syllable mantra (*yig brgya*), and the lotus mantra (*pad gzungs*).⁵³¹

The installed texts and the place these texts occupy in a stupa reflect the peculiarities of the religious tradition in a community. Thus *bla med* (the *dharani*-mantra of the Highest Yoga Tantra) and the name mantras of lineage teachers are considered of the highest rank in Kalmykia, which is in complete accord with the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Of special importance for the stupa consecration is the five great *dharanis* (*sde lnga*): these texts are written on the tree of life and deposited inside in scrolls. Bentor writes that most Tibetan stupas contain a great number of the five great *dharanis*.⁵³²

⁵²⁹ See Bentor 2003: 31.

⁵³⁰ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² Bentor 2003: 32.

As I was told by Andzha-gelong, there are mantras or *nom* that are particularly significant in Kalmykia, and consequently, they are most frequently installed in suburgans and statues. Among these are the root mantra for the White and Green Taras (*sgrol ma dkar ljang*) and the root mantra of the three deities of longevity (*tshe lha rnam gsum*). Moreover, these mantras can be placed in any part of a suborgan and are believed to correct any installation mistakes (if any scroll was put in a wrong place). The cult of the White and Green Taras and the longevity Bodhisattvas (the White Tara, Namgyalma and Amitayus) is very prominent in Kalmykia as these deities are especially popular among the Kalmyks.

Chapter 6

Main rituals performed in modern Kalmykia in connection with the construction of suburgans

The construction of a suburgan as well as of any other Buddhist monument or building is accompanied by a number of rituals of consecration. Consecration rituals aim at empowering and blessing the construction by locating the presence of the Buddha in it.⁵³³ These rituals are indispensable, because through them a monument receives its sacred character. In contemporary Kalmykia the following rituals accompany the construction of a suburgan: the preliminary ‘ground ritual’ (*sa blang*) for obtaining and blessing the site, the empowerment of the items to be installed in the receptacle (*gzungs sgrub*), the ‘offering bath’ (*khrus gsol*) and the final consecration (*rab gnas*).⁵³⁴ All the information about the rituals of consecration was collected from interviews with ritual specialists working in Kalmyk *khuruls*.

The ‘ground ritual’: *sa blang*

According to the Buddhist view in contemporary Kalmykia, before building a stupa or undertaking any other construction project (religious as well as secular) it is necessary to perform the ground ritual called *sa blang*.⁵³⁵ The Tibetan expression *sa blang* literally means ‘to receive or to obtain land’. Hence, *sa blang* is the ritual of ‘obtaining the ground’ from the local spirits and gods.

This ritual is based on the belief in innumerable spirits and gods: the owners of the land, rivers, mountains and other geographical features. This belief is widespread in Kalmykia, in Tibet, and in Mongolia. As I was told by Geshe Dugda, the oldest Tibetan lama working in Kalmykia, every square meter of land or water is inhabited by some spirit or god.⁵³⁶ These landscape deities are inferior to Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and the gods of the Buddhist heaven.⁵³⁷ Local gods are believed to protect their domains, preventing cataclysms and misfortunes. However, they can be very malevolent, causing illnesses and calamities to

⁵³³ Bentor 1996: 5; Bentor 2003: 34-35.

⁵³⁴ Interviews with ritual experts in Kalmykia (June-July 2008, Elista). Bentor mentions the same ritual of consecration in Tibet (Bentor 1996: xxi; Bentor 2003: 34-35).

⁵³⁵ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁵³⁶ Interview with Geshe Dugda, July 2008, Elista.

⁵³⁷ Samuel 1993: 166.

those who pollute, damage or intrude on their territory.⁵³⁸ Nevertheless, local deities may be subdued and even made helpful through certain rituals.⁵³⁹

Landscape gods are of pre-Buddhist origin but were incorporated into Tibetan Buddhism.⁵⁴⁰ Some even received the status of protectors of the Buddhist faith.⁵⁴¹ There exist various classifications of local gods and spirits in Tibet, the most popular being that of the ‘eight classes’.⁵⁴² Philippe Cornu has described ten types of regional gods known in Tibet.⁵⁴³

In the Mongolian pre-Buddhist religious system multiple spirits were believed to exist in the three levels of the universe: the upper level was the sphere of *tengri*, i.e. ‘the residents of the sky’; the middle zone was believed to be inhabited not only by people and animals but also by numerous landscape deities and spirits lower in rank than *tengri*; and the subterranean level was regarded as the world of the dead.⁵⁴⁴ In Kalmyk folk religion, there existed the cult of the owners or *ezen* of land; they were divided into the Lords of the Earth (*khazar ezen* or *γajar ezen*) and the Lords of the Water (*usun ezen*).⁵⁴⁵ These deities correspond with regard to their functions to the Tibetan folk religious landscape gods.⁵⁴⁶

Nowadays the Kalmyk word *ezen* is not used for local spirits. Since the main ritual experts in contemporary Kalmykia are Tibetan monks (or Kalmyk monks who have received their education in Tibetan monasteries in India), the Tibetan and Indian names for landscape gods are in use. The ‘owners of water’ are usually called *nagas*⁵⁴⁷ (water serpent deities) and the ‘owners of land’ are referred to by the Tibetan word *sa bdag* (‘land owner’). Sometimes the Kalmyk term *sakyusn* meaning ‘protective guardian spirits’ can be applied to landscape spirits.⁵⁴⁸ Most often, however, all the local spirits and gods of Kalmykia are referred to by the Russian expression *хозяева земли* (‘land owners’) without distinguishing any particular types.

⁵³⁸ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁵³⁹ Samuel 1993: 161.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid: 177-182; Heissig 1980: 102

⁵⁴¹ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 231-252.

⁵⁴² Samuel 1993: 161.

⁵⁴³ Ibid: 162-163.

⁵⁴⁴ Bicheev 2004: 10

⁵⁴⁵ Bakaeva 2003.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ *Naga* is a Sanskrit term; the Tibetan word for serpent deities is *klu*. However, in Kalmykia the Sanskrit word is in use.

⁵⁴⁸ Interview with Baatr Mangaev, July 2008, Elista.

The ritual of *sa blang* is intended to pacify the ‘landowners’ and to obtain their permission to build a Buddhist monument or construction on their territory.⁵⁴⁹ This ritual is conducted by a group of several monks, usually four; the ritual master in charge of the ceremony must be a monk of high rank. In Kalmykia the ritual master is usually Telo Tulku Rinpoche, the head of the Kalmyk Buddhist, or Geshe Dudga, the oldest Tibetan lama who has been working in Kalmykia for 14 years.

The permission from the ‘land owners’ is requested through offerings and chanting mantras. Offerings are placed on an altar made of a small wooden table covered with cloth and *kha btags*, silk ritual scarves. The offerings are put in seven silver, copper or brass bowls. The sequence of offerings is very important. Thus, the first bowl contains drinking water, the second has the water for washing up, the third contains flowers, the fourth has incense, the fifth is an altar lamp (Kalmyk *zul*), the sixth bowl is filled with perfumed water, and the seventh contains food (usually fruit, sweets, bread, but never meat products).⁵⁵⁰ Sometimes the eighth cup with a shell as the offering of music is also used.⁵⁵¹ This way of giving offerings to deities was practiced in Mongolia and Kalmykia before the Soviet revolution.⁵⁵² The origin of these offerings is rooted in ancient India, where kings and honorary guests were greeted with these seven items: first they were given water to drink, then water to wash their face, then flowers were brought and incense lighted, perfumed water was offered for the body and food was served.⁵⁵³ A very important offering used in *sa blang* in Kalmykia as well as in many other ceremonies of Tibetan Buddhism is *gtor ma* or sacrificial cakes made of dough.⁵⁵⁴ The design and coloring of these cakes depends on the character of the deity or spirit it is devoted to.⁵⁵⁵

I was told that in the ground foundation of a future monument in Kalmykia, vases (*sa chu bum pa* or ‘earth and water vases’) with offerings to ‘landowners’ and subterranean deities are buried.⁵⁵⁶ These vases may contain precious stones and substances, such as gold,

⁵⁴⁹ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁵⁰ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵⁵² See Pozdneev 1993: 89-91. However, Pozdneev gives a different interpretation of the waters in the first two cups. The first cup, according to Pozdneev, contained water for washing feet (he gives the Tibetan expression *zhabs sel* meaning ‘to clean feet’). The second bowl was filled with water for washing face (*zhal sel*) (ibid: 90).

⁵⁵³ Ibid: 89-90; Chongonov 2008: 17.

⁵⁵⁴ Interview with Geshe Dugda, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁵⁵ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 347.

⁵⁵⁶ Interview with Geshe Dugda, July 2008, Elista.

silver, turquoise, pearls, copper, etc.⁵⁵⁷ Sometimes nine such offering vases are buried under stupas, with one vase being situated in the center and the others in the eight directions (the four cardinal and four intermediate directions) around the center.⁵⁵⁸ Thus according to the abbot of Iki-Burul *khurul*, nine vases are buried three meters down under the stupa on the territory of his *khurul*.⁵⁵⁹

This ritual is open for the laity; therefore, many people usually attend the ceremony. It is believed in Kalmykia that a lay person who has strong ties with the territory on which the stupa is about to be built must be present at *sa blang*.⁵⁶⁰ It is considered especially auspicious if both parents of this person are alive. Thus, I was told a story about the problems with the black *nagini*⁵⁶¹ (*klu mo nag po*) during the construction of the first stupa built in Kalmykia after the “non-religious period”, The Stupa of Enlightenment in Elista.⁵⁶² When the foundation of the stupa was laid, strong sandstorms and hurricanes began in that region. Sangye-gelong, a Tibetan monk from Nepal who was in charge of the stupa, said that the storms were caused by the black *nagini* (*klu mo ng po*), the Owner of that territory. The *nagini* was enraged when her pond was drained for the construction of the stupa. The gelong had a dream, in which the *nagini*, having assumed the appearance of a Kalmyk middle-aged man from that district, told the *gelong*: “Look! All these sandstorms! I will destroy your stupa! I will turn it upside down.” The *gelong* found the man he had seen in the dream, because only this man, whose ties with that land were strong, could pacify the black *nagini*. When this man began to read the mantra to Vajrasattva, the *yig brgya*, the sandstorm gradually ceased.

The ritual of procuring the land is a public festive event. The construction of a suburgan is regarded in Kalmykia as a very meritorious deed for the whole community, so when the foundation for a future suburgan is laid, people celebrate it. The ritual lasts for about an hour.⁵⁶³ After the ritual is finished, a table with food and tea is laid for the monks and the lay guests of the ceremony.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Interview with Padma Sherab, July 2008, Iki-Burul.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid. A rat skull was also deposited under this suburgan as a sacrifice to *sa lha mo* (the goddess of earth).

⁵⁶⁰ Interview with Geshe Dugda, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁶¹ *Nagini* is a female *naga* or serpent deity.

⁵⁶² Interview with Baatr Mangaev, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁶³ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

The empowerment of *dharanis* or *gzungs sgrub*

Before all the items are deposited in a receptacle, the ritual *gzungs sgrub*⁵⁶⁴ (‘empowerment of *dharanis*’) must be performed.⁵⁶⁵ It is the ritual of consecration and blessing the ingredients to be installed.⁵⁶⁶ Though religious texts are sacred by their nature, this empowerment ritual is obligatory. As I was told by Geshe Dugda, the texts are sacred, but this ritual makes them produce more benefit for sentient beings.⁵⁶⁷ Tupten Shakya explained that the aim of this ritual is to locate the essence in the relics.⁵⁶⁸ Hence the ingredients for deposition are viewed after this ritual as receptacles of the sacred power of the Buddhas.

Gzungs sgrub is based on the Tantric ritual of *sadhana*. *Sadhana* (*sgrub thabs*) or ‘means of achievement’ is the central practice in Tantra.⁵⁶⁹ It consists in the visualization of a Tantric deity and the transformation of the practitioner into this chosen deity or the *yi dam*.⁵⁷⁰ The notion of *yi dam* is crucial for Tantric meditation. The *yi dam* are Tantric tutelary deities, “forms that the meditator learns to assume deliberately and consciously in ritual”.⁵⁷¹ The *yi dam* most commonly visualized in *sadhanas* are Vajrasattva (Rdo rje sems dpa’), Yamantaka (Gshin rje gshed), Vajrabhairava (a form of Yamantaka, Rdo rje ‘jigs byed), Hevajra (Kye rdo rje).⁵⁷²

In the process of the *sadhana*, the practitioner’s body, speech and mind are transformed into the enlightened body, speech and mind of the visualized *yi dam*.⁵⁷³ Thus the practitioner generates himself (*bskyed pa*) as the *yi dam* and then employs the powers of this tutelary deity.⁵⁷⁴

There are numerous *sadhanas* in Tibetan Buddhism; however, the basic elements of the *sadhana* are the opening recitation of Refuge and the arousing *bodhicitta*,⁵⁷⁵ the

⁵⁶⁴ The Tibetan word *sgrub pa* means ‘to complete, to perform, to achieve’ (Jäschke *Tibetan-English Dictionary*: 121).

⁵⁶⁵ Bentor 2003: 34-35.

⁵⁶⁶ The entire content of a stupa, including scriptures, the tree of life, etc must be consecrated through this ritual (ibid).

⁵⁶⁷ Interview with Geshe Dugda, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁶⁸ Interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁶⁹ Samuel 1993: 233.

⁵⁷⁰ See Bentor 1996: 1; Samuel 1993: 233.

⁵⁷¹ Samuel 1993: 164.

⁵⁷² Bentor 1996: 54-55.

⁵⁷³ Ibid: 1.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid: xviii; 85.

⁵⁷⁵ *Bodhicitta* is the aspiration to reach Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. *Sadhanas* and consecrations in Tibetan Buddhism are based on the bodhisattva ideal of compassion. The main motivation for

visualization of a tutelary deity, the transformation of the practitioner into this deity, the dissolving of the entire visualization into emptiness (*stong pa nyid*) and the dedication of merit to all beings by reciting the verse of merit dedication.⁵⁷⁶ The recitation of the mantra of the tutelary deity is the crucial component of the *sadhana*, since the mantra generates the presence of the chosen deity.⁵⁷⁷ The consecration rituals employ the *sadhana* practice with regard to stupas, statues, scriptures and so forth.⁵⁷⁸

Information about the ritual *gzungs sgrub* as it is performed in Kalmykia was obtained in a number of interviews with the abbot of the central *khurul*, Andzha-gelong, and the ritual masters Geshe Dugda and Tupten Shakya.⁵⁷⁹

As it was described to me by the abbot, this ritual is carried out in the main assembly hall in *khuruls*.⁵⁸⁰ Thus in the *khurul* the Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, the monks, numbering about fifteen, sit in two rows. The higher status the monk has, the closer he is to the altar. The master of the ritual, also called the *vajra* holder or the *vajra* master (*rdo rje slob dpon*) is the closest to the altar; his seat is higher than those of other monks. In Kalmykia the ritual master in all major rituals is Telo Tulku Rinpoche. If he is away, then the role of the ritual master is performed either by Geshe Dugda or Tupten Shakya.

All the ingredients for deposition (vases, texts, scrolls with mantras, the 'tree of life', smaller statues, *tsha tsha*, etc) are put on the platform in front of the altar. A five-color thread is tied to the *vajra* and then this thread is stretched so as to connect all the items that have to be consecrated.⁵⁸¹ The colours of the thread are red, green, blue, white and yellow, i.e. the same as the colours of *tsha tsha* for installation, each colour corresponding to a direction and to one of the Five Supreme Buddhas presiding over this direction.⁵⁸² This

the consecration rituals is to bring benefit to all sentient beings that come in contact with the consecrated items (Samuel 1993: 233-234; Bentor 1996: 4).

⁵⁷⁶ See Samuel 1993: 233-235. Bentor describes the scheme of the fourfold generation (*bskyed pa*) process of the *sadhana* (see Bentor 1996: 1-3).

⁵⁷⁷ Samuel 1993: 234.

⁵⁷⁸ Bentor 1996: 22.

⁵⁷⁹ The setting for the ritual was described to me by the abbot of the central *khurul* in Elista Andzha-gelong; the method of visualization was explained by Geshe Dugda and Tupten Shakya.

⁵⁸⁰ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² The correspondence between the five Tathagatas, the directions they preside over, and the five colours was described in the fourth chapter. For a more detailed description of the five Tathagatas see Dasgupta 1974: 84-87; see also the table of correspondences (ibid: 87).

thread transmits the powers of the mantra from the ritual master to each of the items for consecration.⁵⁸³

The ritual begins with the recitation of the verse of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (the *Refuge vow*), and then the verse of arousing *bodhicitta* is recited. After that the visualization begins. I was told that the most commonly visualized *yi dam* in the ritual of *gzungs sgrub* is Yamantaka (Gshin rje gshed).⁵⁸⁴ The text for Yamantaka⁵⁸⁵ is chanted and the ritual master visualizes himself as Yamantaka by transforming his body, speech and mind into the body, speech and mind of the deity. The generating of the practitioner as Yamantaka is the core of this ritual.⁵⁸⁶ All the monks who are present at the ritual must visualize the same; the number of monks participating can be different, but everybody should be visualizing.⁵⁸⁷ Then the power and essence of Yamantaka is transmitted from the vajra master (*rdo rje slob dpon*) through the *dharani* thread to all the ingredients and absorbed in them; in this way the ingredients are empowered.⁵⁸⁸ The whole ceremony lasts from one to two hours.⁵⁸⁹

Sometimes several *yi dam* can be visualized; in this case, the statues and *tsha tsha* must be visualized as Yamantaka, the texts and *dharanis* as Amitabha ('Od dpag med) and the tree of life as Vairocana (Rnam par snang mdzad).⁵⁹⁰

Thus through the ritual *gzungs sgrub*, the presence of the *yi dam* is located in the ingredients for the deposition in stupas and statues; the consecrated objects are perceived as the containers of the divine power of the *yi dam*.

⁵⁸³ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁸⁴ Interviews with Geshe Dugda and Tupten Shakya, June-July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁸⁵ This text is the hundred syllable mantra of Rdo rje 'jigs byed (ibid).

⁵⁸⁶ Interview with Geshe Dugda, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁹⁰ Interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

The final consecration (*rab gnas*)

The final ritual of consecration of a stupa is called *rab gnas*, which in Tibetan means ‘to make firm or permanent’. *Rab gnas* is performed after all the levels of the stupa have been filled with relics and the construction completed; only then the stupa receives its final consecration.⁵⁹¹ *Rab gnas* is indispensable, because only after this ritual does the stupa become a sacred monument.

Rab gnas takes place outside on the site of the stupa. As a rule four monks participate in the consecration. The ritual master in charge of the ceremony is a lama of high status, in Kalmykia it is usually Telo Tulku Rinpoche, or if he is absent, Geshe Dugda. This ritual is also a ceremony of opening the monument to the public. A great number of lay believers gather on the site; it is believed that the empowerment from the consecration is also transmitted to all who are present at the ceremony.⁵⁹²

Rab gnas is also the name for the texts of consecration, according to which the ritual is performed. *Rab gnas* texts can be in a brief concise form (*rab gnas mdor bsdus pa*), middle (*rab gnas ‘bring po*) and extensive variant (*rab gnas rgyas pa*).⁵⁹³ These texts can be used for the consecration of *khuruls* or any other monument or building.⁵⁹⁴ In Kalmykia most often the concise text is used.

I did not have the chance to see the ceremony of final consecration. However, from a number of interviews with ritual specialists who work in Kalmyk *khuruls*⁵⁹⁵ I could learn about the setting and procedures of this ritual. I was also given two texts of consecration: *Rab gnas bsdus pa* (‘Short consecration’) from the collection of texts *Chos spyod kyi rim pa Thar lam rab gsal*⁵⁹⁶ and *Rab gnas mdor bsdus* (‘Condensed consecration’) from the collection of ritual texts called *Chos spyod rab gsal*.⁵⁹⁷ The first text includes the directions for visualization, the mantras of consecration and the supplication to deities. The latter was

⁵⁹¹ Bentor 2003: 35.

⁵⁹² Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁹³ Ibid. See also Bentor 1996: 68.

⁵⁹⁴ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁵⁹⁵ Interviews with Telo Tulku Rinpoche, Geshe Dugda, Tupten Shakya, Padma Sherab, and Andzha-gelong, June-July 2008.

⁵⁹⁶ *Chos spyod kyi rim pa Thar lam rab gsal* by Smin gling Lo chen Dharma shri. 1970. Solu, Nepal. This text was given to me by the abbot of Iki-Burul *khurul*.

⁵⁹⁷ *Chos spyod rab gsal*. 1990. Pan chen Bsod nams grags pa literature series. Karnataka, India: Drepung Loseling Library.

given to me by the abbot of the central *khurul* in Elista, who referred to this text as the prayer of consecration.⁵⁹⁸

The ritual *rab gnas* is analyzed in this chapter on the basis of the text *Rab gnas bsdus pa*⁵⁹⁹ (from the collection of ritual texts *Chos spyod kyi rim pa Thar lam rab gsal*) and interviews with ritual experts. The ritual may be divided into three parts: the preliminary rituals, the main part or the generation of the sacred power within the stupa, and the final requests to the deities thus located within the stupa.

The preliminary ritual: *khurus gsol*

Before the ceremony a low wooden platform for the monks to sit on is placed in front of the stupa. The monks sit in one row, or sometimes in two if they are many. The seat of the ritual master Telo Tulku Rinpoche is higher than those of other monks.⁶⁰⁰

The ritual begins with the ‘removal of obstacles’ (*bgegs bsal*) with the help of the seed syllable *HŪ*□. After the elimination of obstacles, the ‘offering bath’ (*khurus gsol*) must be performed. *Khurus gsol* is a ritual bath or water purification offered to religious objects and deities.⁶⁰¹ The texts of brief consecration usually do not give precise directions as to how to perform the ‘offering bath’, only the bath offering mantra (*O□ sarva tathāgata abishekata samaya shriye HŪ*□) is given. The information about this ritual was obtained from interviews with ritual specialists, Geshe Dugda and Tupten Shakya. I was told that the ritual bath can be a separate ritual, and is also included in the ceremony of ‘stupa opening’ as a preliminary ritual in the final consecration (*rab gnas*).⁶⁰² In any case the bathing or purification with water is done when the construction is completed.⁶⁰³

The objects of ritual bathing (Buddhas, Bodhisattvas as well as relics inside the stupa) do not require any cleansing, because they are pure. As was explained to me by Tupten Shakya, though the body, speech and mind of the Buddha are stainless, ritual bathing is offered to the Buddha in order to create merit for those who have flaws, i.e. for all sentient

⁵⁹⁸ The whole text consists mainly in the supplication to the deities to enter the stupa and to remain there forever for the sake of all beings. It also includes the requests to grant longevity, prosperity, happiness, etc to the whole community (see *Rab gnas mdor bsdus* 1990: 286-289).

⁵⁹⁹ See *Rab gnas bsdus pa* 1970: 301-303.

⁶⁰⁰ Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁶⁰¹ Bentor 1996: 45.

⁶⁰² Interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

beings.⁶⁰⁴ The bathing is also meant to remove the impurities from the site of the consecration ritual, from all those who are present at the ceremony, and from the performers of the ritual.⁶⁰⁵

During this preliminary ritual a bath is offered in a particular sequence to the ‘glorious lamas’ (*dpal ldan bla ma*), to the *yi dam*, to Buddhas, to Bodhisattvas, to the Dakinis, to the Heroes (*dpa’ bo*), to the Dharma protectors, and to the ‘land owners’ (*gzhi bdag*).⁶⁰⁶ Ritual bathing can be performed in a contracted form for all types of revered beings simultaneously, or it can be offered separately to Buddhas, to *yi dam*, and so forth.⁶⁰⁷ As a preliminary element of the final consecration (*rab gnas*), the offering bath is usually done for all revered beings simultaneously.⁶⁰⁸

It is not the receptacle itself that is actually washed but its reflection in a mirror, i.e. the water is applied to a bathing mirror (*khros long*) in which the receptacles of the Buddha’s body, speech and mind are reflected.⁶⁰⁹ A mirror is used in this ritual, because it captures the reflection of the stupa, of the deities and of the whole universe.⁶¹⁰

Before a bath is offered, a scheme must be drawn on a bathing mirror. These drawings on a mirror can be various. According to the ritual experts working in the central *khurul*, the Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, a mirror should be divided with straight lines into nine square sections; in each section a dot is drawn.⁶¹¹ As was explained to me, these nine sections are the seats for deities, the places where the reflection of the deities must be projected.⁶¹² This sketch represents the mandala of the nine *lha* (‘gods’): the Five Tathagatas (one is in the center and the others are situated at the four cardinal directions), and the four goddesses situated in the four intermediate directions.⁶¹³ Thus Vairocana is in the center, Amitabha is in the West, Amoghasiddhi is in the North, Akshobhya is in the East, and Ratnasambhava is in the South. The four goddesses of the intermediate directions are Locana in the South-West, Mamaki in the North-West, Pandaravasini in the North-East, and

⁶⁰⁴ Interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁶⁰⁵ Interview with Geshe Dugda, July 2008, Elista.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid. Bentor also mentioned that in Tibetan ritual bathing (*khros gsol*) the water or cleansing substances (*‘dag rdzas*) are hardly ever poured or sprinkled on stupas or statues (Bentor 1996: 167).

⁶¹⁰ Interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁶¹¹ Interviews with Geshe Dugda and Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁶¹² Interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁶¹³ Ibid.

Tara in the South-East.⁶¹⁴ The mandala of the nine Buddhas represents the whole universe: the center and the eight directions of space. Consequently, when this mandala is drawn on a mirror, the whole universe is believed to be reflected in this mirror.

The *khrus gsol* is performed on several levels: the level of ritual action (actions done during the ritual), the level of speech (the mantras and texts that must be recited) and on the level of visualization (what should be envisaged by the practitioners while carrying out the ritual actions and chanting texts).⁶¹⁵

The mirror with the sketch drawn on it is raised and shown to the receptacle, so that the reflection of the stupa is captured in the mirror. The water is poured from the ‘bathing vase’ (*khrus bum*) on the mirror.⁶¹⁶ While doing this, the mantra *Oṃ sarva tathāgata abishekata samaya shriye HŪṃ* is recited; this mantra is prescribed for purification by the ritual text of brief consecration.⁶¹⁷ At the same time the monks performing the ritual should visualize the mirror as the representation of the universe. When performing the ritual bathing, the practitioner envisages that the whole universe is offered to all those who receive the ‘bath’, i.e. to the lamas, *yi dam*, Buddhas, etc.⁶¹⁸

I was told by Geshe Dugda that Mount Kailash⁶¹⁹ must be envisaged in the middle; descending from it, four great rivers flow in the four cardinal directions, and four stairways lead down to the water where the bathing is visualized.⁶²⁰

In the end, the mirror is wiped with the ritual silk scarf (*kha btags*), during which the monks envisage that they dry the Buddha’s body.⁶²¹

The generation of sacred power within a receptacle

The core of the ritual of consecration is the establishing of the presence (the body, speech and mind) of the *yi dam* within a receptacle. This part of the final consecration *rab*

⁶¹⁴ For a picture of this mandala see Snellgrove 1987: 211.

⁶¹⁵ Interview with Geshe Dugda, July 2008, Elista.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid.

⁶¹⁷ See *Rab gnas bsdus pa* 1970: 301. Bentor mentions about this mantra when describing ‘offering bath’, she says that it is an initiation mantra, because the bathing is regarded as a type of water-initiation (Bentor 1996: 181).

⁶¹⁸ Interview with Tupten Shakya, July 2008, Elista.

⁶¹⁹ Kapstein writes that Kailash is perceived in Tibet as Himavat or the legendary mountain of ancient Buddhist cosmology. Just like four great rivers are believed to descend from Himavat, four rivers originate in the area around Kailash (Kapstein 2006: 8).

⁶²⁰ Interview with Geshe Dugda, July 2008, Elista.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

gnas will be analyzed on the basis of the text *Rab gnas bsdus pa* ('Short consecration'),⁶²² which is frequently used in contemporary Kalmykia.

Just like the *gzungs sgrub*, a *sadhana* is performed for the final consecration. It begins with the visualization of Vairocana as the aspect of the body, Amitabha as the support of the speech and Akshobhya as the aspect of the mind appearing from the emptiness; the three deities invite the 'wisdom being' (*ye shes pa*).⁶²³ While visualizing this, the monks chant the mantra *Vajra sa ma dza*, evoking the *ye shes pa*.⁶²⁴ Then this evocation is dissolved (*bstim*) into emptiness.⁶²⁵

The next step includes the visualization of the three seed syllables *O*, *Ā*, *HŪ* on the head, throat and heart chakras respectively of the stupa; rays of light come from the syllables and the deities of the three vajras (*rdo rje gsum gyi lha tshogs*) are seen to enter the three chakras, thus becoming inseparable from the body, mind and speech of the stupa.⁶²⁶ Thus the initial stage here is the visualization of chakras as deities.

Then the empowerment deity (*dbang lha*) is invited to bestow the empowerment. Five impurities are washed away and five wisdoms are manifested.⁶²⁷ Thereafter the Five Tathagata families with the five Supreme Buddhas appear and adorn the receptacle, which is also visualized as a deity after it has received the empowerment.⁶²⁸

Finally the generated deities are completely transformed and assume the form of their receptacles, merging with the stupa.⁶²⁹ Afterwards, the consecration mantra is chanted, followed by the recitation of the verse of Interdependent origination in Sanskrit.⁶³⁰ While reciting it, the monks are prescribed by the text to throw around flowers of blessing (*me tog byin*).⁶³¹

This four-step visualization procedure locates the presence of the Buddhas and *yi dam* within the stupa.

⁶²² *Rab gnas bsdus pa* 1970: 301-303.

⁶²³ Ibid: 301.

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ *dri ma lnga sbyangs te ye shes lnga mngon du byas* (ibid).

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ *bskyed pa'i lha yongs su gyur pa rten so so'i rnam par gyur par* (ibid: 302).

⁶³⁰ In the texts in is written in Sanskrit with the Tibetan script (ibid).

⁶³¹ In Kalmykia in most cases rice is thrown (interview with Andzha-gelong, July 2008, Elista).

The final part: requests to the deities

The last part of the ritual consists in the supplications and requests to the deities already inside the stupa. The practitioners address the three jewels (*dkon mchog gsum*), the lineage teachers (*dpal ldan bla ma*), the *yi dam* deities, the protectors and guardians of the Dharma (*chos skyong srang ma*), and the ‘land-owners’ (*gzhi bdag*) requesting them to stay there together with the receptacle for the sake of all sentient beings and to bestow health, longevity, power, prosperity and happiness on the community.⁶³²

Then the practitioner addresses the local spirits of the earth and of the sky, ordering them to treat all living beings with loving kindness and to practice the Dharma. Thus the final consecration includes the subduing of the local spirits. Finally all the people who are present at the ceremony are blessed and freed from fears by the ritual prayer.

At the end of the ceremony a celebration begins, because the final consecration is regarded as a festive event in Kalmykia. Right after the consecration is performed the people who have been observing the consecration process, circumambulate the newly consecrated receptacle. Tables with food and tea are laid for everybody. Very often concerts take place: traditional Kalmyk music is played and traditional dances are performed. This event is always reported in the local newspapers, and the local TV channels broadcast the concerts that accompany the opening of the suburgan.

⁶³² *‘dir ni rten dang lhan cig tu/ ‘gro ba’i don du bzugs nas kyang/ nad med tshe dang dbang phyug dang/ mchog rnams legs par stsal du gsol (Rab gnas bsdu pa 1970: 302).*

Conclusion

Kalmyks are actively indulged in the construction of stupas. Before the Soviet period suburgans were not numerous in Kalmykia, but functioned mainly as architectural elements, decorating of the upper levels of Buddhist temples. However, with the advent of religious revival the situation changed, since 1999 more than forty suburgans have been erected throughout Kalmykia. This widespread activity is driven by the motivation of the laity in Kalmykia. For Kalmyks the stupa is the embodiment of the Buddha and his teachings; moreover, the stupa is a representation of the restoration of the Kalmyk spiritual tradition. At the present moment the Kalmyk national identity is in the process of reorientation. Buddhism is a constituent element of the Kalmyk national pride, because it distinguishes the Kalmyks from neighbouring ethnic groups.

A prominent feature of Buddhism that is being revived in contemporary Kalmykia is its traditional character and orientation towards Tibet as the spiritual centre. Thus Buddhist rituals and practices with regard to the stupa construction and consecration are entirely traditional. The architectural structure, symbolic meaning and functions of Kalmyk suburgans are analogous to that of Tibetan *mchod rten*. Both in Tibet and in Kalmykia the stupa is first and foremost a commemorative religious monument, which is believed to locate the presence of the Buddha in the world and to create merit and spiritual well-being. No funerary function is attached to the position of the stupa in Kalmyk religious life.

Though the content of the Kalmyk suburgans can vary, the concept of relics in Kalmykia reflects the Tibetan concept of relics, which comprises corporeal remains (parts of the body and ashes) of important religious characters, objects associated with holy persons and places, religious scriptures, miniature stupas, *tsha tsha* and so forth.

Buddhist books and mantras play a crucial part in the stupa consecration in Kalmykia. Therefore, most of the interior space of Kalmyk suburgans is filled with Buddhist texts. The practice of depositing religious scriptures as relics is based on the doctrinal precepts of Tibetan Buddhism. The cult of the book is propagated in present day Kalmykia by the *sangha*; lay Kalmyks also believe in the sacred power of Buddhist scriptures. On the other hand, for Buddhist texts to be the most numerous components within Kalmyk suburgans is partially dictated by the possibilities of the community, because bodily relics are quite difficult to obtain in Kalmykia.

In spite of the overall traditional character of Kalmyk Buddhism, the concept of relics in Kalmykia is gradually broadening. New items (such as tapes, compact disks, memory sticks with Buddhist texts recorded, etc) are installed in suburgans and statues built nowadays in Kalmykia.

Though religious texts and other categories of relics are regarded as sacred by their own nature, the entire content of the stupa receives its consecration through special rituals twice: firstly, through the ritual of the ‘empowerment of *dharanis*’ (*gzungs sgrub*) and secondly, through the final consecration ritual *rab gnas*. All the consecration rituals that accompany the construction of suburgans in contemporary Kalmykia are performed in accordance with the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

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Summary

The thesis focuses on the consecration of stupas in contemporary Kalmykia and discusses the position of the stupa in Kalmyk religious life.

The Kalmyks became acquainted with Buddhism around the 13th century A.D. At that time they inhabited the south part of Siberia and were known as Oirats. The name Kalmyk was applied to the Oirats in the 17th century, when a substantial part of the Oirat tribes migrated to the Volga steppe in Russia and became a subject of the Russian Empire. Until the beginning of the 20th century the Kalmyks followed the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism; however, after the Bolshevik revolution Buddhism was prohibited in Russia, including the Kalmyk republic. Since the end of the 1980s religious institutions and practices are being restored in Kalmykia. The construction of stupas is a conspicuous manifestation of the reestablishment of Buddhism in Kalmykia.

A stupa (Tib. *mchod rten*, Mon. *suburgan*) is a Buddhist commemorative monument, containing relics. Being perceived as the reminder of the Buddha's enlightenment and the symbol of the Dharma, a stupa became the object of deep religious veneration. In Tibetan Buddhism a stupa receives its sacred character after it has been consecrated. The consecration consists of the deposition of relics and the final consecration (*rab gnas*). The thesis discusses the concept of relics and their deposition within a receptacle in contemporary Kalmykia. Special attention is paid to the role of Tibetan religious scriptures in the consecration of stupas and statues. In Tibetan Buddhism the concept of relics comprises not only parts of body and ashes of saints or objects associated with holy persons and places, but also books. The installation of Tibetan religious texts serves as the main means of sacralizing stupas and statues in Kalmykia. The thesis surveys the particular texts installed, analyses the importance of these Tibetan texts for Kalmyk Buddhism and describes the process of their installation. The final chapter discusses the main consecration rituals that accompany the construction of a stupa in Kalmykia. These rituals are the preliminary 'ground ritual' (*sa blang*) for obtaining and blessing the site, the empowerment of the items to be installed in the receptacle (*gzungs sgrub*), the 'offering bath' (*khros gsol*) and the final consecration (*rab gnas*).

The thesis is mainly based on data collected through fieldwork, carried out in June and July 2008 in Elista (the capital of Kalmykia) and smaller settlements around the capital.