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To cite this article: Elza-Bair Guchinova (2020) Awaiting the *Chakravarti*-Tsar: Buddhists and Politics in Contemporary Kalmykia, *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia*, 59:1, 8-28, DOI: [10.1080/10611959.2020.1918954](https://doi.org/10.1080/10611959.2020.1918954)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611959.2020.1918954>



Published online: 23 Sep 2021.



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Awaiting the *Chakravarti-Tsar*: Buddhists and Politics in Contemporary Kalmykia

Elza-Bair Guchinova

The post-secular epoch in Russia enabled a phenomenon that is sometimes called the “revival of religion” in Kalmykia, as well as in other regions of the country. In the word “revival” [«*vozrozhdenie*»] I sense a hint of primordialism, as if the surge of interest in religion, including its affirmation in part of Kalmyk society by the late twentieth century, was happening all by itself.¹ This implied that all that was necessary was to “allow religion” to emerge in the very same forms in which this process had been put on hold in the 1930s —without the efforts of a host of people. Yet the forms of religiosity have changed substantially since that time, while the lines of development of religious life in the post-Soviet republics have shown how much depends on economic and political context and on the concrete people occupying leadership positions in state power and ecclesiastical power.

While the “revival of Orthodoxy” was prepared for, *inter alia*, by a lengthy process of legitimization of religion in Soviet times through its localization in culture (Kormina and Shtyrkov, 2015, p. 9), everything was on a more modest scale in relation to Buddhism. The Kalmyk intelligentsia in Soviet times rarely addressed spiritual topics. The first to do so were Nikita Sandzhiev with his expressive sculpture of a lama with the telling title “*Ukhodiashchaia Mongoliia*” [“Mongolia Receding [Into Oblivion]”] (wood, 1974) and Garri Rokchinskii with the picturesque canvas “*Zaia-pandita – prosvetitel’, osnovopolozhnik oirat-kalmytskoi pis’mennosti*” [“Zaya-Pandita—Enlightener, Founding Father of Kalmyk-Oirat Writing”] (canvas and oil, 1980), as well as the art scholar Svetlana Batyreva with research into Old Kalmyk art (see Batyreva, 1991). Sandzhiev could not call his work “Lama,” but he understood that it was important to capture in life-sized statuary form the significant figure of a monk with a prayerful pose of the hands, totally focused on his internal world. The name of the sculpture leads the possible critic beyond the territory of the USSR. Given that all artists in the USSR had the image of the critic in their head as

English translation © 2021 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, from the Russian text, “V ozhidanii tsaria-chakravartina: buddisty i politika v sovremennoi Kalmykii.” The work was carried out within the framework of the RFFI collective project “Pilgrimage in post-secular Russia: the infrastructure of journeys and of the practice of production of spiritual experience.” RFFI project 19-08-00420.

Translated by Stephan Lang.

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they created their works, the epithet “receding” was supposed to compensate for disapproval of attention to “vestiges” of the past, which was the attitude toward religion back then. Rokchinskii created a portrait of an historical person—the Oirat monk who invented the *todo bichig* (clear script), the writing system designed specifically for the Oirats, adapting the script for the Kalmyk language, enabling him to translate important Buddhist written works into this language. This personage continues to remain just as significant for the Kalmyks as the monks Cyril and Methodius are for the Russian people. Yet at the end of the 1970s, the talented painter and Shiroklag labor camp survivor Rokchinskii was still afraid of the consequences.³ He therefore integrated substantiation into the work’s title, since not all of the officials who decide the fates of works of art might be aware of the Oirat monk’s contribution to the written culture of the Kalmyks. Perhaps it is also not by chance that the appearance of the Oirat enlightener looks so much like the face of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Kalmyk ASSR (1974–1989)—L. Badmakhalgaev? Finally, the art scholar S. Batyreva, the first of the Kalmyk scholars in the world of Soviet art scholarship to study the Buddhist art of Kalmyk masters, refers to it as Old Kalmyk, using this name to distance herself from it as yesterday’s art, not relevant today. This necessary ingenuity with names and other tricks were unavoidable for authors, to protect themselves from possible censure by the party leadership and to bring their works to viewers and readers.

It needs to be said that in the scholarly literature of the Soviet years, it was customary to call Buddhism in Russia “Lamaism,” to distance it at least in this way from Buddhism, including its history and transnational boundaries. The role of lamas, monks of high rank, was high and continues to be such in Buddhism all over the world. As time has shown, the renaming of Russian practices of Buddhism could not fully erect a barrier. After liberalization of societal awareness, such coded actions as “you write ‘Lamaism’ but you mean ‘Buddhism in Russia’” became a thing of the past, just like other performative practices of public discourse (see Yurchak, 2006).

Bruce Grant has formulated the policy of subordination between Moscow and the union republics as comparable to relations between a captive dependent on a gift: the position of the captive becomes exacerbated by unilateral gifts given by Russia in the realm of the economy, in the sphere of education, and more. In response, the captive must make available its resources, whether symbolic by delegating sovereignty, or economic by providing human capital (see Bruce Grant, 2009).

In this article, I demonstrate how Kalmykia, which long ago gave away its sovereignty in the realms of economics and politics to the federal center, has been successfully asserting its sovereignty in the confessional sphere in the past few decades. The construction of religion as a space free from state interference explains its phenomenal power (Mahmood, 2017, p. 198.)

A Bit of History

The titular people of the Republic of Kalmykia, the Kalmyks, who according to the 2010 census comprised 162,000 people (57 percent of the population), before the October Revolution practiced Buddhism in its northern, Tibetan, iteration. The Kalmyk population was 196,000 in 1897. In large pre-revolutionary Kalmyk families, it was customary to give one of the sons away to become a monk, so there was no small number of monks. By 1917, more than 5,000 Kalmyk ecclesiastics were thriving (Dordzhieva, 2014, p. 68). Correspondingly, around 100 temples were spread throughout all the Kalmyk homelands. By 1929, all of the temples had been demolished (except one), monks of high and middle ranks were repressed, and simple monks were forced to relinquish their ecclesiastical rank and return to worldly life. The communists called this process “demonk-ification” [«razmonakhivanie»]. During the time of the cultural revolution in the People’s Republic of China, similar rewarding and advancing of monks who violated vows were recorded in the 1960s (see Arjia Lobsang Tubden, 2018, pp. 66–68).

In 1943–1956, the Kalmyks were deported in their entirety to different regions of Siberia, “forever,” as was written in the Edict of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet. However, in thirteen years of exile, the religious sphere was not only privatized, but shrank substantially as well. Perhaps several dozen people continued to practice in deep secrecy. After the discrediting of Stalin’s personality cult at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, at the end of the 1950s the Kalmyks were permitted to return to a restored Kalmyk autonomy, although the territory of the republic had been substantially reduced. The overwhelming majority of the Kalmyks returned to their native steppes and began anew to create roots in the reestablished Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Oblast, which only later became a republic.

At the beginning of the 1980s, it was considered in the Kalmyk ASSR that atheistic work was being conducted successfully and that there were practically no Buddhist faithful in Kalmykia, or if there were, then this was a not-large group of old people. Not a single religious [*kul'tovogo*] structure, not even a small one, appeared in Kalmykia in these years. Nobody saw monks in their beautiful clothing, and no one heard the singing of prayers.² But for some reason, which days were fortuitous for weddings and funerals still needed to be found out from somebody, as well as determining when Kalmyk holidays should take place. One should not think that the official Soviet calendar and the astrological lunar calendar reflected two irreconcilable sides of the life of the Kalmyks. In late-Soviet Kalmyk society, these calendars peacefully co-existed in the intricate way of life of the national republic.

Notwithstanding all the anti-religious repressive policies of the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) and the atheistic propaganda of the CPSU [Soviet Union Communist Party], Buddhism in the USSR was not fully prohibited. The Buddhist *sangha* (community) had to accept the rules that the Soviet state was offering it: clergy could receive a religious education only in Buryatia or in socialist Mongolia, which was called the sixteenth republic of the USSR, and they had to get married. Perhaps state authorities assumed that in married form they would not be seen by the international Buddhist community as *bona fide* monks. Furthermore, their children and wives became hostages, and in such a manner the clergy could be controlled. It is precisely monks like these—born in the USSR and forced to cooperate with Soviet power—who practiced in Buryatia and Tyva (Tuva).

The first monks invited in 1989 to serve in Elista's prayer house were from Buryatia and Tyva. They were joined by a graduate of the cathedra of Tibeto-Mongolian philology of the St. Petersburg State University Oriental Faculty, Vladimir Chumatov (1953–2013), who after the fall of Soviet power received Refuge with Kushok Bakula Rinpoche and became the lama Rinchen Dagva. In this case, we see an example of recycling, a term of Sonja Luehrmann (2011), given the way “work on transforming the abilities, the cognitive and discursive habits of people, . . . [was] aimed at making them useful in a new context, one for which they had not originally been intended” (cited per Kormina and Shtyrkov, 2015, p. 8). Knowledge of the Tibetan language and culture were debased in the academic milieu of the Soviet years, since the dominant ideological framework assumed any religious system to be reactionary and took a unilateral denunciatory approach to it. Subsequently, many institutes of the Academy of Sciences turned out to be in ideological and financial crises after the breakup of the USSR and the downfall of communist ideology. As public religious practices became permitted, demand appeared for conducting a Buddhist service, and here the knowledge of Tibetan culture acquired new significance. The monk Rinchen Dagva was much sought after; he enjoyed particular trust among Elista parishioners because he was not an outsider.

In Kalmykia, a few remaining priest-monks [*gelüings*] of the old school had survived, those who had managed to receive a Buddhist education before the Soviet authorities' active policies of repression. Some had been forced to start families, but they could not be untrue to their spiritual nature. They received in their homes those who sought advice in a difficult moment. They were willing to look at the astral maps to see when it would be best to schedule a matchmaking [*svatovstvo*] and a wedding, or to determine what day would be suitable for a funeral—as well as for prayer, for healing. Their names were not always widely known and, as a rule, people would say they had to go to the Tsagan-Amanian *aav* (grandfather) or to the Zalivnoi state farm. It was tacitly understood that this was for a consultation. Many

remember Tügmed gavdji (Ochir Dordzhiev, 1887–1980), who lived in Tsagan-Aman and was able to maintain a rich spiritual library despite arrests, imprisonment, and exile. Living there as well was Badma Gedeev (1890–1973), who at the age of six had been given away to the Tsagan-Aman *khurul* [temple] and after eighteen years of study took the vows of a *geliüng*, which he was forced to drop in the 1930s; in 1935 he was convicted, and later exiled to Siberia together with the Kalmyks. Having returned from Siberia in 1957, he settled in Tsagan-Aman (Dordzhieva, 2014, p. 110).

Relevant is the research of Valeriia Gazizova (2019), who terms the period of late socialism (1960s–1980s) in Kalmykia “secret Buddhism,” and analyzes forms of secrecy in effect in relation to Kalmyk underground Buddhist agents, in the context of the coexistence of culturally antagonistic world views—the communist and the Buddhist. Nonetheless, the practices of these lamas were not “top secret;” anyone could call on them any day, both ordinary Kalmyks and those from the families of officials. Even the families of commandants, as happened in Siberia, could appeal to them. It must be said that local authorities likewise treated these practices with respect, fearing to openly oppose [them].

Particularly relevant are class of 1923 graduates of the Tsannit Cheria higher Buddhist school: the astrologer Zodka Natyrov (1902–1995), the physician Namka Kichikov (1901–1985), and the philosopher Sandji [Sandzhi] Ulanov (1903–1996). In the ’30s, Namka Kichikov was forced to relinquish his ecclesiastical rank, while Natyrov and Ulanov received prison terms. Ulanov got nearly twenty-five years in the Kolyma forced labor camps. People attested that they always observed Buddhist vows, read prayers, transcribed texts in the old Kalmyk “clear script,” helped people, and received visitors, despite unofficial surveillance that lasted as late as 1990 in the case of Ulanov. Notwithstanding the specific competency obtained by the monks, the Buddhist system of education was such that they knew related areas of specialization well and were able to help parishioners who sought them concerning various questions. [People] came to them from all over the republic.

My son served in Afghanistan, in the paratroopers. Before leaving for the army, grandfather Zodka gave him an amulet [to take] with him—a blessed coin. He strictly admonished [the lad] to carry it on his person. One time in battle a bullet ricocheted and ended up right in this same coin. The son didn’t even get a scratch. He wrote home about this and urgently insisted [that we] go once again to grandfather Zovda, so that that one would put a spell on yet another coin. And so we did. By mail in a letter we sent it off to the son. Fortunately, he came back from the war alive and unharmed and now he’s got two children (L. K.).

I was six years old, and I got a very big scare. Then mama drove me to Zalivnoi. We arrived before daybreak, dawn had not yet come. I’ve forgotten a lot, but I remember well how Namka geliüng was gathering air into his lungs and

blowing at me. I then sensed a particular, very pleasant smell of his breath. Much later in India I sensed this smell from one lama, and immediately remembered Namka. Later I heard in a sermon by His Holiness the Dalai Lama that some people may take away the woes from all living creatures onto themselves in prayers. In such a manner, egoism disappears and compassion is born in the soul. A very pleasant smell appears in the breath of those who practice thus for a long time . . . (A.D.).

These Soviet era “secret lamas” have become the focus of contemporary public worship, with new icons (*thang ka* in Tibetan) and temples devoted to them and stories about their magical abilities abounding. Their former places of residence have become pilgrimage sites, associated with miraculous healings (Gazizova 2019).

Indeed, it required some time to be able to evaluate that work done in secret by the lamas of the old school in Kalmykia.

Meeting with the Teacher: the Dalai Lama’s visits to Kalmykia

As I heard once, when the Dalai Lama came to Kalmykia, and found out that old *gelüings* were still living, he expressed the desire to meet with them. When this was reported to Ulanov, he surprisingly began by refusing. He still remembered the camps and apparently did not trust the communists; at that time the CPSU still ran everything. By the way, Sandji *gelüing* (Ulanov) did have monastic garb, but did not always go around in it; he shaved his head. Ulanov finally did give approval. They say he arrived at the meeting dressed in an unusual manner: something was inside-out, the hat was on backwards. As soon as he saw the approaching figure of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, he began a particular prayer, which His Holiness picked up, and they ended it together. Then Ulanov quickly fixed his clothing, while His Holiness, being the younger monk in age, rendered the elder one the corresponding honors. Then too, as the senior one in rank, the Dalai Lama pressed his forehead to Ulanov’s forehead—as a sign that he acknowledged him as an equal. It turns out that in the beginning of the twentieth century, when the monks were still acolytes (*mandzhik*, teachers warned them that times were coming when false teachers might appear, and for this they were taught a special prayer by which they would be able to identify a true Dalai Lama. The prayer fulfilled its purpose and confirmed that the real Dalai Lama had come to Kalmykia and that the Kalmyk *sangha* (even in secret mode) had been able to carry the teaching of the Buddha through the trials of the anti-religious campaign, deportation, and Soviet power as a whole, and had lived to see the visit of its Teacher.

This story, like a real legend, has other versions as well . . .

The way I heard it, when His Holiness first arrived in Elista in 1991, everyone was in a frenzy—they wanted to come to his prayer service. But Sandji *gelüing*

was in no hurry. Close ones were asking him why he wasn't rushing to go and take a look at the Dalai Lama. But he was calmly replying "He will call me." And indeed, one day people came from the security detail assigned to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and invited Sandji gelüing to come for a ride with them. Sandji gelüing dressed in the way many Kalmyk old men do when they go visiting: a light-colored shirt, a business suit, a hat. He calmly got dressed and rode off. When he entered the room in which His Holiness was, he said something. And in response the Dalai Lama replied something too. Then Sandji gelüing took off his hat, and made prostrations, having satisfied himself that before him was the true Dalai Lama. Turns out, at one time the Fifth Dalai Lama had given an oath that he would help all the Oirats. And Sandji gelüing had begun reading the beginning of this oath, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama had continued this oath. Thus did the monks acknowledge one another. In a year, in 1992 His Holiness the Dalai Lama came anew to Kalmykia and was already giving Refuge to some Kalmyk monks. They say that, having satisfied himself that the line of teaching (the *saniya*) among the monks would continue, Sandji gelüing had said "Now I can depart . . ." (AD).

Finally, there is the testimony of an eyewitness as well. The head of the Dharma-center religious civic organization, Baatr Elistaev, shared the details of that historic meeting between Sandji gelüing and His Holiness—as a recognition of the merits of the Kalmyk monks, who had kept the faith of the ancestors in the westernmost enclave of the Buddhist world. As Baatr Elistaev remembered, Telo Tulku Rinpoche, accompanying His Holiness the Dalai Lama, got excited by the idea of organizing a meeting between His Holiness and Sandji gelüing, because this would be important for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, for his tutors in childhood and adolescence had been monks—Kalmyks . . . "When we arrived that evening at Sandji gelüing's and told about the possibility of a meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama the next day, he had some doubts: our old teachers had said that sham Dalai-lamas are possible . . . Now if I could just go and check. . . . I'm a *gelüing*, and he's a *gelüing*. What do we need from one another?" (Elistaev 1996).

The meeting took place on July 29, 1991.

. . . out of the room came the Dalai Lama. He walked toward Sandji gelüing and, before reaching him, he bowed and brushed against his hands with his head, offering a white *khatag* [ceremonial scarf], in the way that monks younger in age greet older ones. . . . We all stood there at a loss, while the Dalai Lama, breaking into laughter, led Sandji gelüing into the hotel room . . . The Dalai Lama and Sandji gelüing also looked each other in the eyes for a time. The first to ask a question in the Tibetan language was Sandji gelüing, reading an excerpt from one of the hymns to the Buddha. No one understood a thing. Sandji gelüing repeated. The interpreter asked me "Is this in Kalmyk?" . . . The Dalai Lama quickly replied to Sandji gelüing in Tibetan. And Sandji gelüing turned to me and said in Kalmyk: "This is the real Dalai Lama, I've checked him out . . ." It turns out that Sandji gelüing had said "If thou be the real Dalai Lama, continue the hymn to Buddha that I shall read." The Dalai Lama had replied

“I do not know for sure if I am the Dalai Lama, but everyone around takes me as such, while your prayer I can continue.” They laughed and gave each other a big hug . . . (Elistaev 1996).

In the three tales about one meeting we can see how the narrators place emphasis on different details of the event, but important for all the narratives are the underscoring of the special relations between the Dalai Lamas and the Kalmyks (Oirats) (not for nothing is there a Tibetskaia Street in Elista) and the spiritual expertise of Sandji gelüng, which is recognized by the Dalai Lama. Usually, the test for trueness is administered by the one who is senior in status, but here it was the one who was the elder in age. Apparently, the unique experience of S. Ulanov—whose monastic biography of having survived the totalitarian twentieth century had made him a bridge of sorts between one epoch and the other, and who embodied within himself the merits of an entire repressed generation of clergy—gave him seniority. He had the right to declare the significance of what is valid for Kalmyk monks—the true faith and the true Teacher.

The epoch of liberalization saw the start of open religious practices, which began from practically nothing. A prayer house was bought back and opened in 1989; later, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama was invited to Kalmykia, and the first batch of students set off to the monasteries of India for study.

Buddhists and politicians

The beginning of the secular epoch was also a new stage for the establishment of statehood. The first visits of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1991 and 1992 (later, the Dalai Lama was in Kalmykia in 2004) occurred in the last moments of Soviet power. The communists of the late Soviet period were already no longer in a struggle with religion as the opiate of the masses, but were trying to appropriate different forms of work with the people, as though they shared common values. In dialogues with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, people were trying to pose the most important questions for that time, including the question of who of the candidates would become the best president of Kalmykia. In discussing the future presidential elections, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama seemed to have advised choosing a person who had been born after the deportation, as a figure free from deprivation experience.³ The commonality of the experience of expulsion from native places in totalitarian communist regimes and the impossibility of return to the motherland for political reasons unites Tibetans and Kalmyks. “Of the different countries with representatives of which we have contacts, the Kalmyk people is closest of all to us,” said Representative of the Tibetan parliament professor Samdong Rinpoche to the Kalmyk journalist E. Shamakov (*Izvestiia Kalmykii*, February 17, 1996).

The first and second presidents of the Republic of Kalmykia (communists in the past, now supposedly Buddhists) travelled to India from time to time for audiences with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Often these visits were after successful elections, or on the eve of upcoming ones. This is also a contemporary answer to an eighteenth century tradition, when it was specifically the Dalai Lamas who confirmed the Kalmyk khans on the throne. Thus, Ayuka-khan received the khan's title and seal in 1699, endorsed in an embassy to the Sixth Dalai Lama, after which his papers began to be bound with two seals (Tepkeev and Sanchirov, 2016, p. 15).

Banners with an image of [first Republic president Kirsan] Ilyumzhinov together with patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Alexei II or with His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama became a visual part of agitational campaigns during K. Ilyumzhinov's second election in 1995. A promise to build a new *khurul* in the center of Elista became his main political promise to the people. An alternative place for the construction of the first *khurul* had been chosen by His Holiness the Dalai Lama on his first visit in 1991, when the CPSU was still in power and its representatives did not want to allot land within the city limits. During His Holiness the Dalai Lama's third visit to Elista, in the fall of 2004, K. Ilyumzhinov asked him to consecrate the place for the *khurul* complex in the center of Elista and this was done (E.Sh., personal communication).

The second head of the Republic of Kalmykia, Aleksei Orlov, likewise visited His Holiness in his residence in Dharmasala. Witnesses recounted, without naming names, about this one high-level official person, who, having landed an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, asked first thing "Shall we take a photograph?"

During the time of their rule, the first two presidents of the Republic of Kalmykia were not able to do anything substantially positive for the republic's economy from 1993 through 2018. What is more, the first president was spending little time in the republic, getting sidetracked by other projects. But Ilyumzhinov's contribution in the cause of reviving Buddhism must be noted. But the first president of Kalmykia built 2 large Buddhist temples. This was a great contribution to the restoration of Buddhism, he also had other merits. Being likewise elected president of FIDE in 1995, K. Ilyumzhinov was in China almost every year—in connection with international chess events. There, he proposed the idea of signing an agreement on designating Elista and Lhasa as sister-cities. Such an agreement was signed, and the mayor's offices of both cities exchanged visits several times. This is why there is a Lhasskaia Street in Elista.

Under the second president, authoritative power did not reveal itself in any way—roads were not getting repaired in the republic, the drinking water problem and other most pressing questions were not getting resolved, and an acute shortage of jobs was leading to an outflow of the

able-bodied population. This workers' migration of the able-bodied population from Kalmykia to Moscow and Saint Petersburg, to the northern regions of the country, has been compared in society with a "new deportation," when in many families Kalmyk children are once again growing up without parents because they have gone away to earn salaries, often under humiliating conditions. It cannot be said that the government is not aware of the questions of teaching youth the Kalmyk language and the basics of Kalmyk culture, the shortage in Kalmykia of doctors and even elementary medical equipment, and other urgent, vitally important social problems. On the contrary, the press has been regularly reporting what round sums the government has received for their resolution. But nothing concrete in social policy has been changing. The state in the Republic of Kalmykia has not been showing an interest in its citizens living better. Distrust in and disenchantment with local authorities has grown among the residents of the republic.

Defenders of the Fatherland and Faith

Political parties defending religious interests have been prohibited in Russia since 2001. For this reason, it was impossible to register a party that specifically could reflect the interests of the Buddhist faithful in Kalmykia. Before the next regularly scheduled elections to the Kalmyk parliament (*hural*) in 2013, a regional branch was registered of the «Zashchitniki Otechestva» [*Defenders of the Fatherland*] party, whose members throughout all of Russia are usually professional military people. But in the Kalmyk branch, it was headed by people who saw a Buddhist sense in the name—as defenders of the faith in Kalmykia. The motto of their branch became the slogan: "We have the right to meet the Dalai Lama on our land." Only people who had been vetted were being accepted as members of the branch, so that nobody of the branch members would in any way besmirch the work associated with the name of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Nearly all participants in the branch were being nominated for the elections to the *hural*, to use the opportunity of debates on television as a platform for expressing the interests of the faithful. At the beginning of this campaign, only the «Zashchitniki» were talking about the right of the faithful to invite His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Kalmykia for a pastoral visit. They proclaimed that a denial of this right signifies the absence of rights in other areas as well. This slogan of the «Zashchitniki» struck a chord with the inhabitants of the republic, and toward the end of the election campaign nearly all the regional branches of the known parties, including the LDPR [Liberal Democratic] and the CPRF [Communist], had written demands "on the right to receive the Dalai Lama on our land" into their platforms. [They explained,] that "we thought that if

we can stand up for this right, then later we can [stand up for] other rights as well.”

During the 2014 elections for the head of Kalmykia, the «Zashchitniki» supported the businessman V. Matsakov, who had himself asked for the support, considering himself to be a person of faith. They gave him a charge, in the event of a successful outcome to the election campaign, to conduct himself in the manner of a *chakravarti*-tsar, who looked after his people and treated the Buddhist *sangha* with respect. He had to be able to bring order to a country that had been received in a crumbling state. The image of the *chakravarti*-tsar was very appropriate given historical precedent: “this tsar receives power not through force and not by inheritance, but being found at the very top of the social ladder, he aspires ‘to reject all privileges of tsarist status’” (Lepehova, 2011, p. 70).

Present at the meeting on the occasion of Matsakov’s nomination were representatives of the electoral commission of the Republic of Kalmykia, who observed in silence as the members of the branch, together with the candidate, were reading chapter 12 of the *Golden Light Sutra* with a description of the features of the *chakravarti*-tsar. From the outside, it was like an art action. In this case, we again see an example of recycling—how a party with a narrow social base (patriot military pensioners) could be transformed into another one—with totally different objectives (Buddhist ones). Matsakov appeared as one of the sponsors of a charitable project—publication of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s book *My Land and My People*, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. One thousand copies of the print run were distributed to school and state libraries, and given as a gift to all the delegates at a gathering of Kalmyk language teachers. Matsakov built a large *stupa* of Enlightenment and a prayer drum in Elista (the Ninth Microdistrict). The *stupa* was built according to all the Buddhist rules, including [inserted] prayers written in Zaya-pandita’s old Kalmyk script. Matsakov gifted one large detached house [*kottedzh*] built by his campaign to the *khurul*. Monks are now living in it, and teachers who come to lecture stay there. However, Matsakov was not allowed to participate in the elections.

Towards Religious Construction of a Post-Secular Time

A cornerstone in the establishment of the Buddhist religious community became the election of an American citizen who had been born to a Kalmyk family of émigré-Cossacks from the first wave of immigration [after 1917]. Born Erdne Ombadykow [Erdni Ombadykov] in 1972, he became Telo Tulku Rinpoche and was appointed Šajin [Šazhin] Lama—the supreme lama of Kalmykia—in 1992.^b Already as a child he had been recognized as the reincarnation of the Mongolian Dilova-Khutukhta [Diluwa Khutugtu Jamsrangjab]. Life in a Buddhist monastery since the age of six and closeness

to highly realized masters helped him in the post of Šajin Lama to be able to represent the interests of the Dalai Lama and the interests of the faithful in the Commonwealth Of Independent States [CIS] and Mongolia, independently of any secular power of the Federation of Russia. He was able to reveal the high level of his own spiritual and administrative expertise. As Šajin Lama, Telo Tulku Rinpoche had to move to Elista for a long period of time to carry out his mission. Since 2005, Telo Tulku Rinpoche's residence is situated in Kalmykia's main temple, "The Golden Abode of the Buddha Shakyamuni," which as of today is the largest Buddhist complex in Russia and in Europe.

We were all preparing ourselves for Rinpoche to come, and we were thinking about how we could support him. It was very difficult, everything was just starting up, and we didn't have enough knowledge. Everything seemed tentative: someone had heard something . . . At the conference, they came up with the post of commercial director for me: it was necessary to gather together the available vehicles, to get the bookkeeping up and running, *et cetera*, so that Rinpoche could have support, and to always be close by, to help. They chose two of us, me and Ara-Baatr as Rinpoche's secretary (V.K.).

Things were not simple for the young person who had ended up in a strange country with the task of building a Buddhist community. He needed to learn to communicate with officials speaking not simply another language (time had to pass to learn the Russian language, while far from everybody knew the English, Kalmyk, and Tibetan languages), but accustomed to bureaucratic gameplaying. For many in official positions, sincerity was a sign of weakness, and deception was easy in order to attain desired objectives.

There were misunderstandings with the government, with the head of the republic, and everywhere he did not sacrifice conscience, honor, not one iota. Sometimes one wanted to say "Rinpoche-la, please, compromise." But after some time had passed, you understood that there is no alternative, that he had been right, and his status obligates him to this, and the fact that he is the head of Kalmykia's Buddhists. And you understand that we had not had examples [*of worthy service to the people by the highest officials—Auth.*]. And there aren't any to be seen yet. For twenty-five years already I have had the good fortune of watching Rinpoche, and from how he thinks, he is indeed thinking of the people . . . And you understand that we've been very fortunate (V.K.).

Over nearly thirty years, Telo Tulku Rinpoche has created a monastic community, the *sangha* (a minimum of four *gelüings*—monks who have completed no less than eighteen years of studies in monasteries and have taken 237 vows) in Kalmykia. More than thirty temples have been built in Kalmykia under him, constructed according to Buddhist canons. Monuments, *Stupas*, have been raised—correspondingly demanding great efforts. He started inviting leading Buddhist teachers from all over the world

to read lectures, so that the flock would grow. And he fulfilled the project of organizing regular pilgrimages.

People have begun calling the Buddhist complex “The Golden Abode of the Buddha Shakyamuni” the Central *Khurul*, indicating not only its central place among the city’s urban buildings. The *khurul* has become a special place for the urban faithful. Many cultural needs in spiritual and cultural-historical spheres of interests can be satisfied here. Lessons in the Kalmyk language and the Kalmyk Clear Script are conducted in the *khurul*. One can learn to play the *dombra* and borrow books from the oriental-studies library. There are musical offerings honoring His Holiness here, or to put it another way, concerts. Of course, all the performances, lectures, and courses are free. For example, on June 7, 2019, more than seven hundred musicians and vocalists of Kalmykia performed a musical offering to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the *Sangha*. As Rinpoche commented on the significance of this musical festival, “We are performing an offering to the ‘Three Jewels,’ accumulating virtuous merits, showing respect for older generations that preserved the mother tongue and culture, and are likewise trying to popularize national musical instruments, propagandizing the national culture of the Kalmyks, and developing the genre termed ‘Buddhist sacred music’” (FB, June 7, 2020—B.N.). Furthermore, the «Buin-Dobrodetel’» Fund for Assistance to Needy Families of Kalmykia has in its practice taken on major functions of social protection of the population. It was founded through the efforts of Telo Tulku Rinpoche and the monks of the Central *Khurul*.

Here we are coming close to “cultural sovereignty—a broad notion signifying strategies to maintain and develop cultural alterity, as well as assert autonomy from external control” (Coffey and Tsosie 2001). Despite difficulty, it is possible in contemporary Kalmykia principally within the framework of the religious field, as long as Buddhists themselves resolve their own questions in “this very cosmopolitan Buddhist community” (Bernstein, 2014, p. 4).

The position of the supreme lama of Kalmykia is significant for his sovereignty in resolving questions of principle. One such question has become insistence on inviting His Holiness to Russia. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federation of Russia stopped issuing entry visas to the Dalai Lama, in connection with China’s notes of protest. After this, the faithful of Kalmykia, Tyva, and Buryatia lost the opportunity to meet in person with their spiritual leader in Russia. However, the Dalai Lama began to bestow his teaching on the faithful from Russia in Riga (Latvia)—in a place that was the closest to the territory of Russia, and at a time when it was the most convenient for citizens of Russia—during the May holidays. The “Sokharnim Tibet” [“Save Tibet”] society, the Center for

Tibetan Culture and Information in Moscow, the Central *Khurul*, and others facilitated visa procurement by all who desired, not only to Latvia, but also to other countries where His Holiness was bestowing teachings—to the USA, Switzerland, and the countries of united Europe (Guchinova 2020, p. 41). Nevertheless, the Kalmyk community regularly raises the question of inviting His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Russia.

At the same time, the Šajin Lama of the Republic of Buryatia, Damba Aiusheev, chosen as Khambo Lama as well as head of the «Buddhist Traditional *Sangha* of Russia» organization, initiated activity with respect to Russia's Buddhist community obtaining administrative and spiritual autocephaly as a separate institution with its center in Buryatia. Aiusheev condemns the interest shown by the faithful in the teachings of foreigner-lamas. In 2009, he announced that Russia's *sangha* can live just fine even without visits from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as had been the case in recent Soviet times (Darieva and Guchinova 2020, p. 9).

Pilgrimage as a School of Faith

In many sociums, and not infrequently in the Kalmyk one as well, Buddhism is still perceived in primordial terms as a part of ethnicity. Many people are convinced that Kalmyks are Buddhists by fact of birth, that they have no other choice. It is considered that a person can choose between atheism, agnosticism, and faith, but if he or she has decided upon religion, then there can only be one choice for a Kalmyk—Buddhism.

A distinguishing feature of contemporary Kalmyk pilgrimage is that, thanks to the work of the *sangha* of the Central *Khurul* and Telo Tulku Rinpoche, this is organized pilgrimage, notwithstanding the point that groups can consist of 250–300 people each. Monks and activists help by arranging visas, purchasing airline tickets, booking hotels and transfers to international airports (to Moscow—18 hours). Since His Holiness's teachings usually take place in the first half of the day, after lunch the monks conduct supplementary lectures, for clarification of any aspects of teaching that are difficult to understand. The format of the special teachings for people from Russia involves simultaneous interpretation of all lectures into the Russian language, prayers in the Kalmyk, Buryat, and Tuvan languages, as well as audiences for representatives of these republics and other Buddhist organizations. The only place in the Federation of Russia where one can hear the Kalmyk language on a legal footing equal to that of Russian at public events is at Kalmyk theatrical performances. For this reason, the reading of prayers in the Kalmyk language in the Dalai Lama's main temple is a sign of particular respect for Russia's ethnic minorities of the Buddhist confession.

All pilgrims who were processed through the Central *Khurul*—among them one can also encounter Muscovites, and Buryats, and Tuvans—likewise receive a triangular yellow silk neck scarf. They tie these Pioneer-style around the neck—so that the pilgrims can recognize each other in unfamiliar places abroad and gain help if necessary.

The yellow neck scarf, reflecting the “yellow faith” of the ancestors, has become the symbol of the contemporary organized pilgrimage of the Kalmyks. It is visually supplemented by prayer beads and red strings on the neck or the wrist, as well as by a smartphone for staying connected with the group. Announcements about schedule changes and more could be rapidly circulated. Many pilgrims aspire to underscore their ethnicity and take Kalmyk outfits to the teachings, aspiring to distinguish their attire, if not with full dress, then with a t-shirt with a Kalmyk text or a Buddhist logo, [or] headgear with a red brush, reflecting the Kalmyks’ self-appellation “*ulan zalata khalmgud*”—“red-brushed Kalmyks.” One pilgrim explained his feelings as: “after all, we are passing an exam for His Holiness the Dalai Lama as ethnic group (narod).”

These journeys to the Dalai Lama, to “show ourselves as a people,” also resonate with the point that back in the eighteenth century, it was specifically the Dalai Lama who confirmed the Kalmyk khans in their status. For example, that is how it was with the most famous Kalmyk Ayuka-khan. When treaty obligations with the Russian Empire started devolving into those of a subject, Kalmyk representation at public imperial events was often compulsory, as was representation of other peoples in festive folk costumes, in couples—men and women. Sometimes there were merely mannequins in costumes, for example three hundred mannequins at the First Ethnographic Exhibition in 1867. The most famous “parade of peoples” in Russia took place on February 6, 1740 in Saint Petersburg at the jester’s wedding of prince M.A. Golitsyn and the “court Kalmykess” E.I. Buzheninova (see Pogosian 2001), described by I. Lazhechnikov in the novel *Ledianoi dom* [*The House of Ice*]:

Here too were red-haired Finns on tiny little horses, Kamchadals on dogs, Kalmyks on camels, Belorustians [*belorustsy*] under thick felt of matted hair [*voilokom koltuna*], Zyryans, . . . all hundred and fifty couples of different tribes, each in their own folk costume, on a fine pair of animals, in various sleighs and sledges . . . only in Russia could one put together such a rich ethnographic holiday (Lazhechnikov, “*Svad’ba shuta*” chapter).

Can one attribute concepts concerning how one should appear before the leaders of the world in one’s ethnic clothing to karmic imprints, or are there other reasons relevant here? Perhaps the point is that pilgrimage can become a journey that promises a transition, going through the experience of encountering oneself as “real” (Kormina, 2019, p. 37). Thus a “real

Kalmyk” actualizes both the thoughts and the clothing that Kalmyks ideally ought to be wearing. Clothing as a social marker represents through ethnicity the most important thing that a person wants to communicate about oneself. Perhaps in the space shared with the Dalai Lama, markers of ethnicity are an object of pride in belonging to a people whose ancestors were saving Tibet, helping the Dalai Lamas, and were affirming the faith, despite the complicated twentieth century.

The Prayer Service as Protest

In March 2019, the kickboxer-athlete and many-time world champion among professionals Batu Khasikov was appointed—and on September 8 elected—temporary acting head of the Republic of Kalmykia (the third one). On September 26, upon the recommendation of this head of Republic of Kalmykia, the major of Elista became Dmitrii Trapeznikov.^c Before that, Trapeznikov had temporarily headed the unrecognized Donetsk People’s Republic in 2018. Inhabitants of Kalmykia expressed their strong displeasure with Khasikov for this personnel decision: the opposition declared that such an appointment indicated head of the republic Batu Khasikov’s total dependence on the Kremlin, while users of social networks noted that Trapeznikov was a person from outside, appointed on instructions from above. Elista residents were bewildered by Trapeznikov’s biography—he had no work experience in municipal service in Russia, but on the other hand he did have seven higher education diplomas—as well as by unflattering information circulating in the social networks about him as a con man. Residents felt themselves to be subalterns expected to approve of any appointments coming from the center. They were outraged by this: “we do not want dubious biographies to get cleaned up in Kalmykia,” said the discontented in the social networks. The slogan “For the purity of the city” declared moral cleanliness as a principle of political action. This likewise addressed activists’ discontent with the policy of the country’s leadership in relation to the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic [on disputed Eastern Ukraine territory].

Organizers of protest designated as the site for conducting a prayer service [*molebnen*] the most central place of the city—on the former Lenin Square, from which the monument to Lenin had been shifted two hundred meters to the side in 2004 and a Seven Days Pagoda built in its place. Thus had the change of priorities from communism to Buddhism been marked out. This square is located between the most important buildings in the city—with one housing the Administration of the head of the Republic of Kalmykia and the parliament, and neighboring ones containing Elista’s Administration and the university. Earlier, Lenin Square had been empty. Only Lenin dominated, and his broad pedestal had been a spontaneous rostrum for protest rallies in

2004, a convenient position for documentary filming by independent journalists. After those events, K. Ilyumzhinov gave orders to move the monument to another place nearby, and the new design of the square with the Pagoda in the center became cluttered with benches, large chess sets, and lotus-shaped light fixtures, so there would not be space for a large quantity of people to assemble.^d

On October 1, 2019, a public prayer service “for the welfare and purity of Elista” occurred on the territory of the «Seven Days Pagoda» cultural complex. This was the first time that the form of public protest as a prayer service had been used. It had been thought up as “An Alternate Form of Protest,” not documented in specified lists of taboos, considering that a “weapon of the weak” encompasses all forms that are not prohibited (compare Scott 1985). As a prayer protects the person creating it, so too was the form of a prayer service supposed to protect the participants from being dispersed by the police. Such were fears of the organizers. The participants numbered several hundred people. Many of them were not religious and did not know the text of the prayer of the Twenty-One Taras, which had to be read from a sheet. These sheets were distributed to all who desired, but for many it was not simple to read from the sheet. Monks were not invited to the prayer service, because the objectives of the prayer service were after all political. But the subsequent «This is Our City» mass protest actions were always accompanied by good weather, explained as caused by the right start for all protest events—with a prayer service.

The right to receive His Holiness on one’s native land in Kalmykia remains the main demand of the Buddhists of the Republic of Kalmykia. It is an important demand of all Kalmyks who have not received Refuge but do consider themselves Buddhists by birth inasmuch as they are Kalmyks. The Buryats are likewise waiting for permission for a pastoral visit from the Fourteenth His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as are all Buddhists who reside in other regions of Russia. Why is the dissatisfaction of the People’s Republic of China more important for the government of the Federation of Russia than the expectations of Russia’s citizen-Buddhists? This problem was discussed during a session of the Commission for the Harmonization of Inter-Nationality and Inter-Regional Relations of the Civic Chamber of the Federation of Russia on July 21, 2020. Appearing in the name of Kalmyk Buddhists was the administrator of the main temple, the “The Golden Abode of the Buddha Shakyamuni,” Yonden gelüng. He reminded listeners that the Fourteenth Dalai Lama had consecrated the construction site of this temple during his visit to Kalmykia in 2004. It was already fifteen years since the *khurul* had been built and had become one of the largest spiritual-enlightenment centers for the growth of Buddhism in Russia. Other new temples of Kalmykia are similarly in acute need of a consecration ceremony. The clergyman linked the request for organizing a visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in a paradoxical manner by

choosing a jubilee date—the hundredth anniversary of the creation of the Soviet autonomy of Kalmykia. “For all inhabitants of the republic, the visit of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama would become the most long-awaited gift, and a true blessing,” he explained (*V Obshchestvennoi palate*). Such a contradictory combination of religiosity as a part of ethnicity, as well as the dependence of the faithful on higher officialdom in questions of meeting with their supreme teacher, was reminiscent of the Soviet years. It also reflects the historical situation of awaiting the *chakravorti*-tsar.

The Kalmyks were a nomadic people on that territorial homeland which now falls into the Republic of Kalmykia. For four hundred years, the Kalmyks have been within the composition of Russia. This date (marked as the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary in 1959) was widely commemorated in the USSR and later in Russia in 2009 as the “voluntary entry of the Kalmyks into the composition of Russia.” Kalmyks have always prided themselves on not having been conquered by force of arms, but of coming into Russia at the behest of their leaders. The creation of the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic gave the people titularity [*titul’nost’*], which with time became the basis for the Kalmyks to consider themselves an indigenous population.

The weak economy in the republic, unemployment, and the outflow of the able-bodied population to Moscow and Saint Petersburg, as well as the corruption and disregard for the interests of the populace that we see on the part of the first persons of Kalmykia has given rise to discontent. (For example, the head of Kalmykia Orlov reported to Putin that Elista residents had received a new water and sewage treatment system and this story was shown on the First Channel of Russian TV. However, it later emerged that the system was not built, and middle-level officials received criminal [prison] terms for embezzlement of the funds.) High level impunity exists: Orlov, after leaving office, was put forward by the new head of the Republic of Kalmykia—Batu Khasikov—as a member of the Federation Council.

Strong political opposition in Kalmykia has not been attractive in Kalmyk society—few are prepared to go against the state. Any middle class that would have independent sources of subsistence did not form effectively. The businessman Vladimir Matsakov, mentioned above, who was not allowed to participate in the elections, was charged with fraud after four years of investigation. During this process, his business was ruined, and his shared-equity construction enterprise was frozen. This is demonstrative punishment for those who may have wanted to be independent and politically active.

The most powerful manifestation of permitted cultural sovereignty has become Buddhist self-identification, because for the Kalmyks residing in the republic, religion is important as a part of identity that is not as hard to

realize as the return of the mother tongue. To begin the process of becoming a Buddhist, it is enough to go to a *khurul*, talk with the lamas, begin reading the appropriate literature, and attend lessons on the basics of Buddhism within one's social networks or in Elista's Central *Khurul*. One can also listen to the lectures of leading lamas, who come specially to Elista to expound on Buddhism, enabling the faithful of Kalmykia to develop and grow. An important factor has become the Kalmyk *sangha's* independence from the state, its strong moral positions on various questions important to the people, its socially oriented programs for the population, and that uncompromising consistency with which supreme lama of Kalmykia Telo Tulku Rinpoche remains true to the Buddha, the Dharma, the *Sangha* and the interests of the Kalmyk people. For these reasons and more, the Kalmyks are convinced that they have the right to meet His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama on their native land.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the following interlocutors: Vladimir Bembetov, Anatoly Djoudjiev, Batr Elistayev, Darina Gedeeva, Ludmila Kornusova, Valery Kutushov, Erdny Shamakov.

It is no accident that one of the striking books about desecularization in the post-Soviet space is called *Izobretenie religii [Inventing Religion]*, ed. Zh. Kormina, A. Panchenko, and S. Shtyrkov (St. Petersburg, 2015).

2. I first heard melodic recitative prayer from my grandmother and her friends, when my father died in May, 1980. This was in our three-room city apartment before the coffin was carried out. The sounds of the singing were unusual and created a strong, lasting impression.
3. Words of V. Karuev in the documentary film *Doski sud'by* (E. Sakaniants, 1994).

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Editor's notes

a. One of the most egregious aspects of being a "punished people," deported en masse as World War II collaborators, was the Stalinist practice of sending soldiers already fighting the Germans out of the front and into labor camps. Particularly notorious was the Shiroklag labor camp in Siberia, where forced labor was on the

Kos'va River hydroelectric dam. As translator Stephan Lang explains: "In 1944, several months after the entire Kalmyk nation was declared to be fascist collaborators and deported, all the Kalmyks in the Red Army, some 15,000, who had until then still been considered fit to kill fascists despite being collaborators, were rounded up and sent to this forced-labor hydroelectric dam construction project." For more on the "punished peoples," see Aleksander Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples: The Deportation and Fate of Soviet Minorities at the end of the Second World War*. New York: Norton, 1978; and R. V. Neiachenko, *Kniga pamiati ssylki kalmytskogo naroda*. Elista: Dzhangar, 1994. For context, see Elza-Bair Guchinova, *The Kalmyks*. London: Routledge, 2006; Elza-Bair Guchinova "The Republic of Kalmykia" *Anthropology and Archeology of Eurasia*, 1999, vol. 37 (4).

b. When the American Buddhist Erdne Ombadykov was appointed the head of the Buddhist community of Kalmykia, press coverage in many languages was extensive and at times sensational. See for example Seth Mydan's "An Ex-Telemarketer's Other Life as a Buddhist Saint" *New York Times* 6/24/2004 (The Saturday Profile) <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/12/world/the-saturday-profile-an-ex-telemarketer-s-other-life-as-a-buddhist-saint.html> [accessed 4/5/2021].

c. 'Varangian' outsider appointments like that of Dmitrii Trapeznikov, one of the worst cases, have been increasing during President Putin's 4th term. See especially Nikolay Petrov "Agenda and Challenges for Putin's New Term" *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 218, <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD218.pdf>, 2018 [accessed 4/5/2021].

d. See for more detail Elza-Bair Guchinova *Постсоветская Элиста: власть, бизнес и красота: Очерки социально-культурной антропологии калмыков*. St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 2003; and Elza-Bair Guchinova "From the USSR to the Orient: National and Ethnic Symbols in the City Text of Elista," in *Soviet and post-Soviet Identities*, M Bassin, C Kelly, eds., 191-211. Cambridge University Press, 2012.