

**The nomadic culture, society and the founder of
Mongolian Buddhist Church**

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In the seventeenth century, Inner Asia was a witness to a struggle of armies and ideologies. There was a competition between the Manchu Empire and the tsarist Russia for a bigger influence in Inner Asia. It was also a question if Tibet and the newly formed Oirat khaganet will be able to counterbalance it. The territorial dividedness of Khalkha-Mongolia and the ongoing civil war made it unambiguous that the descendants of the world conqueror Mongols of the 13th century can play only a subordinated role in this game. After the collapse of the Great Mongol Empire the eastern Mongolian territories were divided for three centuries, with only a short exception of the relatively stabil Batu Möngke's rule. The foundation of the Mongolian Buddhist Church in the 17th century coincides with this not so prosperous era of Mongolian history.

Öndör Gegen, who is known as the founder of the Mongol Buddhist Church, was an active participant of the events. He, besides spreading Buddhism, made indisputable steps in order to conserve the Mongol traditions and with their help protect the cultural and social integrity. From the second part of the 17th century, foundation of the Church gave an opportunity for the Mongols to preserve their cultural identity even during the Manchu occupation despite of the unifying efforts of the Empire, and later it was an indispensable condition of their political independence, too. Let me show now the innovations which played an important role in the everyday life of the Mongols and nowadays can be considered as tradition in the resurrection of Mongolian Buddhism.

Öndör Gegen's role in the history of Mongolian art and of Mongolian Buddhism has been already presented in detail, using the biographies which are the base of this paper, as well.

Three important texts should be mentioned here:

1. A biography written in Tibetan language by Zaja Pandita Blo-bzang-'phrin-las in 1702, when Öndör Gegen was still alive.

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2. A biography written in 1839 by Ngag-gi-dbang-po in Tibetan language as well.
3. A Mongol version written in 1859 that partly used the translations of the previously mentioned works. It was published by Ch. Bawden in 1961.¹

Brief biography of the first Jebtsundampa:

Öndör Gegen was born as the second son of Tüsiyetü khan Gombodorji of the Khalkha Left Wing on the 25th of the ninth month of the year of wooden boar (1635) at the place called Yisün Jüil. His father was an offspring of Jinggis khans' family. His grandfather was Abatai Sain Khan, whose grandfather was Geresenje the founder of all the Khalkha princely houses. Abadai is well-known as the founder of the Erdeni Juu monastery in the summer of 1585. He was the first introducer of Tibetan Buddhism into the Khalkha territories.

At the age of four (1638), Öndör Gegen became a pious layman *gelong*² under Jambal³ lam. After it his own name was Dzanabadzar (skrt.: Jñānavajra)⁴. The word of dzana derived from Sanskrit terminology *jñā* or knowledge and wisdom. Bazar means Vajra or thunderbolt. So, according to its Sanskrit version in English constituted "A thunderbolt of wisdom".

In the year of Yellow Hare (1639) Dzanabadzar was promoted to the head of the Mongolian Buddhist religion. Thus, the appointment of the head of religious united leadership was of great importance for the further development of Buddhism.

Öndör Gegen being anxious to study left Khalkha-Mongolia for Tibet. On his way to Tibet Dzanabadzar visited many monasteries where Tsong-kha-pa lived. He made a pilgrimage to such famous monasteries as Kumbum (tib. Sku-'bum), Sera (tib. Se-ra), Galdan (tib. Dga'-ldan), and received the consecration of a novice *gecul*⁵ from the Pnachen lama himself at Tasilhumpo (tib. Bkra-shis-lhum-po) monastery. After reaching Lhasa Öndör Gegen was granted an audience with the 5th Dalai lama (1617-1682). Thereafter he was recognized as a reincarnation of Rje-btsun Tāranātha Kun-dga'-snyim-po (mong. Gunganyambo 1575-1634).⁶ After it he became the first Jebtsundamba⁷ of Khalkha-Mongolia, the head of the Mongolian Buddhist Church.

Tāranātha, he always called *rje-btsun* („revered sir”) was born in 1557 and grew up to be a monk of high virtue in the Jo-nang Sect.⁸ He is famous in the history of Tibetan Buddhism for the many works written by him. He founded the Rtag-brtan-ohun-tsogs-gling monastery in 1615.

In 1651 Öndör Gegen returned from Tibet, continued his study and began to work on his creations. In the same year he set up foundation of future IX xüree Gandan šadubling with the establishment of Buddhist Centre by the advice of Dalai and Panchen lama.

¹ Bawden, Ch., *The Jebtsundampa khutughtus of Urga*. Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1961.

² Tib. *dge-slong*, or *genyen* (tib. dge-bsnyen).

³ Mong. Blam-a Jimbalig, khal. Jambal lam. Tib. Byams-pa-gling No-mon khan.

⁴ Tib. Ye-shes rdo-rje, halha lšdorj.

⁵ Tib. *dge-tshul*.

⁶ He was not the first incarnation in this line. Szilágyi, Zs.: *Manchu-Mongol Diplomatic Correspondence 1635-1896. Treasures of Mongolian Culture and Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism Vol 1*. ed. Géza Bethlenfalvy. State Central Library of Mongolia, Research Group for Altaic Studies Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest 2004.

⁷ Tib. Rje-btsun-gdam-pa, mong. Jibcundamba or Jebcundamba, khalkha Jawjandamb.

⁸ The jo-nang-pa was a subsect of the Sa-skya Sect.

In 1662 an internal war broke out in the Khalkha Right Wing. A powerful lord of the Khalkhas Erenchin tayiji attacked and killed Vangchugh Jasaghtu Khan his kinsman and overlord. Thereupon other lords of the Right Wing, with reinforcements from Chaghundorji Tüsiyetü Khan attacked Erinchin, who escape from his base. Because of the mentioned reasons a civil war has unleashed in the Khalkha-Mongol territory. The Oirat Khaganate sided to the Jasagtus, the Manchus sided to the Tüsiyetüs in this struggle. So, this conflict turned into an international problem. In 1690 Galdan's attacks endangered the whole Khalkha territory, and also there was an impending danger to lose their independency. The Tüsiyetü khan was not able to resist them alone, so he was obliged to ask for help from the outside of the border. Öndör Gegen himself supported the Manchu orientation instead of the Russian that can be proved by the following quotations:

“The Tsarist Russia, the land of white people is grate and stable empire, but the people are different from the Mongols, aur religion is not recognized there. The empire to the south is even greater and more quiet, they have the same religion with us. Manchurian country and people are rich. So, if we apply to the south, our country will be rescued a people will be blissful.”⁹

“We have enjoyed the benevolence of the Imperial Court in the greatest manner. Suppose we go over to the Russians seeking refuge from the war. But the Russians, in the first place, do not believe in Buddha, and their customs are not like ours: they have different speech and different dress. It will certainly not be a strategy for an everlasting peace. Rather, we should move inside bringing the whole tribe along and surrender ourselves to the Great Emperor from the bottom of our hearts. Then we may get a blessing for ten thousand years.”

„Well I think, that the Manchu Emperor of the East is a specially intelligent and cultivated person. We, the Khalkha-Mongols sent envoys to you the „Ruler of the State of Ten-Thousand Tranquility”, with respect and clear intention to offer the Nine White Presents of our country to you, and promise to be your servants. The Khalkha-Mongols will be rich and will develop and reach complete happiness. It is written in the Prophecies.”¹⁰

From 1921 in Mongolia it was nearly obligatory to refuse the Russian orientation that is why this point of view was negatively interpreted by the Mongol historians who worked before the change of regime. Öndör Gegen's lifework in Mongolian Buddhist art was not important from political point of view so it was acceptable by the official ideology and tolerated in a certain level, as much as it was possible during the Soviet era in the middle of the 20th century. In this way his artwork and its effect on the Mongols' identity-consciousness or on the survival of Mongol cultural independence was not discussed.

Öndör gegen's Main scope of activities

He made great efforts to preserve Mongolian traditions even during the Manchu regime. In order to that he spread the thesis of Buddhism, writing commentaries and teaching his disciples, but also made many regulations concerning the general sacred rituals, the place of the worship, ceremony

⁹ Čoinxor, J.: *Öndör Gegen Janabajar*. Ulaanbaatar 1995. p. 133.

¹⁰ Szilágyi, Zs.: *The beginning of the Modern Mongolian State*. (PhD. dissertation) ELTE University, Budapest 2005.

customs, etiquette of the lamas' behavior, the life of the priests and believers, and also concerning the clothing of lamas and collective eating. He devoted great attention to keep the traditional Mongol life-style and traditional clothing and promoted their survival. The style of the lamas' cloth planned by him is a good example for it, as both the everyday cloth of the lamas and the ones used at ceremonies were made on the basis of nomad clothing characteristics before the Manchu period. Ceremonies, sacral rites, prayer books, rhythm of the ritual dance (*cam*) all play a very important role in Mongol tradition. A Buddhist symbolic system was also created, which is characteristic for the Mongol branch of Buddhism even in our days. At the same time plenty of Mongolian national symbols can be connected with him, for example the hairstyle of married women, the welcoming rite and the cattle-brands (*tamga*).

Öndör Gegen introduced the moral rules of the Vinaya and integrated them into the traditions of nomadic Mongols living close to the nature. He revised the basic teachings so as to make them easier to obey for the Mongols and to contribute to the survival of this nation. According to his direction all of the Mongol parents were obliged to give one of their sons to a monastery so that he should become a lama and study the teachings of Buddha. It has become an everyday practice in the Manchu period among subjugated families and among noyons, as well. But in addition to these rules Öndör Gegen also gave directions for the believers which basically contradicted to the rules of *dge-lugs-pa* sect organized by *Cong-kha-pa*. For example, Öndör Gegen suggested to send the young adult lamas back to their family to found an own family themselves so as to make the number of the Mongols increase in this way. And later, when these lamas became 40 years old they were allowed to return to the monastery and live there as lamas until their death.

It is worth mentioning that after the change of regime at the beginning of the 1990, when Buddhism started to bloom again, the number of the lamas who had family started to grow. This is partly an effect of the bolshevik pogroms of the late 1930s, as a lot of lamas were forced to leave the monasteries, break their pledge and get married. That is why several lamas have a family nowadays. Society usually accept the marriage of lamas with *gelong* degree, however other marriages are condemned. The 14th Dalai lama, who visited Mongolia in August 2006, had the same point of view in this question.

Öndör Gegen constructed musical instruments that have been used even during the Mongol Buddhist rites. He compiled the general canon of the ceremonies that has become the base of the Mongolian Buddhist ceremony rules and he also composed many pieces of music. A lot of rites are practiced even in our days in the monasteries which were worked out by him. Let me show now some ceremonies worked out by Dzanabadzar:

Um lai taaya: This prayer is offered in the break of the ceremonies when food and drink are consumed. The best part of the foods and drinks are sacrificed to the Three Treasures.

Jinluw cogjol: This is an appeasing prayer written by Dzanabadzar at the time when inner discord and fight made Mongolia weaker.

Puncogusum: This is a prayer to all the Halha saints. It contains the enumeration of Öndör Gegen's earlier incarnations. Prayers important in terms of history are recited during every Buddhist ceremony.

Geleg dod gi: This is a merit-accumulating ritual written by Dzanabadzar himself. The prayer emphasizes the practice of virtue for others. The main virtue is mercifulness. If somebody accumulated merit then it should be used for the sake of others and that's the way how people can get closer to the enlightenment. During the funeral ceremony this prayer is often asked for by the family members of the dead person.

Norow badam: This prayer is recited on the 14th day of every month, on the day when Dzanabadzar departed. This is a glorifying prayer of a very important ceremony. This sutra is recited in the monasteries according to the form of the Mongol long song. This kind of interpretation was first used by Öndör Gegen himself in his monastery.

Dasčirwa: This is a sacrificial ceremony offered to the majority, it was created by Dzanabadzar according to the advice of the Panchen lama. It is written in the rhythm of the limping walk of an old man carrying a leather bottle filled with *tarag* in his hand. The text of the ceremony is recited even nowadays in the monasteries according to this kind of rhythm.

There is a difference between Tibetan and Mongolian ceremonial texts, as the revised Mongol texts remind us of the traditional rhythms that can be observed in Mongolian traditional nomadic life. The author usually did not change the text of the prayer, he varied only the rhythm, and the form of the recitation. There is a prayer that reminds us of the gurgle of quick mountain rivers in its Tibetan version. Öndör Gegen changed this prayer and made its rhythm similar to the walk of a camel.

He tried to tighten the links between Buddhism and the Mongolian traditions using the means of Buddhist iconography. In one of his most important portrayals, Öndör Gegen appears as the head of a nomadic family, who is dividing an *uuji* with his knife (1. picture). The Buddhist representation of this important tradition on the occasion of a significant Mongolian family celebration does not only show Öndör Gegen's high rank, but it emphasizes his being a Mongol rather than being a Buddhist lama. Preserving Mongolian traditions was more important than keeping Buddhist rules.



1. picture¹²

Dzanabadzar played important role in the setting up of monasteries and temples and in particular in the establishment of the future Ix Xüree or Urga. In accordance with the Tibetan tradition Ix Xüree was set up with seven aimags: Amdo aimag, Jasiin aimag, Sangga aimag, Zoogoo aimag, Xüüxen noyon aimag, Darxan emčiin aimag, and Urluud aimag.

In 1651 Öndör Gegen returned from Tibet and later in 1654 Ix xüree moved to the front side of Xentii mountain in the East Khalkha territory and it was built from 1654 to 1686. So, the Ix xüree had been extended and it had monastery with over 2 000 monks. The Khalkha khans invited Öndör Gegen to Erdeni Juu,

¹² Dzanabadzar's portrait, XIX. century, Fine Arts Museum, Ulaanbaatar. Čoinxor, J., *Öndör Gegen Janabajar*. Ulaanbaatar 1995. p. 2.

and he made the monastery a center of permanent religious ceremonies, and also took part in the establishments of other temples and monasteries of Mongolia. In 1686-1697, during the years of Oyirad-Khalkha battles Erdeni Juu and Ix xüree suffered a serious damage, but Dzanabadzar repaired its a built with offering and catering places for lamas.

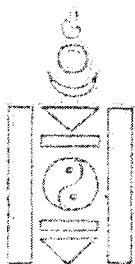
As a consequence of this kind of rules and proposals the Mongolian Buddhist Church became an indispensable and integrated part of the nomadic Mongolian society. The Church obtained such an extensive acceptance which cannot be caused only by the fact that Abatai khan and his followers made Buddhism a state religion.

While Öndör Gegen was working and living in Töwxön monastery, he created a new script, the *Soyombo* in 1686. He made up that alphabet so that the holy languages of Buddhism, the Sanskrit, Tibetan and Mongolian could be equally recorded. However, the first mark of the alphabet the *Soyombo* had a route of its own. The first letter has become a component of the Mongolian State seal, and today is also the State Emblem. When the independent Mongolia was declared, *Soyombo* became the symbol of the Mongol State and independence.

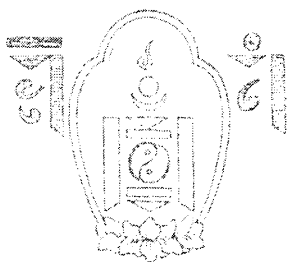
Components of the *Soyombo*.

The first three are, the symbols of fire, the Sun and the Moon. The triangles turned down are symbolizing the protector of the buddhist religion, called *choyjing*.¹³ The yin-yang symbol can be seen in the middle. The horizontal parallels' meaning is *sum*¹⁴ (arrow), the vertical parallels' meaning is *hos shad*¹⁵ (conjugate line).

2. picture. Emblem in 1924



The *Soyombo* is the symbol of peace and freedom in the macro- as well as the micro cosmic space of the Mongols, and the Mongolian State in it. It was used as an Emblem of the Theocratic Mongolian State in 1911, the Mongolian People's State in 1921, the Mongolian People's Republic State in 1924, and was recognized as the State Emblem by Constitutions of 1940, 1960 and 1992.



3. picture. Mongolian State Emblem in 1911¹⁶

¹³ Mong. *čoyijumy*, khalkha *čojjing*.

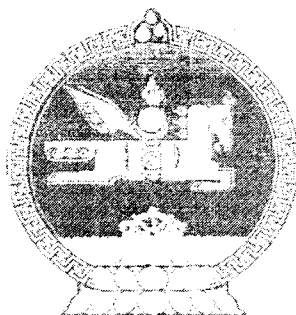
¹⁴ Mong. *sumun*, khalkha *sum*.

¹⁵ Mong. *qoos šad*, khalkha *xos šad* (tib. *shad*).

¹⁶ Pictures 3-5. Bulag, U. E.: *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia*. Claredon Press, Oxford 1998. p. 220., p. 225, p. 223, p. 248.



4. picture. Communist star-capped *Soyombo* Symbol and Mongolian State



5. picture. Mongolian State Emblem adopted in 1992.

Conclusion

We have to emphasize that Öndör Gegen's present reputation cannot be due only to the atmosphere of Buddhist renaissance. His activity as a religious organizer as well as an artist and his role in Mongolian history give us several examples proving that Öndör Gegen, besides spreading Buddhism, made clear steps to preserve Mongolian tradition and by this Mongolian identity, cultural and social integrity.

He recognized that Mongolian independence can only survive if Mongolian people preserve their cultural identity in spite of the Chinese influence. The fact that the Mongolian language has been raised on to the level of a literary language, the forming of the self-existent Mongolian Buddhist terminology, the forming of the course of the ceremonies played an important role in it. The building up of the Mongolian monastery system brought about de facto administrative machinery existing side by side with the Manchurian. It joined the Khalkha territories and provided base for the proclamation of the independent Khalkha-Mongol State.

Today Jiggis is regarded as the symbol of the Mongolian State, at the same time the personality of Öndör Gegen has the similar importance among the Mongolian Buddhists.

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