

International Discourses on the Dorje Shugden Deity in Contemporary Mongolia

Iuliia Liakhova

Abstract

The article analyses the development of the Dorje Shugden controversy in Mongolia. The practice of the Dorje Shugden worship in Mongolia was interrupted during the communist rule but today, it is being revitalized. On the one hand, international discourses on and practices of the Dorje Shugden worship strongly influence the situation in Mongolia. On the other hand, new discourses on Dorje Shugden come to the fore and the deity is becoming an important factor in the processes of forming a Mongolian national identity. Based on data collected during fieldwork in 2018 and 2019, this article compares Mongolian discourses on Dorje Shugden with discourses from other regions where this deity is worshiped, in particular Ladakh, the Tibetan exile community, and Buddhist communities based in Europe and the USA.

Introduction

Dorje Shugden is a wrathful Tibetan deity whose worship has been opposed by the 14th Dalai Lama since the 1970s and was ultimately restricted by him in 1996. The restriction caused a split and polarization within the Tibetan Buddhist community.

The history of this deity goes back to 17th century Tibet, when an important political and religious figure, Gelugpa monk Tulku Dragpa Gyaltsen (1619–1656), was supposedly murdered by other monks. One of the first scholars who studied the history and development of the Dorje Shugden conflict, G. Dreyfus, writes that Dragpa Gyaltsen was a political rival of the 5th Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617–1682). Some of Dragpa Gyaltsen's disciples blamed Lobsang Gyatso's supporters for killing him. After the death, Dragpa Gyaltsen reincarnated as an evil spirit, but “turned his anger from a personal revenge to a nobler task, the protection of the doctrinal purity of the Ge-luk tradition” (Dreyfus 1998, 231). To pacify this spirit, the 5th Dalai Lama ordered to build a small temple near Döl, a pond located in Southern Tibet. “He established the practice of worshiping this spirit under the name of Dorje Shugden and entrusted it to the Sakya school” (Dreyfus 1998, 229–232).

The tradition of the Shugden worship continued without any further major controversy until the 20th century, when popular and influential Tibetan lama Pabongka (1878–1941) using already prevalent Shugden practice (Bell n.d., 14) increased the importance of Shugden for the Gelugpa tradition. Using the deity in his exclusivist policy, he “made him into one of the main protectors” of Gelugpa school (Dreyfus 1998, 246). The 13th Dalai Lama (1876–1933), who was carrying out an inclusive policy on receiving teachings from monks of other Buddhist schools (Kay

1997, 279), put some restrictions on the Shugden oracle. This point can be considered as the beginning of the Shugden controversy.

In the first part of this article, I will shortly describe how the Dorje Shugden conflict develops in various regions relevant to Mongolia and what arguments are used to talk about the controversy there. In the second part, I will describe how international discourses and practices connected to Dorje Shugden correlate to the Mongolian ones. In the final part, I will analyse some features specific to the Mongolian situation regarding the Dorje Shugden deity and will show how Dorje Shugden is involved in Mongolian identity construction and connected to Mongolian state.

Methods and Sources of Data Collection

Most part of the data on the Dorje Shugden controversy in Mongolia was collected during my fieldwork in Ulaanbaatar and at Amarbayasgalant Monastery in July 2018 (together with Alia Solovieva) and in Ulaanbaatar and Delgeruun Choira Monastery in July and August 2019. Some additional information was collected during my trip to Rabten Choeling Monastery in Switzerland in spring 2019 where Mungunchimeg Batmunkh and I conducted interviews with two monks from Mongolia and Kalmykia and talked to other workers and monks.¹

During the fieldwork, I conducted semi-structured, biographical, and in-depth interviews with people from various social and religious groups, above all, monks from both Shugden monasteries as well as monasteries where Shugden is not worshiped; I also interviewed influential lay people venerating Dorje Shugden in Mongolia and other people involved in the controversy. In order to grasp the views on this issue among people not involved in the conflict, I conducted a series of short structured interviews with regular visitors of Gandan Monastery in Ulaanbaatar.

My comparison of Mongolian and international discourses on the Shugden issue profited from former studies. For the comparison with the situation in Tibet, I used the classical work by G. Dreyfus *The Shuk-den Affair: History and Nature of a Quarrel* (Dreyfus 1998) and for Ladakh, M.A. Mills' article "Charting the Shugden Interdiction in the Western Himalaya" (Mills n.d.) was particularly helpful. To compare Mongolian coping strategies for dealing with this conflict to the coping strategies of western Buddhist organizations, I used the article by D. Kay "The New Kadampa Tradition and the continuity of Tibetan Buddhism in transition" (Kay 1997) and J.M. Chandler's PhD thesis on Tibetan Buddhism in America (Chandler 2009). In order to complement the fieldwork on the Shugden issue in Mongolia, M. King's article "Finding the Buddha hidden below the sand: youth, identity and narrative in the revival of Mongolian Buddhism" was used (King 2012), in which the author

¹ The fieldwork was conducted in order to collect material for my PhD project on the Shugden controversy in Mongolia. The thesis is part of the "Religion, politics and national identity: the rediscovery of the protector deity Dorje Shugden in Mongolia" project within the Interfaculty Research Cooperation "Religious Conflicts and Coping Strategies" at the University of Bern, Switzerland. The project leaders are Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz and Jens-Uwe Hartmann (LMU Munich/ Germany).

addressed the connection between Mongolian cultural and nationalist revivalism and religion. I also used K. Kollmar-Paulenz's "Negotiating the Buddhist Future: rDo rje shugs ldan in Mongolia" where she examines the history of Dorje Shugden in Mongolia and connects current Mongolian policies with the historical narrative about Mongolian Buddhism and the popularization of the Shugden practice in contemporary Mongolia (Kollmar-Paulenz 2020).

International Discourses on the Shugden Conflict: Tradition, Politics and Protest²

The 14th Dalai Lama worshiped Shugden until 1975 when the "Yellow Book" by Zimey Rinpoche appeared. The book contained stories of monks who invoked the wrath of Dorje Shugden by mixing practices from various schools. As the Dalai Lama maintained the anti-sectarian (rimé) position he took this book as a personal offence and "a rejection of his religious leadership by the Ge-luk establishment" (Dreyfus 1998, 257). This is when the conflict began to escalate. After the Dalai Lama's announcement in 1996, where he publicly restricted the Shugden veneration, the conflict entered a new phase, some monks in the Tibetan exile community had to break away from their monasteries and establish new ones where they could continue to worship this deity. The controversy was not constrained to the Tibetan exile community and after the Dalai Lama's restriction, it began spreading among Buddhists all over the world. Now I will shortly describe the situation with Dorje Shugden in different regions in order to compare it to the Mongolian case.

Western-based Buddhist organizations and communities involved in the conflict do not form a homogeneous movement. First, there are various branches and divisions of the organization called New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), the loudest propagators of Shugden in Western countries and tough opponents of the Dalai Lama (Chandler 2009, 18). Sometimes they influence the conflict in highly disputable ways, for example, by organizing protests against the Dalai Lama's visits (Kay 2004, 104) and singing petitions and requests to international non-governmental organisations to investigate the situation with Dorje Shugden and to initiate measures to stop the acts of oppression supposedly committed by the Dalai Lama³. In their rhetoric they use such concepts as human rights and religious freedom (Chandler 2009, 229; Kay 1997, 287). They apply to the conflict the concept of the separation of church and

² In this chapter, I will not discuss Chinese discourses and practices connected to Dorje Shugden in Mongolia since they merit a separate article. Here, suffice it to say that a paradoxical situation arises with regard to China: Shugden becomes an element used by some people in Mongolia for building their national identity, but this very fact aligns Mongolia with China because the Chinese support this deity as an opposition to the Dalai Lama. Thereby, China, the most important opponent of Mongolian nationalism, supports the deity promoted as a basis of Mongolian independence and nation-building process.

³ Amnesty International did not find the human rights violation against Shugden worshipers in documents provided by the Shugden Supporters Community (an organization founded by members of the New Kadampa Tradition (Chandler 2009, 281). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA17/014/1998/en/>.

state while traditionally state power and religion in Tibet were not separated⁴, and protector deities – such as Shugden – were always important actors in state politics.

Members of NKT also build their argumentation on the discussion of the ontological nature of this deity: they claim him to be a supramundane deity⁵ (although frequently he is understood as a worldly god who can possess oracles and be involved in the mundane affairs) (Kay 2004, 101–102). That leads to the fact that “NKT intentionally began to distinguish itself from the Geluk tradition proper, choosing a nonsectarian identity of global Buddhism and focusing on devotion to the Buddha Dorjé Shukden” (Bell, 10) because “sectarian element to a protector practice [...] only makes sense if the deity is regarded as a mundane and therefore partial being” (Kay 2004: 101).

Furthermore, other monasteries in which Dorje Shugden is worshiped existed in Western countries even before the conflict escalated in 1996. In some of them monks kept worshiping this deity despite the Dalai Lama’s restriction. One of these monasteries, Rabten Choeling Monastery in Switzerland, is the place where several Mongolian monks (including the most prominent propagator of Shugden in contemporary Mongolia, Zava Damdin Rinpoche) received their education. Despite the fact that some monks in this monastery are concerned with the same issues and use the same rhetorical devices as NKT members⁶, the strategy of the monastery differs from the strategy of NKT. It currently aims at the peaceful coexistence of Shugden worshipers with the Dalai Lama rather than at forcing him to change his position. For example, during my stay in Rabten Choeling Monastery in spring 2019, I was told that in this monastery monks read prayers for the long life of the Dalai Lama (this idea faced opposition from one part of the monastic community, but the decision to read the prayer was made anyway). Also, photos of the 14th Dalai Lama can be found on the monastery’s property. A monk explained to me that those pictures were taken before the restriction of the Dorje Shugden practice (before 1996) and could therefore be placed in the monastery.

The background of Shugden worship in Ladakh and Mongolia has some features in common. Ladakh is a region located in Northern India. Like Mongolia, it is not

⁴ During the drafting of the Charter of the Tibetans-in-exile, the Tibetan equivalent of Constitution, the inclusion of the adjective “secular” to describe the Tibetan state was discussed. Even though the Dalai Lama was in favor of it, the Assembly of Tibetan People’s Deputies decided not to include this characteristic into the Charter (Ardley, 43–44).

⁵ “Protector deities fall into two categories: transcendental (supramundane) and worldly (mundane). Transcendental deities, usually high-level bodhisattvas, are considered to have transcended the world of samsara (suffering) by achieving a certain degree of enlightenment. Protector deities who are enlightened bodhisattvas have realized emptiness and belong to the Sangha, and may thus function as an object of refuge. [...] [W]orldly protector deities, still mired in the world of suffering, may be positive or negative in nature. They are most often co-opted by a school or monastery to provide protection, in return receiving ritual offerings” (Chandler 2009, 183–184).

⁶ E.g. a monk from Austria working in a book shop of this monastery sold me a book about human rights violations performed by the Dalai Lama against Shugden worshippers and sent me some additional information in this regard.

directly subordinated to the Dalai Lama who, however, has a considerable cultural and religious influence over this region. Dorje Shugden has been worshipped there long before the Dalai Lama's announcement in 1996, but the Shugden controversy reached this place later than it had spread in Tibet and among Western Buddhists. At first, people tried not to pay attention to the conflict hoping that it would not become a Ladakhi problem, but after it became impossible to avoid the controversy, Dorje Shugden statues were removed from many Ladakhi monasteries and the practice was changed or somewhere completely interrupted (Mills n.d.).

Mongolian Discourses on the Shugden Conflict in Comparison to International Discourses

Shugden in Mongolia

In Mongolia, Dorje Shugden had been an important protector deity before his worship was interrupted during Soviet times and was revived soon after the collapse of the Soviet system. The Shugden controversy reached Mongolia only in the early 2000s. After the democratic revolution, Guru Deva Rinpoche, an Inner Mongolian monk educated in Tibet, visited Amarbayasgalant, one of the oldest existing monasteries in Mongolia. He brought with him a considerable sum of money that he used for the reconstruction of the monastery and established the Dorje Shugden worship there. It is not by chance that he chose Amarbayasgalant to be the centre of the Shugden practice in Mongolia. There is evidence that this deity had been traditionally worshipped in this monastery since the early 19th century (Kollmar-Paulenz 2020). Guru Deva Rinpoche sponsored the reconstruction of the monastery and assembled a group of disciples including influential businessmen. At the same time, Dorje Shugden was worshipped in Gungaachoin datsan, one of the Gandan's monasteries and another historical place of the Shugden worship in Mongolia that was established by the 4th Jebtsundamba Khutuktu in 1809 (Kollmar-Paulenz 2020). In the 1990s and early 2000s, Dorje Shugden was worshipped in Mongolia alongside other protector deities. According to the information at my disposal, only few people close to the Dalai Lama and Tibetan exile community (or, probably, close to Guru Deva Rinpoche) knew about the conflict.

Mongolian ex-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Lundeg Purevsuren, who during that time was already working at the Ministry, asserted that Mongolian businessmen and politicians did not know about the Shugden issue until the years 2005–2007:

The Dalai Lama didn't say anything. What is it about Dorje Shugden? We didn't know but probably a lot of people were visiting him [Guru Deva Rinpoche]. Really, many rich businessmen were visiting this place [Amarbayasgalant] and praying. And some time between 2005 and 2007, we realized that something was wrong because our guys noticed that the Chinese were strongly supporting Shugden. We asked the Dalai Lama, "What is this?" because the Dalai Lama frequently visited Mongolia. He explained that he had prohibited [Shugden].⁷

⁷ Interview with L. Purevsuren [Mongolian Ambassador to the Swiss Confederation and Permanent Representative of Mongolia to the United Nations Office at Geneva in Bern, 2019].

Moreover, not only politicians, but also monks who worshipped Dorje Shugden did not know about the controversy until the beginning of the 2000s.

Here is an excerpt from an interview conducted in summer 2018 with the head of the Asral Buddhist Centre in Ulaanbaatar, Ueli Minder. He talks about the interruption of the Shugden practice in Gungachoilin datsan in Gandan:

At that time, Gungachoilin was still practicing Shugden, it only happened later when [...] the Dalai Lama came to Mongolia, and he [the monk from Gungachoilin] was not invited to the teaching and he didn't know why, and then he asked to talk to the Dalai Lama, and then the Dalai Lama explained. Because he was translating for the Dalai Lama before many times, and then the Dalai Lama explained him about Dorje Shugden, and now in Gungachoilin they do not worship Shugden anymore.⁸

The visit of the Dalai Lama to Mongolia coincided with the rise of interest towards Dorje Shugden from China, thus in the 2000s Dorje Shugden became the meeting point of interest of both politicians and monks. After the Shugden issue reached Mongolia, some monks continued worshipping him, trying not to attract too much attention to it, other abandoned the Shugden practice, some people for various reasons started joining Guru Deva Rinpoche and visiting the Shugden monasteries.

The next point to analyse is how Mongolian discourses on Shugden correlate to the international ones and how these discourses interact with each other.

Tibet

After reaching Mongolia, the Tibetan conflict was fundamentally transformed. First of all, the Tibetan internal affairs, the sectarian vs. anti-sectarian struggle and the related dogmatic issues, are not important to Mongolians. During the whole period of my fieldwork, only one person, a Tibetan monk Panchen Otrul Rinpoche residing in Mongolia, mentioned the sectarian nature of this conflict. None of the Mongolians were concerned about this aspect of the conflict. Moreover, a nun from the monastery Tögs Bayasgalant in Ulaanbaatar, where Dorje Shugden is venerated, didn't want to say to which school of Buddhism her monastery belongs because they read, as she said, both yellow (Gelug) and red (Nyingma) texts (*nom*), although among Tibetans it is believed that Shugden punishes people for mixing Gelug with other Buddhist schools:

Interviewer: There are red and yellow monasteries. This monastery, it is yellow or red?

Interviewee: We read here texts from various schools. We do not clearly differentiate it here. We read red prayers; we worship them all.⁹

Thus, despite the close relations with Tibet, the conflict in Mongolia is not evolving according to the Tibetan model. The concerns relevant for the Tibetans become unimportant when the conflict reaches Mongolia.

⁸ Interview with U. Minder, [head of the Asral Buddhist centre in Ulaanbaatar, 2018].

⁹ Interview with Dagimaa [nun in Tögs Bayasgalant monastery, Ulaanbaatar, 2018]

Western-Based Buddhists

Mongolian discourses on Dorje Shugden and the discourses of the Western-based Buddhist organisations overlap in a number of significant ways. Some organisations do not have any noticeable influence over the Mongolian situation while others closely collaborate and interact with Mongolian monasteries and Shugden worshipers.

NKT and its divisions, as well as their arguments in the discussion on the Shugden issue, are not well known in Mongolia. In the past, members of NKT contacted some Mongolian monasteries where Shugden is venerated but they do not directly collaborate with them. Here is a quotation from Zava Damdin Rinpoche, head of one of Mongolian Shugden monasteries:

Interviewee: This is Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. New Kadampa's head is Geshe Kelsang. Their way is very European. Most of them [are] English... British people. And then they make protest, yes? Protest against the DL's [Dalai Lama's] visits.

Interviewer: Do you support these protests?

Interviewee: I don't have any connection with them. It's not that [if] someone fights for Dorje Shugden, then we need to follow. No. We have [our] own way, they have [their] own way. Yes? Because we are Asian people, Mongolian people, our mentality is different, we [are] not like Europeans, such want to protest everywhere [...]. Of course, democratic countries need this kind of things, but our way is more an educational way; to protect ourselves. We need to study well, translate the old scripts to new Mongolian language and also spread our teaching, and then people will understand.¹⁰

This conversation shows that Zava Damdin emphasizes the difference between “Mongolian” and “western” understanding of the Shugden issue and believes that there are two ways of dealing with the situation. And he, as well as other Mongolian monks, consciously chooses not to follow the more aggressive way of the NKT. For example, when they suggested Zava Damdin should organize protests against the Dalai Lama's visit to Mongolia, he refused despite all his disagreements with the Dalai Lama's policies:

People suggested that, when the Dalai Lama arrived to Mongolia, we needed to protest at the airport. I said: We are living in our own country, they are visitors, why we need to...[protest]? [...] If [we need to] talk to him – we'll talk to him. Dialogue – yes. And face to face talk. But why do we need to stand up in the street? We are in our own country. [...] That's why I [do] not support [protests], although [I am] not against it, because they [the protestors] have their own way, their own centres.¹¹

Zava Damdin is seen as a loud Shugden propagator in Mongolia. Other Mongolian monks and Dorje Shugden supporters act and talk even more cautiously.

¹⁰ Interview with Zava Damdin [head of the Delgeruun Choira Monastery, 2019].

¹¹ Interview with Zava Damdin [2019].

Therefore, NKT's rhetoric about human rights and freedom of religion does not take root in Mongolia. However, this is not because there is no ground for it (the same rhetoric as used by the Dalai Lama takes roots among the Mongolian clergy) but rather because most of the people simply do not know about the protests. Besides, the authority of the Dalai Lama remains very high in Mongolia and such strong accusations do not find support. And, most importantly, most people are not interested in the Dalai Lama's politics and the prohibition of Shugden in the exile. If they are interested in this deity, it is because of his connections to Mongolia, his role in Mongolian politics, Mongolian history, and religion.

Although the NKT's strategy in the Dorje Shugden issue radically differs from the Mongolian, there are other Shugden monasteries in Europe that share with the Mongolian monasteries similar strategies of dealing with the conflict. For example, Zava Damdin, who at this moment already has his own disciples in Mongolia, received training in the Rabten Choeling Monastery in Switzerland and took monastic vows in the Tashi Rabten Monastery in Austria (Schittich 2005: 57).¹² As mentioned before, the monks in Rabten Choeling read the Long-Life Sutra for the Dalai Lama and have his portraits in the monastery to minimize the conflict. The same attempts exist in the Mongolian Shugden monasteries. For example, I also saw a picture of the Dalai Lama on the premises of the women's Tögs Bayasgalant Monastery in Ulaanbaatar. The nuns of the monastery try not to make any judgements about the Dalai Lama's decisions and about the conflict.

Although this strategy of dealing with the problem and the whole understanding of the issue in Rabten Choeling is similar to the Mongolian ones, there is a difference that is important for the Mongolians. As Zava Damdin emphasized in our interview, it is important that, unlike in Europe, in Mongolia there is a more than a century old tradition of worshipping Dorje Shugden. The history of this deity and the fact that he was important for Mongolia long before the conflict arose, significantly influences the nature of this conflict in this region. It makes it completely different not only from how it develops in Tibet, but also from how it evolves in Western monasteries and Buddhist organizations.

Ladakh

In this regard Ladakh is an interesting region for comparing the strategies of coping with the Dorje Shugden issue there to the Mongolian ways of dealing with it. Just like in Mongolia, the conflict escalated in Ladakh a while later than it did among the Tibetans and in Western organizations. As in Mongolia today, and in contrast to the West, "the Dalai Lama's many statements against Shugden practice prior to 1996 were read by Ladakhis as specifically pertinent to those incorporated within

¹² This network of the Dorje Shugden supporters is transnational. Although Zava Damdin may not share all arguments about Dorje Shugden and the Dalai Lama with the monks abroad, he has spiritual connection with many Shugden monks regardless of their geographical location. E.g. his recognition as Zava Damdin happened with the participation of a monk located in Indiana, USA, and a geshe from a Dorje Shugden Society in India (Schittich 2005: 59-61).

the Tibetan cause, and therefore as not really applying to them” (Mills n.d.). As in Mongolia, the sectarian/anti-sectarian nature of the conflict is never discussed or is even completely absent in Ladakh (see Mills n.d.).

The strategy of coping with the conflict used by the non-Shugden monks in Mongolia is based on silencing the problem. Some of the monks denied that the conflict exists in their country, some refused to talk about Shugden, but most of the monks were just careful in giving statements. Some of my interviewees said that they did not understand why I am interested in the Shugden issue and that instead of attracting attention to it, I could find a more interesting topic to investigate.

According to Mills, the situation in Ladakh is similar: “There was a strong hope that ‘the ban would not come here’. A crucial part of this view was the wish not to attract attention on the matter” (Mills n.d.).

Mongolian Shugden monks, although some of them are fundamentally opposed to the Dalai Lama, also try not to escalate the conflict and attract more attention to it. This strategy is completely opposed to the NKT’s strategy of protest that I described earlier and similar to the Ladakhi one. The difference is, however, that in Ladakh, the conflict hardly extends local debate and interpretation¹³, whereas in Mongolia, the Dorje Shugden issue has transcended the national level and became an element of the nation-building process. This is the case, first and foremost, because after the crash of the Soviet system, revivalist and nationalist ideas appeared in Mongolia (as well as in other countries of the former socialist bloc). The rise of nationalism coincided with the restriction of Shugden in the Tibetan community, which allowed to construct the image of Shugden as a “traditionally Mongolian” deity independent of Tibet. Historical connections between Shugden and the Mongolian state¹⁴ together with mythological narratives linking this deity to Mongolia played an important role in this process. Therefore, political sectarian/non-sectarian Tibetan issues, western concepts of human rights etc. as discussed by the NKT, as well as the ontological nature of the deity as discussed in the West are not crucial for Mongolians. What is, then?

A New Conflict on the Old Basis

Having discussed the relevance of transnational debate for Mongolia and its influence on the development of the Shugden controversy in this country, I will now analyse the discourses and practices specific for the Mongolian case including their foundation in Mongolia and their correlation with the Buddhist tradition.

¹³ Some constitutional changes in the Ladakhi politics appeared though: “The replacement of Shugden with the Tibetan governmental protector Chamsring (and indeed the widespread purchase of the portrait of the Dalai Lama flanked by Nechung and Palden Lhamo), suggest not merely a religious and ceremonial change on the part of Ladakh’s Gelug monasteries, but a subtle constitutional one.” (Mills n.d.)

¹⁴ It is believed that Dorje Shugden took possession of the state oracle of Mongolia Choijin Lama Luvsankhaidav (1872–1918), brother of the 8th Jebtsundamba Khutuktu. His statue built in the 19th century is placed in the Choijin Lama Temple, the monastery of the state oracle, nowadays functioning as a museum (Kollmar-Paulenz 2020).

The historical importance of Dorje Shugden for Mongolians and the conflict with the Dalai Lama make Shugden something specifically Mongolian, independent of Russia, China and, most importantly, of Tibet. Shugden's importance for Mongolian politics is based on two significant facts. Firstly, protective deities have traditionally been playing a specific role in Tibetan politics, and Dorje Shugden is no exception.¹⁵ When brought to Mongolia, he retained his political importance. Secondly, deities and spirits in general have been traditionally involved in the Mongolian political process.¹⁶ Against the backdrop of rising nationalism and attempts to get rid of cultural and religious influence of the Tibetans and in the light of the traditional connection between local beliefs, politics, and the importance of protective deities, Dorje Shugden became pivotal for the nation-building process and an important instrument of international politics.

In order to illustrate how Shugden worshippers use this deity for the formation of a national Mongolian identity, I would like to use one case. In 2011, the statue of the "Father of Mongolia's Revolution", Damdin Sukhbaatar, was replaced on the Ulaanbaatar central square. The old statue was thrown away and then taken by Zava Damdin into his Delgeruun Choira Monastery. Now, this statue whose size appears to be gigantic compared to the size of the monastery, is placed right in front of the main building of Delgeruun Choira. Later, Zava Damdin, the head of the monastery, posted on his Facebook page a video where he, with a group of Buryat children, rehearsed a song about Sukhbaatar.

This example demonstrates that Zava Damdin not only promotes Dorje Shugden by emphasizing the historical connections of this deity and his previous incarnations with Mongolia, but also intentionally creates the image of independent Mongolia with its own pantheon of heroes in which the state power, in the person of Sukhbaatar, is united with the national religion, represented in Dorje Shugden.

Zava Damdin's Revivalist ideas were analysed by M. King using another interesting case, the organization of summer schools entitled "Buddhism for Young People"¹⁷ in Delgeruun Choira Monastery where young Mongolians learned the basics of Buddhism and Mongolian history.

¹⁵ On the concurrence between the protector deities Tsiu Marpo and Pehar in Samyé Monastery see: Bell, Christopher Paul. "Tibetan Deity Cults as Political Barometers". UVaCollab. University of Virginia. [https://collab.its.virginia.edu/wiki/renaissanceold/Tibetan Deity Cults as Political Barometers.html](https://collab.its.virginia.edu/wiki/renaissanceold/Tibetan%20Deity%20Cults%20as%20Political%20Barometers.html) (accessed December 1, 2019).

¹⁶ E.g., *ovoo* ceremonies have always been very political in Mongolia. To denote local spirits, Mongolians used the same word as for chiefs (*khat*, *noiod*). David Sneath describes one typical case of interaction between shamans and politicians: "At the time of my visit [shaman] Sarangerel was engaged by the campaign team of a local parliamentary candidate to provide spiritual protection for him in a particularly bitter dispute with another candidate in the same party. The two men had nearly come to blows, and the rival candidate was said to have gone to a Darhan shaman (a *zairan*) to have a curse placed on his rival" (Sneath 2014, 466). In sum, Mongolian spirits, gods, and sacred mountains traditionally have close relations with political power.

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson notices that the importance of the youth was also a characteristic feature of "emerging nationalist intelligentsias in the colonies" (Anderson 2006, 118). "Almost invariably they were very young, and attached a complex political significance to their youth. [...] The rise of (modern/organized) Burmese nationalism is often dated to the founding in 1908 of the Young Men's Buddhist Association, in Rangoon; and of Malayan by the establishment in 1938 of the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Union of Malay Youth)" (Anderson 2006, 119).

M. King who attended this school in August 2007, concludes: “For them learning Buddhism meant learning their history, ethnicity and a properly ‘Mongol’ social and cultural system. According to the program, by being Mongolian they were already Buddhist. [...] [T]his highly innovative camp [...] incorporated these youth into a narrative of a timeless, Buddhist and ‘historical’ Mongolian identity” (King 2012, 23–24). When I visited Delgeruun Choira Monastery in summer 2019, I also witnessed the organization of the summer camp for children in the monastery. Zava Damdin explained that the camp is dedicated to the “basic study of the Buddhist teaching” together with Mongolian history and “customs”. Thus, Dorje Shugden is only one detail in the revivalism (or creation) of an independent Mongolian Buddhism in post-socialist Mongolia.

Zava Damdin’s Dorje Shugden project can be compared to other ideas which people in Mongolia use to build their identity, for example, the image of Genghis Khan and “shamanism” with the first being generally based on the idea of state power and the second on traditional beliefs. Both are, again, involved in the creation of the Mongolian historical narrative. Like Zava Damdin, people emphasizing that shamanism was the religion of Genghis Khan also try to create a national identity based on historical narrative but use different material to connect state power and traditional beliefs.

Conclusion

I conclude with another historical narrative that the head of a Buddhist centre in Ulaanbaatar, where Dorje Shugden is worshiped, told me in summer 2019¹⁸:

Galdan Boshugtu Khan was a brilliant student in Lhasa and was about to become the first Mongolian head of Gelug tradition. But his brother was killed, and Galdan Boshugtu had to become the king of Western Mongolia. During that time, Zanabazar was the ruler of Central Mongolia. A conflict arose between them. Galdan Boshugtu was the emanation of Dorje Shugden and, in his previous life, he was also Duldzin Dragpa Gyaltzen [?]. In his previous life, Zanabazar was one of the nine students of Tsongkhapa. During Heruka initiation held by Tsongkhapa, they had a fight. The previous emanation of Galdan Boshugtu and the previous emanation of Zanabazar had a fight. The conflict between Zanabazar and Galdan Boshugtu brought about “a big war between Central Mongolia and Western Mongolia. As a result, Central Mongolia became fully attached to the Gelug tradition. The Nyingma and Sakya tradition monasteries were erased by Galdan Boshugtu”.¹⁹

When I asked my interlocutor where he had heard this legend, he answered that a “very old lama in Gandan Monastery” had told him that story. In this legend that differs significantly from the historical events, the idea about a Mongolian person being

¹⁸ This is a summary of the legend, not a direct transcription. Historical facts here are changed and history is reinterpreted by a narrator.

¹⁹ Interview with B. Battuld [head of the Buddhist meditation centre Mahamudra, Ulaanbaatar, 2019].

close to become the head of the Gelug school, also existing in other legends of Dorje Shugden, is combined with the sectarian struggle in which Shugden is usually involved in the Tibetan context. But most importantly, this narrative unites state power with religion in the person of Dorje Shugden as is the case with the statue of Sukhbaatar in Zava Damdin's monastery. And this is not only the symbolical unification of religion and state, but also a physical incarnation of a military commander symbolizing the state in the religious image of Dorje Shugden. As has been shown, what is happening now in Mongolia is not the revival of Dorje Shugden practices but rather a constant creation and construction of something new.

Bibliography

- Ardley, Jane. *The Tibetan Independence Movement: Political, Religious and Gandhian Perspectives*. London, New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition. London, New York: Verso, 2006.
- Bell, Christopher Paul. "Tibetan Deity Cults as Political Barometers". Collab.its.virginia.edu. UVaCollab. University of Virginia. <https://collab.its.virginia.edu/wiki/renaissanceold/Tibetan%20Deity%20Cults%20as%20Political%20Barometers.html> (accessed December 1, 2019).
- Chandler, Jeannine M. "Hunting the Guru: Lineage, Culture and Conflict in the Development of Tibetan Buddhism in America." PhD dissertation, State University of New York, 2009.
- Dreyfus, Georges. "The Shuk-den Affair: History and Nature of a Quarrel." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21.2 (1998): 227–70.
- Kay, David. "The New Kadampa Tradition and the Continuity of Tibetan Buddhism in Transition." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 12(3) (1997): 277–93.
- Kay, David. *Tibetan and Zen Buddhism in Britain: Transplantation, Development and Adaptation*. London, New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004.
- King, Matthew. "Finding the Buddha Hidden Below the Sand: Youth, Identity and Narrative in the Revival of Mongolian Buddhism." In *Change in Democratic Mongolia: Social Relations, Health, Mobile Pastoralism, and Mining*, edited by Julian Dierkes. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012, 17–29.
- Kollmar-Paulenz, Karénina. "Negotiating the Buddhist Future: rDo rje shugs ldan in Mongolia". In *On a Day of a Month of the Fire Bird Year: Festschrift for Peter Schwieger on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, edited by J. Bischoff, P. Maurer, and C. Ramble. Lmbini: LIRI, 2020, 485–505.
- Mills, Martin. "Charting the Shugden Interdiction in the Western Himalaya". Info-buddhism.com. https://info-buddhism.com/Dorje_Shugden_Western_Himalaya_Martin_Mills_2009.html#f1 (accessed December 1, 2019).

Schittich, Bernhard. “Lobsang Dargayaa heißt jetzt Zava Rinpotsche: Revitalisierung des Buddhismus in der postsozialistischen Mongolei am Beispiel der Lebensgeschichte eines Mönches.” Magisterarbeit, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, 2005.

Sneath, David. “Nationalising Civilisational Resources: Sacred Mountains and Cosmopolitical Ritual in Mongolia”. *Asian Ethnicity* 15.4. (2014): 458–72.

Author

Iuliia Liakhova is a PhD student at the Institute for the Science of Religion and Central Asian Studies, University of Bern, Switzerland. She graduated from the Centre for Typological and Semiotic Folklore Studies of the Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow.

iuliia.liakhova@relwi.unibe.ch