

## **Negotiating Self and Other: Transnational Cultural Flows and the Reinvention of Mongolian Buddhism**

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### **Introduction**

This paper begins with two snapshots taken of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital, in 2008.

First: A young Tibetan Geshe<sup>1</sup>, dressed in the traditional Tibetan monk's robes, is giving a lecture at the Mongolian University of Trade and Industry. The large lecture theatre is crowded with young students, male and female. The Geshe is delivering his lecture in the English language. Today, he is presenting to his young Mongolian audience his thoughts about (Western) science and Buddhism, focusing on common aspects of these two systems of thought. Towards the end of his lecture he remarks:

“Easterners, if they are not careful in learning what their culture is, then the Eastern culture will become the culture of the West and the Easterners may be left with empty hands. Currently, Westerners come to do prostrations to Tibetan as well as Mongolian lamas. They also come to learn the teachings and preserve them. If Easterners do not realize the profound treasure of their own culture, then it may be lost. And when we finally realize this and remember of what incredible value it is, it will be too late. We will have to go to teachers in the West.”

Second: An American Geshe and his Western consort are giving a lecture at Ulaanbaatar's State Circus Theatre, one of the largest public venues in Mongolia. With a warm-hearted smile they are referring to sky dances and angels, touching many of the hearts of the people seated in this crowded Mongolian forum. During one of the breaks, everyone is blessed by the Geshe and is given a book, a religious text translated into Mongolian. The book is distributed by the Geshe, free of charge, to everyone present. “Thank you for having us in your wonderful country. I hope we will meet

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<sup>1</sup> Geshe is an academic title in Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism, similar to a PhD in Western science. However, a geshe degree usually takes between 15-25 years to complete.

again soon” are the concluding remarks of the Geshe. This was followed by applause from the audience. However, some Mongolians were wondering about the American “Christian-style” performance of Buddhist teaching.

These two snapshots are presented to illustrate the social and congregational flavor of the revival of Mongolian Buddhism as it is now being played out, nearly eighteen years after Mongolia’s democratic revolution in 1990. The postsocialist democratic society has promoted religious freedom. A strong revival of Buddhism as well as Shamanism<sup>2</sup> has emerged in Mongolia attracting many (and varied) religious actors to the country.

With an increasing number of transnational connections developing, the important question of Mongolian religious identity arises. The case of Mongolian Buddhism is particularly suited to examining notions of identity politics in a highly cosmopolitanized<sup>3</sup> setting. The tradition has a long history of embracing foreign influences and accommodating intercultural connections, although hitherto mainly between Tibet and Mongolia.

During the Communist era, Buddhism went underground until after 1990, when a multitude of older as well as newly established transnational connections came visibly to the surface. Our study attempts to unravel the social processes associated with constant (re)production of existing as well as new negotiated boundaries situated in transcultural contexts.

Below we examine ways in which Mongolian identity is produced and maintained within the multiple Tibetan, Soviet and Western influences currently at play in Mongolia. The main issues to be addressed are: (a) ways in which differences are produced, and (b) ways in which cultural flows are absorbed and integrated, or at times even rejected, in order to (re)produce a specifically Mongolian Buddhist identity.

The first section provides the reader with a historical outline of the genesis of the transnational connections of Mongolian Buddhism. Developments during the Communist era and the role which these connections play today within the postsocialist revival are examined. The second section builds on this contextual information, considering a range of present-day strategies used to negotiate self and other.

We are grateful to the Gerda Henkel Foundation for funding our German-Mongolian research project. Qualitative research has been conducted using the conventions associated with social and cultural anthropology and combining them with an innovative approach: the collaboration between a German and a Mongolian PhD student. The German researcher (BS) spent

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Schlehe has investigated the revival of shamanism in Mongolia (Schlehe 2005).

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the concept of cosmopolitanism, see Beck (2007) and Breckenridge (2002).

12 months in Mongolia on two separate occasions doing participant observation. The Mongolian researcher (LJ) has a Buddhist background, having studied “Tibetan Buddhism”. He also lived with the Tibetan community in exile in India. A total of 60 (long) interviews were recorded for the wider project. Furthermore, the research also draws on filmed footage, detailed field notes based on the investigator’s observations, and many more informal talks.

## **Transnational cultural flows and the reinvention of Mongolian Buddhism**

### **Early spread of Buddhism in Mongolia: the Tibeto-Mongolian entanglement**

The Abbot of Gandantegchenling Monastery, center of Mongolian Buddhism and the largest active monastery in Ulaanbaatar, said during one of the interviews that around 200 children study in exile in Tibetan monasteries in India, and therefore, in his opinion, ‘Tibet’ is the only place to revive Mongolian Buddhism. So, why Tibet?

We find one of the answers in the historical connection between Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhism. Although Mongolian scholars refer to an ancient spread of Buddhism in Mongol lands during the Xiongnu Period (Dam-chos-rgya-mtsho, Klafkowski 1987: 156) Western science often dates the beginning of Buddhism in Mongolia from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, during the period of Ogedei Khaan. His son Godan Khan invited a Buddhist master from Tibet to teach Buddhism in the area we now know as the nation state of Mongolia.

This spread of Buddhism culminated under Khubilai Khaan, an Emperor of the Yuan Dynasty, who introduced ‘Tibetan’ Buddhism as the state religion of Mongolia.<sup>4</sup> A so-called “second” spread of Buddhism in Mongolia<sup>5</sup> is dated back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the regency of Altan Khaan who invited a Tibetan scholar on whom he bestowed the title of “Dalai Lama”. In both cases, there was a complementary synergy of political and religious purposes. During Manchu rule in Mongolia, Buddhism further developed into a vital part of society. Mongolia had its own spiritual and (representative)

<sup>4</sup> At that time Buddhism existed mainly in the courts of Mongolian Khaans and nobles but not on a wider scale in Mongol lands (Siklos 1991:161)

<sup>5</sup> The third spread if we follow Mongolian Buddhist texts like *hor chos 'byung* of Zawa Damdin, which counts the Xiongnu period as the first spread (Dam-chos-rgya-mtsho, Klafkowski 1987:156). For a general history of Buddhism in Mongolia, see Jerryson 2007.

political head, the Jebtsundamba Khutakt, also considered a lineage holder of reincarnations similar to the institution of the Dalai Lama in Tibet.<sup>6</sup>

### **Buddhism during communist time**

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the dominance and politico-religious entanglement of the Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhists started to decline. This was in response to the Communist takeover of Mongolia. After the death of the 8<sup>th</sup> Jebtsundamba<sup>7</sup> in 1924, the Mongolian government inhibited the search for his next reincarnation, and in the same year separated Church and State in the newly adopted Constitution.<sup>8</sup>

As Buddhism (the Yellow Sect) had been the dominant religious force in Mongolia since the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, some party members were reluctant to deprecate Buddhism. Rather, they wanted to reform Buddhism so that it resonated more closely with Marxism. Jamtsarano, one of those advocates, said that “Seeing that the basic aims of our Party and of Buddhism are both the welfare of the people, there is no conflict between the two of them” (Quoted in Bawden 1968: 286).

Nevertheless, starting from the early 1920s, those party members were purged, along with party members who were against the implementation of the Soviet policy and domination. Under Comintern pressure, the government declared Buddhism an enemy of the state and launched a series of campaigns against it in order to weaken its influence on society. The campaigns were targeted at eradicating the economic power of Buddhist monasteries and reducing their continuing and considerable influence on the public.

Monastery property was confiscated. The construction of new temples was prohibited. Accepting minors under the age of 18 to the monasteries was banned and the search for reincarnated lamas was forbidden. Finally, mass executions of lamas took place. Seventeen thousand lamas were ex-

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<sup>6</sup> Especially the first Jebtsundamba Khutukt, Undur Gegen Zanabazar, is well known for his fine Buddhist deity sculptures and developing Zanabazar school of Buddhist Arts. Only the first two Jebtsundambas were born in Mongolia, the others were born in Tibet. After the second Jebtsundamba’s support of the revolt by Mongol lords against the Manchu, the Manchu emperor forbade recognition of Jebtsundamba from Mongolia. One could also see this as a close interconnectedness of the two countries, as the fourth Dalai Lama, for example, was born in Mongolia. So the ethnic and cultural identities were highly entangled in history (Onon 1989: 111-112)

<sup>7</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> Jebtsundamba is the first and last Mongolian theocratic king. He was proclaimed the Great Khaan of the Mongols in 1911 when Mongolia declared its independence from the Manchu Qing Dynasty (Onon 1989: 16-18).

<sup>8</sup> Article 3 Paragraph 6.

cuted.<sup>9</sup> All Buddhist monasteries were closed and destroyed. Not a single monk or a single monastery was left in Mongolia, until the government reopened Gandantegchenling (commonly known as Gandan) Monastery in Ulaanbaatar in 1944.<sup>10</sup> Rupen noted that the Gandan monastery was “maintained mainly to impress foreigners and particularly for Communist propaganda in other Buddhist countries of Asia” (Rupen 1966: 332).

During the Socialist period, Buddhism was under strict control of the government and was restricted to conducting religious activities exclusively within the walls of Gandan monastery.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the monastery managed to transmit Buddhist teachings to the young monk-students at the Buddhist Theological Institute (*Shashny Deed Surguul*) founded in 1970. The Tibeto-Mongolian religious relations, once broken off, were revived through the visits of the Dalai Lama to Mongolia in 1979 and 1982. Furthermore, since the early 1980s Mongolian monks have studied at the Institute of Dialectics in Dharamsala, India, where the Tibetan government in exile resides.

Some visitors to Mongolia, like the British visitor Montagu who visited Gandan monastery in 1954, remarked: “Lamaism is gone, though a few lamas remain” (Montagu 1956: 34). Buddhism was hidden in Mongolia. Some monks emphasize that Buddhism had never left Mongolia (Interview 2009-05-09).<sup>12</sup> They argue that there were more than four monks who kept their monastic celibacy vows during Socialist times, thereby maintaining the minimum number of monks required for a Buddhist community according to the traditional scripture.<sup>13</sup>

During socialist times the “tradition” of “non-celibate monks” was introduced in Gandan. However, these “non-celibate monks” did not live by a monk’s vow. Rather, they lived by a lay Buddhist vow in which marriage is allowed. This marked a compromise between not taking any vows and living by a monk’s vow in celibacy. Most of the young people were already mar-

<sup>9</sup> According to Sandag, 50,000 monks were executed. (Sandag 2000: 121)

<sup>10</sup> The re-opening the Buddhist monastery is explained by some Mongolians in connection with the visit of Henry A. Wallace, the US vice president, who visited Mongolia in 1944. Under the directions of Moscow, the government needs to show the world that it respects freedom of religion which was granted in the Constitution of Mongolia of 1940.

<sup>11</sup> An informant said in an interview that when he became a monk in the late 1990s, the abbot of Gandan monastery instructed newly ordained monks that “you don’t need to wear robe outside the walls of Gandan and should not conduct religious activities beyond the yellow walls of Gandan” (Interview 2009-05-04).

<sup>12</sup> A monk even remarked that the situation of Buddhism had been better in Communist times, because people were practicing real Dharma under pressure, whereas today everybody would announce big things in order to promote themselves (Interview 2007-09-12).

<sup>13</sup> According to Buddhism, a Buddhist community and therefore Buddhism exists where four fully ordained monks reside (Lopez 1995: 32).

ried before studying at the Buddhist Institute. One explanation for such a compromise is explained by Ch.Dambajav, the Abbot of Dashchoiling monastery, as follows:

“I became a monk after my second child was born. Being married did not obstruct me [to become a monk]. What could be done, since I was married. I studied [at the Buddhist Theological Institute] and graduated. [...] Because it was said that there is a lack of young educated people who know Tibetan to work at the history research institutions like the State Library, the Academy of Sciences and the State Museum, where are many Tibetan texts, thus, you will become a monk and work there.” (Interview conducted by Prof. Yuki in 2004)

This was a typical situation during the socialist period. To study at the Buddhist Theological Institute in Gandan automatically implied that the aspirant became a monk (in Buddhist robes) but was not required to take a Buddhist monk’s vow. Nevertheless, if a student wanted to take the Buddhist monk’s vows, he was permitted to do so. Adding to the complexity was the regulation that students were required to serve in the army before they were allowed to study at the Buddhist Institute – an education quite contrary to Buddhist thought and principles (Interview 2008-06-08).

### **Reinvention of Buddhism in postsocialist time**

With the start of *perestroika* (reform) in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, government policies towards Buddhism were softened and, finally, religious freedom was granted by the new Constitution of Mongolia in 1992. When Buddhism re-emerged in Mongolia it created a veritable explosion.<sup>14</sup> The number of monasteries drastically increased from only one, Gandan, to more than 120 by 1998.<sup>15</sup> Ex-monks who had been forced to disrobe during the purges re-opened monasteries and started to train younger boys in Buddhism. Seventy years of restriction of Buddhism had left people in a spiritual vacuum<sup>16</sup> or with a spiritual thirst (Kohn 2006: 176). Apart from its role of meeting “spiritual needs”, Buddhism once again re-emerged as part of Mongolian culture and national identity (Kaplonski 2001: 350).

Though religion and state are separated by the Constitution, the government started to support Buddhism in view of its formative role in asso-

<sup>14</sup> For the developments after 1990 see Barkman 1997, Kollmar-Paulenz 2003.

<sup>15</sup> According to D. Chojjams, the abbot of Gandan monastery. (Chuluunbaatar, Tsedendamba 1998: 24)

<sup>16</sup> Hann argued that the socialist system claimed moral superiority, which left behind a vacuum after the collapse of the system (Hann 2002: 25).

ciating Mongolian culture and identity.<sup>17</sup> For example, with the support of the Cultural Fund, a state agency, the statue of Buddhist deity Migjed Janraisig (Avalokiteshvara) was re-constructed in 1996<sup>18</sup>, and the first Mongolian Buddhist temple in Bodhgaya, India, is being constructed with government support in order to represent Mongolian Buddhism at the place of birth of the historical Buddha. Some politicians and a political party<sup>19</sup> even proposed installing Buddhism as state religion in their election platforms.

Significant socio-political changes took place in Mongolia as a result of democracy in the 1990s, which meant a new situation for Mongolian Buddhists. As Tibet was considered the only place to revive its centuries-old Buddhist tradition, Mongolian Buddhists turned to Tibetans in exile to assist the revival of Buddhism in Mongolia. Within this context, the Dalai Lama visited Mongolia several times<sup>20</sup>, and over 200 young Mongolian monks were sent to Tibetan monasteries to bring Buddhism back to Mongolia. A number of monks were sent to Switzerland to study, where an exile-Tibetan Buddhist monastery also exists.<sup>21</sup>

Not only were monks sent to India where Tibetan Buddhists are based, individuals as well as organizations invited Buddhist teachers to come to Mongolia to teach. Several Tibetan teachers came to Mongolia for both short and longer periods to disseminate Buddhism. One of the prominent Tibetan teachers was the Indian ambassador Bakula Rinpoche. He was considered to be a reincarnation of Bakula, one of the sixteen elders whom the Buddha entrusted with preserving the Buddhist teaching. Consequently, his arrival in Mongolia was viewed by some Mongolian Buddhists as a sign of the revival of Buddhism in Mongolia. After coming to Mongolia, he actively propagated Buddhism and built Pethub Monastery.

<sup>17</sup> The dominant status of Buddhism is legalized in the Law on Relationships between the State and Church. The Article 4.2 of the law states “Mongolia shall respect the dominant status (*zonkhilokh bair suur*) of Buddhism with consideration of unity of Mongolian people and tradition of culture and civilization”.

<sup>18</sup> The original 25.5 meters high, copper gilt statute was installed in 1913. It is said that the original statue was dismantled and sent to the Soviet Red Army during the Second World War for using the copper to make bullets. (for details cf. Sandag 2000: 124-126). The statute is considered to be the symbol of Mongolian independence, thus, the Mongolian President, the Speaker of Parliament and the Prime Minister visit the temple and participate in a religious ceremony on the first day of the Mongolian New Year (*Tsagaan Sar*).

<sup>19</sup> The National New Party made this proposal in its 2008 parliamentary election platform.

<sup>20</sup> Since 1990, the Dalai Lama visited Mongolia in 1991, 1994, 1995, 2002 and 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Schittich (2005) investigated the Mongolia-Switzerland connection, exemplifying it with the example of the life story of a monk and determined the Tulku-System of rebirth and the Buddhist Master-Disciple connection as the two main factors that helped bridge the generation gap after the Communist era.

With the support of Bakula Rinpoche and the (inner) Mongolian Guru Deva Rinpoche, Mongolian women established a Buddhist women's center, which appears to function in a way similar to that of the male Buddhist monasteries. Furthermore, he encouraged women to receive Buddhist precepts and become nuns. Other important Tibetan lamas are Sopa Rinpoche, who established the branch center of the Foundation of the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), and Panchen Otrul Rinpoche, who founded Asral center. Both Tibetan centers engage in social work including providing food and offering medical support to those in need. English language classes and sustainable development projects were introduced in addition to the Buddhist and meditation classes. The FPMT repaired and made Dara Ekh Monastery a nunnery for 14 Mongolian nuns.

Not only Tibetan teachers, Western Buddhist teachers also came to Mongolia in competition with Western Christian missionaries, who wanted to "save the souls" of the Mongols<sup>22</sup>. Mongolia, at the present time, has been described as a "spiritual supermarket"<sup>23</sup>, in which both the traditional Buddhist product and the Western Christian product are available to quench the spiritual thirst of the Mongols who had long been deprived from touching the forbidden religious apple.

Regarding the multitude of transnational connections within Mongolian Buddhism, we refer back to the quote at the beginning of this article: "Tibet is the only place where Mongolian Buddhism can be revived." If we reflect on the question, 'Why Tibet?', at first glance we would have difficulty in finding a straightforward answer. However, if we were to assume, for example, that 'Tibet' is a broader generalization made by the orator, and that the actual locality referred to in the conversation is in fact the exile-Tibetan monasteries in India, then the ensuing interpretation of the dialogue would be somewhat different. One could assume such a (Freudian) slip based on the powerful visual image of Tibet, that has developed beyond more mundane Western mystification<sup>24</sup>. After all, the orator himself was a Mongolian monk who trained in a Tibetan monastery in exile in India. There appears to be a potent imagining of 'Tibet' or 'the Tibetans' in contemporary Mongolia. The globalized exiled Tibetan Buddhist community seems to have a strong influence on the development of Mongolian Buddhism. If so, then this hegemonic influence could be interpreted as one of the challenges confronting Mongolian Buddhist identity.

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<sup>22</sup> For an impression, see <http://www.hvk.org/articles/0801/47.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with an American monk living in Mongolia: <http://www.lamongols.com/content/view/4011/1/>.

<sup>24</sup> Works deconstructing Western images of Tibet: Bishop 1993, Brauen 2000, Lopez 1998.

## Negotiating Self and Other: the case of education in Mongolian Buddhism

Elverskog (2007) questions the somewhat inconsiderate and patronizing notion of Mongols as ‘Tibetan Buddhists’. One reason underpinning this notion is the dominant historical narrative around the patron-priest relationship featured in Tibeto-centrism. Elverskog offers an alternative reading of history, namely that the Mongolian conversion to Buddhism should be seen in the realm of religious power and a much wider sense of socio-political transformation. “Not only are the Mongols denied agency in their own religious history, but also they do not even have their ‘own’ Buddhism” (Elverskog 2007: 62).

What follows is an examination of the Mongolian-Tibetan relationship in the context of how difference is (re)produced and maintained between notions of a Mongolian self and a foreign other. Therefore, Mongolian informants’ construction of emerging boundaries are discussed. Secondly, personal and organizational strategies for maintaining Mongolian identity within the educational collaboration are explored. And thirdly, some of the more obvious reactions of Mongolians towards Western-style transnational flows are examined.

### Producing difference

Most of the interviewees (Mongolians, Tibetans and/or Westerners) agreed that as far as contents (systematic and formalized curriculum studies) are concerned, Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhism are the same<sup>25</sup>. Some Tibetan Buddhist masters involved in the Mongolian situation even point out that in the past were bigger monasteries in Mongolia than in Tibet and some famous Mongolian masters such as the Jetsundambas or Zava Damdin composed works that have been widely disseminated and are highly regarded by the monastic elite in Tibet. From this perspective, the Mongolian Buddhist (scholarly) tradition is respected by Tibetan Buddhist scholars.

But most of the (Mongolian) informants made clear that culturally there would be differences. When asked about their thoughts on foreigners visiting Mongolia to teach Buddhism, all informants referred to a kind of cosmopolitan attitude associated with Buddhism, whereby everybody and anybody (from outside) who was qualified, is being invited to Mongolia to teach Dharma. Buddhism has always been like that, the teachings were the

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<sup>25</sup> In the following we will refer to the *sharyn shashin* (yellow religion), i.e. the Gelugpa lineage, as they are the largest group of informants.

only important content, and different people and cultures have always been welcomed (Interview with the Abbot of a monastery 2008-05-11).

In his appeal to the audience, one Buddhist teacher in Mongolia, who was a Westerner, even went a step further, when he asserted that there was no Tibetan term for ‘Tibetan Buddhism’, which made the term itself a Western construct: “So, I think the Tibetans think Buddhism is *ngangpā chöe* and the Mongolians use the same word, means ‘inner dharma’” (Interview 2008-06-10). The same was true, he continued, before outlining the historical entanglement of Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhism, of the Tibetan language, which was called *choe khed* meaning the ‘dharma language’ and not the Tibetan language (ibid).

Another deconstruction of the dichotomy was made by an American scholar, who gave a lecture in Gandan monastery. He portrayed the life of Geshe Wangyal, who was a Kalmyk Mongolian master and the first ‘Tibetan Buddhist’<sup>26</sup> to teach in the United States. This second-generation North American scholar argued that most North American ‘Tibetologists’ were direct or indirect students of the Mongolian Geshe Wangyal, and therefore that North American Tibetology in fact had Mongolian roots (Lecture in Gandan 2008-07-26).

This kind of cosmopolitizing deconstruction of the distinction between Mongolian Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism in the West (as illustrated above) stands in stark contrast to the cultural practice of producing difference exhibited by Mongolian ‘actors’ who locally and colloquially use the term *shashin* when referring to Buddhism. As one Mongolian monk put it, “This is the weakest point in Mongolian Buddhist history. That is why almost anyone from anywhere can come to Mongolia and teach anything about Buddhism.” In this monk’s opinion, it should be Mongolians (not others) who teach Buddhism not only in Mongolia, but all over the world (Interview 2008-08-07).

At the center of the production of differences stands, of course, Tibet. Hence there is a tendency to posit a Mongolian self superior to a Tibetan other. Working from this premise, informants that were asked about the Tibeto-Mongolian relationship often told a story about a visit of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to Mongolia at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>27</sup>. With him travelled

<sup>26</sup> Geshe Wangyal opened the first ‘Tibetan’ Monastery in the USA in 1955 under the name of Lamaist Buddhist monastery of America, in order to avoid the term “Tibetan Buddhist” monastery (Lopez 1996: 22).

<sup>27</sup> The story was told in different versions with different years (in between 1905 to 1915), but the basic idea was always the same, so that the differences in detail do not matter for the purpose of this paper, as the notions of our informants are more important than historical facts in this context.

an entourage of the highest Tibetan masters, so informants narrate vividly. Upon their arrival, these Tibetan scholars had a philosophic debate in the Dashichoiling Monastery in what is now Ulaanbaatar. One Mongolian master, native to the Bulgan province<sup>28</sup> defeated in turn each of the Tibetan scholars, and finally the Dalai Lama himself, over a three-day-long debate. The 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was so impressed that he became a student of that master and decided to return to Mongolia time and time again. One monk quoted him as saying, in referring to Mongolia, “this is the real country of the Buddhism” (Interview 2008-08-07)<sup>29</sup>.

Other stories like this exist<sup>30</sup> that emphasize the superiority of the Mongolians. Similarly, an ancient Tibetan saying pronounces: ‘Tibetan Buddhism is based on vow, Mongolian Buddhism is based on trust’. The common reading of this saying is again one that positions Mongolian identity above the Tibetan. The Tibetans need the vow in order to prohibit bad action, but the Mongolians have an almost spontaneous inner trust in Buddhism in general and the spiritual master in particular. Nevertheless, from the interviews there appear to be considerable differences between Mongolian and Tibetan monks. Various qualities are ascribed to Mongolian and Tibetan monks, the tendency being to emphasize the superior nature of Mongolian monks.

For example one of the more controversial issues is that of celibacy. As mentioned above, the Communist era produced a special type of monk in Mongolia. Monks who helped to re-open the monasteries after 1990 were those who had been forced to lead a family life under communism. Everybody agreed that ‘those married monks’ were a legitimate and honorable exception to the ethical code of the monastic community (*vinaya*), which strictly prohibited marriage. These monks served as a role model for the younger generation.

<sup>28</sup> The Bulgan province is proud to be known for its heroes. Apart from that master, the first Mongolian Astronaut and the first Mongolian Olympic Gold winner came from that province.

<sup>29</sup> This story was told by a monk when asked what he thinks about Tibetans teaching in Mongolia. He concluded this anecdote as follows: “and the day 13th Dalai Lama had gone back to his country to Tibet, he was just turning (his head) looking back again and again, and saying: This is the real country of the Buddhism. I’ll be coming back again and again, all of my reincarnations. That’s why he said it. That’s in history today. Yes. That’s what happened. This is the answer” (Interview 2008-08-07).

<sup>30</sup> Another example given, to illustrate the rational-intellectual superiority of the Mongolians, is that Mongolian monks discovered a misprinting in the Volumes of a main Gelugpa reference book, the Lam Rim of Master Je Tsongkhapa, on the basis of logical reasoning. The Tibetan Government gave permission to open the stupa which contained the historical text and the error was confirmed (Choimaa, Terbish, Burnee, Chuluunbaatar 1999: 20).

Although a variety of factors may lead to non-celibacy amongst monks<sup>31</sup>, some monks argue that it is wrong, or even that it represents a transitory phenomena, expecting future generations to remain celibate. However, others simply claim this as a Mongolian tradition. A young monk was more candid when we were talking informally and more frankly over dinner:

“You know, the Tibetans, they kill each other for getting a high position, and, what is rarely known, they sometimes sexually abuse young monks. We Mongolians don’t do such things, but we just have wives.”  
(Conversation 2008-06-12)

Although only latent, the same view was voiced by other informants, albeit in a milder way. One strong reaction to foreign criticism is that of a personally preferred, and culturally accepted lifestyle, once again reflecting a reaction by producing difference in referring to a Mongolian self.

### **Maintaining Mongolian Buddhist identity**

On the basis that 200 young Mongolian students have been sent to study Buddhism in Tibetan monasteries in exile, and that Tibetan teachers come to Mongolia, new dividing lines are being established in this transnational configuration. Some Mongolian monks feel the strong Tibetan influence and even speak of a threat of a “Tibetanization” of Mongolian Buddhism. And so at this juncture it may prove fruitful to consider a range of strategies used to maintain Mongolian Buddhist identity, particularly in the field of educational collaboration.

Our interviews revealed that Mongolian monks would like to preserve Mongolian tradition and identity, which has been established and maintained for centuries, and they do not want to lose that identity. One monk from Gandan monastery said (reflecting a more or less nationalistic sentiment) that:

“Mongolian Buddhism is not Tibetan Buddhism. We developed it. If we copy Tibetans in every manner the criticism of ‘you just copied Tibetan Buddhism’ might become true in our generation.”(Interview 2009-05-09)

Further, he remarked that the “revival of Buddhism should not be in Tibetan style.” “Depending on Tibetans and to send students to India is necessary at this time”, one monk remarked. But another monk argues to the contrary, “it is not necessary nowadays [for] everyone to study in Gomang Datsang and

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<sup>31</sup> Discussing the different positions on this issue would provide enough material for another paper; here just some points of reference may be noted: city life, non residency at the monasteries, young novice age before the adolescence etc. One monk said that the meaning of monastery (*khiid*) is “a remote place” and that is the only way to keep it pure” (Interview in Ulaanbaatar 2008-06-14). Again for our paper this discussion is not relevant in its substance, only in as much as it produces difference.

Dharamsala as it was necessary in the early 1990s” (Interview 2009-05-09). In his view, some of the young Mongolian monks who had gone and now come back to Mongolia after several years of study in India “act like a Tibetan person.” He added that young Mongolian monks are always wearing Tibetan monks’ robes even during the “freezing cold winter.” At this point he argued:

“Mongolia was the place which developed Buddhism, in particular Buddhist philosophy, in an excellent way. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Mongolia was par excellence in Buddhist scholarship; much superior to that of the Tibetans. At that time, when Buddhism was flourishing, monks with pure vows dressed in Mongolian monk’s dress in accordance with the seasonal climate and its differing conditions. Then why should not we now wear Mongolian monks’ dress?” (Interview 2009-05-09)

As seen by him, a way of preserving Mongolian Buddhist identity is not to send students to India, but to bring Tibetan teachers to Mongolia. According to another monk, an alternative solution to maintain the Mongol identity is

“train young monks first in Mongolia in the Mongolian tradition, and then send them to India. In this way, they will know the Mongolian tradition and acquire further Buddhist knowledge from that basis.” (Interview 2009-05-14)

The Abbot of Gandan also preferred this latter means of training young Mongolian monks. He argued that when they become monks and go directly to India, they act exactly like a Tibetan person when they come back a few years later. Local collaboration with these monks then proves difficult. (Interview 2008-09-09).

In this light, the importance of Mongolian teachers is often emphasized: Mongolian teachers are ideally placed to pass on Mongolian transmission lines, which they themselves received from Mongolian teachers. It is argued that, even if they are non-celibate, they should never be considered subordinate to teachers who are Tibetan. Furthermore, Mongolian monks can be trained as teachers in India in order to later train Mongolian monks in Mongolia.

“It is not necessary to bring a Tibetan lama for just to receive some common Tantric empowerments and textual transmissions<sup>32</sup> which also can be given by Mongolian teachers. [...] While we have Mongolian monks who can teach series of Buddhist teachings, we are ignoring them.” (Interview 2009-05-09)

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<sup>32</sup> In Tantric Buddhism, an empowerment and textual transmission is highly important in order to study Buddhist Tantric practice.

The importance of training by Mongolian teachers is also supported by some Tibetan lamas. For example, a Tibetan Rinpoche remarked: “A Mongolian student will understand just by one teaching from a Mongolian teacher which could be the equivalent of receiving ten teachings from a Tibetan teacher.” (Interview 2009-05-14).

Individual Tibetan teachers are highly respected by Mongolians, once a master-student relationship has been established, although on a more abstract level the Tibetan influence is seen as a danger to lose (Mongolian) national identity. As Khubilai Khaan said back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, “Don’t think the Mongols incapable of learning your religion. We learn it gradually.” (Shakabpa 1967: 66). Nowadays, the Mongols are again learning Buddhism from “them” but with the emphasis on reviving and preserving a specific Mongolian tradition.

### **Dealing with transnational cultural flows**

The article so far has shown the genesis of the transnational flows in Mongolian Buddhism. Ways in which differences between a Mongolian self and a (mainly Tibetan) other are produced have been outlined, and some strategies intended to maintain a Mongolian Buddhist identity in the context of education have been proposed.

The following empirical analysis illustrates some strategies for dealing with the more globalized transnational cultural flows. There are, of course, a variety of strategies of appropriating and dissociating the cultural flows. Therefore the task is now to determine cultural manifestations of the construction of self within these transnational flows.

A multitude of foreign, ‘Western’ actors are active in the process of reviving Mongolian Buddhism, as has been pointed out earlier. We find ‘Westerners’ teaching classes in Buddhism, male and female alike, from Europe, the USA, Canada, and Australia, ordained in Tibetan lineages of Buddhism or even as non-ordained (Tantric) teachers. For example, German, Swiss and Irish students of Tibetan Lamas are very active as organizers or volunteers of newly founded Buddhist institutions.

Once again, it is mainly the foreign actors that stress the inter-relatedness of mankind and Buddhist teaching. As all the actors are Buddhists, many of them put national differences into perspective by referring to the idea of reincarnation: Somebody who is now a Mongolian could have been, for example, an American in his previous life (as an American monk suggested), and vice versa. Even some Mongolian informants referred to this possibility, and hence pointed out that a too nationalistic notion would be counterproductive in Buddhist terms.

Nevertheless, on a more practical level difficulties in the collaboration arise. “Now I have a Mongolian manager for the organization here, and I don’t know what he is doing. I just do not understand how he is thinking, really not” said a rather frustrated European (2008-08-18), whose declared goal was to develop an organization that should soon be exclusively in Mongolian hands. Another European actor said: “In Mongolia you have to do everything on your own, otherwise everything goes to pieces” (Interview 2008-06-26). A Western Buddhist teacher, engaged in the revival of Mongolian Buddhism, maintained the Mongols “a great sensitivity towards outsiders criticizing”, citing the example of an international Buddhist organization, whose early teachers criticized the monks publicly over the celibacy issue. That organization was still suffering greatly on that account. Furthermore, he stated that the Mongols “when it comes to real authority, certainly they are, they feel very much lords of their own domain” (Interview 2008-06-10). If only their own sense of national identity were respected, collaboration would be easy (*ibid.*). Transnational collaboration seems to be very difficult and problematic for both sides, as long as foreigners are in a privileged position. Especially when foreigners try to transplant their own Buddhist transmission line to Mongolia, difficulties are faced, whereas some rare examples show that a fruitful collaboration can take place, if the cultural sensitivity of Mongolians is respected, and the foreign engagement is embedded in a support of local commitment.

Foreign actors are sometimes even compared to foreign Christian churches, which come to Mongolia and who constitute a strong ‘other’ to the Buddhist faith.<sup>33</sup> The fast developing Christianity in Mongolia is sometimes seen as a wholesome challenge, as Christianity is well acquainted with the integration of lay believers in modern society. Here Buddhism could learn, must learn from foreigners or even other religions, if it wants to adapt to the modern democratic postsocialist society. In this respect Mongolians welcome non-Tibetan or “Western” Buddhist teachers to help improve the situation of Mongolian Buddhism.

In adapting to modern society the inclusion of laity is often mentioned as of utmost importance. Here a language problem arises, as most of the religious studies have been done in Tibetan. Publishing introductory books on Buddhism, written in the Mongolian language and designed to be understood by common lay people therefore became an important task for Bud-

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<sup>33</sup> A French Buddhist nun teaching at a city center in Ulaanbaatar could understand the fascination that Christian churches may have for the Mongolian younger generation. She said that Christianity may appear to them as modern and trendy, just like Buddhism did to her when she lived in France. There Buddhism was the newest and latest, whereas Christianity was considered to be old-fashioned (Interview 2009-05-03).

dhist revival. The use of the Mongolian language poses two difficulties: using Dharma terms with precise meanings in the ancient script *mongol bi-chig*, which makes it hard for common people to understand, or using an easily understood colloquial language with the danger of becoming too indefinite in philosophical contexts. An abbot of a monastery, who translated old books from Tibetan to Mongolian and who is engaged in scholarly exchange between science and Buddhism remarked:

“100 years ago some beginner book, you know, introduction to Buddhism, this book now it’s very high level of education. Cannot understand everybody. [...] we need to publish new [...] introduction to Buddhism. Giving understanding to normal people. [...] Time changed. We need to work on this side [...] One of our wish is to [do] new research work on the introduction to Buddhism.” (Interview 2007-11-07)

Our second snapshot illustrates a common practice of foreign actors: The translation of simple Buddhist books for beginners, most of them written for a Western readership, into the Mongolian language. Similarly, a number of Buddhist books have been or are being translated into colloquial Mongolian to convey the Buddha Dharma to lay people. The spread of Buddhist books, of course, is appreciated by Buddhists, but Mongolian Buddhist actors describe the cultural barriers for those books in Mongolia:

“If we translate English books to Mongolian, because English is very [...] new culture in Europe. [...] all this scholars in Europe they work hard on this research work and then they publish many new books for European mentality. If we translate to Mongolian, English to Mongolian, somehow it is good, but it is also little far from the mentality, you know, it’s very difficult. When you really do good quality work for Mongolians, for Tibetans, Chinese, you need to know the deep culture and history, their character, you know, their own character. [...] It is hard, very hard.” (Interview 2007-11-08)

Hence, again a specific Mongolian way of transmitting the Buddhist teaching is felt necessary, and help from foreigners is seen in a critical light. Furthermore, crucial contribution to the Mongolian way of teaching Buddhism is seen in retaining the traditional Mongolian script, as it transports the Mongolian culture and preserves it against foreign influences, as foreign words have to be written in a different alphabet (*ibid.*).

With the transnational flows cultural practices and resources come to Mongolia as well as new conflict lines. One conflict line is the present debate about a so-called protector deity within the Tibetan Buddhist community, that should no longer be worshipped according to the exile-Tibetan government, whereas some Tibetan Gelugpa schools disagree and continue the practice of worshipping that deity. The Dalai Lama first publicly criticized the practice in 1976, banned the practice in 1996, and the conflict flared up

again in 2008<sup>34</sup>. In Mongolia this was mostly considered to be a Tibetan conflict and not a Mongolian one, as the Abbot of Gandan pointed out (Interview 2008-09-09). A monk said that it was very important to stick to the view of one's teacher, and his teacher advised him to stay neutral (Interview 2009-05-09). But the conflict became stronger and more visible in Mongolia, too, due to the transnational connections. A monk of a monastery in Ulaanbaatar complained that his monastery was like an "abandoned child", as the foreign supporters were against the deity, which was worshipped in that monastery. So the monastery stopped the practice in loyalty to its supporters and the situation improved. (Interview 2008-06-14). Another monk from the countryside was in a serious inner conflict as he had studied in India in an exile-Tibetan monastery that divided due to the conflict in 2008. His supporters were on one side of the exile monastery, that was divided in 2008, whereas his monk friends from his hometown were on the other. Both sides were supported by foreign scholarships. Finally he decided to switch to the side where his Mongolian Dharma friends studied, breaking the ties to his former supporters.

These three stories illustrate that new conflict lines inevitably appear in such a highly entangled environment. Although the reactions are not homogeneous, once again the notion of a Mongolian identity seems to be of utmost importance. The latest case shows that ties with the homeland can be even more important than the loyalty to foreign teachers that support and sponsor education.

## **Conclusion**

The two snapshots at the beginning of the article show that Mongolian Buddhism is deeply influenced by transnational entanglements. On the one hand, Tibetans warned Mongolians not to become dependent on Westerners, who are already engaged in the Mongolian Buddhist revival. On the other hand there is a strong tendency in Mongolia to produce difference in respect of both Tibetan and Western influences, but more so as regards the former.

The transnational entanglements reflect a long history, connecting Mongolian khans with Tibetan lamas, and therefore, religion with politics. These entanglements survived various socio-political constellations. Moreover, they continue to flourish in the present-day situation. Each period of history has had a strong influence on Mongolian Buddhism; Tibet in early

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<sup>34</sup> For an overview see Batchelor 1998; Chryssides 2003. In 2008 in the exile-Tibetan monastery Gandan Shartse a wall was constructed due to the conflict, separating one group from the other (Interview 2008-09-28).

times, the Soviet Union in the last century, and a globalized exile-Tibetan community since 1990. Each of these influences has contributed to the uniqueness of Mongolian Buddhism.

The example of celibacy suggests that even paradox constellations can occur. Innovative solutions, such as married 'monks' with only lay persons' vows, were developed under Communist rule; a period of suppression of an 'own' (Buddhism) by the 'other' (Communism). These inventions were incorporated and absorbed into Mongolian Buddhism and are now upheld as 'own' (Mongolian) against an 'other' (Tibetan) just a few decades later, as was demonstrated in empirical case studies, whereas the new 'other' has striking similarities to the former 'own' (e.g. celibate monks).

The situation of Mongolian Buddhism is still characterized by being a work in progress, providing a heterogeneous field of developments with a yet unclear outcome, as the article has tried to illustrate from a range of empirical positions. Transnational cultural flows provide a great deal of information and alternative role models for the Mongolian Buddhist community, which in turn selectively absorbs certain elements whilst rejecting other aspects in order to strengthen its own construction of a Mongolian Buddhist identity.

Tibet and the West are the two main foreign points of reference in Mongolian Buddhism whereby the flows of Western modernity to Mongolian Buddhism seem to be integrated in order to establish Buddhism in a modern society. On the other hand, differentiating from a "Tibet", which is connoted to the power of defining, seems to be of utmost importance. The fear of losing Mongolian Buddhist identity is visibly strong on an abstract and collective level. Here, a notion of national identity, of a specific and unique Mongolian character associated with superior qualities, that are defined and constructed from a variety of qualities, plays an important role.

In the framework of globalization, the West does not seem to play such an important role as an agent from which one has to distance oneself. Identity politics take place in an inner-Asian context that is highly differentiated, with the exile-Tibetan community in India as a point of reference for producing this differentiation. Harrison (2006) posits a theoretical approach to conflict, taking the example of cultural identity, that calls into question the basic assumption of (folk) social theory that shared cultural symbols are a source of social cohesion. Following ideas of Simmel and Freud, he maintains the very opposite: "the sharing of a common culture or of aspects of a common cultural symbolism can be intensely divisive and contentious" (Harrison 2006: 150). As the scholarly elite of both countries (Mongolia and Tibet) claim that their culture has inseparably melted with Buddhism, they share much of a common cultural symbolism and are therefore predestined

for social (“mimetic”) conflict. An underlying structure of Harrison’s thought is the conceptualization of social actors as individuals, who can then be potentially threatened in their individuality by the commonalities of others. Here he determines a general pattern for the rise of nationalism in a globalized world:

The “images of individuality give rise to those deep and recurrent anxieties which many nationalisms seem to exhibit [...] the pervasive fear of the possibility of the loss of cultural identity in an increasingly globalised world” (Harrison 2006: 154).

Buddhist thought as well as Social Science theory attempt to explain and hence deconstruct the longing inherent existence of identity at both the individual and collective level. However, the construction of a cohesive cultural identity seems to be very important amongst practitioners of Mongolian Buddhism; more important than a – theoretically sound – Buddhist cosmopolitan attitude within a highly transnational environment.

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