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**BUDDHISM IN RUSSIA AND MONGOLIA: PROBLEMS OF  
COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

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*Abstract*

Post-Soviet development of Russia and Mongolia within the confines of the democratic political system and civil society institutions for the last twenty years, freedom of conscience, lack of state ideology, and shifts in the socio-economic structure has significantly changed the position of Buddhist religion in these countries. Buddhism's development in Russia and Mongolia is interpreted ambiguously in the public information space, scientific literature and social mind. This process affects all aspects of social life; it has socio-cultural, political and economic content and takes place both at the institutionalized level of religious organizations and in everyday practices of social interaction. The "revival" of Buddhism in Russia and Mongolia is based primarily on the socio-cultural patterns of Gelug, the school of Tibetan Buddhism, in those forms that had been established by the beginning of the 20th century, including the church-monastic organization, the education system, cult and parish systems. In addition, Buddhist organizations both in Russia and in Mongolia demonstrate a high adaptive potential through implementation of modern educational programs, active participation in socio-political processes, foundation of new organizational structures, involvement of new believers. The study of the interaction between society and the sangha in these countries has a number of important aspects, among which there is the comparative analysis of the political role of Buddhist organizations and groups, the peculiarities of spreading Buddhist ideas in the information space, and adaptation of the cult system to the changed public needs.

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## 1. Introduction

Post-Soviet development of Russia and Mongolia within the confines of the democratic political system and civil society institutions for the last twenty years, freedom of conscience, lack of state ideology, and shifts in socio-economic structure have significantly changed the position of Buddhist religion in these countries. Buddhism's development in Russia and Mongolia is interpreted ambiguously in the public information space, scientific literature and social mind. This process affects all aspects of social life; it has socio-cultural, political and economic content and takes place both at the institutionalized level of religious organizations and in everyday practices of social interaction.

Today, there are certain similarities and significant differences in Buddhism's development in Russia and Mongolia. Although in the late 1980s Buddhism in these countries was in similar conditions of strict state control, official data stated the prevalence of atheism and eradication of religious carry-overs in the people's minds, and sanghas in the USSR and the MPR were founded on the same principles. In the 1990s, radical liberalization of the legislation on religion took place in both states, fast growth of religiosity among population was observed, the confessional situation had been complicated by development of "non-traditional" religious trends, and institutions of the church, cult, and religious education were being transformed. In modern Russia, along with "traditionally" Buddhist Buryatia, Tyva and Kalmykia, new centers are emerging in major cities and new Buddhist communities of different schools with its specific structures and spread are being formed. Similar processes are observed in Mongolia. In addition, "Global" Buddhism, the policy of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Diaspora has different impacts on socio-religious processes in Russia and Mongolia.

The objective of this work is to describe the methodology for sociological research of socio-religious processes of Buddhism's development in Russia and Mongolia. The problem of research lies in the field of comparative study of Buddhism development in post-Soviet Russia and Mongolia. The historical, sociocultural, ethnic and confessional affinity of a number of Russian regions (Buryatia, Kalmykia, Tyva) and Mongolia, ideological unity and substantial similarity of political systems during the Soviet period allow us to carry out cross-national comparison of different spheres of social life. One of the most significant aspects of this research is the study of modern socio-religious processes in the view of transformation of Buddhism's role in the societies of post-Soviet Russia and Mongolia. We can state a significant increase in the number of believers and religious organizations, the penetration of Buddhist ideas and values into the mass culture and public information space. At the same time, it is particularly relevant to identify the peculiarities of institutionalization of Buddhist culture in the new social, economic and political conditions, which are characterized by the predominance of urban population, changes in the way of life, formation of a modern democratic system and new international political conditions.

## 2. Problem Statement

It is rather difficult to define "Buddhist culture", the features of "Buddhist" way of life, behavior and society by the methods of sociology. Modern society and its institutions are generally secular, and Buddhism acts as a kind of culture and "way of life," i.e. values, norms, groups and roles that can be defined as "Buddhist" are not recognized by society as universal. They function as a specific subsystem of society,

performing primarily the function of integrating that part of society which considers them significant – the Buddhist community.

Structure and functions of Buddhist culture are described through the institutions for preserving cultural patterns, the system of religious Buddhist philosophy, canonical and educational requirements, academic ranks, representing fixed cultural patterns — values. Buddhist philosophy as an element of this subsystem is a system of religious and philosophical knowledge, including conceptualized religious and philosophical ideas, categories and concepts that in many ways form a socio-cultural phenomenon, which we call Buddhist culture. In many respects, the allocation of some pan-Buddhist "central idea" seems very controversial, owing to the diversity of Buddhism's "living tradition". Since we mainly consider the Gelugpa tradition, the philosophical ideas recognized by this school as "traditional" are of greater interest to us. An analysis of the "indigenous" texts of the Gelugpa school grouped in a certain way could give a better picture of the system of these ideas.

Thus, the sociological dimension of Buddhist culture is divided into research of temple institutions, clergy, philosophical and other texts, cult practices that are the elements of "higher" Buddhism, and perceptions of believers, behavioral practices and even feelings that constitute the content of "mass" Buddhism. Even at the level describing cult practices, for example, tantric rituals, researchers face the esoteric meaning attached to them by initiated Tantrists and focused on soteriological ideas. However, the mass of believers perceives the Kalachakra initiation or the mystery of Zam primarily through vital needs and utilitarian meaning.

### **3. Research Questions**

The Buddhist community is a heterogeneous social formation; rather dynamic processes of structuring and creating new groups are taking place in it. The system of roles and a status within the boundaries of Buddhist communities is a form of interaction between individuals identifying themselves as Buddhists. The Buddhist sangha is a core of the Buddhist community as a whole. The boundary between Buddhists and non-Buddhists, between laymen and clergy is determined primarily by individual liberation vows of a genin (ubashi, layman), a bandi (rabjung, novitiate), a getshul (samanera, novice, or he is often called semi-monk) and a gelong (bhikkhu, monk) and involvement in temple institutions. In general, vows differ in the degree of distance from the mundane life and obedience to the rules of monastic life. Often vows of a getshul are called vows of "incomplete" monasticism, in contrast to the vows of a gelong or a "full" monk. It should be noted that most of the clergy take only vows of a genin (ubashi, layman) or a bandi.

It is commonly believed that the Buddhist community in Buryatia is represented primarily by the ethnic group of the Buryats. Affiliation to Buddhism was considered as one of the levels of Buryats' ethnic identity, according to sociological surveys even in the 70's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "everything that was associated with the Lamaist religion mass consciousness perceived as a national culture of the Buryats" (Gerasimova, 1995). Sociological research carried out by the group of scientific atheism of Buryat Institute of Social Sciences (SB RAS) in 1982–1987 in the Republic of Buryatia showed that there are 3–4% of passionate believers, 5–6% of believers, who do not follow religious rites. G. E. Manzanov cites data

according to which Buddhism is the dominant religion among the Buryats (Manzanov, 2012). The survey data and statistics of Mongolia show that about 90% of the country's population are Buddhists.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The study of religiosity is one of the most common areas of sociological research in the field of religion. In investigation of the mundane level of religious consciousness and correlation of religiosity with social behavior of the personality, the typology "believers – demurrers – unbelievers" was used to measure two features of religiosity: "religious faith" and "participation in religious activities". Religious faith was revealed through self-definition and participation in religious activities — through the frequency of visiting temples, communicating with like-minded people, participating in charitable actions.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The methodological toolkit for identifying the characteristics of reproduction of Buddhist religiosity should include a two-level system for the carriers of conceptualized consciousness and for the carriers of mundane consciousness. The most important criterion for the members of Buddhist communities involved in both monastic and worldly Dharma centers is formalized or non-formalized membership in the community, acceptance of the Pratimoksha, Bodhisattva and Tantra vows, the degree of involvement in religious practice and "disciple -teacher" relations. For mundane everyday religiosity, measurement of self-definition and frequency of typical manifestations of religious activity are quite adequate. When using the expert survey, it is possible to develop a system of indicators of Buddhist religiosity for measurement of the "index of Buddhist religiosity".

#### **6. Findings**

We should separately emphasize the problem of interacting and correlating the groups and organizations of the followers of "traditional" and "non-traditional" Buddhism in Buryatia. Nesterkin (2003) notes that there are several relatively independent hierarchical systems in Buddhism integrated into a centralized religious organization. According to the Vinaya, the Tantra and Bodhisattva vows in Buddhism, including the Gelug school, "three types of communities are constituted: Sangha Monks, Ganachakra Tantrists and the community of laity, not practicing Tantric methods" (Nesterkin, 2003). A number of researchers studying "modern", "globalized", "transnational" Buddhism in Russia note its significant difference from traditional institutions of Buddhism, the impermanence of community members and secular character (Agadzhanyan, 2004; Nesterkin, 2009; Ulanov, 2014). Manzanov (2012) used a typology also based on self-affiliation: "believers who follows religious rites; believers who do not follow religious rites; demurrers; indifferent respondents; unbelievers respecting the feelings of those who believe; fighters against religion; undecided respondents. He came to the conclusion that today the complex of Buddhist views is reproduced among the Buryat population. These phenomena take place in the process of actualizing Buddhist education, when the habits of religious behavior formed in childhood evolve into regular observance of rituals, which in turn facilitates emotional disposition for formation of religious ideas.

The research should take into account the difficulties in development of toolkit associated with ambiguous terminology, caused both by its complexity and use of Mongolian, Buryat, Tibetan, Sanskrit terms in Mongolia and Buryatia. For example, one of the central categories — Sangha — has several meanings. The term "Sangha" in Buddhism means a social community of its followers. As a religious concept Sangha (community, society — Skt.) has several meanings. In the first meaning, the Sangha is one of the components of Triratna, the Three Jewels, here the Sangha means the "The Noble (High) Saints Community, or The Noble Spiritual Community, that is, the symbolic congregation of all those who have accepted and realized the Dharma, in other words, the "enlightened". As Yeshe Lodoi Rinpoche points out: "Community here implies The High Saints Community, which includes pratyekabuddhas, arhats (the community of Sutra practitioners), dakis, dakinis and defenders of the Teaching (the Tantric community)" (Rinpoche, 2002, p. 39). Along with them, the High Community also involves people who have a direct comprehension of emptiness. The Sangha in this understanding is one of the "Three Refuges" along with the Buddha, and the Dharma.

In its second meaning, Sangha is the "Ordinary Community", i.e. a group of people integrating for Dharma practice and affiliating themselves to a certain Buddhist tradition. Communities of monks, communities of laity and tantric communities can be identified. In a certain sense, one can speak of the world Buddhist sangha, that is, the "universal" community of all Buddhist followers or Sangha of a particular country, or monastery, etc. In this regard, the community should include at least four so-called "full" monks (Skt. — bhikṣu, Tib. — Gelong, Bur., Mong. — Gelun), or one saint (Yeshe, 2002).

According to the Dalai Lama, "if someone takes refuge, or, moreover, refrains from ten evil acts, he (or she) in a certain sense may be an upasaka (upasika), i.e. a person, who accepted worldly vows. In everyday language a group of such people may be called "sangha", or "community", but not the Sangha in the meaning of a refuge object" (Yangutov, 2015, p. 378).

In the third and most narrow sense, this term relates to the name of the centralized religious organization "Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia" (BTSR). It should be noted that there is a kind of semantic "confusion" in the use of this concept in the second, undoubtedly, broader meaning, and in the third one, related to the Buddhist religious organization of the Russian Federation.

In description of religious communities, other concepts reflecting the forms of social religious organization are also used, for example, a temple and a sect. In the mass public consciousness, they, on the one hand, have acquired an evaluative character, and, on the other hand, do not have wide application for Buddhist communities. In journalism, the word "sect" was repeatedly used in non-Buddhist regions of Russia, primarily large megacities, with respect to non-traditional trends in Buddhism. In scientific discourse, use of the concept of Buddhist community is quite common, but concerns only the "traditional" institutions of Buddhism organization. For example, the Karma Kagyu communities or groups led by Geshe Jampa Tinley, as a rule, are not described by this concept. Most often, the more neutral term "community", or Dharma center, is applied to them. The concept "Dharma center" is also used as an opposition to "monastery". In turn, the concept "monastery" denotes a large number of Tibetan, Mongolian and Buryat terms, such as "datsan", "khuree", "khiid", etc. In organizational and legal terms, the concept "religious associations", which includes "religious organizations" and "religious groups", is used.

Thus, if “church” is understood as one of the forms of social organization of religious communities, reflecting the institutional, organized and centralized character of the interaction of individuals within a given religious community, then “sangha” could be understood as a form of social religious community of Buddhist followers, one of the elements of which may be “church” organization. Some researchers insist on the inadmissibility of applying the concept "church" in the analysis of forms of Buddhism’s social organization. In this connection, E. S. Safronova notes: "in our opinion, the term sangha is more in line with the traditional social organization of Buddhism and is used by us instead of the commonly used term "church", which has a Christian-centrist connotation" [14, p. 24]. Moreover, according to A. Berzin, "the hierarchical structure of Tibetan Buddhism differs significantly from the structure of the organized church" (Berzin, 2002, p. 47)

## **7. Conclusion**

Today, there is a need for a deep, comprehensive comparative study of Buddhism’s development in Russia and Mongolia. It seems relevant to study the interaction of organizations, representing different Buddhist schools. Apart from the fact that Buddhism in Mongolia has faced the problems of organizational unity similar to those in Russia, it is in "competition" with the revival of shamanism (Tengrianism), penetration of Christian evangelical confessions, and modern secular worldview. The prevailing opinion in scientific literature and journalism shows that the current Russian situation is characterized by the presence of significant contradictions within the Buddhist community between the followers of "traditional" and "non-traditional" Buddhism. Many researchers and publicists postulate the institutionalization of regional forms of Buddhism as traditionalist ethnic in Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tyva, and extra-ethnic globalized, primarily in large cities. In addition, it is important to study the political role of the Buddhist community in ethno-political processes in the Russian regions, because historically it had ethno-consolidating functions, which in other countries the government assumed. Therefore, the influence of Buddhism on the formation of national awareness, national ideology of the Buryats, the Kalmyks and the Tuvans was more significant, than in countries with strong national statehood. The issues related to the potential of the Buddhist factor in Russian-Mongolian relations also play an important role.

In the study of the current state of Buddhism as a social system, it should be considered that in real social practices, it is developing as a hardly described system of social relations, including individuals, small and large social groups connected with each other by the complex embodiment of Buddhist religion, philosophy and culture. It is very difficult to define the boundaries of this system, because socio-religious Buddhist normative requirements in the behavioral practices of Buddhist communities extend only to a relatively small number of people who make up the core, while the significant mass of people, the periphery, possessing Buddhist identity, are characterized by very vague religious ideas closely related to the irrational non-Buddhist elements of social consciousness.

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