

DOI: 10.17516/1997-1370-0636
УДК 294.3

Woman's Status in the Kalmyk and Buryat Buddhist Tradition: History and the Current State

Mergen S. Ulanov, Valeriy N. Badmaev
and Andrey V. Radionov*

*Kalmyk State University named after B.B. Gorodovikov
Elista, Russian Federation*

Received 23.05.2019, received in revised form 04.06.2020, accepted 10.07.2020

Abstract. The article deals with the problem of the woman's status in the history of Buddhism of the Mongol-speaking peoples of Russia, such as the Kalmyks and the Buryats. Special attention is paid to the female clergy issue in the religious history of these indigenous groups. The authors note that with the spread of Buddhism, women in Buryatia and Kalmykia acquired a higher social and religious status, which is enshrined in legal documents. At the same time, in the traditional Kalmyk and Buryat society a woman was generally excluded from active social life and could not make a career in the religious sphere.

In the 20th century, the position of Kalmyk and Buryat women in the society underwent significant societal changes. The Soviet state sought to involve the women of Kalmykia and Buryatia into building a new society, actively fighting against the Buddhist religion and conducting the nation-wide atheistic propaganda. All these contributed to the significant decrease in the religiosity of the population in these regions, including its female part.

Today, the position of women in the religious life of Kalmykia and Buryatia is characterized as ambivalent. On one hand, in traditional Buddhist organizations women can only occupy the positions of worshipers, secular employees, or perform certain religious duties during rites. On the other hand, the women's role in the laity is more significant. They take an active part in the life of Buddhist communities and organizations, study Buddhist philosophy and medicine. Buddhist activists in modern Buddhist communities in these regions of Russia make a great contribution to the revival of Buddhism. Even though the majority of the Buddhist clergy is made up by men, these are women who constitute the majority of lay practitioners both in Kalmykia and Buryatia.

Keywords: Buddhism, women, gender, Kalmyks, Buryats, female monasticism, Mongolian peoples.

The study was prepared with the financial support of the Russian Science Foundation, project No. 19-18-00118.

Research area: history, culturology.

Citation: Ulanov, M.S., Badmaev, V.N., Radionov, A.V. (2020). Woman's status in the Kalmyk and Buryat Buddhist tradition: history and the current state. J. Sib. Fed. Univ. Humanit. Soc. Sci., 13(7), 1195-1206. DOI: 10.17516/1997-1370-0636.

Introduction

Buddhism is known to be the oldest of the world religions. It takes its origin in the countries of Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia. In the 20th century, this religion began to spread actively around Europe and America. Besides, Buddhism gained ground in some areas of Russia, particularly among the Kalmyks and Buryats. In those regions of the world where Buddhism became the dominant religion, Buddhist values have a great significance, since religion is an essential element of the traditional culture and in many respects guides the spiritual development of countries and nations. The human, his or her place in the world and the society, the relationship between people are important objects of contemplation and understanding in Buddhist philosophy. In this regard, the attitude to women is of particular importance. Buddhism has its own opinion about women equalizing their rights with those of men in matters of religious salvation. Adopted by a new country, it often brought changes to previous ideas about women, raised the social and religious status of women, immediately stimulating the progressive development of the society.

In the modern era, Buddhism is beginning to gain wider popularity in the world community due to its tolerant attitude to other religious traditions, the absence of claims to exclusiveness, and openness to the interfaith dialogue. This process coincided with the uprising of the international women's movement struggling for rights when women began to play a crucial role in the political, economic, social and religious life of the society.

Touching upon the extent of research of this topic, it is necessary to point out that on one hand, gender issues have been beyond the

focus of Buddhology for a long time, and on the other hand, regardless of its popularity in the West, feminist theology has hardly ever addressed the issue of women in Buddhist culture. This situation is partially explained by the fact that feminist theology mainly developed in Europe and North America where Buddhism has been poorly represented until recently. Besides, the tolerance of the Buddhist tradition, which extends to the gender issue, forced many representatives of religious feminism to refrain from criticism, and consequently, special research in this area.

Currently, there is a relatively small amount of research devoted to this issue. The problem of the place of women in the Buddhist culture of the Mongolian peoples of Russia, namely the Kalmyks and Buryats, is regrettably understudied. The present work is dedicated to this problem.

Women in the history of Kalmyk Buddhism

The early history of Kalmyk Buddhism is closely connected with the history of Buddhism development among the Oirats, the ancestors of the Kalmyks, who learned Buddhism from the Tibetan Red Hats in the era of the Mongolian empire. However, the spread of Buddhism began only in the 16th-17th centuries after the introduction of the Gelug school (order), which became dominant among all Mongolian peoples. Among the famous Oirat enlighteners and Buddhism disseminators, there were Neiji-Toin and Zaya Pandita. Their biographies may trace quite a few references to female Buddhists. The biography of Neiji-Toin mentions that he preached about the ways and rules for taking tantric vows "to many vanities, *noyons*, pious representatives of imperial origin, princesses

and noble women ...” (Biography of Neiji-Toin, 1984: 89). Besides, he actively transferred monastic and lay vows, starting with the vows of the *ubashi*, *ubasansa*, *bandi*, *getzula*, and *gelong* (Biography of Neiji-Toin, 1984: 89).

Neiji-Toin also ordained his son Erdem-un Dalai along with his wife. It happened when the preacher was in the territory of Manchuria in Mukden with his son, his wife and children arriving from Dzungaria. However, the lama did not wish to see his relatives for several days, saying that as a monk he could not have a son, a daughter-in-law and grandchildren. However, the local noblemen were very insistent and persuasive, so he agreed to meet only provided that his family got ordained. As a result, Erdam-un Dalai became a *gelong* monk, whereas his wife became his *shabbantsa* (Biography of Neiji-Toin, 1984: 75). The biography of another Oirat enlightener, Zaya Pandita, says that he often took the vows of *gelong*, *getzula*, *bandi*, *ubashi* and *ubasansa* (Radnadadra, 2003: 182). In the biography of Zaya Pandita it is mentioned that he sometimes even gave initiation into the female monastic rank of *getzulma*, which required taking 36 vows, which is an extremely rare custom among the Mongolian peoples. One *ubasansa* brought Zaya Pandita a yurt decorated with silver, twenty camels and ten horses along with many other things. After that, she was ordained to the monastic rank of *getzulma* and given the name of Badma (Radnadadra, 2003: 186).

Thus, at the dawn of Buddhism among the Oirats, there were women who took the spiritual vows of *ubasansa* and *shabagansa*. *Ubasansa* (Tib. *geninma*) was a lay woman who due to high religiosity or other life circumstances took five vows: not to kill, not to lie, not to steal, not to commit wrong sexual acts, not to take alcohol (and other intoxicants). Moreover, those who took this vow were supposed to fast on the 8th, 15th, and 30th days of each month. Unlike other lay women, *ubasansas* wore a red sling over their left shoulder (Golstunsky, 1880: 108).

Shabagansa (Tib. *rabjungma*) was a Buddhist nun who held the vows of the lowest rank in monasticism, which roughly corresponded to the rank of *bandi* (Tib. *rabjung*). *Shabagansa* was already considered a novice nun (Ula-

nov, Tyumidova, 2018: 177). She had to hold 8 vows: not to kill, not to lie, not to steal, to observe celibacy, not to take alcohol (and other intoxicants), to change her outfit for a monastic robe, to change the name for a monastic one, to change the mind (abandon narrow-minded cares and aspirations).

The Mongol-Oirat laws of 1640 (*Iki Tsaadzhin Bichik* or *Ikh tsaaz*) the legal system of the Oirats and Kalmyks rested upon for a long time, defended the rights of the Buddhist clergy, including its female part. *Shabagansas* and *Ubasansas* were mentioned here as follows: “For insulting *bandi* or *shabagansa* a fine of five coins is given. And the one who beats them is punishable by nine coins. For insulting *ubashi* or *ubasansa* a mulct of a horse is to be paid.” (Ikh tsaaz..., 1981: 17).

It should be noted that Buddhism made a significant impact on *Iki Tsaadzhin Bichik*. These laws lack the brutality of the *Great Yasa* of the Mongols (Ulanov, Badmaev, Matsakova, 2016: 1071). The Buddhist humanism influence on the Mongol-Oirat laws of 1640 can be seen in the article concerning the punishment of women for adultery. For example, a woman accused of disloyalty to her husband was punished only with a relatively small fine in favour of the head of the *ulus*, “If a married woman converges with an outsider by mutual consent and mutual love, then the woman is to pay four and the man five heads (of cattle)” (Ikh tsaaz ..., 1981: 24). Meanwhile, in *Yasa*, those accused of adultery were subject to the death penalty.

The spiritual vows of an *ubasansa* were often taken by the noble Oirat women. It is known that Yum Agaskhatun, the wife of Erdeni Baatur-khuntaidzhia, the ruler of Dzungaria, took the *ubasansa* vows after her husband's death and strictly adhered to them till the end of her life. Another no less famous person of the past was Gungzhu-khatun, the mother of Khoshut Tsetsen-Khan, famous for her piety and severity in spiritual precepts. She made numerous pilgrimages to Tibet. Saikhanzhu-khatun, the mother of Khoshut Ablai-taishi, became renowned for her religiousness. The famous monastery complex Ablayin-kit located near the modern city of Ust-Kamenogorsk, was built by Ablai at his mother's request. Yechzhi

Tsagan, the wife of *taisha* Toin from Derbety, the mother of the famous Derbet *taisha* Malai Batyr, also became famous for her piety and strictness in holding her vows. In the summer of 1662, returning from Tibet, she welcomed Zaya-Pandita who was on his way to meet with the Dalai Lama with great respect and hospitality (Alekseeva, 2009: 5-6).

As for female monasticism in the 18th and 19th centuries, there is very little evidence left. And although V.N. Tatishchev mentions Kalmyk women's monasteries in the comments to the Legislation of 1640, which he provided for the Russian Academy of Sciences, "...they have women's monasteries along with men's (though the former are rare)" (Kurapov, 2007: 75). These data are questionable and not supported by any other sources.

Probably, the institute of female monasticism mentioned in *Ikh tsaaz*, gradually fell into decay among the Kalmyks. The Addendum to the Mongol-Oirat Charter of 1640, compiled during the rule of the Khan Donduk-Dashi, makes no mentioning of *shabagansa*. It only lists the men's spiritual titles, "A person who saw [*getsul*] drinking wine, has [the right] to take a three-year-old ram [from him]. If a *bandi* is caught committing an offence, a three-year ram may be taken from him" (Golstunsky, 1880: 61).

In various versions of the Zinzilin decrees, no *shabagansa* are mentioned either, "Whoever insults a *gelong* with a curse is to be fined once with nine [blows]; whoever dares to hit him with a hand, is punished three times with nine whip blows each. Anyone who offends *Bandinar Shabinari* is penalized with 5 heads (of cattle)" (Leontovich, 1880: 17). At the same time, *ubasansa* laywomen are mentioned there, "Whoever offends *Uubushu*, *Ubushansa* with a curse is fined with one horse" (Leontovich, 1880: 17).

In his "Travel notes in the Kalmyk steppes of the Astrakhan Gubernia", P. Smirnov wrote about the functioning of the Kalmyk *ubasansa* noting that "women can perform the rite of worshipping while walking in close files under the leadership of the *ubasansa* if they happen to be around" (Smirnov, 1999: 48). Further on, P. Smirnov adds, "*Ubushi* can be men and

women, of whom the latter are called *ubasansa*. They take a vow not to kill animals, to pray three times a day, either by shaking a *kyurda*, or by counting beads on the rosary (*erke*), uttering *om-ma-ni-padme hum*, not to drink vodka (*arika*), not to smoke tobacco, to stay loyal to the family ties. As a reward from *gelongs*, both receive *orkimdza*, a long band that passes over the right shoulder and is tied under the left muscle" (Smirnov, 1999: 52).

In the works of pre-revolutionary authors devoted to the history and culture of the Kalmyks, there is virtually nothing written about the *shabagansa*-nun institution. An eminent researcher, I. Zhitetsky writes only about the existence of *ubusansa* laywomen (Zhitetsky, 2011: 55). The exception is the work by I.V. Bentkovsky "A Kalmyk woman of the Bolshederbetovsky ulus in physiological, religious and social relations", which states that "a Kalmyk woman, a poor widow of advanced age, may, if she wishes, devote herself to serving in the *Khurul*, and in that case, her duty lies in the performance of works characteristic of a woman and some services to the clergy" (Bentkovsky, 2011: 468). However, the scholar does not mention the term *shabagansa* nor does he write of any personal encounters with nuns, only referring to the Mongol-Oirat Charter of 1640.

The popularity of Buddhism among the Kalmyks contributed to the improving position of women. Pre-revolutionary kalmykologist I.V. Bentkovsky highly appreciated the respect for the woman in the Kalmyk Buddhism, "It is most remarkable that Buddhism does not only allow the presence of a woman in religious service, but also allows her to touch ceremonial vessels and religious objects on the whole and, as such, makes her a part of the religious activities. A woman may, for example, put *burkhans* (deity figures) around her dwelling, light incense and candles in front of them, make a sacrifice and so on. If a woman (mother or wife of the owner) is distinguished by a virtuous life, charity towards the clergy, mercy towards the people and diligence in faith, during solemn worship the clergy praises her with the ultimate part of prayers..." (Bentkovsky, 2011: 467-468).

Women in the history of the Buryat Buddhism

Just like in Kalmykia, in Buryatia women's monasteries historically did not exist. At the same time, it cannot be argued that Buryat female monasticism was impossible. Doubtlessly, women's monasticism did exist among the Buryats. However, just like in Mongolia, it was only found in its most elementary form of taking vows of *shabagansa*, which was usually done at a mature age, when women had more time for prayers and other spiritual practices. After the tonsure, the life of older women did not undergo any dramatic changes. They continued living with their families, playing their traditional social roles, at the same time keeping their spiritual vows. "The Religious Rules of the Mongol-Buryat Clergy of Transbaikalia" of 1831 notes that "elderly women of 50 years or older who out of piety wish to join *chabagansa*, are to be initiated with the knowledge that a married woman should have the consent of her husband; however, they do not have to be listed in *datsans*" (Tsyrempilov, 2013: 266).

Shabagan vows were not compulsory for all older women, but this practice was quite popular, as it was believed that their observance contributed to a favourable rebirth and improved the karma. Besides the basic eight vows, a *shabagansa* woman, had to pray daily, fast for long periods, attend *datsans*, participate in prayers in the houses of laymen etc. (Dondokova, 2008: 208).

Another form of female religiosity among the Buryats was the *ubasansa* institution. Besides keeping the five basic vows, *ubasansas* were supposed to fast on the 8th, 15th and 30th lunar days. Unlike *shabagansa*, *ubasansa* did go through tonsure (had their hair cut) nor did they observe celibacy. The girls who took the vows of *ubasansas* were allowed to marry and have children. These vows could be made by girls aged 5 or older. However, at a young age, doing so was extremely rare. It was more common for the wives of lamas after marriage (Dondokova, 2008: 58).

The adoption of the *ubasansa* and *shabagansa* vows, as a rule, found support among the Buryat clergy, since this increased the number of believers among the laity and facilitated the popularization of Buddhism among Bury-

at families (Dondokova, 2008). The works by many pre-revolutionary travellers and scholars who visited Buryatia testify to the great number of women who kept spiritual vows in Transbaikalia. Having visited Transbaikalia in the 1830s, V. Parshin, for example, noted that many Buryat women and even girls wear the red ribbon *orhimzho* over their shoulders, which, embodying moral purity and adherence to the Buddha's teachings, testified the fact of making their Buddhist vows (Parshin, 1844: 48-49). Osokin who visited Transbaikalia at the end of the 19th century and remarked that Buryat women often take the vows of *shabagansas* upon themselves. According to the researcher, after becoming nuns, they did not only wear a red ribbon over their shoulder, but also had their heads clean-shaven. "From now on, many of them do not eat meat or drink wine, nor do they take part in any family celebrations attending solely *datsan* and *'ombons*'. A conversation with lamas constitutes their favourite pastime" (Osokin, 1898: 12).

In contrast to the Mongolian religious tradition, in the Buryat Buddhism, the institute of *khubilgans* (reincarnations of deities and high lamas) was not widely spread. However, the Buryat lamas often recognized Russian monarchs as the *khubilgans* of the popular goddess White Tara (Bur. Sagaan Dara Ekhe). Empress Elizabeth became the first monarch to be recognized as an incarnation of this goddess, following her 1741 decree that granted official recognition to Buddhism as a traditional religion and established a Buddhist clergy institute in Transbaikalia. In the subsequent period, Catherine the Great, Alexander III and Nicholas II were also considered the incarnations of White Tara. The last emperor was even lauded in the Buryat *magitals* (songs of praise), in which he is likened to "God, the incarnation of the virtues of White Dara-ekhe" (Trepavlov, 2017: 230). However, since this recognition was more a sign of respect and a political gesture rather than a religious matter, it did not receive a wide resonance across the Buddhist world.

The first and only female *khubilgan* in the Buryat community appeared only in the early 20th century. Her recognition as an incarnation of White Tara was associated with the activi-

ties of Lama Agvan Dorzhiev, a famous Buryat reformer and leader of the Buddhist renovation movement in Russia. The person recognized as an incarnation of Sagaan Dara Ekhe in 1918 was a Buryat girl Aksinya Bainova from a poor family of Tarkhanuta ulus of the Ekhirit-Bulagatsky aimag. She was recognized as a *khubilgan* by a group of local and Transbaikalian lamas presided by A. Dorzhiev. In 1923, in honour of the first woman *khubilgan*, Western Buryats even built Murinsky *datsan*, where two of the most honourable thrones were meant for the incarnations of Sagaan Dara Ekhe and A. Dorzhiev. The resonance of this event in the local community created a number of legends. As a result, the population of local uluses and aimags began to flock to Tarkhanuta to worship the incarnation of Sagaan Dara Ekhe who was considered to be the saviour of the folk. All this contributed to the spread of Buddhism among the Irkutsk Buryats, the majority of whom preached shamanism. Later, the *khubilgan* girl was transferred to Atsagat *datsan*, but constantly visited her native ulus to hold prayer ceremonies, practice healing and speak to believers (Dondokova, 2011: 137-139).

In general, the spread of Buddhism among the Mongolian peoples of Russia contributed to the improvement of attitude to the local women. Tolerance, humanism, and high moral standards characteristic of the Buddhist culture, contributed to the growth of the social and legal status of women.

Women and Buddhism in Russia in the Soviet period

In the 20th century, the position of the Kalmyk and Buryat women in society was significantly changed. The Soviet state sought to attract the women of Kalmykia and Buryatia into building a new society, fighting against the Buddhist religion and conducting atheistic propaganda. All these contributed to the slump in the religiosity in these regions, including its female population. However, according to the classified data of the National Census conducted in 1937 among the Kalmyks and Buryats, even after two decades of the Soviet rule, the number of believers was quite large. Out of 218,597 Buryats and 127,336 Kalmyks, 82,139

people claimed to be believers. Among the adult population (16 years and older), approximately 60% of the Buryats and Kalmyks recognized themselves as believers, with 56.7% of which being women and 43.3% being men (Maksimov, 2011: 284). Considering that the fear of reprisals made many people conceal their actual convictions, the actual percentage of religiosity of the female population could be much higher.

In the second half of the 20th century, Buddhism in Russia was, despite all the restrictions, a significant factor in the formation of the Kalmyk and Buryat peoples' identity. However, in different regions, the situation was different. In the area populated by the Buryats, it is possible to talk about the restoration, albeit in a rather limited form, of Buddhist temples and institutions. As an example, Ivolginsky *Datsan* was opened in Buryatia in the middle of the 20th century, while Aginsky *Datsan* resumed its activities in the Chita Oblast. A large proportion of the parish was made up by middle-aged and elderly women. During the Soviet period, in the rural areas the institution of *shabagansas* (nuns in the world) continued to exist. There, elderly *shabagansas* often helped lamas during religious ceremonies.

In Kalmykia, the situation was more complicated, since the war, deportation, and 13 years of exile severely undermined the Kalmyk Buddhism. After the restoration of the autonomy of the Republic of Kalmykia, there was no revival of Buddhist temples. The efforts of the Kalmyk believers to officially register at least one Buddhist community were toughly rejected by the authorities (Ochirova, 2004: 10). In such conditions, the activity of women's communities, popularly known as "*matsgta emgdyud*" (literally "grandmothers practising the *matsg* ritual"), became more vibrant. According to E.P. Bakaeva, the practice of the *matsgta* community was a stage of transition from the monastery-temple level to the popular form of Buddhism. The exact date of establishment of the *matsg* communities among the laity is unknown. However, the memoirs of the informants claim that at the beginning of the 20th century some worship services were held in the houses of believers during the fasting days.

Consequently, it can be assumed that the *matsg* tradition among the lay Buddhists of Kalmykia took shape no later than the beginning of the 20th century (Bakaeva, 2011: 120).

The *matsg* tradition was upheld by elderly lay women who observed the *Mahayana* vows of one day (Tib. “*sojong*”, Kalm. “*matsg*”). The practice consisted of taking Buddhist vows and reading communal prayers on special days of the *matsg* associated with the 8th, 15th, and 30th lunar days, as well as on the days of major Buddhist holidays (Tib. “*duchen*”, Kalm. “*dutsng*”). The prayer ceremonies were held in the homes of women. Usually, all the major prayers days were scheduled for several months in advance. Believers knew exactly and beforehand where and when the next *matsg* ritual was to take place.

By the end of the 1980s, there were several *matsgta emgdyud* communities in Elista. However, with the restoration of the Buddhist temples and the appearance of *khuruls* in Kalmykia, the community activities began to decline. By the late 1990s there was only one *matsgta* congregation in Elista with about twenty permanent members; a similar community was also in the town of Gorodovikovsk (Bakaeva, 2011: 121).

Women in the Buddhist communities of Kalmykia and Buryatia in the post-Soviet period

The social and political changes that shook Russia after the start of the Perestroika process resulted in radical modifications in the religious situation in the society. The process of religious revival did not bypass the Buddhist regions. In the post-Soviet period, the women of Kalmykia and Buryatia were actively involved in this religious revival process. A manifestation of this process was the emergence of a community of Buddhist women activists. This religious community is special for its social heterogeneity. Its core is represented by women distinguished not only by strong faith and commitment to Buddhism, but also by their serious interest in Buddhist philosophy and meditation, which was not typical of religious women of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. At the same time, the majority of Buddhist women activists do not have

extensive knowledge of Buddhism and are only partially involved in the activities of Buddhist communities. Meanwhile, the share of women among the representatives of the Buddhist clergy is very small (Badmatsyrenov, 2017: 26).

In the post-Soviet Buryatia, the first and only female Buddhist *datsan* appeared in Russia. The name of the temple can be translated from the Tibetan language as “Prosperous and noble monastery”. Zungon Darzhaling Datsan was built with the blessing of His Holiness Dalai Lama XIV, who at a meeting with the Buddhist public in 1992 in Buryatia proposed to erect a female temple there. According to the spiritual leader of Buddhists, the female *datsan* would promote peace and harmony in the Buryat land (Dorzhieva, 2018).

Zungon Darzhaling Datsan is located in one of the districts of Ulan-Ude. One of the important tasks of the Buddhist Women's Center is to offer assistance to women who come not only from the regions of Buryatia, but also from different areas of Russia. It should be noted that the parish consists of both men and women. The service and individual reception are held by women, which differs this *datsan* from other Buddhist temples in Russia. Today, three women of the clergy bear the *genenma* status, i.e. they observe the five vows of the laity. In the *datsan*, they wear a traditional Mongolian Lama robe significantly different from the Tibetan one.

For a long time, the head of the *datsan* has been Zorigma Budaeva. Holding a degree in speech therapy and pathology, before she worked as an associate professor at the Institute for Advanced Studies before being ordained as a female lama. The just like other representatives of the women clergy, the head of the *datsan* lives outside its premises. All the women have ordinary families and children. This is the main difference from the more widespread Buddhist monasteries in the East. “We are the same as the priests and priestesses of the majority of the *datsans* of Buryatia, we organize prayer ceremonies, meet with parishioners, but live in ordinary families and have children,” says Z. Budaeva (Shevtsova, 2004).

At the same time, as researchers observe, the female *datsan* has encountered numerous

obstacles. The independent position of these women does not find support and approval from either the Buddhist establishment or the general Buddhist public. They are probably wary of the desire of women to work outside the Buddhist religion. Nonetheless, Z. Budaeva and her surrounding work hard to create conditions for the Buddhist practices of women. Thanks primarily to their perseverance, these women have eventually gained access to basic Buddhist education, rituals, and spiritual teachings (Buddhism in Mongolian History, 2015: 269).

Today, the female *datsan* has expanded its influence. Lama women organize lectures on Buddhist philosophy for everyone. The priest of the Zungon Darzhaling quite successfully establishes international contacts and participates in the international women's Buddhist movement.

Z. Budaeva has presented at several conferences organized by the Sakyadhita movement and regularly introduces the international Buddhist community to the problems of female Buddhists from Buryatia (Buddhism in Mongolia History, 2015: 269-270). Sakyadhita (Skt. "The daughters of the Buddha") is the International Organization of Women Buddhists, committed to changing the position of women in Buddhist society. Sakyadhita appeared as a result of the First International Conference of Buddhist Women held in the Indian city of Bodhagaya in 1987. Sakyadhita strives to unite female Buddhists from various countries and traditions, to support them and to promote their work for the benefit of the humankind. The activity of Sakyadhita is also aimed at achieving real equality in Buddhism and equal opportunities for obtaining Buddhist education, regardless of gender (Fenn and Koppedray, 2008).

Buryat women today are actively learning the secrets of traditional Tibetan medicine. Today, in the Transbaikal Territory, at the premises of the Buddhist Academy of the Aginsky *datsan*, "a lot of women are majoring in Tibetan medicine. In 1999-2012, 36 women graduated from the academy, which accounts for half the graduates in this major. Female specialists in Tibetan medicine practice in different regions

of Russia and other countries" (Badmatsyrenov, Badmatsyrenova, 2015: 63).

In modern Buryatia, there is a nun who succeeds in fully immersing herself in monasticism along with active research and social activities. This is Doctor of Philosophy, Professor I.S. Urbanaeva, known in the Buddhist world as *gezulma* nun Tenzin Chodron. In 1996, with the blessing of the authoritative Buddhist teacher Geshe Dzampa Tinley, she established a Buddhist centre in Ulan-Ude, better known as Green Tara. The centre is actively developing. In 2003, she was initiated as a *getzulma* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV in Dharamsala (India). Today, I.S. Urbanaeva combines fruitful academic work with active Buddhist practice, translating texts from Tibetan into Russian (Chetyrova, 2018: 225-226). Tenzin Chodron actively expands international contacts, cooperating with Russian and foreign colleagues, Tibetologists and Buddhologists. As the Chief Researcher at the Institute of Mongolian Studies, Buddhology and Tibetology of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Tenzin Chodron has organized a number of scientific events including conferences and round tables with such eminent representatives of the international and domestic Buddhology as professor Robert Thurman, former head of the Central Tibetan Administration Professor Samdong Rinpoche, Rector of Sarnath University Geshe Ngawang Samten and others. (Chetyrova, 2018: 226).

An important feature of the modern religious situation in Buryatia is that the tradition of *shabagansa* nuns is still retained here. The nuns in the world are mainly mature aged women. They often take part in out-of-temple prayer services and ceremonies together with male lamas. During the services, the nuns have the right to sit next to the lamas. However, researchers note that the number of elderly Buryat women who have taken monastic and *shabagansa* vows is noticeably reducing, which may lead to the disappearance of this unique tradition. This situation is "associated with the loss of traditional everyday life, with the corresponding stereotypes of age-related behaviour, with the intensification of secular life, with modern temptations, and a responsible attitude

to vows” (Zhambalova, 2011: 89-90). It is no coincidence that in one of his interviews the head of the Buddhist traditional *sangha* of Russia, Khambo-Lama D. Ayusheev stated that he planned to support the practice that encourages Buryat “women once they have raised their children and grandchildren to take vows” (cit. from Badmatsyrenov, 2015: 62).

In the post-Soviet Kalmykia, the institute of convents and temples in Kalmykia has not yet shaped itself. However, in recent years, social networks have given rise to informal organizations of women. Thus, the goals of the VK community ‘The unions of women Buddhists in the Republic of Kalmykia’ include expanding the opportunities for the spiritual development of women; providing access to Buddhist education and common cultural heritage of modern civilization with a focus on the development of the internal growth of a woman as an individual, mother, homemaker, custodian of the traditions and culture of her people (Unions of Women Buddhists). Importantly, women constitute the overwhelming majority among the worshipers of Buddhist temples and members of lay communities, numerous on the territory of Kalmykia.

Conclusion

With the spread of Buddhism, women in Buryatia and Kalmykia have acquired a higher social and religious status, which was enshrined in legal documents. However, in the traditional Kalmyk and Buryat society, the woman was usually excluded from social activities and could not make a career in the religious sphere. Historically, there were no women's monasteries in Buryatia and Kalmykia, making it dif-

ficult for women to get religious education. In the meanwhile, the Buryat female monasticism was present in the form of the *shabagansa* institution (nuns in the world). In the Soviet period, the tradition of taking *shabagansa* vows was preserved, and in many villages, older women assisted lamas in performing rites and rituals, especially those related to the life cycle. In Kalmykia, women mostly took vows of *ubasansas* (lay women).

Currently, the position of women in the religious life of Kalmykia and Buryatia is ambivalent. On the one hand, in traditional Buddhist church organizations, women can only appear as church-goers and staff (cooks, accountants, secretaries, etc.), as well as perform basic religious activities during certain rituals. On the other hand, within laity associations, their role becomes more significant. Women take an active part in the activities of Buddhist communities and organizations, study Buddhist philosophy and medicine, carry out religious services, and contribute to the transfer of Buddhist knowledge to the younger generation of the Russian national republics. Such activities in modern Buddhist communities contribute to the revival of Buddhism in these regions of Russia. Women of Russia interact with the international Sakyadhita organization, uniting women from more than 50 countries of the world. An important event in the history of Russian Buddhism was the appearance of the first female Buddhist *datsan* in the territory of Buryatia. In general, even though men constitute the bulk of the Buddhist clergy, those are women who make up the majority of lay parishioners and actively practice lay faith in Kalmykia and Buryatia.

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Статус женщины в буддийской традиции калмыков и бурят: история и современное состояние

М.С. Уланов, В.Н. Бадмаев, А.В. Радионов

*Калмыцкий государственный университет имени Б.Б. Городовикова
Российская Федерация, Элиста*

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается проблема статуса женщины в истории буддизма у монголоязычных народов России: калмыков и бурят. Особое внимание уделено вопросу женского духовенства в религиозной истории данных народов. Авторы отмечают, что с распространением буддизма женщины в Бурятии и Калмыкии приобрели более высокий социальный и религиозный статус, который закреплялся в юридических документах. При этом женщина в традиционном калмыцком и бурятском обществе в целом исключалась из активной общественной деятельности и не могла сделать карьеру в религиозной сфере.

В XX веке положение калмыцких и бурятских женщин в социуме претерпело значительные изменения. Советское государство стремилось привлечь женщин Калмыкии и Бурятии к построению нового общества, активно борясь с буддийской религией и проводя атеистическую пропаганду. Все это способствовало тому, что религиозность населения в данных регионах, в том числе и его женской части, значительно снизилась.

Сегодня положение женщин в религиозной жизни Калмыкии и Бурятии двойственно. С одной стороны, в традиционных буддийских церковных организациях женщины могут занимать лишь позиции прихожанок, светских сотрудников, а также осуществлять вспомогательные культовые действия при проведении некоторых обрядов. С другой стороны, в объединениях мирян их роль более значима. Женщины принимают самое активное участие в деятельности буддийских общин и организаций, изучают буддийскую философию и медицину. Деятельность буддийских активисток в современных буддийских сообществах данных регионов России способствует возрождению здесь буддизма. Несмотря на то что мужчины составляют основную массу буддийского духовенства, большинство активно практикующих верующих-мирян в Калмыкии и Бурятии составляют именно женщины.

Ключевые слова: буддизм, женщины, гендер, калмыки, буряты, женское монашество, монгольские народы.

Исследование выполнено за счет гранта Российского научного фонда (проект № 19-18-00118).

Научные специальности: 07.00.00 – исторические науки, 24.00.00 – культурология.