

University of San Diego

Digital USD

Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty
Scholarship

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

2016

Prayers of Resistance: Kalymyk Women's Covert Buddhist Practice

Karma Lekshe Tsomo PhD
University of San Diego, tsomo@sandiego.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/thrs-faculty>



Part of the [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Digital USD Citation

Tsomo, Karma Lekshe PhD, "Prayers of Resistance: Kalymyk Women's Covert Buddhist Practice" (2016). *Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty Scholarship*. 7.
<https://digital.sandiego.edu/thrs-faculty/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital USD. For more information, please contact digital@sandiego.edu.

Field Note

Prayers of Resistance

Kalmyk Women's Covert Buddhist Practice

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

ABSTRACT: Throughout decades of Soviet repression of religion and into modern times, groups of Buddhist women known as *babushki matsik*, or “group of old women precept holders” have covertly engaged in Buddhist practices in Kalmykia, following the Tibetan tantric tradition. Located to the northwest of the Caspian Sea, the Kalmyk Republic of the Russian Federation is the only region of Europe with a predominantly Buddhist population. For centuries, the region has been the site of repeated migrations, shifting political and military alliances, and Russian Orthodox conversion efforts. The devastating period of forced relocation and exile in Siberia between 1943 and 1957 cost the lives of nearly half the Kalmyk population. During that period, devoted groups of religious women secretly continued their Buddhist practices and played a key role in perpetuating Kalmyk Buddhist traditions and rituals. Their contributions to lay Buddhist society and to preserving the Kalmyk heritage continue to the present day and, while overshadowed by male-dominated Buddhist institutions, are increasingly recognized.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Kalmykia, women, Russia, religious revival

Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions, Volume 20, Issue 1, pages 86–98. ISSN 1092-6690 (print), 1541-8480. (electronic). © 2016 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/nr.2016.20.1.86.



The author, center, with members of the babushki matsik. Photo courtesy of the author.

The revival of religion in Russia since the end of the Soviet Union is a topic of great interest to researchers across disciplines and the revival of Buddhism in various republics of Russia – Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Tuva – has also merited significant scholarly attention. Like Buddhists in other regions, over a span of several centuries the Buddhists of Kalmykia have endeavored to maintain their ethnic and religious identities, despite many political vicissitudes. Kalmyk Buddhist monastic institutions were decimated and their all-male clergy murdered by Stalin’s severe persecutions of religion. In the face of these catastrophes, small independent groups of women devotees carried on the Buddhist practices they had learned and passed them on to new generations. Despite the loss of almost a hundred thousand kin and generations of ancestors, these women managed to preserve their religious traditions. Often meeting in secret, they gathered regularly to perform Buddhist prayers and rituals. Through several generations of hardship, including forced exile in Siberia and near extermination, these women managed to convey their ritual knowledge and continue their prayers for the peace and happiness of humanity. The group has no special name and is simply known as the *babushki matsik*, or “group of old women precept holders.”

In 2013, while traveling in Kalmykia, a republic of the Russian Federation, I learned about a group of women who meet to chant Buddhist mantras and prayers. This small group of friends was formed

early in the 20th century, motivated by a sincere wish to pray for the welfare of all living beings, and continued to meet clandestinely after the Socialist Revolution began in 1917. All the current members of the group are now old women, except for one man. The women, born between 1925 and 1941, were young children when they and their families were forcibly evicted from their native Kalmyk lands.

The oldest woman in the group is Togrya Togriash. Born in 1925 in Kalmykia, she was forcibly transferred to Siberia in 1938 and returned to Kalmykia in 1958. Nadezda Dordzjinovna, the leader of the group, was born in 1935 in the village of Novonikolaevskaya in the region of Rostov (western Kalmykia). The youngest, Svetlana, was born in 1941 in Siberia. Roza Borisovna Babicheva was also born in 1941 in the village of Tsoros in the region of Bashantinskyi Raion. Another was born in 1932 in Rostov Oblast. Three members of the group were born in or near Rostov: Katya Mikova was born in Rostov in 1933; Nadezda Markovna was born near Rostov; and Semen Nerypov Sandzinovich, the lone male in the group, was born in 1938 in the village of Horse Factory in Rostov.

My methodology in interviewing the women of the *babushki matsik* was ethnographic. When I inquired about women's Buddhist activities in Kalmykia during a visit to Geden Sheddup Choikhorling, the central monastery in Elista, Gerla Nurova immediately mentioned the *matsik* and arranged a meeting with the women. The women arrived the next day in traditional attire and brought precious Buddhist artifacts that their mothers and grandmothers had managed to preserve during the period of forced relocation and exile in Siberia between 1943 and 1957 that devastated the Kalmyk population and took the lives of an estimated 60,000.¹ An attitude of respect and compassion inevitably arose as I listened to their tragic stories. Based on previous research in Buryatia,² I noticed numerous parallels in the lifestyles and historical experiences of Kalmyk and the Buryat women. Both peoples are descendants of Mongol tribes who lived nomadic lifestyles and settled in lands that today are Russian territory. The religious beliefs and cultures of both peoples derive from Mongolia and Tibetan Buddhist traditions; both peoples were severely persecuted and their cultures significantly diminished during years of Soviet control. Both peoples have been influenced extensively by Russian mores and most now speak Russian as their first language. The specifics of their histories are unique, however. Kalmykia is the only region of Europe with a predominantly Buddhist population and the Kalmyks' history of collective forced exile to Siberia is unparalleled.

A BUDDHIST REPUBLIC IN EUROPE

The Republic of Kalmykia is a little-known republic of the Russia Federation located north of the Caucasus, between the Black and

Caspian Seas, and stretching across 76,100 square km of dry steppes. The Kalmyk inhabitants are the descendants of Oirat Mongol nomads who traveled west from Dzungaria in the mid-seventeenth century and acceded to Russian rule in exchange for land, while agreeing to protect the southern borders.³ Along with their tents and nomadic lifestyle, these settlers brought the Buddhist religious traditions they had acquired from Tibet and Mongolia. In the middle of the eighteenth century, some 200,000 Kalmyks, dissatisfied with life under Russian control, migrated eastward toward Dzungaria, but only half survived the journey. Those who stayed behind had their own share of hardships ahead.

When the Socialist Revolution began in Russia, some Kalmyks supported the White Army and were forced to flee, settling in various parts of Europe.⁴ The Kalmyks who remained were slow to express loyalty to the Socialist authorities and many of their leaders were persecuted. During Stalin's repressions of the 1930s, in a broad purge of religious institutions across the Soviet Union, all Kalmyk Buddhist temples and shrines were destroyed. Stalin distrusted specific ethnic minorities and deported entire nationalities to Siberia and Central Asia. During World War II, the Kalmyks were accused of Nazi sympathies and in 1943 the entire Kalmyk population was deported, without any possessions, to various remote regions of Siberia. About half of the exiles, especially the children, the frail, and the elderly, succumbed to cold and starvation on the way. After almost two decades of struggling for survival in conditions of extreme cold and destitution, those who survived were permitted to return to Kalmykia in the wake of Khrushchev's famous speech denouncing Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956.

Today, the majority of Kalmyks live in urban areas, but many of them also live in the countryside, where they earn their living by ranching and agriculture. About 58 percent of the roughly 300,000 people in the Republic of Kalmykia are ethnic Kalmyks and about 30 percent are ethnic Russians. The Kalmyks generally follow the Gelug school of Buddhism and revere His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader. All the Buddhist temples (*khurul*) of Kalmykia were destroyed by the Bolsheviks.

Following *perestroika*, great changes swept the religious landscape of Russia that profoundly affected both the Orthodox Christian Church and religious minorities. The temples of Kalmykia are now gradually being rebuilt. The largest is the Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, the main temple in the capital city of Elista. In 1992, H.H. Dalai Lama appointed Telo Rinpoche (Erdne Ombadykow), a Kalmyk American, as the head *lama* (religious teacher) of Kalmykia.⁵ Born in Philadelphia to Kalmyk parents and educated at Drepung Monastery in South India, he was appointed as the Shabzin Lama of Mongolia by H. H. Dalai Lama in 1991. He is among the many descendants of Kalmyks who fled

Russia beginning in the 1920s and settled in various countries of Europe and the United States, where they established communities and temples in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Kalmykia gained world attention when Kirsan Nikolayevich Ilyumzhinov, the head of the Kalmyk Republic from 1993 to 2010, became the head of the World Chess Federation and instituted chess as a required subject in the first three years of primary school.⁶

A HISTORY OF TRAGEDY

On 28 December 1943, soldiers suddenly appeared at the doors of Kalmyk homes and ordered the people to get out. One woman in the *matsik* I met with told me that she ran out into the street, but was caught by a soldier. Still a young girl, she tried to ask, “Why? Can we take our things?” But the answer was, “No. You must go without taking your things.” She said that her family was forced to leave just two hours later, carrying only the few things they could gather together in that short time. The execution of the expulsion order depended on the soldiers, however; in some places the soldiers allowed the families more time to gather their things. Still, the Kalmyks were all forced to abandon their animals, most of whom froze to death.

The Kalmyk exiles were sent to many different places, all in Siberia. One contingent, for example, was sent to Omsk. All the Kalmyk soldiers who had fought for the Soviets during World War II were sent to the gulag. The expulsion had the marks of genocide: “Stalin hated Kalmyks,” one woman said. The women in the group concurred that Kalmyks were treated like traitors and denigrated with a variety of slurs, including “cannibals.” Racism as a motivating factor in the tragedy cannot be ruled out, but the Kalmyks were not the only people expelled from their homes; many Chechens, Caucasians, Turks, Kazakhs, Estonians, Tatars, and others were also exiled to Siberia. Mixed families were separated; a husband or wife who was not ethnically Russian was forced to leave. Some children of mixed parentage were forced to stay, while others were forced to go.

At the time of this forced exile, despite the risk, some people managed to carry religious items with them, such as small images of Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, while others hid or buried them, fearing repercussions for their children. Many of these religious items had been passed down in families for generations and were regarded as precious, possessing both spiritual and sentimental value. When the survivors of this forced population transfer arrived in Siberia, they began new lives in conditions of extreme hardship without the comfort that religion can offer. “Our poor parents had no temple,” one woman said, “but every morning we would make tea and offer it before the Buddha.”

The oldest woman in the *babushki matsik*, who was 88 years old when I visited in 2013, told me that their group formed sometime after the Russian Revolutions of 1917 and continued its clandestine practices during the harsh repression of Buddhism during Soviet times. Even before World War I (“the Great War”), Kalmyk women of the older generation had gathered in private homes to pray. Many lamas knew that they would be arrested during the looming Stalinist purges and that their chances of survival were slim, so they transmitted their knowledge of Buddhist prayers and rituals to old women, who were considered untouchable – that is, they were so old that they were considered politically negligible and immune to arrest. Due to the political exigencies of the time, previously celibate lamas were forced by circumstances to marry and gradually disappeared into secular society as a survival mechanism. The lamas had translated sacred texts into Kalmyk, but many old women could not read, so their teachers transmitted prayers and ritual knowledge to them orally. This turned out to be fortuitous; even though all religious materials were eventually confiscated, the verses and mantras the women had memorized could not be destroyed. When the Kalmyks were deported to Siberia in 1943, the women continued reciting these verses and mantras surreptitiously. In 1957, after years of exile, those Kalmyks who were fortunate enough to survive were allowed to return to their ancestral lands to the west of the Caspian Sea. Thereafter, the women’s chanting group continued to meet secretly to pray and to tend to the spiritual needs of Kalmyk families who sought their assistance. Although it became safe to practice Buddhism openly again in the 1990s, today the *matsik* continues to meet in private homes.

All the members of the *matsik* were taught prayers and ritual practices by their grandmothers. During Soviet times, it was illegal to meet for religious activities, so they practiced at home and met secretly in different homes on special occasions. Even during these years of religious repression, the women were invited to visit the homes of people who had died and, despite the danger of arrest, secretly conducted prayers for them and their families. The women were aware that they were under the surveillance of the local commandant, but were careful and non-threatening enough to avoid arrest. After Krushev’s government passed a law guaranteeing freedom of conscience, anti-religion policies were formally lifted and the people were allowed to begin the difficult process of rebuilding the temples and monasteries (*datsan*) that had been destroyed.

Beginning in 1957, an official decree was announced that allowed those Kalmyks who survived to return to their homelands. A few began returning in 1956 and a mass migration occurred in 1958. When the Kalmyk exiles returned, they found that “everything had been destroyed,” including all the *datsan* and other sacred sites.⁷ The returnees set about rebuilding Elista, an effort that took more than thirty years. There, the

group continued to meet covertly in each others' homes on a regular basis to chant Buddhist prayers and mantras, quietly ministering to the needs of the local population. Among other services, they prayed secretly for the dead.⁸ In the Buddhist context, prayers may take the form of aspirations, praises, and supplications. Practitioners aspire to acquire all the qualities of the awakened ones, such as boundless compassion and liberating wisdom. Praises enumerate the virtuous qualities of the *arhats*, Buddhas, and *bodhisattvas*, and serve to inspire the practitioner. Supplications are directed to Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, which are collectively termed "deities" (*hla*), although these realized beings are distinguished from worldly deities such as Brahma, Indra, local gods, nature spirits, and so on. One of most popular deities is the female *bodhisattva* (and later Buddha) Tārā, who is invoked for protection against disasters such as earthquakes, floods, famine, lightening, theft, and untimely death. In Mahāyāna Buddhist practice, it is believed that the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* have the capacity to respond to the needs of sentient beings. The prayers performed by the members of the *matsik* were a source of great solace, both during the period of their exile and after their return.

BUDDHIST TRADITIONS, CONTINUED

The *matsik* follows a strict schedule of religious observances that often include fasting. Members gather together from 8 to 11 am and from 12 to 2 pm on the ninth, fifteen, and thirtieth days of the lunar calendar to recite prayers. On the second and sixteenth days of the lunar calendar, they go to the field to pray to the White Old Man, a practice of nature worship that predates Buddhism in Central Asian cultures.⁹ In this ritual, the women worship the master of nature and make prayers for peace, rain, and abundant crops, and to stave off natural disasters. They make a fire using butter and sheep fat, and present their requests for the welfare of both people and animals. In addition, they gather for four major celebrations throughout the year. During the Kalmyk New Year (*Sagansar*), which is celebrated on the first day of the lunar calendar and lasts for one week, the women meet to pray every day for eight days. Their prayers include supplications to Tara, Avalokitesvara, and the five protector deities. They begin and end their sessions by reciting the *midtsema* prayer, a popular five-line verse that pays tribute to Je Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), the renowned scholar monk who initiated the Gelug school of Buddhism in Tibet. The women's enactment of this diversity of ancient rituals testifies to the eclectic nature of Kalmyk religiosity and to the inclusive propensity of the Vajrayana tradition.

Aside from observances on these special days, the women keep up a rigorous practice in their homes, arising at 4 am to recite mantras and prayers to the Dharma protectors, the 21 Taras, Guhyasamaja, and a host

of other Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*. “Not many women can get up so early,” one woman told me. The practitioners recite the *migtsema* and make offerings, dedicating the merit to all sentient beings and to their family members who support their practice, for example, by preparing tea for them. In their homes, the women maintain altars with images of many sacred beings, offering daily prayers to each one. The women refrain from smoking, playing cards, and, on certain days, also refrain from eating meat. They observe special practice commitments that involve tantric *yidams* (“meditational deities”) such as White Tara, Bhaishajaguru (Medicine Buddha), and Kalachakra. Some of the practices the women do are associated with empowerments they received in 2012 when they visited Bodhgaya, India, to participate in the Kalachakra ceremony with H. H. Dalai Lama. Although some of these practices are lengthy and complicated, the women take their commitments very seriously. One told me, “If we don’t remember the entire liturgy, then we can read it, but we have all the mantras by heart.”

The women perform a variety of rituals and find solace in Dharma practice in many different ways. They perform some rituals outdoors in the natural environment on behalf of their ancestors and other beings, “including doggies and cats and insects.” Only after making the offerings to these beings do they themselves eat. They offer butter lamps with added flavor in little bowls. When asked whether they feel that women are more spiritual than men, one woman replied, “Maybe. Women give birth to children and are responsible for the family, so they want to make prayers to ensure their well-being.” “Dharma is imprinted in our minds,” another said. “But we really had no idea about Buddhism when we were young. Our ideas were different then.” One woman explained, “I became devoted to Buddhist practice after my daughter became seriously ill. At that time, there was no temple (*khurul*).” The leader of the group said, “When I was young, we experienced so much suffering. And I saw my grandmother was praying. I came to Buddhism through suffering.” Another woman said that Buddhist practice extends one’s life. Another said that she was disabled for a long time and Buddhism helped her through that difficult period. Another said she believes her son has taken rebirth as her grandson and that the lamas at the temple tacitly confirm this when they tell her, “Don’t scold this boy.” One reported seeing her deceased mother in a dream. Her mother had no clothes on and was lying on the road. In the dream, she told her mother, “I want to go with you,” but her mother said, “No. Go back.” Her Dharma practice helped to console her and to provide guidance in coping with loss and attachment.

The members of the *matsik* observe the five precepts of a layperson that are common to all Buddhist traditions: to refrain from taking life, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants. Their commitment to observe the five precepts is implied by the word *matsik* and the shawl

that the women wear is a symbol of their status as lay Buddhists who keep the five precepts (Tibetan: *genyen*). They refrain from killing any insects. When I asked where they had taken the five precepts, they seemed a bit surprised and said that they had not participated in any formal ceremony. “A lama blessed us and we keep the precepts in our soul.”

The women in the *matsik* explained that joining the group entailed responsibilities. Members must agree to meet for prayers on certain days of the month, according to the lunar calendar. They must be prepared to visit the homes of relatives who have died. Before going to pray at the person’s home, they must visit the *khurul*, and then again afterwards. These are the unwritten rules of the *matsik*. The leader of the group is responsible for calling all of them together. Many people call her with requests for prayers and rituals. Once she determines the address of the place, the group goes there and prays to the *nagi* (female water spirits in the form of a snake) of the four directions: east, south, west, and north. When teachers come from other places, members of the *matsik* go to visit them and make offerings to pay respect and express thanks. They collect donations and place an order for biscuits and other offering materials. For example, for the celebration of H. H. Dalai Lama’s birthday, they ordered three very large tortes, had these offerings blessed by the lamas, and distributed them to the people – children especially wait for this. They are active in making arrangements for Kalmyk pilgrimage groups; for example, during one pilgrimage to India, they made special arrangements to provide lunch, tea, and bread for five hundred Kalmyk devotees.

The women have been delighted to welcome Buddhist dignitaries such as H. H. Dalai Lama, who has visited Kalmykia three times (in 1991, 1992, and 2004),¹⁰ and Bakula Rinpoche, a lama from Ladakh appointed as the Indian Ambassador to Mongolia, who visited Kalmykia in 1989. As evidenced in official photos of the visit, the women were prominent in welcoming H. H. Dalai Lama during his visits. In 2004, although the temperature was 41 degrees below zero and strong winds were blowing, the women felt overjoyed to see H. H. Dalai Lama, their root lama,¹¹ whom they revere as the “the source of all happiness.” Despite freezing temperatures, the women reported, “Nobody got sick.”

The *babushki matsik* of Elista is an example of an informal, grassroots Buddhist practice group that retains its religious identity and functions with no official recognition from the formal Buddhist establishment in Kalmykia. Since the members of the group learned their ritual practices from their mothers when they were young, the women sometimes have some doubts about whether they are performing the rituals correctly and consult lamas for guidance. When they approached H. H. Dalai Lama, he told them, “If you perform the rituals from the depths of your hearts, it will always be alright. Very important.” The fact that the women of the *matsik* are respected practitioners in the Kalmyk Buddhist community is attested by the prominence women’s prayer groups are given

in a photo exhibition that was displayed at the time of my visit in June 2013. It is notable that the main temple (*datsan*) in Elista, Geden Sheddup Choikhorling, which is a monks' monastery, hosted a meeting between members of the group and religious studies scholars researching women's roles in Kalmyk Buddhism, such as myself and Dr. Zhargal Aiakova. Both the exhibit and the meeting were arranged by the art director of the monastery, an art historian named Gerla Nurova. Creating educational exhibits such as this at Geden Sheddup Choikhorling was the concept of Telo Rinpoche, the current head of Kalmyk Buddhism.

Members of the *matsik* have traveled to many sacred sites. The oldest member of the group reports having visited India three times, once to Dharamsala and twice (in 2003 and 2012) to Gomang College of Drepung Monastery in Mundgod, South India.¹² As a group, they have visited all the *datsans* of Kalmykia. The members of the group are so highly respected that everywhere they go, people offer them hospitality. One woman's nephew provided their travel expenses and a special bus that took them to visit all the *khurul* in the region. The way was long and difficult. Sometimes in remote areas they had to stay overnight with the sheep. But they persevered and managed to visit all the *khurul* in Kalmykia.

The women have also traveled to Buryatia, Mongolia, and India. Along the way, they were hosted by families who acknowledged their religious accomplishments and offered them hospitality. In 2005 and 2010, they visited Buryatia, where they met many lamas and were received with great warmth. They learned that all volumes of the Perfection of Wisdom texts (*Yum*), as well as the Kangyur and Tengyur, are preserved in Buryatia, and they were very eager to go and pay respect to them.¹³ These texts have reportedly been kept in the private home of a Buryat family for 350 years. At Etiguiski Datsan, they paid respect to a rare sandalwood image of Sakyamuni Buddha that is believed to date from the time of the Buddha himself. They visited Atsagat Datsan, the monastery where Agvan Lobsan Dorjiev convened a conference on Tibetan medicine in 1927.¹⁴ At Ivolginski Datsan, they were received with respect by the Khambo Lama, who said that he was very glad to see them. There they paid respect to the preserved body of Dashi-Dorzho Itigilov (1852–1927), which was exhumed in 2002, and were allowed to touch and take photos, a rare privilege.

The majority of the people who participate in religious activities at Kalmyk temples are women, "because men are fewer in number and because men are at work all day." In Kalmykia, there are very few old men. When I asked why there are only eight women in the group, they responded saying, "Others have promised to join us. But some are already very old and some are still very young. Many people have gone elsewhere to work. We are waiting."

When I asked the women whether they were passing the traditions they practice to the younger generation in Kalmykia, they said that they

explain Buddhism to their daughters and grandchildren, and teach them how to make the food offerings. “After us, you must continue the traditions. Take these beads,” I heard one woman say. The women said that their daughters, as well as many of their relatives, neighbors, and colleagues, are interested in participating and want to learn how to do things. Lamas send people to join the group when they have free time. The women recalled the accomplishments of Geshe Ngawang Wangyal (1901–1983), a Kalmyk lama who settled in Howell, New Jersey, and was the teacher of a number of accomplished Buddhist translators, including Jeffry Hopkins, Robert Thurman, Alex Berzin, and Bhikkhu Bodhi. Although the women never met Geshe Wangyal in person, they are aware of his excellent reputation as a teacher both to the Kalmyk community in New Jersey and to many Western students of Buddhism. When Geshe Wangyal was young, they said, it was foretold that he would become a great teacher and this prediction was confirmed by his actual accomplishments.

QUIET, DETERMINED DEVOTION

The *babushki matsik* of Elista is a unique institution in Buddhist history and culture. As a group composed primarily of laywomen, this small band of devoted practitioners is located outside the established halls of religious power in Kalmyk Buddhism. Yet today, after decades of forced dislocation and hardship during which all material traces of Kalmyk religious culture were virtually annihilated, they are recognized for the invaluable role they serve in ministering to the needs of a people devastated by loss and struggling for cultural survival. These quietly determined women have taken upon themselves the duty to pray to the best of their abilities, not for any worldly gain, or even subsistence, but solely from a sincere dedication to the Dharma. These days, there are also many Buddhist prayer groups that attract younger people, both men and women, who feel a special responsibility to preserve the traditions they received from their mothers. Like the “old women precept holders,” some among the younger generation gather to chant Buddhist prayers and celebrate offering ceremonies (*tsok*) according to the lunar calendar and on major religious occasions.¹⁵ Although some young people may be unaware of the debt of gratitude they owe to the brave women (and men) who kept Kalmyk Buddhism alive through many years of repression, they continue traditions preserved by the *matsik*. Though their numbers are dwindling, the noble women of the *babushki matsik* continue in the practice of their “main mantra”: to pray for the welfare of all sentient beings.

In this research, I am very grateful for the assistance of Dr. Zhargal Aiakova, a senior lecturer in Sociology and Political Sciences at Buryat State Academy of

Agriculture in Ulan Ude; Saglava Mandzhieva, a lecturer in the Department of Oriental Languages at Kalmyk State University in Elista; and Gerla Nurova, a lecturer in Art History at Kalmyk State University in Elista and curator of cultural exhibits at Geden Sheddup Choikhorling in Elista.

ENDNOTES

¹ For an ethnosociological account of the years of Kalmyk exile, see Elza-Bair Guchinova, “Deportation of the Kalmyks (1943–1956): Stigmatized Ethnicity,” *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia*, ed. Uyama Tomohiko (Sapporo, Japan: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2007), pp. 187–220.

² See Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Transition and Transformation: Buddhist Women of Buryatia,” *Buddhism in Mongolian History, Society, and Culture*, ed. Vesna Wallace (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 261–79.

³ François Grin, *Kalmykia: from Oblivion to Reassertion?* (Flensburg, Germany: European Centre for Minority Issues, 2000), p. 4; Konstantin N. Maksimov, *Kalmykia in Russia’s Past and Present National Policies and Administrative System* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2008), pp. 1–54.

⁴ Concise overviews can be found in Majorie Mandelstam Balzer, *Religion and Politics in Russia: A Reader* (New York and London: M. E. Sharpe Armonk, 2010) and Geraldine Fagan, *Believing in Russia: Religious Policy after Communism* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁵ Telo Rinpoche was appointed the Honorary Representative of H. H. Dalai Lama in Russia at a large celebration in Elista in November 2014.

⁶ He also attracted attention for claiming to have contact with aliens.

⁷ According to reports, “nothing remained there but the ruins of four stone houses.” Elza-Bair Mataskovna Guchinova, trans. David C. Lewis, *The Kalmyks* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 94.

⁸ Whereas lamas perform prayers both before and after a death, the women are only invited to pray for the deceased after death. No explanation of this convention was forthcoming.

⁹ For more information about religious syncretism in the Buddhist republics of Russia, see Eva Jane Neumann Fridman, *Sacred Geography: Shamanism among the Buddhist Peoples of Russia* (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 2005); and Kerry A. Waylena, Anke Fischera, Philip J. K. McGowanb, and E. J. Milner-Gullandc, “Interactions Between a Collectivist Culture and Buddhist Teachings Influence Environmental Concerns and Behaviors in the Republic of Kalmykia, Russia,” *Society & Natural Resources* 25, no. 11 (2012): 1118–1133.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the reasons why further visits of H. H. Dalai Lama have not been approved by the Russian government, see Edward C. Holland, “Buddhism in Russia: Challenges and Choices in the Post-Soviet Period,” *Religion, State and Society* 42:4 (2014) 389–402. pp. 395–399.

¹¹ The term “root lama” refers to one’s principal teacher, defined variously as the lama who gives one teachings or tantric empowerments and the one who first “turns one’s heart to the Dharma.”

¹² Anya Bernstein has written about the interactions between visiting Kalmyk Buddhists and the *tulkus* recognized as the rebirth of Kalmyk lamas in India in her article, “On Body-Crossing: Interbody Movement in Eurasian Buddhism,” *Ab Imperio* 2 (2012): 168–94.

¹³ The Perfection of Wisdom genre of literature refers to Mahāyāna texts that appeared in India between 100 and 700 CE, texts that emphasize the compassionate path of the *bodhisattva* and the wisdom that understands emptiness (*śnyat*), or lack of inherent existence of all phenomena. The Kangyur (*bka’ gyur*) is a collection of texts in Tibetan regarded as the words of the Buddha. The Tengyur (*bstan ’gyur*) is a Tibetan collection of treatises or commentaries on the Kangyur written primarily by Indian scholars. Together, the Kangyur and Tengyur comprise the Tibetan Buddhist canon.

¹⁴ Among other activities, Agvan Dorjiev is famous for establishing Datsan Guntschoinei, a large Buddhist temple in St. Petersburg that opened in 1913. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the temple was appropriated by the Soviets, pillaged, and fell into disrepair. After 1990, it was restored and is once again an active center for Buddhist practice.

¹⁵ The Tibetan term *tsok* (Sanskrit: *ganachakra*) refers to tantric *sadhana*s enacted by groups of practitioners, involving recitation, offerings, and other ritual elements.