



Paying for prayers: perspectives on giving in postsocialist Ulaanbaatar

Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko

To cite this article: Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko (2015) Paying for prayers: perspectives on giving in postsocialist Ulaanbaatar, *Religion, State & Society*, 43:4, 327-341, DOI: [10.1080/09637494.2015.1118204](https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2015.1118204)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2015.1118204>



© 2015 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 17 Dec 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 564



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Paying for prayers: perspectives on giving in postsocialist Ulaanbaatar

Saskia Abrahms-Kavunen^{*}

Resilience and Transformation in Eurasia, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), Germany

(Received 18 February 2014; accepted 16 June 2015)

Since the end of the socialist period in 1990, Buddhism in Mongolia has been undergoing a resurgence. Temples no longer oversee vast tracts of land and receive income from the activities of bonded nomadic herders as they did in the presocialist period. They must instead fund themselves from the freely given donations of lay Buddhists. Whilst the majority of the Mongolian population self-identify as Buddhist, regular donations to temples are not an assumed part of social and economic relationships. Unlike the case in most other Asian Buddhist societies, the concept of giving donations as a way to make merit was not present amongst my interlocutors. The urban Mongolians that I spoke to viewed their donations as payments for highly valued ritual services. The act of donating to temples was for some an ambivalent activity, bringing to the fore broader issues relating to spiritual authority, religious education and observance, and the necessary conditions for spiritual efficacy. In this article I investigate patterns of religious giving in Ulaanbaatar in relation to ideas about donation, the role of religious specialists and concerns about the intersections between capitalism and religion.

Keywords: *dāna*; Mongolia; Buddhism; lamas; laity; Ulaanbaatar

Introduction

This article is based on fieldwork that I carried out in the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar from 2009 to 2010. My interlocutors were sourced using two different methods. The first was location-specific. I met people at global Buddhist centres that were regularly attended by students who received comprehensive tuition about Buddhist philosophy and transformative practices. I participated in the same activities as they did, and volunteered as an English teacher to university students and to Buddhist religious specialists. The second sample was drawn from the friends and acquaintances that I met during my daily life in Ulaanbaatar. Most of these were urban, middle-class Mongolians and identified as lay Buddhists. Most visited temples at least once a year and received little or no formal tuition on Buddhist philosophy and practice. This article mainly, but not exclusively, discusses this second group of lay Buddhists and their relationships with Buddhist temples in Ulaanbaatar.

In many Buddhist communities making merit (Mongolian *buyan*, Sanskrit *punya*) in the form of freely given donations (Mong. *öglög*, Sans. *dāna*) to the monastic population (Mong. *huvrag*, Sans. *saṃgha*) is an important, if not central, part of lay Buddhist practice. The tradition of giving *dāna* is widely practised in Theravada, Mahayana and

^{*}Email: abrahms@eth.mpg.de

Vajrayana Buddhism. In postsocialist Mongolia, where Vajrayana Buddhism has been undergoing a resurgence since the end of the socialist period, the most common interface with Buddhist institutions is to make donations in temples to lamas.¹ In exchange lamas read prayers to benefit the donor, their friends and family. When I asked my interlocutors about giving a donation for prayers to be read by lamas none mentioned that the process of giving the gift itself, rather than the outcome of the lama reading the prayer, would create benefit for the donor.

Whilst there are circumstances in which it is seen to be conducive to good fortune to make large donations, such as in the period after the death of a family member when donations may be made to temples or lamas (High 2013) or to others in the local community (Humphrey 2002), amongst my urban interlocutors giving donations to temples was not mentioned as a source of merit. When asked about life after death, none referred to the meritorious activity of giving *dāna* to religious institutions as a way to better their chances in the afterlife. For those who irregularly sought support from temples when they had worldly problems, giving donations was seen as a reciprocal relationship far removed from the idea of *dāna* as a free gift (Laidlaw 2000).

In this article I will situate lay perspectives on religious giving in relation to the postsocialist contingencies that have distinctively shaped Mongolian religious economies, practices and beliefs from 1990. The change from a socialist economy with religious restrictions to a capitalist economy with religious freedoms has created a style of religious specialisation where lamas and female lamas² tend to live outside monastic institutions. As a result lamas must support themselves (and sometimes their families) as others do, by working, often in a position funded by donations made at temples. Like other Mongolians they must meet the financial challenges of living in an ever more expensive city with a fluctuating economy and increasing wealth disparity. As lamas tend to treat their role as an important and highly valued service position, many laypeople see the donations that they make to Buddhist religious specialists as a reciprocal exchange for their labour. Coincident with this perspective, when urban Mongolians spoke about making donations to temples some expressed ambivalent attitudes regarding monetising religious services. These critiques centred around the temples' ambience, fiscal motivations and whether or not lamas were properly educated or followed extensive vows.

Buddhism and merit making

Merit making is a topic that has been frequently discussed in the anthropology of Buddhism. In many Buddhist societies giving *dāna* to monastics forms one of the main foundations for lay–monastic interactions. In theory, with the support of the laity, monastics are able to 'renounce' the material world of work and can devote themselves to religious practice (Spiro 1984). Being released from the need to support themselves materially, monastics are theoretically able to focus on Buddhist soteriological goals. In Spiro's schematic (1984) he calls this form of Buddhism 'Nibbanic Buddhism'. According to Spiro, those devoting themselves to this style of Buddhism dedicate their lives to release from the endless cycle of rebirths (Mong. *orchlon*, Sans. *saṃsāra*) with the intention of achieving the goal of enlightenment (Mong. *gegeerel*, Sans. *nirvāṇa*). Spiro observed that the majority, but not all, of his Burmese lay informants tended to be concerned with achieving better rebirths rather than the ultimate salvation of enlightenment (1984). Making donations to temples provided an opportunity for the laity to be able to continue their lives as householders whilst creating the positive karma necessary for positive future rebirths. According to Bell, in Theravada Buddhist societies

The lay person must give material support to monks, listen to the monks' sermons, and invite monks to chant texts and offer blessings at household and calendrical ceremonies. The monks' agenda, invariably presented in its ideal form, stands in stark contrast to that of the lay person. The monk (*bhikkhu*) is supposed to concern himself with progress along a prescribed spiritual path, pointing to ultimate liberation from the entanglements of birth and rebirth. (Bell 1998, 149)

If carried out correctly, this meritorious activity is thought to lead over many lifetimes to a fortunate reincarnation wherein one is able to devote one's life to monastic renunciation and pursue spiritual attainment (Spiro 1984). In this schema, monastics enable the laity to have the opportunity to make merit through their donations and in return are supported by householders so that they may pursue Buddhism's soteriological goals.

Neither the act of giving nor the gift itself necessarily creates merit for the donor. There are a number of key factors for the act of *dāna* to be successful – for it to create merit for the gift giver (or for the donor's deceased family members, see Gombrich 1971). For the donation to create merit the donor should give the donation freely with good intentions. In Buddhist philosophy in order for an act to be positive it must arise from free choice and positive motivations (Heim 2003). Cook (2010) writes that for her Thai interlocutors it is important for the donations to be made without the intention of making merit and without the expectation of gratitude from the monastic community. The gift of *dāna* is, in theory at least, free from the bounds of reciprocity and social obligation, as it is for Laidlaw's Jain interlocutors (2000). The second factor in the success or failure of the meritorious offering may be emphasised or de-emphasised according to context. This is the morality and spiritual advancement of the monastic to which the donation is offered (Cook 2010). The more spiritually and morally advanced a monastic is the more merit is created from the donation (2010). This may influence the donor's choice of whom to give the gift to. In many Buddhist societies, perceptions of spiritual and moral advancement create discrepancies between the wealth of monks and nuns, as monks are often seen as being spiritually and morally superior to nuns (Gutschow 2004).

Alienation from monastics because of their perceived lack of spiritual or moral rectitude can result in the withdrawal of support from lay donors. For many groups, in order for an act of *dāna* to be successful the monastic should be seen as being worthy of accepting donations. In Samuels' account of a Sri Lankan village (2007) he details the story of a temple where the resident monastics fail to live up to the expectations of the laity. Instead of continuing their patronage of the temple, the laypeople decide to build a new temple and revoke their support for the previous monks. As donating to the monastics became more difficult and unpleasant, because of the monastics' evident lack of interest in and disdain for the low-caste laity in the region, these lay supporters felt that they were no longer able to give donations freely and feel sympathetic joy after offering alms. The villagers, who believed that these feelings must accompany the giving of *dāna* for the act of giving to be meritorious, regarded the monks as no longer fulfilling their obligation to offer the laity an opportunity to make merit (Samuels 2007). This removal of support does not always occur, and some anthropologists have noted that monastics continue to receive donations in spite of publicly recognised improprieties (Southwold 1983).

The strength of relationships between monastics and the laity based on merit-making has been mobilised by monastics as a site of political resistance. In the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Myanmar, monks overturned their alms bowls in an act of defiance that stated they were no longer going to receive donations from the military, and hence would

no longer enable the accrual of merit by those within this powerful institution (Gravers 2012). This was a powerful symbolic action in a country where members of the military government have made high-profile and expensive religious donations, such as the building of lavish pagodas, in order to publicly demonstrate the accrual of merit (2012).

In the Himalayan region where Vajrayana Buddhism is practised, along with landholdings (where they still exist) and an extensive network of kinship ties, donations derived from merit-making activities still play an important role in financing temples and rituals, as well as maintaining lay–monastic relationships. In Mills’ ethnography on a Gelugpa monastery in Ladakh (2003), he writes that in addition to mobilising kin relationships and wealth from landholdings, donations for specific ceremonies, rituals and festivities are seen as being important sites for laypeople to generate merit. In Gutschow’s work on Buddhist nuns in Ladakh (2004), her interlocutors struggle to make ends meet as a result of the widespread idea that because of their lower status as women, making donations to them was not seen as being as meritorious as making donations to lamas and high lamas.

The financial support of temples by the broader population in some regions of China is being challenged by the idea that monastics, rather than enabling the laity to make merit through their donations, may in fact be a ‘burden’ on the laity. Caple describes how Tibetan monastics in the A-mdo region see their own financial sustainability as a moral issue (2010). In part as a result of socialist perceptions of ‘lazy’ monastics and in part as a result of internal reforms within the Tibetan Buddhist diaspora, monastics concerned about being a ‘burden’ on the lay population try to sever some of their financial dependencies on the broader population. In doing so they make capital investments and give out loans, radically altering the dynamics of their relationships with people outside the monasteries (Caple 2010). Given the changing economic dynamics, with money being mobilised through tourism, new economies of global Buddhism (including the growing importance of charity) and increasing secularisation, ideas of donations and merit-making in Vajrayana Buddhism are being contested.

The history of Buddhism in Mongolia

The presence of Buddhism in Mongolia dates to the fourth century AD (Heissig 1980, 4). In popular culture most Mongolians date the first contact with Buddhism to the reign of Chinggis Khan (Genghis Khan) who ruled from 1206 to 1227. Historically, there were two main Buddhist conversions (Heissig 1980), though it is debatable whether Buddhism was ever really extinguished in Mongolia after the first (Sagaster 2007). The first conversion occurred during the Mongolian Empire and the second came during the rule of Altan Khan, a Tümed leader who lived in the sixteenth century. In 1578, Altan Khan made an alliance with the Gelug lineage of Vajrayana Buddhism (Sagaster 2007, 396). Altan Khan bestowed the title of Dalai Lama (literally meaning ocean-like teacher) on a powerful Gelugpa lama, and in return the Third Dalai Lama bestowed upon Altan Khan the title of Cakravartin Sechen Khan ‘the real ruler of the world... whose epithet was Sečen, “the wise one”’ (Sagaster 2007, 397). This powerful alliance was cemented over the centuries, especially during the Qing Dynasty, and by the early twentieth century Mongolia had Buddhist temples in strategic positions on key trade routes all over the countryside (Moses 1977).

By the early twentieth century monasteries had amassed large estates and wealth. As Kaplonski writes, the monasteries had ‘developed what was in effect an ecclesiastical feudal hierarchy’ (2014, 16). Lamas of high rank had *shabi*, a term that can be translated as ‘a disciple’ but also came to mean ‘an ecclesiastical serf’ (Kaplonski 2014, 17). At the

beginning of the 1920s the highest-ranking lama and brief leader of an independent Mongolia, the eighth Javzandamba Hutagt, had an estate containing an estimated 90,000 *shabi*. This is an extraordinary figure given that at that time the 1918 census estimated that the population of Mongolia was only 647,504 (Even 2011, 628). As Kaplonski writes:

Most families that were able to would send a son to a monastery, and donations and offerings to monasteries and to individual monks were expected at various times of the year such as the Lunar New Year, as well as for individual services. (2014, 17)

This relationship was reciprocal in the sense that the monasteries provided religious, ritual, medical and other services to the laity who supported them. However, as Sihlé (Forthcoming) points out in his discussion of present-day Baragaon in the Nepalese Himalayas, it would be overly romantic to emphasise the reciprocal aspects of monastic–lay relations when these relationships are characterised by domination. In the Manchu period in Mongolia the relationship between monasteries and the rest of the (non-noble) population was far from equal. It is likely that it was experienced as a mixture of domination, devotion, reciprocity, duty and donation.

By the early 1920s, when the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party came to power, the Mongolian population was strongly connected to Buddhist institutions through kinship, religious worship, donations and livelihood. To the socialist government these powerful institutions along with the nobility presented themselves as being of strategic significance, as alternative centres of influence over the trajectory of the Mongolian state. The government's first line of attack was to destroy 'superstitious' reliance on the Buddhist clergy by educating the lay population and, at the same time, by attempting to imbue the lower lamas with a class consciousness, exposing their exploitation at the hands of the 'feudal overlords' or high lamas (Bawden 1968, 244). By the late 1930s this attack on the Buddhist clergy had escalated and by 1940 only one of the 767 monasteries remained in operation (Lattimore 1962). During this period of persecution, lamas were forced to marry or join the army and thousands were imprisoned or executed (Bawden 1968).

After the Mongolian Democratic Revolution of 1989 to 1990 Buddhism was utilised by some, alongside the image and legend of Chinggis Khan, as a symbol of a new independent period, free from associations with the old socialist regime (Kaplonski 2004; Humphrey 1992; Rossabi 2005). Buddhism had not simply vanished during the socialist period and manifested anew at the beginning of the Democratic Revolution. Many Mongolians had practised it in their homes and most of my interlocutors had memories of hidden sacred objects and of rituals that family members conducted in secret during the socialist period. In spite of the best efforts of socialist educators, the memory of Buddhism was not erased. When the opportunity was presented, Buddhism, along with other repressed traditions and exemplars from the 'deep past' (Humphrey 1992), re-emerged from the private sphere to become important symbols of Mongolian identity and ethnicity. Materially, however, temples no longer had the wealth, land or resources that they had before the socialist period.

The donor: lay perspectives on visiting temples

In the 2010 Mongolian census 53% of the population self-identified as Buddhists (National Statistical Office of Mongolia 2010, 34). The majority of Mongolians that I

spoke to in 2009 and 2010, including those who did not consider themselves to be Buddhists, visited temples anywhere from once a week to once a year. All but one of the lay Buddhists I spoke to visited temples at least once a year, with most visiting around the Lunar New Year (Mong. *Tsagaan Sar*) when it is believed to be auspicious to have prayers read for prosperity in the coming year. Though there was a diverse range of exegeses that accompanied visits to the temples there was a circumscribed set of activities that characterised temple visits. All the people I spoke to from amongst my group of interlocutors who irregularly visited temples but identified as Buddhist did one or more of the following activities. These were: paying for prayers to be chanted, seeking guidance from lamas, watching chanting and other rituals, the circumambulation of the temples or religious objects, spinning prayer wheels, giving seed to birds, lighting candles, and enjoying the ambience of the temple.

Whilst activities at the temples fell within a range of prescribed ritual actions, the religious exegeses of lay Buddhists were highly divergent. Most lay Buddhists did not frequent religious spaces where doctrinal education was a key component. Many openly discussed their own religious ignorance, which was generative of hope, enthusiasm, anxiety and reverence (for further discussion see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015). When I asked about concepts such as enlightenment (*gegeerel*), the Buddha (*burhan*), and life after death, my interlocutors revealed a broad range of interpretations often improvised from information collected from a combination of trusted friends and family, and Buddhist and non-Buddhist sources (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2012).

The majority of the laypeople I spoke to said that getting prayers read by lamas was an important part of their visit to a temple. Inside most temples was a booth or shop where visitors could make a donation or pay a set price for prayers to be chanted by lamas. The appropriate ‘book’ (Mong. *nom*) was chosen as a result of advice from friends or family, personal choice or a recommendation from a lama or other religious specialist. Some of the people I spoke to did not mind paying a set price for prayers, whilst others expressly avoided temples with fixed prices. When I visited the main temple Gandantegchenling Hiid with a friend to have prayers read for the coming year during Tsagaan Sar, the room that I entered to pay for prayers had the appearance of a small but bustling shop. As it was the Lunar New Year the room was full of people all waiting to choose their prayers from the price list attached to the wall. After the usual jostling that accompanied many of my busier Mongolian shopping experiences I chose prayers that had been recommended to me by my friend’s mother and ordered them from the lama dressed in yellow sitting behind the counter. After I paid the fixed price he printed off a receipt with my husband’s and my names on it along with the prices of each prayer and the total for all the prayers that we had ordered. He advised that the chanting itself was to be carried out on the following day inside one of the temples, which contained a reading room full of chanting lamas (Mong. *hural*). Alongside the counters set up for purchasing prayers was a place to buy incense (Mong. *arts*) and blessed water (Mong. *arshaan*). In the words of a friend, Nergüi, who irregularly visited three different temples:

The monks read the books [*nom unshih*].³ So we tell them what kind of things we want them to read and so they read it. Sometimes they read it in front of us and then just go around and see the god statue and pray over there [and] get some *arts* [incense]. And what else? And then there’s drinking the pure water, *arshaan*. Basically you smell the incense and then you also get the pure *arshaan*. . . and then you drink it.

When I asked Nergüi what the benefits of getting prayers read by lamas were he replied:

If there is like a devil and if there is any obstacles spiritually blocking your path... then I believe those prayers, they can kind of unlock those obstacles and then they can help you, assist you moving along.

The majority of my interlocutors who infrequently attended temples believed that prayers had positive effects in this life. Out of the 21 people from this sample that I formally interviewed only one person did not like having prayers read at the temple. This was, she said, because many people visited temples to alleviate the results of wrongdoing and the temples had become full of negative 'energy' (*energi*) – an increasingly popular concept in Mongolia (see Højer 2012). All my other interlocutors valued having prayers read especially if they thought that they were being read by a trusted lama or in a recommended temple. Two of my interviewees thought that the positive effect of having prayers read was due only to a psychological or placebo effect. Altogether 17 of my interlocutors answered with confidence that the lamas themselves caused the positive effect and three of these thought that getting prayers read had an effect only if a person also believed in the efficacy of prayers. One person said that she was unsure if it had an effect but felt that she must have prayers read as a kind of obligation. Others described a feeling of lifting something heavy off themselves – that they felt 'lighter' or better after having prayers read. For most of the interviewees there was the sense that the prayers had cleared obstacles, in the way that Nergüi describes above.

When I asked lay Buddhists what they thought happened after the prayers were read, some people believed that the action of the lama reading the prayer itself had a very powerful and positive effect. Narangerel, a young woman in her early twenties:

My sister burned from like here, the back side, with hot water and then she was staying in the hospital and for a few days she wasn't able to walk. And then my mum went to the lama to ask him to pray for her younger daughter. She was in hospital, and then that lama read some prayers for my sister and then my mum and myself came into the hospital and I saw one girl and then she was walking with new boots. And those shoes (actually my mum bought for my sister) and then I told my mother, 'oh these shoes are the same like my sister's'. And then she said 'yes it's the same'... and then we looked up and it was my sister. She was running and then the mother of her roommate was saying 'your sister was running all day almost'. Oh my gosh! That lama read very good prayers for my sister, some of them helped her.

This is a common trend in the interviews I conducted: that the power of the prayer, rather than the donation to the temple, was responsible for the positive effect. None of the people who irregularly visited temples suggested that the act of giving itself caused positive effect. Furthermore, only one person from the group who regularly attended global Buddhist centres suggested that the giving might be the root of efficacy, and then only obliquely.

Who is a 'real' lama?

Concerns about making donations to temples, when they were expressed, tended to centre around the lamas to whom donations were being made. As donations were made for specific services, some lay Buddhists were concerned about whether the lamas were properly motivated and were able to carry out their ritual tasks in a way that would be

efficacious. Most of my interlocutors distinguished between lamas who were trusted or unknown to them but thought to be good, and those whose motivations or training were thought to be insufficient. To understand these criticisms, I will first describe some of the discussions and controversies relating to Mongolian lamas.

Majer (2009, 57) estimates that in 2008 there were around 1000 lamas in Ulaanbaatar and that 660 of these were affiliated with the two largest temples. Throughout my interviews there was a lot of discussion about what constituted a ‘real’ male or female lama. Partly because of the ‘domestication’ of religion during the socialist period – a term coined by Dragadze (1993) to describe the process whereby practices disallowed in the public sphere were continued, albeit in different forms, in secret in the private sphere – the majority of Mongolian lamas do not follow full monastic vows (Majer and Teleki 2008). After 1990 many old men who had been part of monasteries as young men before the socialist period once again identified as lamas, shaved their heads and started to wear robes. These lamas had been forced to disrobe and marry during the 1930s and when they again became lamas they already headed households (see also Humphrey and Ujeed 2013, for discussions of a similar phenomenon in Inner Mongolia). Some of these lamas had been practising in secret during the socialist period and they saw no contradiction between being a Buddhist lama and maintaining a family. These lamas took on students who, following their teachers’ examples, often had a girlfriend or a wife and practised as lamas.

Because of a lack of temple resources, most lamas cannot live inside the temple where they work and live like any householder after working hours (Majer 2009). When public institutions reopened, whilst Buddhist practitioners were able to practise in the public sphere most maintained their domestic connections. While some Mongolian lamas do follow extensive Buddhist vows it is common practice for lamas to have wives or girlfriends and to participate in other activities common amongst laypeople. Some Mongolians see this as a unique quality of Mongolian Buddhism whilst others see it as part of a transition period in which Buddhist institutions are rebuilding after the socialist period (Jadamba and Schittich 2010).

At the same time as local Buddhist practitioners became public lamas, international Buddhist organisations connected to the Tibetan diaspora came to Mongolia with the hope of ‘reforming’ and helping to spread Buddhism in Mongolia. There are several international Buddhist organisations in operation in Mongolia and these often send Mongolian lamas to India or Nepal to receive a comprehensive Buddhist education and to learn to live within strict monastic vows. Some of these organisations prioritise lay education and charity, such as the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). Others, such as Bakula Rinpoche’s monastic legacy Betöv Hiid and the FPMT’s Dara Eh Hiid, stress monastic education and discipline. Over the summer months numerous Tibetan Rinpoches and respected foreign teachers visit Mongolia to give teachings to lay Buddhists and lamas and to conduct tantric initiations. Some Theravada monks, who have taken an interest in the growth of Buddhism in Mongolia, visit the country at various times in the year.

From the perspective of global Buddhist organisations, predominantly Gelugpa, those amongst the Mongolian *saṃgha* who do not follow monastic vows have had their lineages severed during the socialist period and need to obey strict monastic rules in order to rejoin the global Buddhist *saṃgha*. Traditionally in the Tibetan Buddhist *saṃgha* there are a number of different types of religious vows that monastics take. The first, which young novices take upon entering a monastery, consists of the five basic *genen* or *genenmaa* vows, which can also be taken by a layperson. These are injunctions against sexual misconduct, theft, intoxicants, harmful speech and killing. Taking additional vows and

taking on a religious name can reinforce these vows if the young novice chooses. After this monastics can become a *getsel* or a *getselmaa* (for women) by taking ten precepts and then can become fully ordained as a *gelen* after taking 253 precepts or a *gelenmaa* (for women) after taking 364 (Majer and Teleki 2008).

In Mongolia lamas do not necessarily observe these vows (Majer and Teleki 2008; see also Humphrey and Ujeed 2013 for Inner Mongolia). In their survey, Majer and Teleki found that only *gelen* lamas observed celibacy and most *getsel* lamas did not, even though the *getsel* vows prescribe it.

Married *getsel* “lamas” are so common that it is often said that there is a different interpretation of the vows in Mongolia to the extent that it is not necessarily considered to be a case of breaking the vows to be married. (Majer and Teleki 2008)

From their research they estimate that 70–80% of lamas do not strictly observe the monastic *getsel* vows. In High’s recent study on rural lamas in Uyanga (High 2013) her rural interlocutors believed that the urban lamas in Ulaanbaatar followed stricter monastic vows than those in the countryside. Whilst this may be true, a number of urban lamas estimated that the rate of adult lamas who had girlfriends or wives was at about 80–90%.

Whilst I knew male and female lamas who had taken extensive vows and were serious about their ordination, for many Mongolians being a lama is quite like any other job. Outside work hours they take off their robes and behave as any other Mongolian does after work. Some lamas have day jobs and practise as lamas at weekends or when they are asked by family, friends or acquaintances to conduct rituals in people’s homes. One lama who had studied in India, with whom I had acquaintance, fell in love and consequently decided to disrobe. His family members, who saw no contradiction in being a lama and getting married, were confused by his decision and still cannot understand why he became a layperson. Most male and female lamas live in residential situations almost identical to laypeople. They may live with their parents, their teacher or their wife (or husband) and children.

Some Mongolian lamas who are married maintain that they are following the Mongolian variant of Buddhism (rather than the Tibetan one). Many do not openly discuss their personal lives. Others, especially those who have been influenced by global forms of Buddhism, argue that Mongolian lamas who are in breach of monastic vows should not wear Buddhist robes. These monastic discussions have an influence on laypeople’s ideas about how a ‘real’ lama should behave. The central concerns that laypeople expressed were based on celibacy, the consumption of alcohol, education, money, whether or not their lineage allowed women to become monastics and whether they were following Mongolian tradition. Lay Buddhists often told me that a person wasn’t a ‘real’ lama because he was married, had a girlfriend or drank alcohol. I heard complaints about religious rituals being conducted in people’s homes where the payment for the service was food and alcohol.

Not everyone thought that keeping extensive vows was a central problem for Buddhist religious specialists. One friend told me that in the ‘yellow religion’ (Gelugpa; Mong. *Sharyn Shashin*) it was traditional for the lamas to get married and that it was in the ‘red religion’ (Mong. *Ulaan Shashin*), an overlapping term which is often used to describe all other traditions including the Nyingma school (see Havnevik, Ragchaa, and Bareja-Starzynska 2007), that lamas were celibate. Confusions about the rules that lamas were supposed to follow often came up in discussions about ‘red’ and ‘yellow’ lamas. One of

my interlocutors, Batbayer, told me that he didn't respect the 'red' Buddhists because they allowed women to become lamas.

There are two kinds of Buddhist theory in Mongolia, 'red' and 'yellow'. Mine is 'yellow' Buddhist. In 'red' it is different they can have nuns. In my mind it is not possible, it is not good. Lamas must be men. For girls it is hard, meditation is hard. Especially when they visit the mountain and stay for a long time it is hard. Meditation is not good for ladies.

Another common criticism that emerged from interviews was about the level of education of the lamas. In the words of Sarangarel,

When we see that there are nowadays so many lamas, maybe some people will think 'ah Buddhism is developing in Mongolia'. But in the real case so many lamas does not mean it's developing. I'm a meteorologist, I have to learn so many things about meteorology. They are a lama they have to know about Buddhism. Everything, not only one little boy in lama's clothes, it is not Buddhism.

Other lay Buddhists complained that because of low levels of education for lamas most did not understand what they were reading because the prayers are written and chanted in Tibetan. Some said that they had seen lamas skipping through texts that they assumed they should be reading and one told me that he thought that many lamas didn't really focus on what they were reading and were probably thinking about women or troubles they were having at home.

Overall, the contemporary practices of Mongolian lamas are largely a product of historical, cultural and economic forces. The controversial practices of the majority of Mongolian lamas are the results of the domestication of religion that occurred during the socialist period. Contemporary practices that dominate temples have also arisen in part because of limited resources and economic imperatives that temples face.

Capitalism, tax and charity

The other major critiques of Buddhist institutions and lamas centre on fiscal imperatives. Many of my interlocutors referenced the transition to capitalism as a reason to distrust religious specialists including Buddhists. Some were suspicious that lamas may have chosen their profession because of economic incentives instead of being motivated by their desire to help people (see also Buyandelger 2007). The government's taxation of religious institutions and the visibility of the charitable works of Christian organisations add to the feeling that Buddhist institutions are becoming too economically oriented and are not doing enough for the Mongolian public.

In the 1992 Constitution Buddhism was not sanctioned by the state as the national religion (Rossabi 2005, 191). Like Islam in Central Asian countries (Peyrouse 2007), Buddhism in Mongolia is mobilised by political parties to fulfil a nationalist agenda but is treated by the government with caution because it contains a potent alternative political locus. In contrast to Western countries where churches are generally given tax-exempt status, officially in Mongolia all religious organisations have to be registered with the government and the salaries of lamas are taxed. Whilst only half of the temples that Teleki and Majer recorded in their research were registered, it is the government, and not Gandantegchenling Hiid or any other Buddhist authority, that decides whether or not a temple is allowed to operate (Majer 2009, 56). The government requires regular checks of foreign religious visitors and workers to ensure that all their visa requirements are met. In

2015 the price of registering a foreigner for a visa to work as part of a religious organisation per year had risen to 4 million *tögrög* (approximately US\$2000). To control the growth of religious organisations and create revenue, the government taxes all religious institutions. Temples have to pay property taxes and social security, and lamas pay an income tax if they receive a salary from the temple. A few of my interlocutors identified these taxes as the reason that some temples have elected to put up price lists for prayers.

The creation of revenue through reading prayers also means that whilst some temples are poor, others are relatively wealthy. Temples often pay lamas' salaries from a central pool of donations that are collected by the temple. In 2009 one lama estimated that most lamas get paid a very small monthly salary of around 60,000 *tögrög* a month. At the time of my fieldwork the average wage was an already low 200,000 *tögrög* a month. A couple of lamas explained that this lack of income was the reason why some lamas appeared to be very poor and that some temples were unkempt and needed repair. Because lamas attract different rates of income for reading prayers or conducting high-profile rituals, as a result of a variety of factors ranging from temple affiliation and education to personal qualities and kin connections, there is a growing discrepancy amongst the wealth of the lamas. Whilst some make a small amount of extra income from small donations left by visitors to temples, others operating independently of temples, or as part of them, generate considerably greater extra income in the form of money or consumables by carrying out services in people's homes or businesses or by doing astrological readings, amongst other activities.

The process of paying for prayers was the most criticised characteristic of Mongolian Buddhism by my interlocutors and many laypeople told me that they did not like to visit temples where there was a price list for prayers. My friend Nergüi said

It's becoming like a business now, that's what I really don't like about going to monasteries at the moment. Because I know that they are helping people and so on, going to houses and driving their own cars and everything it's just not what it's about, it doesn't feel right. It just looks like a business ... Ideally ... I want to see monasteries that is very, very peaceful to visit and very calm, where I can stay calm and you know really concentrate on what I'm trying to pray because that's what a spiritual place is all about.

This idea that temples should be a place of quietude was shared by a number of my interlocutors. This perceived lack of any quiet place to pray may be due to the times of year that many lay Buddhists visit temples. Many told me that they visited once a year in the busy period after the Lunar New Year, when the temples can indeed feel quite overcrowded and bustling. Because of the number of people lining up to order their prayers the atmosphere of the prayer shops where people make their donations, which is the primary interface for many lay Buddhists, can at this time of the year appear very mercantile.

A number of my interlocutors worried that some people became lamas because of financial imperatives and that they did not really care about their respected role as religious specialists. My interlocutor Tsevelmaa said

Ten years, fifteen years, twenty years ago the monks really didn't think about the money. It was cheaper. You had to give some money but it was cheaper. And they don't look at the money they'd look at the people how to help them away from the suffering. Now, and I'm sorry if I am wrong, most of the monks look at making money. Parents think of their boys becoming a monk because it is good business.

In Mongolia there are taboos surrounding making money as a religious specialist, as making money from other people's suffering is widely believed to carry negative energy (Buyandelger 2013; Højer 2012). Whilst some Mongolians believe that wealthy religious specialists have proven their power and capacities through their wealth (Buyandelger 2013) those who are seen to be overtly fiscally oriented are viewed with suspicion.

The globally funded FPMT supports two of the educational temples at Gandantegchenling Hiid so that they can feed their lamas lunch. As they don't have enough donations to feed them breakfast and dinner the lamas have to return home to eat in the evenings. My interlocutor Oyunchimeg said

I wonder sometimes, who is the real monk? You know I think that that is important, to be a real monk. I don't know if the number will increase because there are not very good conditions in the monasteries ... to really practise and to live in your ordination and in your vows and to stay in the monastery. I think financially and all the conditions are just not there. And that is why I don't think that the number will increase much. I really hope that the quality of the monks will increase.

Very few of the temples have residential quarters for lamas or female lamas, and this means that it is very difficult for lamas to live within strict monastic vows. For some Mongolians that I spoke to this is seen as a unique variant following Mongolian tradition, but for others it is a point of contention.

Conclusion

The contemporary situation of Mongolian temples in Ulaanbaatar is far removed from their position in presocialist life. Temples are no longer inextricably tied up with the day-to-day lives of laypeople. People now choose whether or not they will donate to them, and when or if they will seek out religious rituals, astrological readings or more continuous educational practices. Buddhist temples are options amongst a plethora of new or newly revived religions in the capital. The compulsory donations of the presocialist period have now been replaced by the idea of paying for ritual services.

The idea of *dāna* as an important means by which one makes merit, or through which one furthers soteriological or karmic aims, was not present amongst my urban lay interlocutors. Instead, lamas were seen as having a valued occupation, providing services for which they should be financially recompensed. With its historical and contemporary contingencies, Mongolian Buddhism presents an interesting variant on patterns of gift-giving in Buddhist societies.

Because of limited temple resources most lamas live outside temples, and following on from trends from the socialist era, their lives outside the temple look much like those of other Mongolians. Most pay for their own food and housing and support their families. Adding to the weak boundaries between laypeople and lamas is the fact that their salaries, like any others, are taxed by the government. This means that many temples have opted to record fiscal transactions in a methodical way. In the case of Gandantegchenling Hiid they have a set price list and print receipts for donations.

Many of my interlocutors said that whilst they enjoyed the process of having prayers read and thought that they were efficacious they did not like the feeling that they were entering a shop when they were ordering prayers to be read. This was seen by some to undermine the religious ambience associated with visiting a temple. The apparently fiscal

nature of this practice is a key factor contributing to the general feeling that lamas are professionals fulfilling a specific service role.

Most of the donors I spoke to believed that supporting lamas was a positive thing to do because the chanting that they carried out was believed to have real-world effects. The benefit for laypeople in paying for prayers is in the efficacy of the prayers, rather than in the merit of giving the gift. This is a transactional religious exchange, though one which is not free from tensions surrounding the fiscal realities of religious organisations and Mongolians' expectations of what constitutes an authentic religious specialist.

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 13th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies and at a pre-field presentation as part of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology's weekly seminars on Resilience and Transformation in Eurasia. I would like to thank the participants in these presentations for their helpful feedback. My gratitude goes to the research group Buddhist Temple Economies in Urban Asia for the stimulating discussions about Buddhist gift-giving. Thanks also to my husband Shultz Abrahms-Kavunenkenko for discussions regarding this paper and to my doctoral supervisors Victoria Burbank and Debra McDougall for their support and mentoring during my doctoral candidature.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. *Lam* (lama) is the word used to refer to Buddhist robed religious specialists irrespective of whether or not they keep extensive monastic vows. As this is the local term I will use 'lama' or 'female lama' rather than 'monk' or 'nun' to describe these Mongolian Buddhist religious specialists. Where the term 'monk' is used in the Mongolian context instead of 'lama' this is because the informant used the term: some of the interviews were carried out in English.
2. As female Buddhist religious specialists are relatively rare and categorised differently from male lamas, in this article I focus on lay attitudes towards male lamas.
3. In Mongolian the reading of prayers by lamas is often called *nom unshih* (literally, book reading). As this interview was carried out in English I have put the Mongolian term in brackets to clarify the intended meaning.

Notes on contributor

Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenkenko is a research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), Germany. She is currently working on a research project 'New Buddhist economies in Mongolia: accrual, dispersal and the vicissitudes of wealth' as part of the research group Buddhist Temple Economies in Urban Asia. Her recent publications include 'Religious "Revival" after Socialism? Eclecticism and Globalisation amongst Lay Buddhists in Ulaanbaatar', *Inner Asia*, 14(2), 2012, pp. 279–297, and 'The Blossoming of Ignorance: Uncertainty, Power and Syncretism amongst Mongolian Buddhists', *Ethnos*, 80(3), 2015, pp. 346–363.

References

- Abrahms-Kavunenkenko, S. 2012. "Religious 'Revival' after Socialism? Eclecticism and Globalisation amongst Lay Buddhists in Ulaanbaatar." *Inner Asia* 14 (2): 279–297.
- Abrahms-Kavunenkenko, S. 2015. "The Blossoming of Ignorance: Uncertainty, Power and Syncretism amongst Mongolian Buddhists." *Ethnos* 80 (3): 346–363. doi:[10.1080/00141844.2013.844193](https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2013.844193).

- Bawden, C. 1968. *The Modern History of Mongolia*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Bell, S. 1998. "British Theravada Buddhism: Otherworldly Theories, and the Theory of Exchange." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 13 (2): 149–170. doi:10.1080/13537909808580828.
- Buyandelger, M. 2007. "Dealing with Uncertainty: Shamans, Marginal Capitalism and the Remaking of History in Postsocialist Mongolia." *American Ethnologist* 34 (1): 127–147. doi:10.1525/ae.2007.34.1.127.
- Buyandelger, M. 2013. *Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory, and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
- Caple, J. 2010. "Monastic Economic Reform at Rong-bo Monastery: Towards an Understanding of Contemporary Tibetan Monastic Revival and Development in A-mdo." *Buddhist Studies Review* 27 (2): 197–219.
- Cook, J. 2010. *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dragadze, T. 1993. "The Domestication of Religion under Soviet Communism." In *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Local Practice*, edited by C. Hann, 141–151. London/New York: Routledge.
- Even, M.-D. 2011. "Ups and Downs of the Divine: Religion and Revolution in 20th Century Mongolia." In *Proceedings of the Third International Symposium "The Book. Romania. Europa"*, edited by A. Berciu, R. Pop, and J. Rotaru, 627–644. Bucharest: Bibliothèque Métropolitaine de Bucarest.
- Gombrich, R. 1971. "'Merit Transference' in Sinhalese Buddhism: A Case Study of the Interaction between Doctrine and Practice." *History of Religions* 11 (2): 203–219. doi:10.1086/hr.1971.11.issue-2.
- Gravers, M. 2012. "Monks, Morality and Military: The Struggle for Moral Power in Burma – and Buddhism's Uneasy Relationship with Lay Power." *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13 (1): 1–33. doi:10.1080/14639947.2012.669278.
- Gutschow, K. 2004. *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas*. Cambridge MA/ London: Harvard University Press.
- Havnevik, H., B. Ragchaa, and A. Bareja-Starzynska. 2007. "Some Practices of the Buddhist Red Tradition in Contemporary Mongolia." In *The Mongolia–Tibet Interface: Opening New Research Terrains in Inner Asia*, edited by U. Bulag and H. Diemberger, 223–237. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- Heim, M. 2003. "The Aesthetics of Excess." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71 (3): 531–554. doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfg076.
- Heissig, W. 1980. *The Religions of Mongolia*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- High, M. 2013. "Cosmologies of Freedom and Buddhist Self-Transformation in the Mongolian Gold Rush." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19: 753–770. doi:10.1111/1467-9655.12063.
- Højer, L. 2012. "The Spirit of Business: Pawnshops in Ulaanbaatar." *Social Anthropology* 20 (1): 34–49. doi:10.1111/soca.2012.20.issue-1.
- Humphrey, C. 1992. "The Moral Authority of the Past in Post-Socialist Mongolia." *Religion, State & Society* 20 (3–4): 375–389. doi:10.1080/09637499208431566.
- Humphrey, C. 2002. "Rituals of Death as a Context for Understanding Personal Property in Socialist Mongolia." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8: 65–87. doi:10.1111/1467-9655.00099.
- Humphrey, C., and H. Ujeed. 2013. *A Monastery in Time: The Making of Mongolian Buddhism*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Jadamba, L., and B. Schittich. 2010. "Negotiating Self and Other: Transnational Cultural Flows and the Reinvention of Mongolian Buddhism." *Internationales Asienforum* 41 (1–2): 83–102.
- Kaplonski, C. 2004. *Truth, History and Politics in Mongolia: The Memories of Heroes*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Kaplonski, C. 2014. *The Lama Question: Violence, Sovereignty and Exception in Early Socialist Mongolia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Laidlaw, J. 2000. "A Free Gift Makes No Friends." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6 (4): 617–634. doi:10.1111/1467-9655.00036.
- Lattimore, O. 1962. *Nomads and Commissars: Mongolia Revisited*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Majer, Z. 2009. "Buddhism in Mongolia Today: Introduction." *Silk Road* 7: 51.

- Majer, Z., and K. Teleki. 2008. "Survey of Active Temples in Ulaanbaatar in 2005 – 2006, with Some Annotations in 2007." <http://www.mongoliantemples.org/index.php/en/2014-07-01-06-34-46/2014-07-01-06-44-08>.
- Mills, M. 2003. *Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism: The Foundations of Authority in Gelukpa Monasticism*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Moses, L. 1977. *The Political Role of Mongolian Buddhism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Asia Studies Research Institute.
- National Statistical Office of Mongolia. 2010. "Mongolia – Population and Housing Census 2010." <http://catalog.ihsn.org/index.php/catalog/4572>.
- Peyrouse, S. 2007. "Islam in Central Asia: National Specificities and Postsoviet Globalisation." *Religion, State & Society* 35 (3): 245–260. doi:10.1080/09637490701458676.
- Rossabi, M. 2005. *Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sagaster, K. 2007. "The History of Buddhism Among the Mongols." In *The Spread of Buddhism*, edited by A. Heirman and S. Bumbacher, 379–432. Boston: Brill.
- Samuels, J. 2007. "Monastic Patronage and Temple Building in Contemporary Sri Lanka: Caste, Ritual, Performance and Merit." *Modern Asian Studies* 41 (4): 769–795. doi:10.1017/S0026749X06002502.
- Sihlé, N. Forthcoming. "Towards a Comparative Anthropology of the Buddhist Gift (and Other Transfers)." *Religion Compass*.
- Southwold, M. 1983. *Buddhism in Life: The Anthropological Study of Religion and the Sinhalese Practice of Buddhism*. Manchester/Dover, NH: Manchester University Press.
- Spiro, M. 1984. *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*. Berkeley: University of California Press.