

A Study of Tibetan Buddhism in Kalmykia: Reform or Revival

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Abstract : The anti-religious campaigns of the Soviet Union in the 1930s eradicated Kalmyk Buddhism from the public sphere. Following Perestroika, the Kalmyks retained a sense of being essentially Buddhist people. Nevertheless, since the collapse of the Soviet Communist regime, Kalmykia has been going through vigorous ethnic and cultural revitalization. The new Kalmyk government is reviving the religion with the building of Buddhist temples and the attempted training of Kalmyk monks. Kalmykia, officially an autonomous republic within the Federation of Russia, is situated in the European part of Russia in the steppe region bordering the Caspian Sea in its southeast. According to the 2010 census, the Kalmyks, a people of Mongolian origin, constitute over 57 percent of the Republic's population of less than 290000. Russians living in Kalmykia comprise around 30 percent, the remainder being various Slavic and Asian groups. Since the Kalmyks historically adhere to Buddhism, Kalmykia is often described in tourist brochures and proudly by the Kalmyks themselves as one of the three "traditional Buddhist republics" of Russia and "the only Buddhist region" in Europe. According to traditional Kalmyk Gelug Buddhism, monasticism is the central aspect; hence monastic Tibetans from India have been invited to the Republic to help revive Buddhism and their Buddhist identity in Russia as a whole. However, for the young post-soviets, the monastic way of life is proving too alien, and the subsequent labeling by these monks of 'surviving' Kalmyk Buddhist practices as superstitious, mistaken, or corrupt is an initial step in the purification of alternate views, leading to religious reform. This sentiment is also felt by younger Kalmyks who do not find sense in surviving Buddhism but believe more in the philosophical approach of Buddhism taught by the visiting Buddhist teachers at Dharma centers. By discussing this post-soviet shift in local notions of religious efficacy, an attempt will be made to shed light on how the social movements of both reform and revival arise as a collusion between contemporary Tibetan and Kalmyk views on the nature of true Buddhism. This work explores aspects of religious innovation that have developed since the early 1990s in the process of reconstitution of ethnic and religious identity in Kalmykia, a Republic in the southwest of Russia. Any attempts to study the history of Buddhism in Kalmykia would surely mean studying the "History of the most northern Dharma community in the World."

Keywords : Kalmykia, Tibetan Buddhism, reform, revival, identity

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