

Öndör Gegen Zanabazar and his Role in the Mongolian Culture

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In the seventeenth century, Inner Asia witnessed a struggle of armies and ideologies. There was competition between the Manchu Empire and tsarist Russia for greater influence in Inner Asia. It was also a question of whether Tibet and the newly formed Oirat Khaganate would be able to counterbalance them. The territorial dividedness of Halha-Mongolia and the ongoing civil war made it unambiguous that the descendants of the world-conquering Mongols of the thirteenth century could play only a subordinate role in this game. After the collapse of the Great Mongol Empire, the eastern Mongolian territories were divided for three centuries, with only the short intermission of the relatively stable rule of Batu Möngke. The foundation of the Mongolian Buddhist Church in the seventeenth century coincides with this not so prosperous era of Mongolian history.

Öndör Gegen, who is known as the founder of the Mongol Buddhist Church, was an active participant in these events. Besides spreading Buddhism, he made indisputable steps to conserve the Mongol traditions and with their help to protect the cultural and social integrity of Mongol society. From the second half of the seventeenth century, the foundation of the Buddhist church gave an opportunity for the Mongols to preserve their cultural identity even during the Manchu occupation despite the unifying efforts of the Empire, and later it was an indispensable condition of their political independence, too. Let me now show the innovations which played an important role in the everyday life of the Mongols and which nowadays can be considered as traditional in the resurrection of Mongolian Buddhism.

Öndör Gegen's role in the history of Mongolian art and of Mongolian Buddhism has already been presented in detail, in the biographies which are also the main sources of this paper. Three important texts should be mentioned here:

- (1) A biography written in the Tibetan language by Zaja Pandita Blo-bzang-'phrin-las in 1702, when Öndör Gegen was still alive.
- (2) A biography written in 1839 by Ngag-gi-dbang-po, also in the Tibetan language.

(3) A Mongol version written in 1859 that was partly based on translations of the previously mentioned works, published by Ch. Bawden in 1961.¹

Brief biography of the first Jebtsundampa

Öndör Gegen was born the second son of Tüsiyetü khan Gombodorji of the Khalkha Left Wing on the 25th day of the ninth month of the year of the wooden boar (1635) at a place called Yisün Jüül. His father was a descendant of Jinggisi khan. His grandfather was Abatai Sain Khan, whose grandfather was Geresenje, the founder of all the Khalkha princely houses. Abadai is well-known as the founder of the Erdeni Juu monastery in the summer of 1585. He was the first to introduce Tibetan Buddhism into the Khalkha territories.

At the age of four (in 1638), Öndör Gegen became a pious layman *gelong*² under Jambal³ lam. His name thereafter was Zanabazar (Sanskrit *Ānāvajra*).⁴ The word *dzana* derived from Sanskrit $\sqrt{ज्ञ}$ or knowledge and wisdom. *Bazar* means *Vajra* or thunderbolt. Thus, according to its Sanskrit version, in English the name means, "A thunderbolt of wisdom".

In the year of the yellow hare (1639) Dzanabdzar was promoted to the head of the Mongolian Buddhist religion. This appointment of a new head of a united religious leadership was of great importance for the further development of Buddhism.

Being anxious to study, Zanabazar left Khalkha-Mongolia for Tibet. On his way to Tibet, he visited many monasteries where Tsong-kha-pa, the founder of the Geluk school lived. He made a pilgrimage to such famous monasteries as Kumbum (Tibetan *Sku-'bum*), Sera (Tibetan *Se-ra*), Galdan (Tibetan *Dga'-ldan*), and received consecration as a novice *gecul*⁵ from the Pnachen lama himself at the monastery of Tasilhumpo (Tibetan *Bkra-shis-lhum-po*). Upon reaching Lhasa, Öndör Gegen was granted an audience with the fifth Dalai lama (1617-1682). Thereafter he was recognized as a reincarnation of Rje-btsun Tāranātha Kun-dga'-snyim-po (Mong. *Gunganyambo*, who lived 1575-1634).⁶ After this he became the first Jebtsundamba⁷ of Khalkha-Mongolia, the head of the Mongolian Buddhist Church.

Tāranātha, always called *rje-btsun* ("revered sir"), was born in 1575 and grew up to be a monk of high virtue in the Jo-nang Sect.⁸ He is famous in the history of

¹ Ch. Bawden, *The Jebtsundampa khutughtus of Uрга*. Wiesbaden 1961.

² Tib. *dge-slong*, or *genyen* (Tib. *dge-bsnyen*).

³ Mong. *Blam-a Ĵmbalig, khal. Ĵambal lam*. Tib. *Byams-pa-gling No-mon khan*.

⁴ Tib. *Ye-shes rdo-rje, halha Išdorj*.

⁵ Tib. *dge-tshul*.

⁶ He was not the first incarnation in this line. Zs. Szilágyi, *Manchu-Mongol Diplomatic Correspondence 1635-1896. Treasures of Mongolian Culture and Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism*, Vol. 1. ed. G. Bethlenfalvy. State Central Library of Mongolia, Research Group for Altaic Studies, and Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest 2004.

⁷ Tib. *Rje-btsun-gdam-pa*, mong. *Jibcundamba* or *Jebcundamba*, khalkha *Ĵawjandamb*.

⁸ The jo-nang-pa was a subsect of the Sa-skya Sect.

Tibetan Buddhism for the many works written by him. He founded the Rtag-brtan-ohun-tsogs-gling monastery in 1615.

In 1651 Öndör Gegen returned from Tibet, continued his study and began to work on his creations. In the same year he laid foundations of the future *Ix xüree Gandan šadubling* with the establishment of a Buddhist Centre by the advice of the Dalai lama and the Panchen lama.

In 1662 an internal war broke out in the Khalkha Right Wing. A powerful lord of the Khalkhas, Erenchin tayiji, attacked and killed Vangchugh Jasaghtu Khan, his kinsman and overlord. Thereupon other lords of the Right Wing, with reinforcements from Chaghundurji Tüsiyetü Khan, attacked Erinchin, who escaped from his base. A civil war was thus unleashed in the Khalkha-Mongol territory. In this struggle, the Oirat Khaganate sided with the Jasaghtu, and the Manchus sided with the Tüsiyetü, so that the conflict turned into an international problem. In 1690 Galdan's attacks endangered the whole Khalkha territory, and also there was an impending danger of losing their independence. The Tüsiyetü khan was not able to resist them alone, so he was obliged to ask for help from outside the borders of Khalka territory.

Öndör Gegen himself supported the Manchu orientation instead of the Russian, as can be proved by the following quotations:

Tsarist Russia, the land of white people, is a great and stable empire, but the people are different from the Mongols, our religion is not recognized there. The empire to the south is even greater and quieter, they have the same religion as us. The Manchurian country and people are rich. So, if we apply to the south, our country will be rescued, the people will be blissful.⁹

We have enjoyed the benevolence of the Imperial Court in the greatest manner. Suppose we go over to the Russians seeking refuge from the war. But the Russians, in the first place, do not believe in Buddha, and their customs are not like ours: they have different speech and different dress. It will certainly not be a strategy for an everlasting peace. Rather, we should move inside bringing the whole tribe along and surrender ourselves to the Great Emperor from the bottom of our hearts. Then we may get a blessing for ten thousand years.

Well I think that the Manchu Emperor of the East is a specially intelligent and cultivated person. We, the Khalkha-Mongols send envoys to you, the "Ruler of the State of Ten-Thousand Tranquilities", with respect and with the clear intention to offer the Nine White Presents of our country to you, and promise to be your servants. The Khalkha-Mongols will be rich and will develop and reach complete happiness. It is written in the Prophecies.¹⁰

From 1921 in Mongolia it was almost obligatory to reject the Chinese orientation that is why this point of view was negatively interpreted by the Mongol historians who worked before the change of regime. Öndör Gegen's lifework, being

⁹ Ё. Їoinxor, *Öndör Gegen Janabajar*. Ulaanbaatar 1995, 133.

¹⁰ Zs. Szilágyi, *The beginning of the modern Mongolian State*. (PhD dissertation) ELTE University, Budapest 2005.

mainly in Mongolian Buddhist art, was not important from the political point of view, so it was acceptable by the official ideology and was tolerated at a certain level, as much as was possible during the Soviet era in the middle of the twentieth century. This meant, however, that his art-work and its effect on the Mongols' identity-consciousness or on the survival of Mongol cultural independence were not discussed.

Öndör Gegen's main scope of activities

Öndör Gegen made great efforts to preserve Mongolian traditions even during the Manchu regime. He worked to spread the thesis of Buddhism, writing commentaries and teaching his disciples, but also made many regulations concerning the general sacred rituals, the place of the worship, ceremonial customs, etiquette of the lamas' behavior, the life of the priests and believers, and also concerning the clothing of lamas and collective eating. He devoted great attention to keeping the traditional Mongol life-style and traditional clothing and promoted their survival. The style of the lamas' clothing planned by him is a good example, as both the everyday clothing of the lamas and the costumes used at ceremonies were made on the basis of characteristics of nomad clothing before the Manchu period. Ceremonies, sacral rites, prayer books, the rhythm of the ritual dance (*cam*) all play a very important role in Mongol tradition. A Buddhist symbolic system was also created, which is characteristic of the Mongol branch of Buddhism even in our days. At the same time, many of the Mongolian national symbols can be connected with him, for example, the hairstyle of married women, the welcoming rite and the cattle-brands (*tamgha*).

Öndör Gegen introduced the moral rules of the Vinaya and integrated them into the traditions of nomadic Mongols living close to nature. He revised the basic teachings so as to make them easier to obey for the Mongols and to contribute to the survival of this nation. According to his direction, all Mongol parents were obliged to give one of their sons to a monastery so that he should become a lama and study the teachings of Buddha. It became an everyday practice in the Manchu period among both subjugated families and among *noyons*. In addition to these rules, Öndör Gegen also gave directions for believers which basically contradicted the rules of the *dge-lugs-pa* sect organized by *Cong-kha-pa*. For example, Öndör Gegen suggested sending the young adult lamas back to their families so that they could start their own families, so as to increase the Mongol population, and then later, when these lamas became forty years old, they were allowed to return to the monastery and live there as lamas until their death.

It is worth mentioning that, after the change of regime at the beginning of the 1990s when Buddhism started to bloom again, the number of the lamas who had families started to grow. This is partly an effect of the Bolshevik pogroms of the late 1930s, when many lamas were forced to leave the monasteries, break their pledge and get married. That is why some lamas have a family nowadays. Society usually accepts the marriage of lamas who have attained the *gelong* degree,

however, marriage by others is condemned. The fourteenth Dalai lama, who visited Mongolia in August 2006, had the same point of view on this question.

Öndör Gegen also constructed musical instruments to be used during the Mongol Buddhist rites. He compiled the general canon of the ceremonies that has become the basis of the Mongolian Buddhist ceremonial rules and he also composed many pieces of music.

Many of the rites that are practised nowadays in the monasteries were designed by him. Let me now show some prayers and ceremonial rituals that were composed by Zanabazar:

Um lai taaya: This prayer is offered in the break of the ceremonies when food and drink are consumed. The best part of the foods and drinks are sacrificed to the Three Treasures.

Ānluw cogjol: This is an appeasing prayer written by Zanabazar at the time when inner discord and fighting made Mongolia weaker.

Puncog gusum: This is a prayer to all the Halha saints. It contains the enumeration of Öndör Gegen's earlier incarnations. Prayers important in terms of history are recited during every Buddhist ceremony.

Geleg dod gi: This is a merit-accumulating ritual written by Zanabazar himself. The prayer emphasizes the practice of virtue for others. The main virtue is mercifulness. If somebody accumulated merit then it should be used for the sake of others and that is the way people can get closer to the enlightenment. During the funeral ceremony this prayer is often asked for by the family members of the dead person.

Norow badam: This prayer is recited on the fourteenth day of every month, on the day when Zanabazar departed. This is a glorifying prayer of a very important ceremony. This sutra is recited in the monasteries according to the form of the Mongol long song. This kind of interpretation was first used by Öndör Gegen himself in his monastery.

Dasčirwa: This is a sacrificial ceremony offered to the majority, it was created by Zanabazar according to the advice of the Panchen lama. It is written in the rhythm of the limping walk of an old man carrying a leather bottle filled with *tara*g in his hand. The text of the ceremony is recited even nowadays in the monasteries according to this kind of rhythm.

There is a difference between Tibetan and Mongolian ceremonial texts, as the revised Mongol texts remind us of the traditional rhythms that can be observed in Mongolian traditional nomadic life. The author usually did not change the text of the prayer; he varied only the rhythm, and the form of the recitation. There is a prayer that reminds us of the gurgle of quick mountain rivers in its Tibetan version, but Öndör Gegen changed this prayer and made its rhythm similar to the walk of a camel.

Öndör Gegen tried to tighten the links between Buddhism and Mongolian traditions using the means of Buddhist iconography. In one of his most important portrayals, Öndör Gegen appears as the head of a nomadic family, who is dividing an *uu*j with his knife (Fig. 1.). The Buddhist representation of this important tradition on the occasion of a significant Mongolian family celebration not only

shows Öndör Gegen's high rank, but it emphasizes his being a Mongol rather than being a Buddhist lama. Preserving Mongolian traditions was more important than preserving Buddhist rules.



Figure 1. Portrait of Öndör Gegen (Zanabazar)¹¹

Zanabazar played an important role in the setting up of monasteries and temples and in particular in the establishment of the future monastery of Ix Xüree or Urga. In accordance with the Tibetan tradition, Ix Xüree was set up with seven *aimags* (tribes): Amdo aimag, Jasiin aimag, Sangga aimag, Zoogoo aimag, Xüüxen noyon aimag, Darxan emčiin aimag, and Urluud aimag.

In 1651 Öndör Gegen returned from Tibet and later, in 1654, Ix xüree moved to the forefront of the Xentii mountain in the East Khalkha territory and from 1654 to 1686, Ix Xüree was constructed and developed into a monastery with over 2,000 monks. The Khalkha khans invited Öndör Gegen to Erdeni Juu, and there he made the monastery a centre of permanent religious ceremonies, and also took part in the establishment of other temples and monasteries of Mongolia. In 1686–1697, during the years of the Oyirad-Khalkha battles, Erdeni Juu and Ix Xüree suffered serious damage, but Zanabazar repaired the buildings with offerings and catering places for lamas.

As a consequence of this kind of activity, rules and proposals of the Mongolian Buddhist Church became an indispensable and integrated part of the nomadic Mongolian society. The Church obtained an extensive acceptance so great that

¹¹ Portrait of Zanabazar (nineteenth century), Fine Arts Museum, Ulaanbaatar, reproduced in Čoinxor, *Öndör Gegen Janabazar*, 2.

it cannot have been caused only by the fact that Abatai khan and his followers made Buddhism the state religion.

While Öndör Gegen was working and living in Töwxön monastery in 1686, he created a new script, the *Soyombo*. He invented this new alphabet so that the holy languages of Buddhism, the Sanskrit, Tibetan and Mongolian could be recorded equally. However, the first mark or letter of the *Soyombo* alphabet has had a trajectory of its own, having become a component of the Mongolian State seal, which today is also the state emblem. When the independent Republic of Mongolia was declared, the *Soyombo* became the symbol of the Mongol State and its independence.

Components of the Soyombo symbol

The first three elements of the *Soyombo* symbol are the symbols for fire, the Sun and the Moon. The triangles turned upside down are symbolic of the protector of the Buddhist religion, called *choyjing*.¹² The yin-yang symbol is incorporated in the center. The meaning of the horizontal parallel lines is *sum*¹³ (arrow), and of the vertical parallel lines mean *hos shad*¹⁴ (conjugate line).

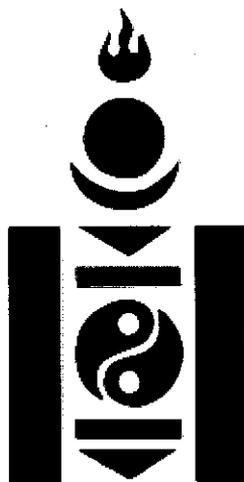


Figure 2. *The Soyombo symbol*

The *Soyombo* is the symbol of peace and freedom in the macro- as well as the micro cosmic space of the Mongols, and the Mongolian State in it. It was used as an emblem of the Theocratic Mongolian State in 1911, the Mongolian People's State in 1921, the Mongolian People's Republic State in 1924, and was recognized as the State Emblem by Constitutions of 1940, 1960 and 1992.

¹² Mong. *čoyiǰunγ*, khalkha *čoiǰing*.

¹³ Mong. *sumun*, khalkha *sum*.

¹⁴ Mong. *qoos šad*, khalkha *xos šad* (Tibetan *shad*).

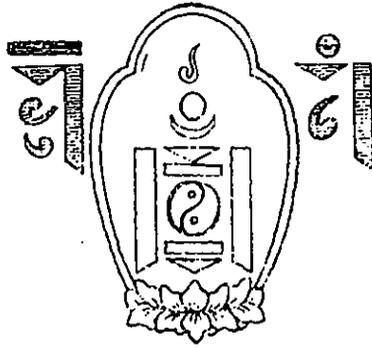


Figure 3. *Mongolian State Emblem in 1911*¹⁵

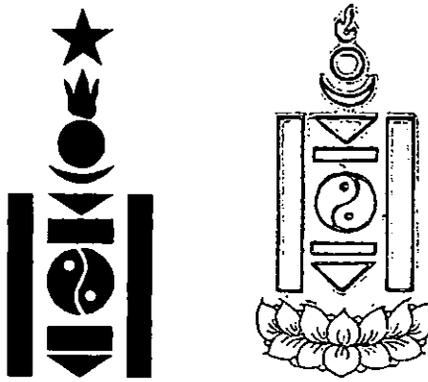


Figure 4. *Communist star-capped Soyombo symbol and Mongolian State Emblem in 1924*



Figure 5. *Mongolian State Emblem adopted in 1992*

¹⁵ Figures 3–5. U. E. Bulag, *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia*. Oxford 1998, 220, 223, 225, 248.

Conclusion

We have to emphasize that Öndör Gegen's present reputation cannot be due only to the atmosphere of the Buddhist renaissance. His activity as a religious organizer as well as an artist and his role in Mongolian history give us several examples of how, besides spreading Buddhism, he made clear steps to preserve Mongolian tradition and by this Mongolian identity, cultural and social integrity.

Öndör Gegen recognized that Mongolian independence can only survive if Mongolian people preserve their cultural identity in spite of the prevailing Chinese influence. The fact that the Mongolian language has been raised to the level of a literary language, the creation of the self-existent Mongolian Buddhist terminology, and the formation of distinctive ceremonial prayers and rituals played an important role in it. The building up of the Mongolian monastery system brought about a *de facto* administrative machinery existing side by side with the Manchurian, which united the Khalkha territories and provided the base for the proclamation of the independent Khalkha-Mongol State.

Today Jinggis khan is regarded as the symbol of the Mongolian State, while at the same time the personality of Öndör Gegen has a similar importance among Mongolian Buddhists.