

Sources of Mongolian Buddhism

Edited by

VESNA A. WALLACE

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Oral Narratives from the Early Twentieth Century

Adrienn Gecse

Introduction

The Oral History of Mongolian Buddhism (Mongolin burkhani shashni aman tūükh) is a three-volume work dedicated to the oral history of Mongolia. It contains the narrative stories that are recorded exactly as they were heard from their primary informants, who took part in the described events. The narratives were collected in various parts of the country. In the present chapter, I will introduce from these three volumes the reminiscences of the then-ninety-two-year-old G. Sükhbat of Erdenetsogt district (*sum*) of Bayankhongor Province (*aimag*).¹ The stories describe the lives of various monks, the teachers of the storyteller. The narrative is not always coherent; hence, at times it is difficult to follow the sequence of events, but this is a common occurrence in oral storytelling. There is no script to follow; the storytellers rely only on their memories. One of the protagonists cited herein, probably the most well known of them all, was Gachin² Lama, a Tibetan master. Gachin Lama became well known not only in Bogdyn Khüree, or Ikh Khüree, but also in the countryside due to his frequent travel and teaching activities outside the capital. The temple of Gachin Lama was established in 1903 in present-day Bayankhongor Province, in the center of Erdenetsogt district, in the place of the old banner of Prince (*vang*) Daichin in Sain Noyon Khan Province.³

Mongolian scholar Shagdaryn Bira notes that ancient Mongolians, similar to other peoples, possessed a rich oral history that served as the basis for written sources produced at a later stage.⁴ One of the earliest written sources that we know about Mongolian tradition of oral history comes from Rashīd al-Dīn, the well-known fourteenth-century Persian historiographer.⁵ The preservation of its heritage through oral transmission is not new in Mongolia. The monks and others have followed the traditional way of preserving their heritage in order to maintain it for future generations, as is also demonstrated by translated oral literature given later in this chapter.

Before turning our attention to the stories themselves, it is worth looking into the era that inspired their emergence. Compared to the vast knowledge accumulated in relation to many other areas of Mongolian studies, the information available about the period of the 1920s and 1930s is still relatively scarce and, most important, hardly known outside the country or the academy. The first part of the twentieth century was a period when traditional and, most of all, religious values were undermined and replaced by so-called Western principles. As the editors of the oral history note, traditional culture was considered primitive and outdated, and for this reason, it had to be eliminated.⁶ Western, scientific achievements, deemed superior, entered politics and turned the government against religion, which was perceived as nothing more than blind faith and superstition. Religion was looked upon as the main carrier of traditional Mongolian culture, and the prevailing regime was not willing to sustain that. In his *Prelude to Violence: Show Trials and State Power in 1930s Mongolia*, Chirstopher Kaplonski notes that the attack against Buddhism was to eliminate a major force that would have threatened the socialist system, for religion had been deeply intertwined with the political and economic life of the country for centuries, and with that came tremendous power.⁷ The most significant parts of tradition were wiped out from the everyday life of Mongolian people, together with oral literature. This means that the oral history of Buddhism was also forgotten, with only certain legends (*domog*) surviving. That is why the compilation in question, published by the Jebtsundamba Khutagt Center (Töv) in Ulaanbaatar, is a significant work with its large number of stories that record episodes from a dark era in Mongolia's past.

Due to the Stalinist suppression that took place between 1937 and 1939, Mongolian society was brought to the brink of collapse. As the Comintern leader Bohumír Shmeral said, "People of Mongolia are not important, the land is important. Mongolian land is larger than England, France and Germany."⁸ Religious circles suffered the biggest losses. As Jeffrey Hays put it, after Mongolia declared its independence in 1921, due to its close relation to Russia, the country sank into a status of Russian dependency for decades. In 1928, Marshall Khorloogiin Choibalsan rose to power and was responsible for the destruction of monasteries and for the execution of lamas and opposition leaders. By 1939, monasticism had ended because of regulations such as the confiscation of monastic livestock, and the imprisonment and liquidation of senior and middle-ranking monks.⁹ According to Ian Smith, one of the aims of these mainly Russian policies was to destroy Mongolian nationalism. About 3 to 5 percent of the population was killed during the purges, which means that roughly 30,000 people were executed.¹⁰ While Kaplonski writes about 36,000 dead and over 700 monasteries destroyed over a period of just eighteen months, the Arts Council of Mongolia asserts that more than 1,250 monasteries and temples were razed, together with other invaluable institutions such as libraries and medical clinics. Thus, the Soviet-backed

"Modern Mongolia" project clearly ended in tragedy.¹¹ We can see from the available sources that the numbers quoted somewhat differ, but whatever the exact numbers are in terms of lives lost and cherished values eradicated, it can be safely said that the true loss was incalculable. Until the 1990s, even Mongolians themselves were unaware of the full scale of destruction. It is no wonder then that in the West these events are still not common knowledge. The Mongolian government remembers the victims of political persecution by holding a memorial ceremony each year on September 10.¹²

The 1990s witnessed the transformation of Mongolia from a communist system to a free society; while the opportunities seemed endless, so did the challenges. These challenges included the rediscovery of traditional values, a considerable number of which were related to religion. Old monks had to be found, and ceremonies and religious arts had to be relearned by both lamas and the public. One example of a lama who has sought to reintroduce Buddhist art is Pürevbat Lama, one of the most significant representatives of Mongolian Buddhist art today. He has also at times been called the "Garbage Lama" because in order to teach his students, he collected surviving religious artifacts from ordinary people who had kept them hidden throughout the decades of repression.¹³ Similar initiatives were essential in the preservation and resuscitation of Mongolian Buddhism, for, as Glenn Mullin states, the post-Soviet Mongolian government did little or nothing in this regard. Instead, the government imposed heavy taxes on those lamas who participated in rebuilding projects. Mullin recalls the answer of Professor Robert Thurman to a question posed by a journalist who wanted to know why the professor does not do more for Mongolian Buddhism, why he promotes mostly Tibetan Buddhism in the West. Thurman's answer might have shocked those present, but it gives us a glimpse into what contemporary Mongolians generally regard as most significant about their culture. Thurman said, "Mongols have to do more, not us Westerners. Instead of always talking about the warmongers of Mongolian history, such as Chinggis Khan, you should look more to the hundreds of great wise men and sages in your history. Celebrate them in your media. The world will respond. Nobody outside of Mongolia likes Chinggis Khan. He murdered millions of innocent people."¹⁴ Of course, when analyzing this statement, we have to consider why Chinggis Khan became so important in the identity making of Mongolia, but no doubt, the name of Chinggis Khan has become synonymous with the country of Mongolia in the eyes of most Westerners, and this was made possible by an effective propaganda campaign. However, there is still space for the rediscovery and recognition of certain elements of traditional Mongolian culture. Luckily, even during the most difficult period, lamas could continue their teaching and learning either abroad through scholarships or in the country secretly within an underground movement.

Owing to the strength and persistence of both monks and laypeople, the stories included in the aforementioned publication are an important source of information about the Buddhism of the Communist period. Because most monasteries and temples were destroyed during the purges, together with precious written sources, the recollections recorded in these volumes are extremely valuable. Krisztina Teleki summarizes the archival situation in Mongolia in her survey of available Buddhist source materials, where she notes that during the destruction of monasteries from 1937 to 1938, almost all Buddhist sacred texts were burned. However, there are still surviving sources in various places in Ulaanbaatar, like the National Library of Mongolia, the Gandantegchenlin Monastery, the Archives of the National Security Service, the Ministry of War, and the National Archives. While access to some of these materials requires special permission, others are relatively freely available. Nevertheless, sources concerning monastic life have not yet been published; therefore, we still do not know the full scope of existing collections.¹⁵

It is also worth noting that due to Mongolians' nomadic lifestyle, most of Mongolian history was traditionally preserved orally. This is a natural consequence of living a migratory life in comparison to a settled way of life, on the basis of which written sources could develop at an early stage of history. In Mongolia, the importance of written sources has been significantly less than that of oral lore. Oral legends or tales (*khuuch yaria*) were kept safe in people's minds, crossing centuries and hardships. These stories tell us about the lives, customs, and beliefs of Mongols. In times of upheaval and even in times of stability in Mongolia, it has not been uncommon that the significance of oral literature has grown. There is need for a hero, a savior, and for a vision of a better future. In this social and political context, local history and related stories become part of the resistance in Mongolia, consciously or unconsciously, and for this reason they often stay hidden from the wider public. They do not get written down, and they emerge to the surface and become more widely known only after the passing of the danger to which they were originally a response. In this case, the transmitters of these stories were the monks who provided hope for the return of a past that is often idealized. Such lamas took on added importance in the efforts to revitalize Buddhism and Buddhist identity in post-Soviet Mongolia.

Translated Texts

"Hey, Narrow-Eyed Tibetan! Take Your Own Sheep!"

My father's name was Muguid Genden. He was herding Master Gachin sheep. "Take a few rams and come!" Thus Gachin master spoke one day, and off my father went, taking some animals with him from the many sheep belonging to the

coal mine of Bayanteeg, and he soon arrived at the Tuin River. It was late autumn, when the Tuin River has not yet fully frozen. Nevertheless, there was not a [single] sheep that would have crossed the river. The sheep hardly saw anything of the river and would not go down to the water. At that time, the river was in bad shape, covered with a thin layer of ice. Because the animals would not enter the river, my father fumed and cursed his master in this way: "Oh, you narrow-eyed Tibetan, take your own sheep!" Then, a black-eyed ram got to its feet and entered the river; every other sheep followed suit and went into the water. The herd went straight to the monastery of Gachin master. They (the sheep) did not know at that time at which of the three temples of Master Gachin they had arrived. When they entered the master's residence, he was laughing and said: "You must be very tired, aren't you?" He was laughing because he knew that he had been called a narrow-eyed Tibetan. This Gachin Lama was a reincarnation and had come to Mongolia from Tibet by invitation. He was a mystic, an exceptional teacher. Through his miraculous abilities he knew what my father had called him. In general, he was very friendly with my father. He made my father herd his only mule and his small number of studs. It turns out that Gachin Lama has now reincarnated as Rinchinsambu, who is my older brother's grandchild. Maybe because the earlier emanation of Gachin Lama was so kind to my father, he has now been born into my family. This is what I think.

"It Is Fine to Slaughter a Sheep to Make Soup"

Gachin Lama was a man of absolutely great learning. This happened when either my older brother or my older sister was born; I don't remember which one of them exactly, but it happened when one of them was born. My father wanted my mother to eat some fresh soup, but that year the animals were in a poor state. Because of severe weather conditions, they grew very thin. It was spring time. One black-headed sheep of the generous Gachin Lama looked more fat and well-fed, and my father asked himself what would happen if he killed that animal for soup and left the other sheep in the herd alone. He was puzzling over this for a while and said: "Ah, that is impossible. That would be a sin." So they had soup made from a skinny sheep, and the matter was resolved. The following summer, Gachin Lama stayed nearby and one day when my father went and bowed to him, he said: "Oh, my Genden. If you want to eat soup, you can slaughter that sheep and eat it. That is fine." He spoke thus. The lama said that my father was allowed to take a sheep from his herd and eat it. Through his supernatural abilities, the lama knew about my father's worry that spring, when he did not find an animal with which he could make soup for his wife who had just given birth to their child. This is how my father later told it. The animal that my father chose belonged to the monastery. Whether all the animals belonged to Gachin Lama or whether his animals were among the temples' animals, this I don't know.

"About the Present Emanation of Gachin Lama and His Monastery"

This Rinchinsambuu lama is Gachin lama's ninth reincarnation. He is the son of my eldest brother's daughter. This temple in the land of Erdentsogt district was called "Master Gachin Dwelling." In the time of the cooperatives, the building became a storehouse for leather and fur. One other monastery of Gachin lama was Utai Gumbum, where, as I heard, two lamas were staying. One of them was from Inner Mongolia and the other from Tibet, but the latter also spoke Mongolian. This blessed child of ours that is my sister's son apparently went there. One of the lamas said to him: "This is your home here."

There is a shrine on the hill, the design of which was the same as this temple's. This is what our miraculous child said. And up there in Dundgovi Province, one other reincarnation might have been born, too. This is what the people of Dundgovi say.

"An Emanation Lama"

In the land of our Erdenetsogt district, there had previously been a *khuvilgaan*¹⁶ lama. This reincarnated teacher was born in the township of Urtin Gol. The previous reincarnation of this *khuvilgaan* lama was a monk so fat that even horses could not carry him on their backs. So he said: "Ah, being too fat is a sin. Let me take rebirth in a slender form next time." After saying that, in his next reincarnation he was born as a thin person. There is even a picture of him now.

In the lower Jargalant Valley there were a few whitish rocks near the river. Whether those rocks were trodden by bare feet, we don't know, but they looked like human footprints. About this *khuvilgaan* lama said: "If these traces are destroyed, then a new era will begin." This is what they say. During the time when I lived in that area, although I went and looked for those rocks, I didn't find anything. There is a rock on the riverside. Near the foot of the mountain there are only a few fair-colored stones.

"Khüree Gavj, a Monk Who Graduated from Urga"

In the center of Övörkhanga Province they killed the monks who were captured in the banner of Vang. After being captured, they were all shot dead on a mountain slope. How awful is that! Opening their clothes it was clear that they all had been shot. The blood-red could have been seen from afar on the slope of that mountain. It happened in the northern part of Övörkhanga Province. I don't know the

name of the place. In that destroyed [monastery] lived my teacher, one of the lamas of Züün Khüree (Eastern Monastery). He arrived from Züün Khüree and settled down in our Vanglin Khüree. His students called him teacher Gavj (Tib. *dka'bcu*).¹⁷ He was the abbot of our monastery. As part of his service, he visited my *ger*¹⁸ and gave teachings. I don't know in what manner he came to our monastery, but originally he was from Züün Khüree. Züün Khüree is called sometimes Da Khüree or Bogdyn Khüree. He was arrested in 1937 and was vilified as an enemy.

At one time our Gavj Lama despondently said: "I didn't do anything against the law. I am not an enemy of the government. I am a monk so I do not lie, silly you!" After scolding them sharply in this way, he was shot. Khüree Gavj Lama was invited to our *ger* regularly. When I lived in Savkh, I remember when he once visited our family and spoke to my father. I was still very small then. It was before the time when monks were persecuted. It happened at the end of the 1920s. At that time the people's government imposed a large amount of taxes on monks. Poor lamas had no possessions, they had nothing with which to pay those taxes, so they asked the people: "Give us sheep, lambs, give us money." They were begging for alms in this way. The taxes were too high and unregulated. The people's government desperately imposed hefty taxes on monks and collected them. Then this Khüree Gavj Lama of ours said to my father: "No, Genden! Dovdoon, why don't you go and tell them to come out? Even if there is a demon, that's okay. Ha ha ha." This is how he was giggling, "tee-hee." He was laughing this way; he was a giggling monk. Then our teacher walked away. I was a small child and I did not understand what he meant, so I thought that they had summoned demons this way. Much later one of my older sisters, who is now the mother of this red-faced Byambadorj, said that a person arriving at the monastery of Erdenetsogt said, "Khüree Gavj managed to get away after being captured." This was the time when my family moved and settled in Deliin Buuts of Ar Khairkhan Mountain. Then our teacher got into trouble with the secret police, and after a fight, based on a frame-up that came without delay, he was also shot.

"The Gray-Haired Lord"

The Gray-haired lord was the most prominent man in the banner of Vang. That lord was not an ordinary man, he was a *khutagt*—this is what they say. There was not an oracle (*gürten*)¹⁹ at the side of every lord. My teacher, Tseren *gürten*, was a fourteen year-old child at that time. When the Gray-haired lord heard that my teacher was an oracle, he sent his couriers with this message: "Catch that naughty boy and bring him here!" Then when my teacher arrived before the Gray-haired lord, the lord said thus: "Hey, you! Will you hold a ritual for me?" He was sitting with his feet hanging down.

If my *gürten* master were still alive, he would now be more than one hundred years old. He was eighty-four when he passed away. One of his children, the clock repairer called Ragchaa, moved to the city in the end.

"Tseren Gürten"

My teacher was called Tseren *gürten*. He was a scholarly man, a protector of the teachings. He was also captured. My other teacher, Khüree *gavj* lama, was shot, but this teacher of mine was young and because of this he managed to stay alive. He worked for a sawmill. There were monks working at the same place, and after being interrogated, they were shot. Then the highest-ranking judicial official of Övörkhangaï Province or a prominent principal, I am not sure which, had a child who did not suckle the breast, so it became sick. Due to a lack of medication, they had given up hope. The parents said: "No, this monk has no solution either. He is a young, inexperienced lama, he doesn't have a cure." And the official went to the monk by car and said: "My master, I have only one child and this child is bedridden. It is possible that he will now not survive. What's your solution?" he asked. "What advice can I give? Everything was taken away from me. I have now only my own body and the lice that are grazing. I have nothing else," replied the monk.

He was just like an imprisoned man. "Alright. I will try to cure your child now. If I send word tonight, come back in the morning. But if I don't send you a message, then do not come!" With this he sent away the principal who returned home and told his wife everything about the monk. That evening smoke was wreathing, the fragrance of juniper was in the air, and the *ger* became filled with the smoke of burning juniper. Then, a strange thing happened. The child slept soundly all night. Very early in the morning, the principal arrived [to the lama]. "My child slept well last night. In the evening the *ger* filled up with smoke," he said.

Then that principal employed my teacher as his own cleaner. He did this to keep my master nearby and to keep him from being sent to prison. So he started work as a cleaner. They notified the government about this, and my teacher's life was spared. This is how my master escaped and came to my home region. When asked, my teacher, after sitting and thinking a little, answered honestly, "This is how it was. I am telling what I saw."

One day I was arguing with an old man. We became cross with each other, and I was wondering if we should part ways, so I decided to visit my master. He lived in the monastery of Övör Jargalant, and I lived in Bürden. Therefore, I left on horseback. My teacher lived with Enkhüüsh lama's old father, Dondog. When I entered the *ger*, he said: "Hey, why were you two quarreling?" He was the kind of person who knew about everything.

"When I First Met My Teacher"

Our Tseren *gürten* was this old lama who was invited by my relatives. Previously I did not know him at all. I only heard that he was a good scholarly person, that he was a good man. He was arrested but was not killed. This is what people said. At that time my family set up only one *ger* for the summer in that mountainous region. Now, this is about one of the sons of Bayanjargal lama's relatives. He became my friend and helped in grazing the livestock. Then going to Northern Khövd, there were quite a few *gers* in Khangaichuul and Erdenetsogt districts. Within that neighborhood lived a man called Tseren *gürten*.

When my family settled down there, the next day or the day after, Tseren *gürten* arrived and said to the elders: "Give me some food!" He asked in this way. I had never met him before, I didn't know him. "Ask that dark boy to go! Tell him to bring some food," he said. After this, I bought and slaughtered a sheep, and I brought the meat of the animal. "The stomach cannot be cut open. Bring it during the night." Because he said so, I delivered the meat at night. This is how I first met my teacher. Because my elders called this teacher Daadai, I also followed suit, and I became used to calling him Daadai, too.

"The Miracles of Tseren Gürten Master"

One night a wolf visited my flock of sheep. Under the trees there were one or two sheep lying with their bellies sliced open. The following day was the yearly counting of livestock. At that time, the livestock were counted during the summer, and the animals were kept in private holdings. To hide my neglect, I allowed the wolves to catch an animal, and I threw the carcass [of that animal] into a faraway ravine. Then I thought in this way: "I will surely be punished because of this. What shall I do now?" Then I decided that I would go to Tseren *gürten* lama and ask him if it was possible to find a solution. After thinking this way, I returned home. My teacher's wife was the daughter of Erdenetsogtin Düüvei's family. Knowing me, she greeted me outside the *ger*. By following the wife, I entered the *ger*. The master asked, "The previous night was difficult, wasn't it? I am sure it was. Wolves visited the livestock. Now you might be punished," he said, and then he added: "Alright, everything is fine now." But I was only sitting and thinking: "No! How can we say that everything is alright, when the wolves came for our sheep?"

Later something else happened, too. I was young, and it happened after a student arrived at Master Gürten's [place]. I played finger games with some young local people in their *ger*, sitting and sipping *airag*.²⁰ When I returned in the evening, my saddled horse that was previously tied on a rope was nowhere. Because

my master was nearby, I went to him and told him what happened. My teacher said, "Alright, take this torch and go! You will bump into a vague figure on the road. He will bring you news."

After this I took a horse and left. I was told to go north toward Duutin Khüree's. Being tipsy, I was walking slowly in that direction. Then a vague shape turned up in front of me. It was the short-eared Batkhuu. "Hey, Sükhbat! Some people who found your horse came. Your horse went to the river, but they caught it and tied it outside the *ger*," he said. So the horse was found. The next day I visited my master in his *ger*, and he said, "You didn't believe me, did you? Do you believe me now?" This is how it was. My Daadai (Tseren *gürten*) lama passed away in Amchuulin district. That place was carpeted with beautiful grass. Next to the shop of Amchuulin there was a wide passage. That is where he died. People say that if an indecent family settles down in that place, then the earth gets angry.

Notes

1. J. Eröolt, *Mongolin burkhani shashni aman tüükh*, Vol. 3 (Ulaanbaatar: Jetbsundamba Khutagt Töv, 2013): 8–20.
2. Tib. *bka' chen*, a monastic academic degree equivalent to *geshe* (*dge shes*). The Mongolian word *gachin* or *khachin* comes from the Tibetan term *mkhas chen*, designating a monk who was sent by the Tibetan Panchen Lama to Mongolia to spread the Dharma.
3. *Mongol nutag dakhi tuul soyolin dursgal* (1999): 268.
4. Sh. Bira, "News of the Profession," *Journal of Asian Studies* 20, no. 3 (1961): 417.
5. Bira (1961): 417.
6. P. Lkham and J. Eröolt, *Mongolin burkhani shashni aman tüükh*, Vol. 1 (Ulaanbaatar: Javzandamba Khutagt Töv, 2010): 3.
7. Christopher Kaplonski, "Prelude to Violence: Show Trials and State Power in 1930s Mongolia," *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 2 (2008): 324.
8. Ian Smith, <http://www.thevintagenews.com/2016/03/11/photos-show-mongolia-soviet-purge>.
9. Jeffrey Hays, http://factsanddetails.com/central-asia/Mongolia/sub8_2b/entry-4564.html.
10. Smith (2016): <http://www.thevintagenews.com/2016/03/11/photos-show-mongolia-soviet-purge>.
11. Kaplonski (2008): 321; Glenn Mullin, "Mongolian Buddhism Past and Present: Reflections on Culture at a Historical Crossroads," in *Mongolians after Socialism: Politics, Economy, Religion*, edited by Bruce M. Knauff and Richard Taupier (Ulaanbaatar: Admon Press, 2012): 191.
12. Anand Nyamdavaa, "What Happened to the Buddhist Lamas in Mongolia Following Stalin's Purges? Were They All Killed?" <https://www.quora.com/What-happened-to-the-Buddhist-lamas-in-Mongolia-following-Stalins-purges-Were-they-all-killed>.

13. Adrienn Gecse, "Mongolian Statuary: Its Tibetan Roots, Current Situation, and Social Significance," Doctoral Dissertation (Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Humanities, 2016): 154.
14. Glenn Mullin, "Mongolian Buddhism Past and Present: Reflections on Culture at a Historical Crossroads," in *Mongolians after Socialism: Politics, Economy, Religion*, edited by Bruce M. Knauff and Richard Taupier (Ulaanbaatar: Admon Press, 2010): 193–195.
15. Krisztina Teleki, "A Mongol Nemzeti Levéltár kolostori anyaga," *Távol-Keleti Tanulmányok* (2012, no. 1–2): 215–216.
16. *Khuvilgaan* is a reincarnation of a high lama.
17. *Gavj* (Tib. *dka' bcu*) is a monastic scholarly degree above the *geshe* degree.
18. *Ger* is a traditional Mongolian tent.
19. Tib. *msgur then*.
20. *Airag* is fermented mare's milk, a traditional Mongolian drink.

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