The Practice of Pilgrimage by Kalmyk Buddhists

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Abstract

Kalmyk Buddhists have long engaged in the practice of pilgrimage for religious purposes. Historically, the main destination for Kalmyk pilgrims was Tibet, which was facilitated by traditional ties between the Kalmyks and the Dalai Lama (and by extension the Tibetan people) after the adoption of Buddhism by Oirat groups at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. Kalmyk pilgrims pursued a host of goals – religious, political, diplomatic, and educational in nature. Some pilgrims engaged in exploration; during the early Soviet period Kalmyk pilgrims were used by the Soviet government as covert foreign policy instruments in its dealings with Tibet. Soon afterwards, however, pilgrimage was banned altogether due to the anti-religious policy endorsed by the Bolsheviks. It was not until the late 1980s that pilgrimage was revived owing to the democratization of social and political life in the Soviet Union.
Keywords


1 Introduction

Pilgrimage is an ancient human activity and both universalizing and ethnic religions – including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism – have developed complex pilgrimage cultures, with a range of destinations and unique rituals (Coleman and Elsner 1995). With its roots in ancient India, Buddhism postulates that visiting holy places associated with the Buddha and famous saints accelerates one’s achievement of Enlightenment. “Today, a journey through Buddha’s homeland,” according to Geary and Shinde (2021, 99), “is a dream for many Buddhist followers and for those who seek the path of Awakening (bodhi) as exemplified by the Buddha’s life.”

Notably, Kalmyk pilgrimage stands out for its strong historical focus on the persona of the Dalai Lama; whenever the Dalai Lama changed his residence, as in 1959 when he fled to India from Tibet, Kalmyks directed their attention to this new site as a primary destination of pilgrimage. More recently, the Dalai Lama’s choice of Riga, Latvia, to host his annual teachings since 2014 turned this Baltic city into another pilgrimage site. The bond between the Kalmyks and their spiritual hierarch has been embodied in the Buddhist deity Palden Lhamo, regarded as the main protector of both the Dalai Lama and Kalmykia. This is due to the historical fact that the Kalmyks adopted Buddhism directly from Tibet and not via the Mongols as was the case with the Buryats. This bond, however, was severed twice in history when Kalmyks could not travel and pay homage to the Dalai Lama: the first time, following the Kalmyks’ loss of political independence to the Russian Empire in 1771 up until the end of the nineteenth century (Khodarkovsky 1992); the second time, during the Soviet period when Buddhism was banned in Kalmykia altogether. When this spiritual bond was not available to enact through pilgrimage, Kalmyks tried to form and retain relationships with other Buddhist geographies and leaders of spiritual significance. During the relaxation of the Tsarist ban on Kalmykia-Tibet relations at the end of the nineteenth century, Kalmyks tried to form an ecclesiastical bond with the eighth Jebtsundamba Khutuktu of Mongolia (which was also precipitated by a new route from Kalmykia to Tibet through Mongolia). During the Soviet period of enforced atheism, Kalmyks secretly travelled to the Ivolginskiy Datsan in Buryatia, the only Buddhist temple functioning in the
Soviet Union, and the Gandan Monastery in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, built by the fifth Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, where Buddhism was allowed to function in a limited capacity. As soon as state-political conditions allowed, the Kalmyks would reestablish their historical bond with the Dalai Lama and undertake pilgrimages to see their spiritual leader, as happened in the 1990s following the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

This article recounts pilgrimage as practiced both in history and today by Kalmyk Buddhists, expanding on the central role of the Dalai Lama among other themes. The article opens with a short overview of the study of the topic of pilgrimage by Russian and Kalmyk scholars. It then provides a history of pilgrimage as practiced from Kalmykia and in Kalmyk Buddhism, in the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods. The section on post-Soviet pilgrimage concludes with an ethnography of the Dalai Lama's annual teachings held in Riga, Latvia, in 2017 as an example of contemporary pilgrimage as practiced from the republic.

2 Kalmyk Pilgrimage: Antecedents and Scholarship

The ancestors of the Kalmyks, the Oirats, were historically shamanists who adopted Tibetan Buddhism beginning in the sixteenth century. In 1640 Buddhism officially became the state religion among all Oirat groups, alongside the Khalkha Mongols. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, several Oirat tribes migrated from their homeland in Asia (Dzungaria) to Europe, bringing their nomadic practice to the southern Urals, the Volga region, and the North Caucasus, where they came to be known as “Kalmyks” and became subjects of Russia (Terbish 2022; see also Terbish's article in this issue). Notwithstanding the fact that they were geographically removed from their ancestral lands and kinsfolk, Kalmyks are perceived to this day by other Mongolian-speaking groups as a fragment of a larger Mongolian civilization, and in literature Kalmyks are sometimes described as “Russia’s Oirats.” The Kalmyks are the only representatives of Buddhist culture not only in western Russia but in Europe as a whole. Two other Buddhist peoples of Russia, the Buryats and the Tuvans, both live in the Siberian part of the country.

Traditionally Buddhists, the Kalmyks have had centers of cultural and religious attraction outside Russia. In this respect, pilgrimages among Kalmyks to the east served as one of the ways in which they tried to preserve their religious and cultural identity. An important source in the study of the pilgrimage tradition among the Kalmyks are the narratives and diaries of Kalmyk pilgrims and travelers, including Purdash Dzhuangruev, Baaza-bakshi Menkedzhuev, Ovshe
Norzunov, and Dambo Ulyanov (on the last, see Ulyanov 1913). Some information on Kalmyk-Tibetan religious relations can also be found in the biography of the famous Oirat-Kalmyk educator Zaya Pandita, who lived in the seventeenth century and is best known for developing a written script for the Oirat language, as well as in the historical and literary works of Gaban Sharab (who lived in the eighteenth century).

Despite its rich and interesting history, pilgrimage among the Kalmyks did not attract scholarly attention until recently. In the pre-Soviet period, authors rarely touched on this topic apart from A. M. Pozdneev (1897) and N. E. Ulanov (1902), who in their works provided some information on the relationship of the Kalmyk clergy with Tibet. During the Soviet period, the topic continued to be largely neglected due to the politics of atheism in the country (on atheism in the USSR, see Smolkin 2018). Pilgrimage was mentioned in passing in works on the pre-revolutionary history of Kalmykia (see, for example, Ocherki Istorii Kalmytskoi ASSR 1967). One of the paradoxical characteristics of the Soviet system was its inconsistency, which allowed certain topics that were overtly discouraged or banned to be studied covertly under the guise of something else. The topic of Kalmyk pilgrimage is an example. While not studied as an historical-social phenomenon, pilgrimage was studied in this roundabout way by literary scholars. The foundation of this genre in Soviet Kalmyk literary studies was laid by A. V. Badmaev (1973) in his article, “On the genre of travel descriptions in Kalmyk literature,” which discusses Kalmyk pilgrimages to Tibet from 1891 to 1903.1

The post-Soviet period saw a proliferation of studies of Kalmyk pilgrimage as element of foreign policy pursued both by Tsarist Russia and the Kalmyk Khanate preceding it. Andreev (1997, 2006) studied Kalmyk pilgrimages to Tibet in the context of Russo-Tibetan political relations, noting this relationship’s special role in Russian history; as Tibetan Buddhists, the Kalmyks traditionally maintained close ties with the highest Buddhist hierarchs of Tibet, including the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, and regularly visited Lhasa and other religious centers in the country as pilgrims or for religious education. Considerable attention is paid in these works to Soviet expeditions to Tibet, in which Kalmyks and Buryats played main roles, entering Lhasa disguised as pilgrims.

Kurapov (2007) researches the influence of the Buddhist community on the domestic and foreign policy of the Kalmyk Khanate, which confirms the

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1 Despite A. V. Badmaev being acknowledged as the founder of this genre in Soviet Kalmykia, travel books and diaries were known to have been part of much older Russian Orthodox tradition. In pre-Revolutionary times Kalmyk ecclesiastical scholar also wrote “travel books” in the traditional Clear Script (Satsykin 1994, 26–7).
conclusions of both Bakunin (1995) and Pal'mov (1926) about the close connection between pilgrimages and the foreign policy of the Kalmyk Khanate. Following Kurapov, the system of traditional Buddhist pilgrimage made it possible to use the clergy as ambassadors. The suspension of pilgrimage during the period of military conflicts, Kurapov argues, threatened the normal course of life of the Buddhist community, since both the training of priests and the purchase of trade goods were carried out in Tibet. Kitinov (2004) analyzes similarly the spread of Buddhism among the Oirats and the relationship between the Oirats and Tibetan clergy in the context of the geopolitical situation in the region; this work briefly touches upon the initial period of the establishment of religious ties between the ancestors of the Kalmyks, the Oirats, and Tibet.

Beyond these studies oriented towards the relationships across and between empire, other recent work has considered the history of Kalmyk pilgrimage and the agency of individual actors. Ochirova (2010) examines the history of the Kalmyks’ pilgrimages to Tibet and reveals the explicit and implicit goals of pilgrimage. Guchinova’s (2020) article draws on fieldwork to show the specifics of the contemporary form of pilgrimage in Kalmykia, which is determined by the local confessional situation – the role of the community of believers attached to Elista’s main khurul (khurul means “temple” in Kalmyk), or Buddhist temple, the Golden Abode of the Buddha Shakyamuni, and the Shajin Lama of Kalmykia, Telo Tulku Rinpoche. Pilgrimage trips by Kalmyk Buddhists are today oriented towards meeting the fourteenth Dalai Lama (Marzaeva 2014).

3 Kalmyk Pilgrimage in the Pre-Soviet Period

Unlike the Buryats in Siberia, who are geographically close to Mongolia and thus have had a strong relationship with that country from where they imported Buddhism, the Kalmyks received knowledge about Buddhism directly from Tibet (Ulanov et al 2019, 1453). After its adoption, the Buddhist religion came to dominate practically all aspects of the social life of the Kalmyks (Ulanov et al 2017, Ulanov and Badmaev 2018). Unlike Buryats, Kalmyk pilgrims from the seventeenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century travelled to Tibet through the territory of Dzungaria by bypassing Mongolia (Bakaeva 2004, 24).

As early as the seventeenth century, Kalmyks were in contact with Tibet, actively participating in the domestic political life of Tibetan society. Gushi Khan (1582–1655), the founder of the Khoshud Khanate in Kokenuur in Tibet,2 was instrumental in enabling the fifth Dalai Lama, Agvan Lubsan Jamtso, to

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2 Khoshuds were a constituent part of the Oirat confederation. Founded in 1642 by Gushi Khan, the Khoshud Khanate ceased to exist after 1686.
establish spiritual authority over Tibet while himself retaining control over the armed forces of the Dalai Lama state. As benefactor of the Dalai Lama and the Gelug school of Buddhism, Gushi Khan received from the Dalai Lama the title of Danzin Choijal (“The King of Law and the Pillar of Religion”) (Sumba-Khambo 1972, 65). As a token of gratitude, Gushi Khan in turn endowed the Dalai Lama’s entourage with Mongolian titles that were in use in Tibet until the mid-twentieth century (Kychanov and Savitsky 1975, 84).

The first Oirat monks received education in Tibet at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, which was facilitated by the territorial proximity of Dzungaria to Tibet. This link, however, continued even after the ancestors of the Kalmyks moved westwards and settled on the lower Volga. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the number of Kalmyk disciples in Tibetan monasteries was so large that they comprised separate communities in the monasteries of Drepung, Sera, and Ganden, respectively (Ochirov 2008). While some Kalmyks stayed on in Tibet, others returned to the lower Volga where they continued their educational training and religious activities (Ubushueva and Matsakova 2019, 364). Not only did Kalmyk youth travel to Tibetan monasteries in large numbers, but the reverence for Tibet was also locally manifested in the Buddhist architecture on the lower Volga, especially in nomadic temples that had their entrance facing east, in the direction of Lhasa, Tibet’s capital.

One of the most famous Kalmyk pilgrims in the seventeenth century was the lama Dzhidzheten, who is still venerated among modern Kalmyks. According to several legends, he was the first among the Kalmyks to pay a visit to the Dalai Lama in Lhasa. Dzhidzheten is known to have been a skillful painter who authored many Buddhist icons. Pozdneev (1897) references Baaza-bakshi Menkedzhuev (1846–1903), who identifies Dzhidzheten with the historical personality Galdan-Tseren (d. 1745), a descendant of the Derbet noyon Dalai-taisha, a major Oirat ruler (d. 1637). One popular legend explains his reason for undertaking a pilgrimage as follows: Dzhidzheten “woke up early one morning and saw a shining (sign) Zu in a part of the sky where the sun reaches at noon. He took this for an omen commanding him to go to Tibet to worship the gods. Thirty monks of the Torghut clan expressed their wish to accompany him on this holy undertaking” (Dzhidzheten 1886, 890).

While pilgrimage is frequently understood as a purely religious undertaking, especially for ordinary people, it should be noted that it did contain political goals among pilgrims of aristocratic background. Taisha Shukur Daichin, for example, made two pilgrimages to Tibet, the first in the mid-1640s and the second in the first half of the 1650s (Batmaev 1993, 106). According to some scholars, Shukur Daichin’s first pilgrimage was animated by his aim of meeting
the Dalai Lama (Bogoyavlenskiy 1939, 78; Kichikov 1994, 68). During the second pilgrimage, he attended a consecration ceremony at the Ablainkit monastery and invited Zaya Pandita to the Kalmyk lands (Biography of Zaya Pandita 1969, 177). Shukur Daichin was conferred the title of khan by the Dalai Lama, but for a handful of reasons he refused to accept it (Gaban Sharab 1969, 57). Another secular recipient of holy approval was Ayuka Khan, whose position as leader of the Kalmyk Khanate was officially consecrated by the Dalai Lama in 1690. Pilgrimages influenced not only the political life of the Kalmyk Khanate but also the spiritual life of its subjects, which was recognized by the Tsarist government.

The eighteenth century saw the birth of a tradition among the Kalmyks whereby they sent the ashes of their distinguished rulers to Tibet along with special delegations. Thus, in 1729 a group of pilgrims, led by Namka gelung, the second-most powerful figure in the Kalmyk Buddhist hierarchy, set off for Lhasa, carrying the ashes of Ayuka Khan. Having received a substantial financial contribution from the Tsarist government towards their trip, the Kalmyk delegation paid a visit to the seventh Dalai Lama and to Tibet’s main religious centers (Besprozvannykh 2002, 151). Besides performing obligatory religious rituals, the delegation used the opportunity to replenish the Kalmyk Buddhist establishment with new clergymen.

After the exodus of the majority of the Kalmyks to Dzungaria, which by then had become part of China, in 1771, pilgrimage among the Kalmyks who remained on the lower Volga region practically ceased due to the ban imposed by the Tsarist government that tried to keep the Volga Kalmyks and their kinsfolk in China separate (Ochirova 2010). Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did pilgrimage among the Kalmyks revive. The reason for this was the fact that Russia, which had growing geopolitical interest in the East, needed accurate knowledge of the region and Tibet in particular. Tibet was a little-known country, and Kalmyks and Buryats, who were Buddhists by birth, could travel there freely. It should be noted that Tibet’s capital Lhasa was historically the main destination for Kalmyk pilgrims, and it was a dream of every Kalmyk believer to visit this holy city at least once in a lifetime and to prostrate themselves at the feet of the Dalai Lama. Not only did Kalmyks compose songs about pilgrimages to see the Dalai Lama, but his image figures in many Kalmyk legends and tales. Given this situation, the Tsarist government did not need much persuasion to make Kalmyks undertake a pilgrimage to Tibet in tandem with exploration goals, especially when it paid for the expedition. This does not mean, however, that individual Kalmyks could not travel to Tibet on personal initiative.
Among famous Kalmyk pilgrims to Tibet of that period was Baaza-bakshi Menkedzhuev, who built the Dundu Khurul shortly before setting out on pilgrimage.\(^3\) Baaza Menkedzhuev wished to visit Tibet and bow to the Dalai Lama after studying documents in Kalmyk monastic archives pertaining to the historical ties between the Kalmyks and Tibet (Bembeev 2004, 2013). Besides the descriptions of various shrines, Baaza Menkedzhuev’s travel notes contain interesting information about life in Tibet and about the customs of its inhabitants. The notes also have information on nature and climate and several other observations (Pozdneev 1897).

The Kalmyk monk Purdash Dzhungruev traveled to Tibet twice, in 1898–1900 and in 1902–1903, respectively. He wrote about the reason for undertaking his first trip as being guided by his desire to follow in his fellow countrymen’s footsteps: “In the past, Yoguchar zurachi and Zaisan [commoner official] from the clans of Shabiner and Mamut/Mamadut Shabiner reached Tibet and introduced themselves to the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Bogdo. From both hierarchs [they] received diplomas, a seal, objects of worship, Buddhas and many similar objects that had been consecrated” (Dzhungruev 1995, 127).\(^4\) Once in Lhasa, during his audience with the Dalai Lama, Dzhungruev handed His Holiness a letter from the Buryat lama Agvan Dorzhiev, who was at that time in Russia. Taking advantage of the privileges granted to him by the Dalai Lama, he carefully observed activities of the monasteries and the central office of the Buddhist establishment. In understanding the intricacies of the Lhasa court, he was helped by a Kalmyk lama, Boovan Badma, who was undertaking education at Drepung Monastery. In his travel notes, Dzhungruev (1995) describes in extensive detail his audience with the Dalai Lama, as well as other interesting observations of life and local beliefs. Besides the ethnography, Purdash Dzhungruev’s notes are of great geographical value for they contain detailed information on the routes he traveled, on the advantages and disadvantages of certain routes, on the topography of certain places, on time estimates required to cross certain places, on necessary provisions, and various methods of transportation. Dzhungruev traveled extensively in Tibet, visiting the monasteries of Ganden, Braibun, Sera, and Tashilhunpo, as well as the residence

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3 Bakshi meaning “teacher” was a monastic title.
4 The name shabiner derives from the word shabi, meaning a disciple in a Buddhist monastery. With time, families of commoners attached to Buddhist monasteries began to be called shabiner. Historically, shabiner referred to the subjects of monasteries or important lamas. Maloderbetovskiy ulus had nine shabiner groups, including Iki-Khurla shabiner, Dund-Khurla shabiner, Bag-Khurla shabiner, Bagshin shabiner, Deed lamyn shabiner, Iki-Manlan shabiner, Baga-Manlan shabiner, Bogdun shabiner, Tungtn, Gendzhin and Mamadut shabiner (Bakaeva et al 2015, 33).
of the Panchen Lama. Acknowledging its value, Purdash Dzhungruev’s work was awarded a Minor Silver Medal of the Russian Geographical Society, which funded expeditions to Tibet in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries staffed by Kalmyk and Buryat pilgrims (*Istoriya Kalmytskoi Literatury* 1981, 261–2).

A great contribution to the establishment and strengthening of Russo-Tibetan relations was made by Agvan Dorzhiev (1854–1938; Omakaeva 1994). With Dorzhiev’s patronage, a Kalmyk *zaisan* named Ovshe Norzunov from Bolsheberetovskiy ulus made three pilgrimages to Tibet. During his first trip that took place in 1898–9, Norzunov, together with Purdash Dzhungruev, travelled to Tibet through Mongolia’s capital, Urga. After reaching Lhasa, he delivered to the Dalai Lama a letter from Agvan Dorzhiev reporting on the progress of his negotiations on the establishment of Russo-Tibetan relations in St Petersburg. Ovshe Norzunov surveyed the Tibetan capital, taking notes on the life and local beliefs of its inhabitants. At the beginning of 1900, he attempted to reach Tibet from Darjeeling in British India but was apprehended and deported back to Russia. At the end of the same year of 1900, Ovshe Norzunov again set off for Tibet as part of a group led by Agvan Dorzhiev himself, and on 28 February 1901, the travelers successfully reached Lhasa. There Ovshe Norzunov took photographs of the city, which were later published by J. Deniker and the Russian Geographical Society (Mitruiev and Voronina 2018, 36). Reprinted in several Russian and foreign magazines and newspapers, Ovshe Norzunov’s photos caused a sensation beyond academic circles. In 1902 the Russian Geographical Society awarded Ovshe Norzunov a Major Silver Medal (*Istoriya Kalmytskoi Literatury* 1981, 262). Later, most of his photos were reprinted in the book *The Buddhist Pilgrim at the Shrines of Tibet* (Tsybikov 1919). Ovshe Norzunov’s travel notes contain ethnographic information about Tibetans and their customs and about his visits to three famous monasteries of Ganden, Drepung, and Sera (*Istoriya Kalmytskoi Literatury* 1981, 267).

Another noteworthy individual who made a pilgrimage to Tibet is the lama Dambo Ulyanov, who travelled to Lhasa with an expeditionary group headed by N. E. Ulanov. The travel plan was personally approved by Tsar Nicholas II, who in January 1904 blessed the members of the expedition who were presented to him by Prince E. E. Ukhtomsky (Dmitriev 2013, 52). Published in 1913, which coincided with the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, Dambo

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5 Agvan Dorzhiev was one of the thirteenth Dalai Lama’s teachers and his closest advisor. A supporter of rapprochement between the Russian Empire and Tibet, Agvan Dorzhiev was a well-known figure in Russo-Tibetan relations in the early twentieth century, serving as the Dalai Lama’s representative in Russia (Bareja-Starzyńska 2014; Tsyrempilov 2011).
Ulyanov’s travel notes document the active role played by Kalmyk pilgrims in the establishment of Russo-Tibetan relations and in the promotion of Russian foreign policy in the Central Asian region.

Pilgrimages undertaken by Kalmyks to the East were not limited to Tibet. On their way to Lhasa, many pilgrims visited large monasteries and shrines in Mongolia, which was precipitated by the fact that this route was approved by the Tsarist government which sent both Kalmyk and Buryat pilgrims through Mongolia, the shortest way from Buryatia to Tibet. By contrast, prior to 1771, when the Kalmyks had their independent khanate, the pilgrimage route from the lower Volga region to Tibet went through Dzungaria. As Russia’s subjects, some Kalmyk pilgrims traveled to Mongolia intentionally to pray in famous monasteries and to prostrate themselves before the leader of Mongolian Buddhists, Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, whom the Kalmyks, like the Mongolians, revered as the embodiment of a deity. One of such pilgrims was Dorzhi Setenov, abbot of Chonos Khurul, the second largest in the Don region at the turn of the twentieth century, who visited Mongolia in June–September 1900 to conduct prayers. Between February and April 1905, he returned to Mongolia with the same purpose. His travel notes, entitled “The journey to Mongolia by the Head of all khuruls of the Bolshtederbetovskiy ulus, bagshi Dorzhi Setenov” and written in Russian, serve as a source of historical and ethnographic information about Mongolia at that time. Besides elaborating on various Buddhist ideas, the notes include the description of the author’s stay in Mongolia’s capital of Urga and his reception by Jebtsundamba Khutuktu (Istoriya Kalmytskoj Literatury 1981, 274). Dorzhi Setenov (1849–1915) was also the author and translator of textbooks for Kalmyk folk schools, which contained stories of religious and moral nature and offered elementary knowledge of Buddhism (Istoriya Kalmytskoj Literatury 1981, 273–4).6

Among Kalmyk ecclesiastical leaders to travel to Urga was the Bakshi Lama of the Don Kalmyks, Menke Bormanzhinov,7 who paid several visits to Jebtsundamba Khutuktu with the aim of reviving Buddhist philosophy studies in Kalmyk temples and monasteries. In 1894, he was bestowed the title of Pandita, or scholar, by the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu (Sabrukova 2017, 74–5).

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6 Folk schools originated in Kalmykia in the second half of the nineteenth century. They arose due to the desire of the population to teach children near the family. Folk or tribal schools were created directly in the settlements of some aimags (groups organized through the male line that shared pastureland). Schools were maintained at the expense of aimag societies (see Efremova 1969).

7 The Bakshi Lama oversaw Cossack Kalmyk temples and monasteries in the Don region. His counterpart was the Shajin Lama who looked after the faithful on the Kalmyk steppe of Astrakhan guberniya.
4 Kalmyk Pilgrimage during the Soviet Period

The establishment of Soviet rule in Russia saw the further politicization of pilgrimages, and political-diplomatic and intelligence gathering took precedence. Pilgrimage became a cover for the Soviet Union’s political aims. As noted above, a similar practice of political pilgrimages was known previously during the times of the Kalmyk Khanate when Kalmyk rulers used pilgrims as diplomats. The difference between the two cases, however, was that whereas during the Khanate period it was Kalmyk lords themselves who used Kalmyk pilgrim-diplomats for purposes related to the khanate’s domestic policy, during the early Soviet period Kalmyk pilgrims were used by external Soviet leadership for the advancement of Soviet foreign policy.

In the 1920s, the Soviet government organized several secret intelligence-gathering expeditions to Tibet, under the guise of pilgrimages, one of which was headed by the Kalmyk V. A. Khomutnikov (Ubushaev and Nadbitov 2015). The Soviet leadership held Tibet to be a strategically important place, a springboard to spread the communist revolution to India, known as “the pearl of the British crown” or “the soft underbelly of the colonial empire” (Andreev 2006, 222–3). In this policy the fledgling Soviet government was guided by ideas about global revolutionary processes prevalent at that time; if the Soviets succeeded in revolutionizing the East, then the victory of the revolution in the West would be secured. In 1921, Khomutnikov was instructed to travel to Tibet as a pilgrim and negotiate with the thirteenth Dalai Lama. The Kalmyk Luvsan-Sharap Tepkin, who had been undertaking religious education in Lhasa since 1909 and served as the Dalai Lama’s private secretary, helped Khomutnikov arrange an audience with the Dalai Lama. The main result of this expedition was the restoration of diplomatic relations between Tibet and the Soviet Union as the Russian Empire’s successor, which had been interrupted following the 1917 Revolution. For his successful expedition, Khomutnikov was awarded in 1925 the Order of the Red Banner, the highest award at that time.

By the 1930s, the Soviet state, however, had reversed its religious policy towards Buddhism, taking on a strict anti-religious stance, which led to the persecution of Buddhist monks and the destruction of all temples and monasteries across the Kalmyk lands. The tradition of making pilgrimage to Tibet, which had become active in the first decades of the twentieth century, was thus abruptly interrupted.

The ban on Buddhism had a devastating effect on the Buddhist establishment, but it did not eradicate faith among ordinary people who secretly adhered to their religion. The turning point was the deportation of the entire Kalmyk population to Siberia in 1943–56 by the Stalinist regime. Having
practically no rights and being excluded from mainstream Soviet society, deportees endured years of everyday humiliation and uncertainty, prompting many to cling to their banned beliefs. The fact that many Kalmyks saw the exile as a divine punishment only made these individuals, particularly those of middle age and older generations, embrace their religion with zeal and repentance (for more on the effects of exile on religion, see Guchinova's article in this issue). During exile, Kalmyks were not allowed to leave their places of forced settlement, let alone undertake pilgrimage.

Upon their return from exile to their native land following Stalin's death, Kalmyks in Kalmykia did not have ecclesiastical leaders left who were connected either to the Dalai Lama in Tibet or the Buddhist establishments in Buryatia and Mongolia, where Buddhism was allowed to function in a limited capacity beginning after World War II. That said, some individual Kalmyks, mainly ex-monks who survived the repression and the ensuing exile and who positioned themselves as laypersons, were known to have secretly traveled to the Ivolginskiy Datsan, the temple complex outside of Buryatia's capital of Ulan-Ude, and the Gandan Monastery in Mongolia (Muzraeva 2017). Posing as Soviet tourists rather than pilgrims, these individuals kept the spirit of pilgrimage alive until it was revived during the perestroika years.

5 Kalmyk Pilgrimage in the Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Periods

The tradition of pilgrimage was revived at the end of the twentieth century as a result of the political liberalization of the late Soviet period. At this time, Kalmyk believers began to openly travel to the Ivolginskiy Datsan in Buryatia, established in 1946 as the headquarters of the Central Spiritual Board of Buddhists of the USSR (Holland 2014a). The Buryat leadership of the Central Spiritual Board offered substantial organizational assistance to Kalmykia in its effort to restore Buddhist institutions. Monks from Buryatia came to Kalmykia to conduct services in temples and prayer houses, the first of which was opened in 1988 in Elista, Kalmykia's capital. Among the first lamas to arrive were Valeriy Tsympilov (his religious name is Tuvan Dorzh), who headed a prayer house in Elista, and Bazarsad Lamazhapov, who still lives in Elista (Ochirova 2011, 84). Tuvan Dorzh also served as the first post-Soviet Shajin Lama of Kalmykia until 1992, when he was replaced by Telo Tulku Rinpoche, a Kalmyk American monk who was educated in a Tibetan monastery in India (Holland 2015).

Thanks to Telo Tulku Rinpoche, Kalmyks began to undertake tours to India and Tibet to visit temples and other holy places of the Himalayan region from
the early 1990s. Today, the main attraction for Kalmyk Buddhists and those around the world is the residence of the fourteenth Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India, and the purpose of pilgrimages to India is primarily associated with attending his teachings there.8

The process of democratization of social and political life and the changes that took place in the confessional policy of the Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s made it possible for the Dalai Lama to visit Russia in 1991 and 1992. However, the subsequent improvement of relations between the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China and the establishment of close economic ties between the two countries put a halt to the Dalai Lama’s visits to Russia (Holland 2014b). Even though the Dalai Lama has not raised the issue of Tibet’s secession from China for a long time, acknowledging that Tibet is part of China and Tibetan culture part of Chinese culture, for China’s communist leadership he is still persona non grata. Petitions by Russia’s Buddhists to the government in Moscow to respect their religious right to host and behold their religious leader in Russia resulted in a short visit by the Dalai Lama to Kalmykia in November 2004. In the years since, the Russian Foreign Ministry has not issued the Dalai Lama a Russian visa. The impossibility for the Dalai Lama to come to Russia prompted Russian Buddhists to seek individual arrangements to travel to India to see their spiritual leader. In 2007, Telo Tulku Rinpoche and the administration of the Central Khurul of Kalmykia organized the first mass pilgrimage of Russian Buddhists to Dharamsala where more than 5,000 people, including 500 pilgrims from Buryatia, Kalmykia, Tuva, and Mongolia, participated in the first puja ritual of longevity dedicated to the Dalai Lama.

Another noteworthy event in the pilgrim’s calendar is the annual teachings that the Dalai Lama has given to Russian Buddhists since 2009. During these teachings, the Dalai Lama meets his followers, comments on Buddhist classical treatises, and performs rituals of dedication. These events attract pilgrims from traditionally Buddhist groups, as well as Buddhists from the West (Lamazhaa et al. 2020, 142) and the Baltic countries. Riga, Latvia, hosted the annual teachings in 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2018.

Besides India and to a lesser degree Tibet and Latvia, another important destination for Kalmyk pilgrims remains Buryatia, where the Ivolginsky

8 Today India is not only the primary destination for Kalmyk pilgrims but many Tibetan religious institutions that were established in the country by the Tibetan diaspora attract Kalmyk students wishing to pursue religious education. These institutions include the Drepung Gomang monastery, the Karmapa International Buddhist Institute, the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS), among others.
Datsan houses a precious Buddhist object – the incorruptible body of Khambo Lama Dashi-Dorzho Itigelov (1852–1927), head of the Buddhists of Eastern Siberia in the first decades of the twentieth century (Amogolonova 2012, 135; Quijada 2019). Although today the body can be beheld only on major Buddhist holidays, pilgrims from distant regions are usually exempted and allowed into the “palace” where it is kept in a glass sarcophagus. Buryatia is also a place where members of the Kalmyk Buddhist Center “Chenresig”, based in Elista, organize annual trips to Lake Baikal to participate in Buddhist retreats on Lamrim (stages in the path to Enlightenment). A less known pilgrimage site in Buryatia is Zandan Zhuu (“Sandal Buddha”), which is a statue of Buddha housed in the Egituyskiy Datsan in Yeravinskiy district. According to legend, the statue, which is made from white sandalwood, is 2,500 years old and was brought to Buryatia from Beijing by lamas during the Boxer Rebellion. Zandan Zhuu has been recognized in Russia as a cultural object of federal significance (Montlevich 2008).

Kalmyk pilgrims do not have to always travel to distant locations, for there are a host of holy places locally, both inside Kalmykia and the neighboring Astrakhan oblast’. Just as pilgrimage to faraway regions and countries can be combined with tourism, so too pilgrimage to local places of spiritual significance is often carried out as tourist trips (on the connections between pilgrimage and tourism, see Collins-Kreiner 2010 inter alia). The list of local pilgrimage sites includes Khosheutovskiy Khurul, Mount Bogdo, the Single Poplar Tree, the Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni temple, and the grave of Tugmyud Gavdzhi, among others.

Situated in the village of Rechnoe in Astrakhan oblast’, which was historically Kalmyk land, Khosheutovskiy Khurul was built in the 1810s to honor Russia’s victory over Napoleon in the Patriotic War of 1812, in which the Kalmyk cavalry saw action alongside the Russian army. Combining elements of Mongolian and Russian religious architecture, the Khurul’s design also benefitted from the plan of the Kazan Cathedral in St Petersburg, which coincidentally resembles the tribal sign of the noyons (lords) of the Khosheutovskiy ulus. The only surviving Kalmyk temple from the imperial period, in Soviet times Khosheutovskiy Khurul was partially destroyed and fell into disrepair (Borisenko 1994). Despite it being still under restoration, the temple has today become an important pilgrimage site where the faithful perform various

9 Near the village of Zarechye in Buryatia there is a Buddhist meditation center established by the Tibetan lama Geshe Jampa Tinley, who was sent to Russia in 1993 by the Dalai Lama to assist in the revival of Buddhism. Geshe Jampa Tinley is a well-known figure not only among Buryats but also Kalmyks, who have great respect for him.
rituals – consisting of prayers dedicated to various Buddhist deities and ancestral spirits – under the guidance of a lama. Following these rituals, the pilgrims receive blessing from the lama, make circuits of the temple, light candles, and tie Buddhist ki morn ("wind horse") flags to the walls of the temple or to the nearby trees.10

Mount Bogdo (Kalm. Bogdo Uul), considered sacred by Kalmyks, is also situated in Astrakhan oblast’ a few kilometers south of Lake Baskunchak. Kalmyk pilgrims often travel there along with a lama who conducts rituals. In contrast with rituals performed at Khosheutovskiy Khurul, rituals at the feet of the mount usually include a fire offering whereby food is dedicated to various Buddhist deities, local spirits, and ancestral spirits by means of burning.11 To mark the place as sacred, Kalmyk pilgrims have erected a statue of Tsagan Aav ("The White Elder") where they usually perform fire rituals. Tsagan Aav is a deity believed by the Kalmyks to watch over Kalmyk land, people, and animals.

The most popular site on the territory of the Republic of Kalmykia where people perform rituals is Odinokiy Topol’ ("Single Poplar Tree") situated at a place called Khar-Buluk ("Pure Spring") in Tselinnyi rayon. As its name suggests, it is a single poplar tree growing near a spring in the middle of the steppe. Legend has it that the tree was planted by the famous Kalmyk lama Purdash Dzhunguev (mentioned above), who brought poplar tree seeds from his pilgrimage to Tibet at the beginning of the twentieth century.12 Today, the tree is surrounded by eight Buddhist stupas and a wooden Oriental gate protected by a couple of stone lion statues. Due to its proximity to Kalmykia’s capital Elista, the place is popular not only with locals but also hosts large public rituals performed by Elista-based lamas in the presence of large crowds of pilgrims.13

In Soviet times institutional, or monastic, Buddhism was banned by the state, although many people continued, as mentioned, to practice simple

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10 See Churyumov and Lelyaeva (2016) for a video of Kalmyk pilgrims performing Buddhist rituals outside the Khosheutovskiy Khurul in May 2016. This video was produced with the participation of one of the authors of this article.

11 See Churyumov and Babaev (2016a) for a video of Kalmyk pilgrims performing rituals at Mount Bogdo in April 2016. It was produced with the participation of one of the authors of this article.

12 If the legend is to be believed the Single Poplar Tree is more than 120 years old.

13 Terbish and Churyumov (2015) and Churyumov and Babaev (2016b) document two rituals performed at the Single Poplar Tree site. The first video features a ritual presided by Tatsak Rinpoche, a guest lama to Kalmykia, supported by Elista-based lamas, who perform a ritual in front of a congregation. The aim of the ritual is to consecrate land for the building of a stupa. The second video shows a ritual called gazr tyaklgn ("worship of land") performed twice a year by the lamas from Elista; the ritual is headed by the Shajin Lama of Kalmykia.
Buddhist rituals in the privacy of their homes, and in this sense, religion was never eradicated (Holland 2015). It was also customary among some families to visit their ancestral places (i.e., places where their ancestors were believed to have lived before many Kalmyk families either moved or were forced by the Soviet state to move to other locations) and secretly perform rituals. With the collapse of the Soviet system, when religion was allowed open expression and monastic Buddhism underwent a revival, pilgrimages to ancestral places became not only popular but also more elaborate and ritualized. Today such pilgrimages to ancestral places are often presided over by lamas who perform a fire ritual (Kalm. gal tyalgn) aimed at appeasing the supernatural, including ancestral spirits, local nature spirits, Buddhist gods, and bodhisattvas. Usually involving patrilineal relatives, the main purpose of these rituals is to receive a blessing from the supernatural and thus secure the wellbeing, prosperity, and health of the participants in the ritual.

The revival of institutional Buddhism in Kalmykia went hand in hand with the restoration of old temples and the construction of new religious buildings to mark sites of spiritual significance. Often marked by a temple or a Buddhist stupa, such places are considered sacred and attract pilgrims. One such sacred place is a temple in Tsagan-Aman, the only town in the Republic of Kalmykia on the Volga River, which was erected in the 1990s on the site of an old temple which had been destroyed early in the Bolshevik’s anti-religious campaign. This temple is regarded as doubly sacred for it stands near the house and grave of the famous Kalmyk lama Tugmyud Gavdzhi (d. 1980), whose memory served as an inspiration to restore the historical temple.14

5.1 A Video Ethnography of Kalmyk Buddhist Pilgrimage15

The last section relays a short ethnography of Kalmyk pilgrimage to Riga to the Dalai Lama’s annual teachings in 2017. As mentioned, Latvia’s capital Riga hosted the Dalai Lama’s teachings on four occasions. Churyumova had the opportunity to attend his teachings on “states of meditation” and “concise Lamrim” held at the Skonto stadium 23–25 September 2017. The result of this ethnography are several videos featuring the teachings, rituals performed before the

14 His secular name O. M. Dordzhiev, Tugmyud gavdzhi was born in 1887 on the Kalmyk steppe of Astrakhan guberniya. After receiving a religious education at the local Arshinskiy Khurul, he resumed his education in Inner Mongolia. During the Soviet period he secretly served as a faith healer in Tsagan-Aman. In Kalmykia he is best known as the translator of the canonical Sutra of the Wise and the Fool from Tibetan to Kalmyk.

15 Fieldwork in Latvia for Churyumova was funded by the Arcadia Fund, as part of the Kalmyk Cultural Heritage Documentation Project (KCHDP).
The event, and interviews with Kalmyk pilgrims and organizers. According to Telo Tulku Rinpoche, the reason for holding this event in a Baltic country is to make it more affordable for Buddhists from Russia and Baltic countries to attend the Dalai Lama’s teachings; Latvia was chosen because the organizers “had good (local) friends who were willing to take up the responsibility and organize the event in Riga” (Terbish 2017a). The 2017 teachings attracted about 4,000 people, including organizers and staff consisting of about 100 volunteers. The Central Khurul in Elista organized a group of pilgrims, 695 people in total, who arrived on chartered buses from Elista. In Riga the pilgrims were housed in hotels and were looked after by the organizers. Many Kalmyk individuals also made their own private travel arrangements arriving in Riga by plane, car, and other modes of transportation. Besides Kalmyks, there were small groups of Buryats and Tuvans at the teachings.16

The event was preceded by a ritual dedicated to local deities, Buddhas, and the Dalai Lama, which was performed in the morning on 22 September by a group of lamas from the Central Khurul in Elista. Most Kalmyk pilgrims arrived later that day, and only a few came to witness the ritual. The main event began the next day with the Dalai Lama arriving at the venue and giving a press conference where he answered questions put forward by the local press and journalists from Kalmykia and Buryatia (Terbish 2017b). Afterwards, His Holiness entered the main hall of the stadium where he greeted the pilgrims and proceeded on his teachings. While the teachings were given in Tibetan, they were translated synchronically into several languages, including Russian, English, and Latvian, which the audience could listen to through specially provided headphones.17

Both during breaks and after the day’s teachings Churyumova video-interviewed Kalmyk pilgrims, about 30 people in total, of all ages, genders, occupational backgrounds, and places of residence (Kalmykia, St Petersburg, and Moscow, as well as Kalmyks who recently emigrated to the United States). While some were first-time pilgrims, others said that they had attended the Dalai Lama’s teachings previously and visited holy sites in India or Buryatia. Acknowledging the Dalai Lama as the spiritual leader of the Kalmyk nation,

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16 Some Russian pilgrims whom we met in Riga were not only from cities such as St Petersburg where Buddhism has been traditionally practised and researched (in St Petersburg a Buddhist temple was built in 1915 by Agvan Dorzhiev) but also from various cities in central Russia where Buddhist centres appeared since the collapse of the Soviet system.

17 Videos of the Dalai Lama’s teachings were made by Terbish and Churyumova (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d) as part of the KCHDP.
pilgrims had various views on his spiritual role and of the purpose of their pilgrimage to Riga, ranging from one’s wish to establish a karmic link with the Dalai Lama to improving one’s knowledge of Buddhism through his teachings to practicing one’s will to control “body, speech, and mind” to charging oneself with positive energy. Many interviewees also described their pilgrimage experience in Riga as a way of trying to find answers to various questions, personal and philosophical.ⁱ⁸

Besides video-recorded interviews, Churyumova also conducted informal interviews with Kalmyk pilgrims. The majority of middle-aged and older pilgrims said that they come to the Dalai Lama’s teachings, irrespective of where it is held, to receive a blessing, to repent past sins, to greet and touch the Dalai Lama (see Terbish 2017c), or to increase one’s luck; that is, they were more interested in rituals (to improve one’s life and health) and less in understanding difficult philosophical texts, although listening to the Dalai Lama’s speech was seen as part of the ritual. In contrast, many pilgrims who said that they come to the Dalai Lama’s teachings to improve their understanding of Buddhist philosophy and texts tend to be of a younger generation (20 to 30 years of age), usually with higher education and high social status. This is presumably partly because such individuals have less interest in rituals to obtain what they have already obtained by other means, including a well-paid job, high living standards, and social status. Since pilgrims tend to seek during pilgrimages what they do not have (yet in life), some single young Kalmyks reported having joined pilgrimages intending to find partners while guided by their interest in finding answers to deeper philosophical questions. What pilgrims of all age groups nevertheless report to have in common is their reverence for the Dalai Lama as the “spiritual leader of the Kalmyk nation” and their view that pilgrimages are “auspicious events.”

When asked specifically, many, if not most, of the interviewees also characterized their journey to Riga as an act of pilgrimage. For many, attending the Dalai Lama’s teachings and seeing the Holy Teacher, who is the physical manifestation of their faith, was a transformative experience, resulting in spiritual, moral, and material benefits. While unaware of the initial ritual performed on the morning of 22 September, which included a rite to appease the local deities in Riga and consecrate the location, many pilgrims said that they felt that the Skonto stadium and its environs inspired spiritual awakening, emanated positive energy, and united the large community of pilgrims into one big family,

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ⁱ⁸ Several representative video interviews with pilgrims were made as part of the KCHDP (Terbish 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e, 2018f).
albeit temporarily. The example of Riga hosting the Dalai Lama’s teachings shows all hallmarks of a pilgrimage site, and the pilgrims themselves have confirmed this. However, Riga, and the Skonto stadium in particular, is different from traditional Kalmyk pilgrimage destinations in India, Tibet, Mongolia, and elsewhere in the sense that its spiritual significance is not fixed or historical but comes out during the Dalai Lama’s visits who, through his very presence, temporarily activates the site’s “holy and consecrated essence”. This new phenomenon of temporary pilgrimage sites such as Riga that are activated and then deactivated at specific times depending on the presence of the holy person can be explained with the help of two interconnected facts, one historical and the other contemporary. First, Kalmyk pilgrimage’s strong focus on the persona of the Dalai Lama renders any place where he resides or performs rituals holy. While historically in the imagination of Kalmyk pilgrims there was no obvious division between the two – in other words, between the holy person (the Dalai Lama) and the holy place (pilgrimage site), in that both co-existed in the same space (Lhasa, Tibet) – the precedence of the holy person over the holy place crystallizes in a moment when the former detaches himself from the latter as happened in 1959 when the Dalai Lama fled Lhasa for northwestern India. Hence, Dharamsala, where His Holiness resides, is considered today the primary pilgrimage destination for Kalmyk pilgrims. Second, the Dalai Lama XIV’s mobility in the context of global politics, whereby he decided on Riga as a place for his annual teachings for his followers in Russia (where he cannot travel since 2004) renders Latvia’s capital, as a destination to which he can travel and which believers from Kalmykia can access, a pilgrimage site.

6 Conclusion

Pilgrimage among the Kalmyks has a long and rich tradition. Historically, the primary sites of pilgrimage were various shrines in Tibet, in particular the residence of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, due to strong spiritual ties between the Kalmyks and the Dalai Lama (and by extension the Tibetan people). Besides the religious dimension, pilgrimages often had other goals, for example educational and political, which was precipitated by the fact that the Kalmyks regarded the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader endowed with the power to confer legitimacy on Kalmyk rulers.

Following the 1771 exodus of the majority of the Kalmyks back to their historical land in Dzungaria (China) and the subordination of the Kalmyks under the governor of Astrakhan, Kalmyks were not allowed to cross the
Volga, in essence proscribing pilgrimage to the east and Tibet (Khodarkovsky 1992, 234). It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that Kalmyks were again allowed to travel to Tibet for pilgrimage purposes, but this time Kalmyk pilgrims often combined their travel with scholarly and exploratory work that they conducted on behalf of the Tsarist government, which began to show growing interest in Tibet. Kalmyk pilgrimages were continued by the Bolshevik government in the early Soviet period, which regarded pilgrims as tools in its political, diplomatic, and intelligence gathering projects. In that period, pilgrimages of Kalmyks to the East were not limited to Tibet, although it was their primary destination. On their way to Lhasa through Mongolia, a new pilgrimage route approved by the Tsarist government and then continued by the Bolsheviks, many Kalmyks visited large monasteries and shrines in Mongolia and prostrated themselves before Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, the leader of Mongol Buddhists, and some pilgrimages were undertaken with a view to visiting Mongolia only. Pilgrimages to Tibet and Mongolia, however, were interrupted in the 1930s due to the strict anti-religious policy adopted by the Soviet state only to be revived yet again following the end of the Soviet system when the Kalmyks reestablished their religious and cultural ties with the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan diaspora in India, who, after fleeing their native land following China’s annexation, rebuilt their monasteries and religious institutions in the birthplace of Buddha.

Today, Kalmyk pilgrims travel not only to India, which turned into the primary pilgrimage destination due to the Dalai Lama’s residence there, but also to new destinations such as Riga, Latvia, to attend the Dalai Lama’s teachings. Riga was chosen by the Dalai Lama so that his followers in Russia and Baltic states could meet him there rather than flying to India, which is economically burdensome for many ordinary believers. Another facet of religious revival in Kalmykia is manifested in growing pilgrimages of Kalmyks to destinations both inside Kalmykia (ancestral places, restored shrines, and monasteries) and neighboring Astrakhan oblast’ (Khosheutovskiy Khurul and Mount Bogdo that are in former Kalmyk territories), as well as further afield within the Russian Federation to Buryatia (monasteries housing holy relics, Buddhist retreats at Lake Baikal), a development which goes hand in hand with religious and cultural revival in post-Soviet Kalmykia.

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