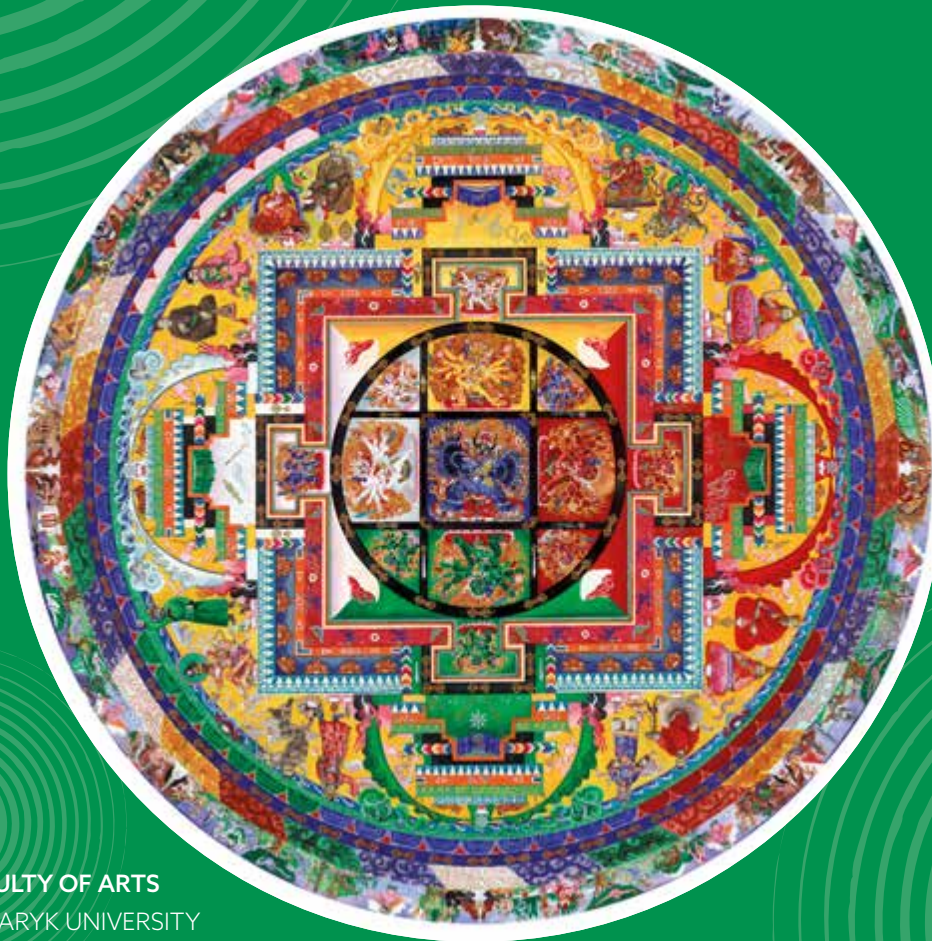

Mandala and History

Bidia Dandarovich Dandaron and Buryat Buddhism

Luboš Bělka



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BRNO 2016

KATALOGIZACE V KNIZE - NÁRODNÍ KNIHOVNA ČR

Bělka, Luboš

Mandala and history : Bidia Dandarovich Dandaron and Buryat Buddhism / Luboš Bělka. – Vydání první. – Brno : Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, 2016. – 119 stran. – (Spisy Filozofické fakulty Masarykovy univerzity, ISSN 1211-3034 ; 462)
ISBN 978-80-210-8493-3

24-335 * 323.28-051 * 929 * 243.4 * 323.28 * 24-1/-9 * 13:003.6 * 2-6 * 328/329 * (571.54)

- Dandaron, Bidija, 1914-1974
- buddhističtí filozofové – Rusko – 20. století
- političtí vězni – Rusko – 20. století
- tibetský buddhismus – Rusko – 20. století
- náboženská perzekuce – Rusko – 20. století
- učení buddhismu – Rusko – 20. století
- mandaly – symbolika
- mandaly – Rusko – 20. století
- monografie
- biografie
- Burjatsko (Rusko) – náboženské poměry – 20. století
- Burjatsko (Rusko) – politika a vláda – 20. století
- Buddhist philosophers – Russia – 20th century
- political prisoners – Russia – 20th century
- Tibetan Buddhism – Russia – 20th century
- religious persecution – Russia – 20th century
- Buddhist doctrine – Russia – 20th century
- mandalas – symbolism
- mandalas – Russia – 20th century
- Buriatia (Russia) – religious conditions – 20th century
- Buriatia (Russia) – politics and government – 20th century
- monographs
- biography

22/24 - Náboženství Dálného východu. Indická náboženství. Hinduismus. Buddhismus [5]

929 - Biografie [8]

294 - Religions of Indic origin [5]

920 - Biography, genealogy, insignia [8]

The preparation of this monograph was supported by the grant TEMEVYR – *Theoretical and Methodological Challenges in the Study of Religions* (MUNI/A/0931/2015), investigated by the Department for the Study of Religions Masaryk University, 2016.

Review by Martin Slobodník (Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia)
Daniel Berounský (Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic)

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ISBN 978-80-210-8725-5 (online : pdf)

ISBN 978-80-210-8493-3 (paperback)

ISSN 1211-3034

DOI: 10.5817/CZ.MUNI.M210-8493-2016

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FOREWORD

The following book deals with the life, work and legacy of the Buryat Buddhist and Buddhologist Bidia Dandarovich Dandaron (1914–1974) against the background of Buryat Buddhism in the 19th and 20th centuries. The text is based on the author’s earlier articles and monographs, which were substantially rewritten and enriched with new knowledge.¹

My thanks and gratitude extend to my colleagues who assisted me with the preparation of this text and collection of materials. Some contributed with their testimonies and recollections of the period, people and events; others with critical comments and insights. I am also grateful to have been given photographs and permission to publish the Dandaron mandala in color. I would not have been able to write this book without all these things. I will try to mention all those who contributed to this work – in the alphabetical order and omitting academic titles. Some of these great people are not among us any more:

Daniel Berounský (Praha); Aleksandr I. Breslavets (Saint Petersburg); Donatas L. I. Butkus (Vilnius); Nikolay V. Tsyrempilov (Astana); Tsyvan Anchenovich Dashitsyrenov (Ulan-Ude); Andrej Fukas (Bratislava); Isabelle Charleux (Paris); David Mac Gillavry (Brno); Andreas Maleta (Oberweiss); Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (Bern); Josef Kolmaš (Praha); Stefan Krist (Vienna); Pavel Křepela (Brno); Kristina Lange (Leipzig); Linnart E. Mäll (Tartu); Vladimir Mikhailovich

1 For more details see Luboš Bělka, *Tibetský buddhismus v Burjatsku* [Tibetan Buddhism in Buryatia, in Czech], Brno: Masarykova univerzita 2001; Luboš Bělka, “Bidia D. Dandaron: the Case of a Buryat Buddhist and Buddhologist during the Soviet Period”, in: Iva Doležalová – Luther H. Martin – Dalibor Papoušek (eds.), *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War: East and West*, New York – Bern: Peter Lang 2001, pp. 171–182; Luboš Bělka, “Mandala Dandarona: Vizualnaya reprezentatsia istorii neofitsialnoi buryatskoi buddhiskoi sangkhi sovetского perioda” [Dandaron Mandala: Visual Representation of the Unofficial Buryat Buddhist Sangha History during the Soviet Era, in Russian], *Tartaria Magna* 2/1, 2012, pp. 151–169; Luboš Bělka, “Dandaron Mandala: Unofficial Buryat Buddhist Sangha during the Soviet Era”, *Orientalistika, University of Latvia*, vol. 793, 2013, pp. 132–143.

Montlevich (Saint Petersburg); Aleksandr Moiseevich Piatigorsky (London); Herbert Schwabl (Zürich); Martin Šlobodník (Bratislava); Andrey M. Strelkov (Ulan-Ude and Saint Petersburg); Andrey A. Terentyev (Saint Petersburg); Tsymzhit Purbuevna Vanchikova (Ulan-Ude).

However, my biggest thanks belong to my family.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1.1 The Buryat sangha within Tsarist and Soviet Russia

The position of Tibetan Buddhism, previously referred to as *Lamaism*, in Russia, later the Soviet Union, changed in accordance with state policy regarding this religion. The relationship between state authority and minority churches, in this case the Buryat sangha (Buddhist community of monks and lay believers), oscillated from a policy of tolerance to one of elimination of Buddhism in Russia.¹ The attitude of the Buddhist sangha also transformed in response to changes originating in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. In the three-hundred-year history of the interaction between Buddhism and the state, several key turning points may be identified, in which religious policies of the Russian or Soviet government changed radically. The latter half of the 1930s can clearly be described as the most critical period. Official religious life ceased to exist for almost a decade as a result of harsh Stalinist reprisals. The first restoration of Buddhism in Buryatia began after 1946 and lasted until the *perestroika*, in the mid-1980s. The history of Buryat Buddhism is the history of a search (at least in part successful) for a mutual relationship between the Russian Orthodox state and the Buddhist sangha which was, in its early stages, connected to international structures.

1 A remarkable and probably the oldest publication describing the relationship between the Orthodox state and Buryat sangha in the 19th century from the viewpoint of the Tsarist administration is: Vladimir Vashkevich, *Lamaity v Vostochnoi Sibiri* [Lamaists in the Eastern Siberia, in Russian], Saint Petersburg: Tipografia Ministerstva Vnutrennykh Del 1885. See also Rustam Sabirov, “Buddhism in the Russian Republic of Buryatia: History and Contemporary Developments”, in Bruce M. Knauft – Richard Taupier (eds.), *Mongolians after Socialism: Politics, Economy, Religion*, Ulanbatar: Mongolian Academy of Sciences, National University of Mongolia – Open Society Forum Mongolia 2012, pp. 235–248; Natalia Lvovna Zhukovskaia, “Buddizm i shamanizm kak faktory formirovaniï buryatskogo mentaliteta” [Buddhism and Shamanism as Forming Factors of Buryat Mentality, in Russian], in: Natalia Lvovna Zhukovskaia (ed.), *O buddizme i buddistakh. Stati raznykh let 1969–2011*, Moskva: Orientalia 2013, pp. 136–141; Tsymzhit P. Vanchikova – Galina D. Chimitdorzhin, *Istoria buddizma v Buryatii: 1945–2000 gg.* [History of Buddhism in Buryatia: 1945–2000, in Russian], Ulan-Ude: Izdatelstvo BNTs SO RAN 2006.

1.2 Internal development of the sangha at the turn of the 19th century

The social reforms of 1905 directly affected religious matters: the Tsar's Toleration Patent granted Russian citizens the right to leave the Orthodox Church freely and without legal or other consequences. In addition, it ensured the right of parents to raise their children in the spirit of their chosen religion and guaranteed non-orthodox churches, denominations and other ecclesiastic structures, such as Old Believers, the right to create and build temples, own property and even to establish elementary schools.²

Another example of expanding tsarist tolerance towards Buddhism came in the form of the approval, by Tsar Nicolas II, for the construction of a Buddhist temple in Saint Petersburg in 1907.³ Thus, another non-Christian sacral building was built in the center of the Russian Orthodoxy (following the Muslim mosque).

The Buryat Buddhist clergy, lay intelligentsia and to a lesser extent common believers, all became involved in these events. Even before the outbreak of World War I, the process of forming differing opinions was apparent among the Buryat Buddhists. This process continued well into the 1920s and was especially apparent in the political development in the Soviet Union. The monastic community and the few members of Buryat national intelligentsia fell into two competing groups. This schism derived from their fundamentally different views on the developments in the sangha (community of Buddhist monks and lay people): the reformers (Rus. *obnovlentsi*) and the conservatives (traditionalists). Apart from these two groups, there was a third, not very numerous, group of nirvanists,⁴ which rejected the schism and pointed out that Buddhists must devote their energy to the primary aim of Buddhism, the spiritual goal of all aspiration – the achievement of the state of nirvana by all sentient beings.

Kseniia M. Gerasimova in her monograph on the reform movement of Buryat Buddhist clergy mentions a link between rich Buryats (referred to by her as *kulak* in Russian or *noyon* in Buryat) and the conservative wing. The oth-

2 Cf. Harrold Berman, "Religious Rights in Russia at a Time of Tumultuous Transition: A Historical Theory", in: Johan David Vyver, van der – John Witte Jr. (eds.), *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective*, Hague: Kluwer 1996, p. 288.

3 Ernst Benz, "The Status of Buddhism in the Soviet Union and Its Relations to Buddhism in Southeast Asia", in: Ernst Benz (ed.), *Buddhism or Communism: Which Holds the Future of Asia?* London: Allen and Unwin 1966, p. 153; see also Aleksandr Andreev I., *Buddiiskaia sviatynia Petrograda* [The Buddhist Shrine in Saint Petersburg, in Russian], Ulan-Ude: EkoArt 1992.

4 Kseniia M. Gerasimova, "Sushchnost izmeneniia buddizma" [The Nature of the Buddhist Change, in Russian], in: R. E. Pubaev (ed.), *Kritika ideologii lamaizma i shamanstva: Materialy seminarov lektorov-ateistov*, Ulan-Ude: Buryatskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo 1965, pp. 28–46.

er group, *obnovlentsi*, was more democratic and progressive according to the author, but even this group spawned from the rich Buryat bourgeoisie (sic!). She states that:

“Kulaks were politically organized in regional and gubernial congresses in the Verkhneudinsk, Chita, Gusinozersk and Tsugol Monasteries. In the Chita congress in April 1905, the Buryats definitely split into *obnovlentsi* and *starodumtsi*, proponents of bourgeois autonomy without the supervision of peasants... The other group, the *obnovlentsi*, was established later in Aginskoe, 1906. Its members were representatives of intelligentsia, coming from the circles of noyons and kulaks. They were not numerous, but were important as ideologists and theoreticians of the *obnovlentsi*.”⁵

1.2.1 Conservatives

The first to form an oppositional stance against the reformers were the traditionalists. The conservatives, represented by Lama E. Vambotsyrenov, the former Khori tribal chief (Bur. *taisha*), stood in strict and often armed opposition to Soviet power. Lamas-warriors did not just belong to the realm of popular myths and the imagination; these Buddhist fighters really existed, although their numbers were lower than Buryat legends have it. At the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s, rebellions against the Bolshevik regime broke out in neighboring Mongolia⁶ and in Buryatia, where lamas participated both as ordinary warriors and as instigators of the unrest.

The Buddhist conservatives advocated the traditional Buryat conception of religion and rejected all changes and reforms. Their efforts were directed towards the maintenance of the pre-war status quo and the traditional lifestyle of the Buddhist community.

Tensions between these two movements in the Buryat Buddhism escalated at the beginning of the 1920s and the risk of open armed conflict between the feuding factions became imminent even within individual monasteries. The potential conflict was resolved by an unexpected agent: the intervention of Soviet power, the Communist Party, combat groups of atheists, the Komsomol, the secret police and finally the Red Army.

5 Kseniia M. Gerasimova, *Obnovlencheskoe dvizhenie buryatskogo lamaistskogo dukhovenstva, 1917–1930 gg.* [Buryat Lamaist Clergy Reform Movement, in Russian], Ulan-Ude: Buryatskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo 1964, pp. 113–114.

6 See for instance: Larry W. Moses, *The Political Role of Mongolian Buddhism*, Bloomington, Indiana: Asian Studies Research Institute 1977; Bulcsu Siklos, “Mongolian Buddhism: A Defensive Account”, in: Shirin Akiner (ed.), *Mongolia Today*, London: Kegan Paul 1991, pp. 155–182.