Observations of Buddhist New Year rituals in present-day Mongolia

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The present paper is based on research carried out in Ulan Bator in 2001 in collaboration with Dr. Hanna Havnevik (University of Oslo) as part of the project *Revival of Buddhism in Mongolia since 1990*. This paper focuses on a selection of Buddhist ceremonies of the New Year (Tsagaan Sar) performed in monasteries in Ulan Bator.

Democratic changes in Mongolia since the 1990s have brought freedom of expressing religious beliefs and a strong revival of Tibetan Buddhism. Most of the New Year ceremonies observed in Ulan Bator in 2001 were performed also in the past, while the very popular *tsam* (*'cham*) dances are not enacted at present. While some rituals appear to have kept their old form, other traditional religious observances have become enriched with new elements, e.g. the participation of the President and Prime Minister in the New Year *mandala* offering in Gandantekchenlin, the largest and most important monastery in Mongolia. This, together with other characteristic new features of Mongolian religious life, suggests that Buddhism is used as one element in the ongoing nation-building process.

This presentation aims to show similarities and differences between Buddhist New Year rituals observed in monasteries in Ulan Bator in 2001 and ceremonies documented in records from pre-revolutionary Mongolia. An attempt will also be made to compare New Year ceremonies in Ulan Bator today with relevant such rituals in pre–1950 Tibet. Not being able to observe processes of ritual change, their altered contexts and meaning over time, necessarily makes such a comparison of old and new religious forms superficial. Nevertheless, an attempt will be made here to give a preliminary description of and to identify some of the elements that make up the highly creative moment of religious life in present Mongolia, where partly forgotten New Year rituals practiced in secrecy for decades are being re-enacted and recreated in a new socio-cultural setting.