

Mechanisms of Localization: Policy, Adaptation, and Hybridity in Kalmyk Buddhism During Tsarist Period

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This paper investigates the mechanisms underlying the localization of Buddhism among the Kalmyks during Tsarist rule. It identifies and analyzes three interconnected processes: (1) the evolving framework of Tsarist policies aimed at administrative integration and religious regulation; (2) Kalmyk adaptive strategies, particularly the development of unique institutional responses (Supreme Lama election, Chief Bagshi, Dayanqi, and Temple Adherent systems) to navigate state constraints; and (3) spontaneous processes of cultural hybridity are manifested in material culture (e.g., the Khoshut temple) and religious narratives (e.g., Ulyanov's reinvention of prophecies in Prophecies of Buddha). Utilizing the concept of "conjuncture practice" to frame these interactions, the study demonstrates how localization operated through a combination of regulatory pressure, community-level adaptation, and cultural synthesis, ultimately forging a distinct Kalmyk Buddhist expression within the imperial context.

Keywords: conjuncture practice, Buddhism, localization

Introduction: Unpacking Kalmyk Buddhist Localization

Russia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation. Its Buddhist communities are primarily located in the Republics of Buryatia, Tyva, and Kalmykia. Historically, the Kalmyks migrated from territories within China to settle along the Volga River in the first half of the 17th century due to internal conflicts among the Oirat tribes. Situated in the European part of Russia, far from traditional Buddhist centers like Tibet and Mongolia, and surrounded by neighboring peoples of different faiths, the Republic of Kalmykia constitutes a Buddhist cultural region within Europe.

Scholarly focus on Kalmyk Buddhism, both within Russia and internationally, has largely centered on historical descriptions (notably by Russian ethnographers and Mongol scholars from the 18th to 20th centuries), linguistic and historical studies of Buddhist scriptures, manuscripts, monuments, and artifacts (exemplified by the work of Russian Mongolologists like A. M. Pozdneev), and recent examinations of Buddhist doctrine, rituals, calendars, sects, biographies, and protective deities, alongside explorations of Buddhism's relationship with Kalmyk culture, ethnic identity, and interethnic relations. Chinese scholarship has predominantly concentrated on the Torghut exodus eastward and preceding historical events documented in works like *The Historical Outline of the Oirat Mongols* and *A Brief History of the Dzungars*. Translations, such as *N. Pal'mov's Historical Sketch of the Kalmyk People during Their Stay within Russia*, touch upon the status of Kalmyks remaining after the exodus, with related domestic studies often referencing the 1822 Tsinzilin Assembly.

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While extensive, this body of research has paid less attention to the dynamics of socio-cultural change. Understanding cultural transformation is crucial for explaining the formation and development of localized cultures, revealing mechanisms and characteristics of social structural shifts and cultural evolution within specific regions. However, the precise nature and extent of this maintained cultural “self” require scrutiny. How did Kalmyk culture evolve under Tsarist policies and within Russia’s multi-ethnic milieu after the Torghut exodus? What were the processes driving this cultural change? This study contends that the dynamic concept of “conjuncture practice” offers a productive lens for exploring these questions, specifically by analyzing three key mechanisms: Tsarist Policy Regulation, Kalmyk Institutional and Social Adaptation, and Spontaneous Cultural Hybridity.

This paper, drawing on Russian historical materials, relevant Russian scholarship, and fieldwork conducted in the Republic of Kalmykia (Russia) during 2018-2019 and 2021-2022, examines Kalmyk Buddhism during the Tsarist era. It analyzes the localization process through the lens of “conjuncture practice”, demonstrating how these three mechanisms interacted dynamically. Through specific case studies, it aims to reveal the agency of cultural actors within this process. The paper proceeds by examining each mechanism in turn before synthesizing their interaction in the conclusion.

Mechanism 1: The Regulatory Framework—Tsarist Policy Evolution

For the Tsarist government, the Kalmyks were an external people. Driven by mutual, albeit differing, political needs, the Kalmyks gradually entered a state of dependency on Tsarist Russia after their migration in the early 17th century, while the Tsarist state employed various means to integrate them into its imperial system, particularly to secure its southwestern frontier. Tsarist policy towards the Kalmyks concerning Buddhism can be broadly divided into a “Balance” period and a period of Direct Control following the abolition of the Khanate.

Phase 1: Pre-1771 “Balance”

Initially, Tsarist policy granted the Kalmyks relative autonomy, maintaining a power “balance” (баланс) among the leadership of the various uluses (tribal divisions) to enable indirect management (Кичиков, 1966, p. 86). This approach stemmed from the mid-17th century political climate, where Russia urgently needed new military allies, and the Kalmyks were prime candidates. Under this early “balance” policy, the relatively independent Kalmyk uluses did not form a unified khanate. Religiously, each ulus possessed its own independent temple (khurul) and Bagshi (equivalent to the Shiretui Lama in Buryatia), with no subordination between them; high-ranking lamas belonged to the privileged class of their respective ulus. Recognizing Buddhism’s importance to the Kalmyks, the Tsarist government actively courted the Kalmyk Buddhist elite (Бакунин, 1995, p. 41), simultaneously obstructing their ties to Tibet while indirectly interfering in Kalmyk affairs (Бакаева, 1994, p. 18).

Concurrently, after the death of Ayuka Khan, the Tsarist government actively promoted Orthodoxy among the Kalmyks. While deemed necessary, initial Christianization efforts were cautious, often employing formalistic methods like accepting fugitives from their own uluses into Orthodoxy (Максимов & Очирова, 2009, p. 260). A Senate Decree on January 20, 1724, mentioned converting Kalmyk elites to Orthodoxy and translating Christian classics into Kalmyk (Российская Национальная Библиотека, 2024). In response to Tsarist Christianization and diplomatic interference, Donduk-Dashi Khan issued the Supplemental Regulations (Токтолы) to the 1640 Oirat Code during his reign. These regulations reaffirmed the legal status of the Buddhist establishment. For the Torghut elite, Buddhism served as a means to maintain connections with other Mongol

regions and as an ideological tool for the populace; the regulations aimed to protect their national religious culture (Dalizhabu, 2016), constituting a direct response to Tsarist policy.

Tsarist Christianization achieved some short-term success, underpinned by policies adhering to the “balance” or “divide and rule” principle. For instance, Peter I secretly facilitated the departure of the Dorbet Noyon Cheter from Ayuka by ordering him to pasture, like his father, on the other side of the Don River, which Cheter did in 1723 (Максимов & Очирова, 2009, p. 345; Национальный архив Республики Калмыкия, Ф. И-36. Оп. 1. Д.25. Л. 4-5). Through successive “balancing” acts, the Kalmyks developed close ties with neighboring Russian peoples, particularly early interactions with Cossacks that broke language barriers. Gradual adoption of a settled lifestyle also made Kalmyks more receptive to Orthodox culture.

Buddhism played a pivotal role in the 1771 Torghut exodus eastward. According to the Astrakhan Tatar Mustafa Abdul, Lobsang Jalchin Rabjampa (рабджамба Лоузанг-Джалчин) played a major role in organizing the departure: “It seemed that through his efforts and inclination the Kalmyk people fled from Russian protection to the Chinese side, and under his leadership reached there; as a reward he hoped to gain the main leadership of this people” (Дорджиева, 2002, p. 74; Батмаев, 1993, p. 354). The Kalmyk Buddhist establishment’s desire for their compatriots to return under the protection of the Buddhist center (Курапов, 2007, p. 208) was a contributing factor. Thus, the wish for the Kalmyks to return to the land of their “legitimate great khan” was fulfilled (Трепавлов, 2007, p. 158). However, with the majority departing, those remaining along the Volga witnessed the abolition of the Khanate. Tsarist policy shifted from “balance” to direct intervention in Kalmyk affairs, marking the beginning of comprehensive Tsarist administration.

Phase 2: Post-1771 Direct Control & Codification

Following the 1771 exodus, smaller-scale eastward migrations occurred among the remaining population but were eventually quelled by Tsarist intervention. The exodus directly led to the abolition of the Kalmyk Khanate. To manage the remaining populace and foster loyalty, the Tsarist government formally acknowledged the legality of Buddhism (Российский государственный исторический архив (РГИА), Ф.796. Оп.81. Д.685. Л.2) while intensifying control. The interaction between the Kalmyk Buddhist elite and the Tsarist state in the 19th and early 20th centuries is traceable through key events and legislation.

Post-Khanate abolition, a series of administrative bodies were established: the Gubernatorial Expedition for Kalmyk Affairs (губернская экспедиция калмыцких дел 1771-1786), the Kalmyk Chancellery (калмыцкая канцелярия 1786-1796), and the Kalmyk Administration (калмыцкое правление 1797-1801) (Дорджиева, 2012, p. 65). To administer Kalmyk affairs, the Tsarist government reinstated the traditional judicial body, the Zargo, but reserved final decision-making authority for the state. Buddhist personnel, as privileged members of Kalmyk society, were integrated into the imperial system for managing non-Orthodox faiths. The Supreme Lama of the Kalmyk People (Лама калмыцкого народа) was appointed by the Tsar based on recommendations from regional authorities, incorporating Buddhist leadership into the steppe administration (Курапов, 2017).

By decree of Paul I in 1800, the Dorbet Lama Soybing (Сойбинг) was appointed Supreme Lama. He received an annual salary of 600 silver rubles, was provided with staff, and granted authority over the monastic communities of the uluses. Due to Paul I’s personal connections with Kalmyk Noyons, following an audience with a delegation led by Dorbet noble Chuchai-Taisha Tontudov (Чучей-тайша Тонтудов), Chuchai was appointed Governor of the Kalmyks. Under Paul I’s patronage, Soybing Lama’s authority grew, and the Kalmyk monastic community conducted annual Buddhist prayer ceremonies for the longevity of the Tsar’s family at the

rebuilt Ded-Lama Temple (Дед-Ламин хурул) (Дорджиева, 1995, p. 47). Soybing's enhanced influence led the Tsarist government to refrain from appointing a successor after his death in 1806 until 1836.

The 1825 Rules for the Administration of the Kalmyk People (Правила для управления калмыцким народом) were highly significant. From 1825, Kalmyk affairs were transferred to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Rules declared the former Khanate's territory subordinate to Tsarist internal provinces. It established a five-member Commission for Kalmyk Affairs (Коммисия калмыцких дел, 1826-1836), comprising three Tsarist officials and two representatives from the Kalmyk secular elite and clergy. The Commission's tasks included investigating "the attitude of the lords towards the religious estate", "the degree of power and tasks of the religious estate, its influence on the affairs of the people (lords, zaisangs, commoners)", and "the degree of dependence and taxation of subjects towards the religious estate". While proposing control over the religious estate, the Rules permitted the free conduct of religious rites (Российская Национальная Библиотека, 2024).

Phase 3: Codification & Quotas (1834/1847)

For stricter oversight, the Tsarist government enacted the Statute on the Administration of the Kalmyk People (Положение об управлении калмыцким народом) on November 24, 1834, effective on January 1, 1836. This Statute replaced the Commission with the Council of Kalmyk Administration (Совет калмыцкого управления) and established a new Lamaist Spiritual Board (Ламайское духовное правление 1836-1847), chaired by a Lama and consisting of four members. The Board's primary responsibility was Kalmyk religious and administrative affairs, specifically supervising the daily activities of religious personnel and reporting to the Council on temple activities and personnel numbers (Максимов & Очирова, 2009, pp. 233-234). Its staff were selected from Bagshis and Gelungs (Гелюнг, fully ordained monks), but operated under the direction of the Astrakhan Chief Supervisor (a military governor), with all decisions subject to approval by the Tsarist Council and Governor (Российская Национальная Библиотека, 2024).

The definitive state system for managing Kalmyk affairs was established with the new Statute enacted on April 23, 1847. Kalmyk administration was placed directly under the Horde Department for Nomadic Peoples (Ордынское отделение кочевых народов) of the Astrakhan Chamber of State Property (Астраханская палата государственных имуществ). While formally granting freedom of Buddhist belief and power to religious leaders, this Statute strictly controlled the number of monasteries and clergy, effectively transforming the Supreme Lama into a Tsarist official. The management of Kalmyk affairs operated under this 1847 Statute until 1917 without substantial alteration.

This regulatory evolution—from indirect "balance" to direct control and codified quotas—constituted a persistent external pressure mechanism. It aimed at administrative integration, limiting Buddhist institutional autonomy, and controlling religious personnel, setting the stage for Kalmyk adaptive responses.

Mechanism 2: Adaptation—Kalmyk Institutional and Social Responses

Faced with the evolving regulatory pressures outlined in Mechanism 1, the Kalmyk community, particularly its religious institutions and pupils, developed adaptive strategies. These manifested in innovative institutional frameworks and social practices designed to navigate state constraints while preserving core religious functions.

Institutional Innovations

Four key institutional adaptations emerged, primarily in response to state control over leadership and clergy numbers:

Supreme Lama system (Институт Ламы калмыцкого народа). Prior to 1771, there was no unified monastic leadership; each ulus had its own monastic community and Bagshi. After 1771, appointments stalled until Soybing's state appointment in 1800. Following his death in 1806, no state-recognized Supreme Lama was appointed until 1836, when the 1834 Statute mandated elections. The Tsarist government selected Jamba-Bakshi Gabung Namkiev (Джамбо-бакши Габунг Намкиев 1836-1847) from candidates nominated by the ulus Noyons (Дорджиева, 2012, pp. 85-90). This system persisted until the Soviet era, with candidate lists submitted by ulus Noyons to the Astrakhan Governor, forwarded by the Minister of Internal Affairs to the Tsar (Дорджиева, 2012, pp. 85-90). Including Soybing, there were 11 Supreme Lamas in Kalmyk history (Бакаева, 2009, p. 233). This system adapted leadership to mandatory state oversight.

Chief Bagshi system (Институт старших багшей). Before the 1834 Statute, temples enjoyed autonomy; temple affairs were managed by Bagshis, and the ulus Lama was chosen from among them. The 1834 Statute abolished the ulus Lama position, replacing it with the state-controlled Chief Bagshi system. Appointments required the Supervisor's consent, prioritizing political reliability. This centralized monastic management under state-sanctioned figures.

Dayanqi system (Институт даянчи). The 1771 exodus drastically reduced the clergy, but numbers rebounded, causing concern. Astrakhan Chief Administrator N. I. Strakhov reported in 1802 that Kalmyk religious personnel were too numerous (1546 by 1803). He proposed strict per-temple quotas (25 Gelungs, 25 Getzels (Гецель), 50 Manjis (Манджи, equivalent to Bandis in Buryatia/Mongolia)), granting secular status to non-staff and taxing them. He also sought to end the custom of sending sons for ordination and prohibit nobles from donating subjects to serve monasteries or elite clergy (Максимов & Очирова, 2009, p. 233). Strakhov's proposals were implemented via the 1825 Rules and subsequent laws. The 1847 Statute codified strict quotas (67 temples, 1656 clergies) (Национальный архив Республики Калмыкия. Ф. И-9. Оп. 4. Д. 33. Л. 26об. 27). In response, the mid-19th century saw the emergence of the Dayanqi system under Supreme Lama Gelik (Гелик). Elderly and infirm clergy were "retained" in monasteries as non-staff Dayanqi ("care recipients"), bypassing the quota. Although the Chamber deemed this illegal, to avoid conflict, it prohibited new lay ordinations and clergy promotions instead (РГИА. Ф. 383. Оп. 18. Д. 23738. Л. 12). Reports revealed, however, that some Dayanqi were fully able-bodied, not genuinely infirm. Age falsification (e.g., registering 30-year-olds as 63) and opaque procedures for assessing capacity or resignation were also documented. The term was used loosely, and deceased Dayanqi were replaced by non-staff personnel (Дорджиева, 2012, p. 90). This system was a social mechanism to circumvent numerical restrictions.

Temple pupil system (Институт «сургулин кебюн»). Kalmyk clergy traditionally progressed through ranks: Manji (novice), Getzel, Gelung (fully ordained), followed by specialized study (Корсункиев, 1977, p. 70). Post-1847 Statute, the Supreme Lama could promote clergy and, with permission from ulus leaders and the Astrakhan Chamber, ordain laymen into vacant positions—a difficult process. Thus, the Temple pupil (Surgulin Keb ün) system emerged in the latter half of the 19th century. While the Statute included formally studying Manjis participating in rituals within the quota, beginners were designated Temple pupils. They continued studying but were not counted against the quota limit. However, the number of children living in temples remained substantial. The Tsarist government then mandated that children under 16 could not reside in temples for Buddhist education. After negotiations, an 1881 compromise allowed children under 16 to be admitted, but only if they knew Russian and had received Russian secular schooling (Дорджиева, 2012, p. 92). This system managed novices under quota pressures while accommodating secular education demands.

Navigating the Rules: Compliance, Circumvention, and Community Agency

These institutional innovations were not merely passive acceptance but active strategies constituting the core adaptive mechanism. Kalmyk responses involved a complex interplay of formal compliance and practical circumvention (policy vs. practice), exploiting loopholes and leveraging community support:

Formal compliance. Following appointment procedures for Supreme Lama and Chief Bagshi; establishing the Dayanqi system ostensibly to “care” for retirees; nominally adhering to the Temple pupil structure; incorporating Russian language education for young pupils after 1881.

Circumvention & exploitation. Using the Dayanqi designation to retain active clergy beyond quotas; widespread age falsification and document fraud regarding Dayanqi status (РГИА. Ф. 383. Оп. 18. Д. 23738. Л. 12); utilizing personal connections with figures like Paul I to enhance religious authority (Дорджиева, 1995, p. 47); exploiting the gap between policy intent and local enforcement capacity; continuing the practice of sending young boys to temples as pupils despite restrictions.

Community-level strategies. Community support for sustaining the Dayanqi system; adaptation of monastic education to include Russian language; maintaining core religious functions and community identity despite regulatory constraints.

These adaptive strategies, embedded within both formal institutions and informal social practices, demonstrate significant Kalmyk agency. They reveal a community actively shaping its religious life under constraint, strategically navigating the rules—both complying and circumventing—to maintain the core functions and continuity of their Buddhist faith and institutions. This dynamic adaptation was the crucial mechanism processing the external regulatory pressure (Mechanism 1) into lived religious reality.

Mechanism 3: Hybridity—Spontaneous Cultural Fusion

Beyond institutional adaptation, localization was manifested in spontaneous cultural synthesis, where Kalmyk Buddhist traditions organically blended with Russian cultural elements. This hybridity, particularly evident in material culture and religious narratives, represents an output of the prolonged interaction and adaptation processes.

Material Hybridity: The Khoshut Temple

The most tangible example of architectural fusion is the Khoshut Temple (Хошеутовский хурул, or Great Tyumenev Khurul), located in Astrakhan Oblast. Built to commemorate the victory in the 1812 Patriotic War, it was commissioned by Khoshut ulus Noyon Serebdzhab Tyumen (Серебджаб Тюме́нь), who led the 2nd Kalmyk Regiment alongside the Russian army into Paris. Conceived as a symbol of Russian-Kalmyk friendship, its design explicitly blends Russian Classicism/Empire style with traditional Buddhist elements. Tyumen designed the structure, advised by Lama Gavan Chombe (Гаван Чомбе), drawing inspiration from St. Petersburg’s Kazan Cathedral while creatively incorporating distinctively Buddhist features like stupas and symbolic finials (ganzhir). Construction began in 1814, funded primarily by Tyumen with public donations.

Plans from the 1880s by V. V. Suslov (<https://www.kalmlib.ru/docs/hosheut.pdf>) show the original complex: a central structure modeled on Kazan Cathedral, flanked by small stupas connected via colonnaded walkways rich in Russian Classical motifs. The vibrant color scheme and window frames reflected Russian imperial style, while the stupas and their finials embodied Buddhist tradition. Although the central structure survives, the flanking walkways and stupas were demolished in the 1960s for building materials. After WWII, the temple

served as a club and granary, damaging interior murals irreparably. Historical photographs and archives confirm that such architecturally hybrid temples, combining Russian imperial grandeur with Mongolian-Tibetan Buddhist forms, became characteristic of late 19th-century Kalmykia (Бакаева, 1994). This fusion reflected not just new materials and techniques, but a growing Kalmyk embrace of Russian cultural aesthetics within their sacred spaces. The early existence of mobile tent churches with Orthodox crosses in Kalmyk areas also exemplifies cultural borrowing (A mobile tent church exists in the southwestern suburbs of Elista, with an Orthodox cross atop the tent roof. This mobile church is a replica built to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Orthodoxy in Elista, established on September 29, 2017.).

Narrative Hybridity: Ulyanov's "Prophecies of Buddha"

A profound example of narrative reinterpretation is found in the work of Don Kalmyk Lama Dambo Ulyanov (Дамбо Ульянов), "Prophecies of Buddha about the House of Romanov and a Brief Sketch of My Travels in Tibet in 1904-1905" (Предсказания Будды о доме Романовых и краткий очерк моих путешествий в Тибет, 1904-1905), published in 1913. Ulyanov acknowledged differences between Don Kalmyks and those from the Volga region. His arduous pilgrimage to Lhasa, ultimately facilitated by Russian geopolitical expansion and exploration missions in Central Asia, forms the backdrop. Within Buddhist scriptures, Ulyanov identified four prophecies by the Buddha and Padmasambhava concerning the Romanov dynasty. He creatively interpreted these prophecies as foretelling his own journey and the fate of his companion, Captain/translator Naran Erencenovich Ulanov (Наран Эренценович Уланов), who died en route, framing it as destiny (Дамбо Ульянов, 1913, pp. 86-87).

His interpretations were highly inventive:

Linking the prophecy of brothers offering honey (bal-burum) to the Buddha at his enlightenment, Ulyanov noted that "zhasir" (джасир) in Tibetan means "yellow hair", also signifying Russia. He thus identified the Tsars as reincarnations of these brothers, whose "sweet honey taste" attracted people, leading them "on a new path of salvation". (Дамбо Ульянов, 1913, pp. 86-87)

He interpreted the prophesied brothers blessed by the Buddha as reincarnations of the Tsar (elder brother) and the Chinese Emperor (younger brother) (Дамбо Ульянов, 1913, pp. 75-76).

Synthesizing various elements, he identified the "great kingdom bordering China" as Russia, equating the legendary northern Shambhala with European Russia, and directly linking the Shambhala royalty to the Romanov dynasty, declaring the Tsars Bodhisattva incarnates. While not the first to propose the Tsar as a Bodhisattva (similar ideas existed in Buryatia), Ulyanov's detailed scriptural justification was unique to Kalmykia.

As Takehiko Inoue (2016) argues, Ulyanov's creative exegesis exemplifies the distinct cosmological reinterpretation occurring within Kalmyk Buddhism under Tsarist rule. Prophecies of Buddha represent a quintessential spontaneous conjuncture practice at the narrative level. It constitutes a profound "invention of tradition", creatively adapting Buddhist cosmology to legitimize Kalmyk Buddhism within the imperial framework and affirm Kalmyk belonging within the Russian Empire. Ulyanov employed rich imagination, meticulously crafting a narrative that intertwined Kalmyk religious heritage with Russian imperial history.

These examples of material and narrative hybridity are not imposed adaptations but organic cultural syntheses. They demonstrate how sustained interaction (facilitated by Mechanisms 1 and 2) naturally produced localized forms where Russian elements became integral to Kalmyk Buddhist expression, shaping a unique European Buddhist identity.

Conclusion: Conjuncture Practice and the Interplay of Mechanisms

The persistence of Buddhism among the Kalmyks in Europe is not a story of simple assimilation or passive preservation. Instead, it resulted from a dynamic process of localization driven by the complex interplay of three interconnected mechanisms operating within a framework of “conjuncture practice”: Tsarist Policy Regulation (Mechanism 1), Kalmyk Institutional and Social Adaptation (Mechanism 2), and Spontaneous Cultural Hybridity (Mechanism 3).

The evolving Tsarist regulatory framework (Section II) provided the essential external context and pressure. From initial “balance” to post-1771 direct control and the definitive codification/quotas of the 19th century, state policies aimed at administrative integration, limiting Buddhist autonomy, and controlling religious personnel. This created the structural constraints within which Kalmyk agency operated. Crucially, Kalmyk responses were not passive. Through adaptive institutional innovations (Supreme Lama election, Chief Bagshi, Dayanqi, Temple pupil systems) and community-level strategies navigating compliance and circumvention (Section III), the Kalmyks actively reshaped their religious institutions and practices to maintain the core of their faith under state pressure. This adaptation constituted the core mechanism processing external constraints into viable religious life. The resulting prolonged interaction and adaptation naturally fostered spontaneous cultural fusion (Section IV). The hybrid architecture of the Khoshut Temple and Ulyanov’s creative reinterpretation of Buddhist prophecies to incorporate the Romanovs exemplify how Russian cultural elements became organically integrated into Kalmyk Buddhist expression, forging a distinct localized identity.

The concept of “conjuncture practice” effectively frames this dynamic. It moves beyond Sahlins’ focus on the static “structure of conjuncture” resulting from events (Sahlins, 1985), to emphasize the ongoing process of interaction and mutual shaping, particularly over the *longue durée* (Yuan, 2021), and the agency of local actors (Huang, 2017; Wang & Zhang, 2024). Here, conjuncture practice describes the continuous, multi-layered interaction between Tsarist regulatory pressures (II), Kalmyk adaptive agency (III), and the resulting cultural synthesis (IV). Policy (II) set the stage; Kalmyk adaptation (III) was the active, strategic response; and cultural hybridity (IV) emerged organically as both an outcome and a new form of expression within this sustained conjuncture. The Kalmyk “self”, while rooted in Buddhism, transformed through this process, embodying a unique fusion of Kalmyk and Russian elements shaped by state policies and local responses, ultimately manifesting as a Russian-Kalmyk cultural synthesis based on Buddhism.

This study’s significance lies in providing a clear analytical model—the triad of Regulation, Adaptation, Hybridity—for understanding religious localization within imperial contexts. It highlights the multifaceted nature of community agency, demonstrating how groups navigate domination through institutional ingenuity and cultural creativity. Finally, it defines the specific characteristics of localized Kalmyk Buddhism: a faith marked by state-influenced administrative structures, unique adaptive institutions, and a tangible cultural blend of Buddhist tradition, and Russian imperial influence, forged through centuries of dynamic conjuncture practice on the European steppe. The endurance of this distinct form testifies to the effectiveness of this complex interplay of mechanisms.

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