

# The Mongolian Ideology of Tenggerism and Khubilai Khan

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It was a belief in the Tenggeri (Heaven-God) that inspired and motivated the unprecedented rise of the Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and this belief was eventually developed to the point that it constituted a cohesive political theory that can be called Tenggerism or Heavenism.

The ideology of Tenggerism went through three stages of development. It first emerged during the period when Chinggis Khan founded the Great Mongol State in 1206. At that time it was aimed at the sacralization and legitimization of the power of his Eurasian nomadic empire. The second stage occurred during the period of the world-wide expansionism of Chinggis Khan's successors. At that time Tenggerism developed into a sophisticated universal ideology of Tenggerization, according to which all under Heaven must be united under the rule of the Mongols. The third stage of Tenggerism commenced with the reign of Khubilai Khan, who completed the creation of the universal empire by conquering the whole of China. Unlike his predecessors, Khubilai Khan was less concerned with conquests than with the problems of pacifying and consolidating the universal empire.

I have already dealt with the first two stages of this process in some of my previous writings.<sup>1</sup> At this time I would like to speak about the third stage. It was during Khubilai Khan's thirty-five

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<sup>1</sup> Sh. Bira, "Mongolian Tenggerism and Modern Globalism: A Retrospective Outlook on Globalism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 14 (2004), 3-12.

years of rule that the Mongolian policy of Tenggerization reached its apogee and the Mongolian empire acquired its universal character. The world was actually united under one political authority. It was interconnected by the communication network known as the *örtöge* system of horse relay stations. Peoples, ideas, information, and commerce flowed freely between countries through this network. Examples include the creation and introduction of an international alphabet, the so-called square script, which encouraged the cultural integration of many ethnic groups and the construction of an astronomical observatory at Maraghah in Azerbaijan. The famous observatory was headed by the great astronomer Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi (1201-1274). It became a meeting place of scientists from various countries and there developed a close collaboration between Arab-Iranian and Chinese astronomers. In 1267 Khubilai Khan invited the Iranian astronomer Jamal ad-Din to his capital Dadu, the present-day Beijing. The astronomer brought the astronomical instruments sent by Il-Khan Hülegü to his brother Khubilai Khan. The famous Chinese astronomer Guo Shoujing (1231-1316) together with his Iranian colleague Jamal ad-Din founded an observatory in the capital of the empire, and their research was most fruitful.

It was during the Mongol Yüan dynasty that the Mongols came into direct contact with a variety of cultures, including Chinese, Indo-Tibetan, Arab-Islamic and Central Asian. Buddhist literature was translated from different languages into Mongolian. Not a few Mongols mastered the Chinese language and script. They took an active part in literary and translation activities, and some of them even wrote their works in Chinese. Uighurs, Tanguts, Tibetans, Chinese and Central Asians worked in close collaboration with Mongols. In 1307 Bolodtemür, the Assistant of the Left in the Secretarial Council, presented to Qaisan Khan a Mongolian version of the famous Confucian book *Xiaojing* in the so-called state script. The Mongols also became acquainted with the stories of the famous Alexander Romance. Möngke Khan's minister Mahmud Yalavach once related to his sovereign a story from the Muslim version of the Alexander Romance, and the Mongol khan was extremely pleased with it. The Alexander Romance soon gained wid-

er popularity and in the early fourteenth century the entire work is said to have been translated into Mongolian.

The exchange of intellectual achievements across the Eurasian continent found its most illustrious expression in the world's first universal history known as *Jami'al-Tawarikh* ("The Compendium of Histories"), compiled by Rashid ad-Din with the assistance and participation of an international team of historians, including the Mongol Bolod (Pulad) chingsiang. The close collaboration and friendship of Rashid ad-Din and Bolod chingsiang are very symbolic in terms of cultural rapprochement between East and West. Thomas Allsen writes that "when acknowledged at all, our Bolod is usually described, quite accurately, as a literate Mongolian and as the informant of Rashid al-Din. But he was much more than that. He may be justly characterized as a Mongolian intellectual-literate, cosmopolitan, and a man of affairs. Although continuously exposed to foreign cultures and to their leading representatives, he never abandons his ties to Mongolian traditions. Bolod, of course, knew much about Chinese and later Persian culture, but he remained to his dying day 'the expert' on Mongolian customs and genealogy."<sup>2</sup>

I have given some details only from the intellectual sphere. More details can be gleaned from the economic, commercial and humanitarian interconnections in those days. All of these facts show that there had been developing something more than military conquests of nomadic "barbarians" who brought nothing but destruction and massacre. Rather there took place some kinds of global processes that, in some ways, can be compared with modern globalization, specially in terms of making peoples and countries closer and more integrated than ever before.

Khubilai Khan was a great reformer of the Mongolian ideology of world domination. He knew his own nomadic civilization as well as the Confucian, Buddhist, Arab-Islamic and European-Christian civilizations, and he did his utmost to exploit their gains successfully and selectively in conformity with his policy of Tenggerization. He explained his religious policy to Marco Polo as

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 79-80.

follows: "There are four gods worshipped by everybody. Jesus Christ of the Christians, Mohammed of the Iranians, Moses of the Jews and Buddha Chandamani. As regards myself, I respect all of those four religions, but whosoever is the greatest and most honest in heaven, I wish to have bless me".<sup>3</sup>

History confirms that the Mongolian khan finally gave preference to Buddhism as a neutral and more universal religion in comparison with other religions known to him. His political pragmatism allowed him to find the universal and supranational character of Buddhism well suited to the model of his multinational universal emperorship. As is well-known, since ancient times Buddhism had been developing an original ideology in which the *chakravartin-rāja* concept occupied center stage. According to this ideology the world should be united under the banner of Buddhism and ruled by universal monarchs who turn the wheel of *Dhārma*. It should be pointed out that in the pro-Buddhist policy of Khubilai Khan the most decisive role was played by *hPhags-pa* Lama, the famous abbot of the *Sa-skya* monastery of Tibet. The fact that Khubilai's policy towards Buddhist Tibet differed greatly from that towards other countries essentially reflected his specific attitude to Buddhism. Tibet, as a matter of fact, was not conquered by force, but joined to the Mongol empire by way of establishing a predominantly spiritual relationship called by the Tibetans themselves a *Yong-mchod* (*Yong-bdag-mchod gna*, in Mongolian: *öglige-yin ejen*, *takil-un orun*) or "Alms-giver-Religious Preceptor" relationship which eventually expressed the sacred meaning of the union of the so-called two orders, that of the Union of the Khan or "Alms-giver" as the head of the secular power and the Preceptor as the head of the ecclesiastic power.

In reality, however, the *Yong-mchod* relationship was not an equal partnership of the two heads of power. The khan as "the Alms-giver" played the leading role and provided the Preceptor with donations, while the Preceptor as the spiritual leader served to sanctify and legitimate the khan's power. One can say that this was the Mongolian interpretation and modification of the old traditional Indo-Tibetan conception of the Buddhist monarchy on

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<sup>3</sup> A.C. Moule, *Marco Polo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 201.



the basis of the Mongolian ideology of Tenggerism. After acute disputes at their first meeting, Khubilai Khan and hPhags-pa Lama reached a concordance according to which the oldest Buddhist doctrine of unity of the ecclesiastical and temporal orders underwent a major transformation. Khubilai Khan saw to it that the traditional hegemony of the Buddhist religion over the state power was going to be limited, while hPhags-pa Lama succeeded in getting a special status for his country as a spiritual center of the Mongolian empire. Tibet of that period reminds us to a certain extent of the Vatican in the modern age.

Khubilai Khan carried out bold reforms in the universal ideology of his predecessors. Not rejecting Shamanism and its ideology, he preferred to apply the main tenets of Buddhist universalism to his policy of Tenggerization. By the Order of Khubilai Khan issued on the first day of the middle summer month of the Year of the Mouse (1264) and called the *hjah-sa mo-tig-ma* ("The Pearl Yasa") the Mongol khan, although traditionally referring both to the power of everlasting Tenggeri<sup>4</sup> and protection of the khan's charisma (*sun jali*) in the beginning of his Order, stated as follows:

"Though one should follow the law of Chinggis Khan to reach all the best in this life, it is necessary to rely upon the Law of Buddha after this life. Having perceived the meaning of all this [I] have understood the path of Shakyamuni as a genuine path only. It is my teacher hPhags-pa Lama who, having well understood himself that path, has well taught this path to others. This is why I have received the *dbang* (abisheka) from him and awarded him the title of *guoshri* (Chinese: *guoshi*), the State Preceptor, and he was declared to be venerated by all *huvrags* (lamas)..."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "I have reconstructed the Mongolian original from the Tibetan: *tse-ring gnam-gyi*..."

<sup>5</sup> See my *O "Zolotoi knige" Sh. Damdina* (Ulaanbaatar : Izd-vo Akademii nauk MNR, 1964), 73-74. Cf. *Pagha lama-yin tuguji* (Kökeqota: Öbör Monggol-un Arad-un Keblel-ün Qoriy-a, 1992), 43-56.

In the same Order hPhags-pa Lama was designated as the Head of Religion, and all the huvraqs or lamas of Tibet were required to obey him and be engaged exclusively in religious services for the welfare of the Mongol khan according to the precepts of the Buddhist teaching. Under these conditions only the khan would indispensably provide the lamas with his donations and veneration, and would free them from "the three duties" - military service, taxes and örtöge duties.

This Order marked a turning point in the ideology of Khubilai Khan's Tenggerism. He actually declared Buddhism to be the state religion, having appointed hPhags-pa Lama the State Preceptor. At the same time he underlined his loyalty to the power of Tenggeri and the protection of the khan. Here one can see some kind of division of power with preference given to the khan's power. It is characteristic that almost all the edicts issued by Khubilai Khan's successors, like Buyantu Khan, and imperial family members, like Mangala, Dhāmapala's widow, Ananda consistently referred to the power or strength of Eternal Heaven and the khan's charisma (*sunu*), thus demonstrating their loyalty to their traditional ideology of Tenggerism. Although these documents dealt with the affairs of different religions -- Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, and Islam -- their representatives were ordered to pray to Heaven and pronounce benedictions in favor of the Mongol khans.<sup>6</sup>

It is obvious from the Order and other, similar sources that Mongolian Tenggerism did not clash with Buddhist universalism, as it did with Islam and Christianity during the reigns of Khubilai Khan's predecessors. Moreover, Tenggerism was being considerably transformed under the impact of the fundamental ideological principles of Buddhism. Source materials, particularly Tibetan, testify that with the active participation and assistance of hPhags-pa Lama the Mongol khan managed to put Buddhism into the service of his universal emperorship. Thus a new philosophy arose with the aim of supporting and justifying the policy of Tenggerization of the Mongols.

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<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Poppe, *The Mongolian Monuments in hPhags-pa Script* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1957), 46-56.

By his numerous works, especially those addressing Khubilai Khan and his family members, hPhags-pa Lama did much to substantiate the universal nature of the Mongol empire and legitimate the right of the Mongol ruler as the Chakravartin-rāja. In his well-known work *Shes-bya rab-gsal* (The Book to Clarify Knowledge), hPhags-pa Lama did his best to justify the universal character of the Mongol empire from the viewpoint of Buddhist historiography. The book was composed by order of Khubilai Khan's son, Crown Prince Chingim, in the Year of the Earth Tiger (1278). The State Preceptor was the first to include the Mongol empire in the scheme of the general history of the Buddhist world and to call Chinggis Khan a Chakravartin khan (in Tibetan: hkor los sgyur-'ba'i rgyalbo).

This was quite a new initiative in the Buddhist historiography of that time. The author gave a brief survey of the Mongol empire just after the history of ancient India and Tibet, the two great Buddhist countries. Hence there first appeared, as I have written previously, a three Buddhist monarchy scheme (India, Tibet, and Mongolia) of writing history in Tibetan and Mongolian historical writings. According to this scheme the history of the Mongol empire was incorporated into the history of the Buddhist universe, and Chinggis Khan and his successors were linked to the sacred genealogies of the great Buddhist kings of India and Tibet, beginning with Mahāsammata, the legendary forefather of all the kings of the Buddhist world.

I want to emphasize that hPhags-pa Lama did not falsify history by forcefully linking the genealogical bloodlines of the great Mongol khans with those of the ancient Indian and Tibetan Dhārma-rājas, as Mongol historians did later on. He only confirmed that there was a universal empire founded by Chinggis Khan, and that this empire became a Buddhist one under the rule of Khubilai Khan. On this basis, he had some reason for including the Mongol empire into the list of Buddhist countries and for comparing Chinggis Khan with Chakravartin and likening Khubilai Khan to the Bodhisattva, calling him a Dhārma-rāja, the supporter and protector of the all-victorious Buddhist teaching. One year before Khubilai became khan, hPhags-pa Lama elevated him to the level

of a great Boddhisattva khan and wished many blessings on him.<sup>7</sup> In one of his blessings he called Khubilai “the highest Boddhisattva, friend of the Dhārma, the right and merciful protector of the world”.<sup>8</sup>

In another blessing hPhags-pa Lama praised Khubilai Khan as the highest Boddhisattva Sechen Khan, distinguished by his virtues, prominent for his sincere belief and merciful wisdom, the advocate of religion and the protector of the world by his honest mind”.<sup>9</sup> The elevation of the Mongol khan as a Boddhisattva by the head of a religion pursued, after all, a far-reaching aim. According to the Buddhist worldview, the Boddhisattva ideal of the king represented a cosmic liberation that not only delivers his subjects from all miseries, but provides a cosmic unity, integration and harmony to the Universe. And it is not difficult for us to imagine that Khubilai Khan was not only extremely flattered by all this praise, but he accepted it as objectively correct because the khan had, after all, been tireless in his attempts to unite “all under Heaven” by all possible means.

Khubilai Khan’s new approach towards the policy of Tenggerization found its most impressive reflection in the fact that he himself converted to Buddhism by way of receiving a consecration (abisheka, Tibetan: dbang) from hPhags-pa Lama, and the act of consecration was repeated for three times. The first time was in 1253, when he was not yet a khan but involved in Tibetan affairs, and the two others occurred in 1260 and 1270. The abisheka which he received was that of Hevajra (Tibetan: dges-pa rdorje), the Tantric deity (yi-dam). Hevajra is one of the main tutelary deities in Lamaism who was especially worshipped in the Sa-skyā monasteries and whose cult is closely linked with that of Mahākāla (Tibetan: mGon-po). hPhags-pa Lama himself is believed to have received the initiation in Hevajra by Mahākāla.

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<sup>7</sup> hPhags-pa bla-ma, rGyal-po la gdams-pa’i rab-du byed-pa (Sa-skyā bkah-hbum), Vol. Ba, ff. 1a/344-37a/430a.

<sup>8</sup> Sa-skyā bkah-hbum, Vol. Va, ff. 3a/390b

<sup>9</sup> *Pagba lama-yin tuguji*, Coyiji, ed. (Kökeqota: Öbör Monggol-un Arad-un Keblel-ün Qoriy-a, 1992), 53.



The fact that Khubilai Khan got the initiation in Hevajra rites from the direct transmitter had, from the point of view of Tantrism, a great magic meaning in terms of enhancing his God-like nature and legitimating his universal khanship. By having gotten into direct spiritual contact with his tutelary deity Mahākāla, the most powerful defender of religion, Khubilai Khan could claim to have acquired all his mysterious powers in the cause of ruling his empire. Thus, the Mongolian khanship could enjoy not only the



Mahākāla

favor of Tenggri, but the favor of the powerful Tantric god. The black figure of terrifying Mahākāla had actually become a symbol of the khan's might just as the Shamanist black *sülde* had been the symbol of Chinggis Khan's power.

In 1270 on the initiatives of Khubilai Khan and hPhags-pa Lama there was built a temple consecrated to Mahākāla in the place of Zhuozhou located south of Dadu. At the temple there used to take place great rituals dedicated to Mahākāla, the fearful defender who suppressed all evil forces of state and religion. These rituals were held especially frequently during times of war. The cult of Mahākāla continued until the end of the Yüan dynasty, and many temples dedicated Mahākāla were constructed in different parts of China. Even though they were no longer held after the fall of the Yuan dynasty, these rituals created a tradition of Mahākāla worship among the Mongols that continued until modern times. Tanakas and statuettes of Mahākāla had been kept in most Mongolian families including my own, as he came to be widely regarded as the main defender and protector of the Mongolian nation.

Judging by the description by Chos-kyi-'od-zer (fl. 1305-1321) in his poem devoted to Mahākāla ("The Great Black"), the deity was represented in those days as being of black color, having a terrifying image with four hands, one face, three red eyes symbolizing the past, present, and future, and yellow hair, and holding a sword in his front right hand, a scull in the other right hand, a spear in his upper left hand, and the dvaja or victory banner in his lower left hand. This description largely corresponds to the terrifying form of Siva in her character as destroyer. Siva is one member of the Hindu triad of deities, the two other being Brahma "the creator" and Vishnu "the preserver". This close similarity means that the worship of Mahākāla was traditionally associated with that of Siva, who was also depicted in the black color as Mahākāla.

The other tutelary deity whom Khubilai Khan had chosen was Sitāpatra, in Mongolian Čagan Sikürtei and in Tibetan gdugs-dkar čan. In 1270 Khubilai Khan, on the advice of hPhags-pa Lama, hoisted over his throne in the Da Ming Palace in Dadu the white parasol of the Tantric god Sitāpatra. With that act Khubilai Khan turned the Tantric deity into the protector of the Mongol



empire. As is known, the white parasol was popular in Buddhist countries as an emblem of royalty signifying peace and prosperity, and Khubilai Khan used it alongside the white *sülde* or banner of Chinggis Khan as the “sülde of peace”. The white color and the calm, peaceful image of Sitātapatra probably resonated well with the Mongols of Khubilai Khan’s days as they soon began to identify the Tantric deity with their own shamanistic “protective spirit”, the *Čagan tug*, which was the white standard first raised by Chinggis Khan as a symbol of peace and protection at the ceremony of his enthronement in 1206.



Sitātapatra

One should point out that the ideological and practical meaning of the worship of the Tantric deity Sitātapatra was far-reaching in terms of sacralizing and pacifying the world empire of the Mongol khans. Whoever worshipped this deity (*yi-dam*) entered into a mysterious and intimate union with his tutelary spirit and enjoyed her peaceful magic powers and favors. Although Tantrism was introduced into the Mongolian empire from Tibet, its origin goes back to the ancient Indian worship of the feminine as a prime cause of all phenomena. Therefore, in Tantrism most deities (*yi-dam*) are depicted as feminine. The *yi-dam* Sitātapatra is traditionally represented as a female deity with all her attributes. Her color is pure white with many hands and faces, keeping a vajra in her main right hand and the white parasol with the long handle in her main left hand, suppressing innumerable evil forces under her big waist band. One can find images of Sitātapatra as described here in the illustrations of the Mongolian version of the Kanjur.<sup>10</sup>

Researchers like Herbert Franke and Choyiji have produced some interesting data from the *Yuan shi* concerning the rituals of Sitātapatra that had been suggested by hPhags-pa Lama and introduced at the imperial court by Khubilai Khan. The rituals of Sitātapatra were held every year on the fifteenth day of the middle month of spring, beginning in the year 1270. During the colorful ceremony, participated in by the khan and the state preceptor and a large number of dignitaries, the white parasol was taken from the khan's palace and carried in the procession circumambulating the capital city. The ceremony was attended by huge crowds of people and looked in all respects like a great festival that included both religious and cultural forms of colorful entertainment. After the end of the procession the white parasol was returned to the imperial palace and again hoisted over the khan's throne.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Rasisereng, *Monggol "Ganjuur" daki Burqan-u burin iji köriig jirug : Degedu* (Kökeqota: Öbör Monggol-un Arad-un Keblel-ün Qoriy-a, 2002), 78.

<sup>11</sup>Herbert Franke, *From Tribal Chieftain to Universal Emperor and God: The Legitimation of the Yüan Dynasty* (München: Verlag der BAW, 1978), 60-62; Coyiji, *Monggol-un burqan-u sasin-u teüke: Yeke Monggol ulus-un iyy-e, 1206-1271* (Kökeqota: Öbör Monggol-un Arad-un Keblel-ün Qoriy-a, 1998), 283-284.



The worship of Sitātapatra and the rituals associated with it were designed to demonstrate to the huge crowds attending the annual festivities and to the empire as a whole the khan's power to ensure peace and welfare for all. At the same time, the rituals served to demonstrate the god-like nature of the Mongol khans as Chakravartin emperors of the universe.

In conclusion, one should say that during the Yuan period of the Mongol empire the traditional Mongolian ideology of Tenggerism underwent great changes thanks to the impact of Buddhist religious and political philosophy. When compared with other religions and ideologies known to the Mongol khans at the time, Buddhism offered them a form of universalism that, thanks to its supranational and cosmopolitan nature, was far more attuned to the needs of governing a world empire. Rather than replacing Tenggerism, the Buddhist model of the monarch as Chakravartin strengthened it by serving as a new innovative paradigm for imitation, invocation and, finally, for deification of the Mongolian khans in their attempts to justify and legitimize their world domination.

The Mongol Yuan dynasty represented in its ideology and form more of a Buddhist universal monarchy than the Chinese or nomadic types of Eastern empires. The introduction by Khubilai Khan, on hPhags-pa Lama's initiative, of an elaborate court cult and colorful ceremonies of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Tantric deities, particularly Mahākāla and Sitātapatra, was bound to demonstrate the Buddhist god-like nature of the universal khanship. If Tenggerism justified the world-wide conquests of the Mongols, Buddhism in the form of Tibetan Lamaism was worshiped with the aim of sacralizing the peaceful domination of the numerically small elite of Mongols over all the world.

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