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special issue

**Women as Visionaries, Healers and Agents of
Social Transformation in the Himalayas, Tibet and
Mongolia**

edited by Mona Schrempf and Nicola Schneider



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- Mona Schrepf & Nicola Schneider — Editorial**
Female Specialists between Autonomy and Ambivalence
pp. i-viii
- Elisabeth Benard**
Born to Practice: The Sakya Jetsunma Phenomenon
pp. 1-20
- Anne de Sales**
Heroic Destinies and Petty Claims: Women and the
Transformation of Shamanic Practices in the Hills of Nepal
pp. 21- 34
- Hanna Havnevik**
Female Temple Founders, Ritualists, and Clairvoyants in Post-
Socialist Mongolian Buddhism
pp. 35-52
- Theresia Hofer**
Gender and Medicine in Kham: An Analysis of the Medical Work
and Life of Derge Phurpa Dolma
pp. 53-77
- Sarah Jacoby**
Relational Autonomy in the Life of a Contemporary Tibetan *Dākinī*
pp. 79-113
- Françoise Pommaret**
Empowering Religious Women Practitioners in Contemporary
Bhutan
pp. 115-138
- Johanna Prien**
Fieldnotes on my Stay with a *Neljom* Teacher and her Disciples in
Western Bhutan
pp. 139-151

Françoise Robin

Caring for Women's Words and Women's Bodies. A Field Note on
Palmo and her "Demoness Welfare Association for Women"

pp. 153-169

Nicola Schneider

Self-Representation and Stories Told: the Life and Vicissitudes of
Khandro Choechen

pp. 171-188

Mona Schrempf

Becoming a Female Ritual Healer in Eastern Bhutan

pp. 189-213

*

Notes on Contributors

pp. 215-217

*

Editorial

Female Specialists between Autonomy and Ambivalence

Mona Schrempf & Nicola Schneider

This special issue is based upon an international symposium on autonomous religious women held during 2013.¹ It offers a new, comparative perspective on women as visionaries, healers and agents of social transformation in Tibet, the Himalayas and Mongolia. The contributions form a collection of ethnographically based case studies of autonomous female specialists from across this wide, but rarely compared region, which is culturally coherent in respect to the sharing of both shamanic and Buddhist traditions, and yet historically, politically and socially diverse. Notably, most of these case studies share certain dramatic and fundamentally disruptive socio-political changes that had previously created a vacuum of religious and secular education and practices. These were followed by revivals or recoveries of religion and education—whether this concerns Tibet after the Cultural Revolution beginning in the 1980s, post-socialist Mongolia and democratisation in Bhutan starting in the 1990s, or post-Maoist democratisation and outmigration of Nepalese male labourers in the new millennium. These times of revivals made space for innovation and new opportunities, which several female specialists have seized in different ways, allowing them to become more autonomous. The case studies also allow comparison of different religious and ritual specialists, from female shamanic to meditative Buddhist practitioners, along with two female professionals in Tibetan literature and medicine. Concerning the religious practitioners, however, boundaries between their specialisations are blurred, meanings differ locally, and their roles—at times in need of recognition by a higher (male) authority—can change within one

¹ As editors of this special issue and organisers of the international symposium “Women as Visionaries, Healers and Poisoners—Autonomous Female Religious Specialists in Tibet, the Himalayas and Inner Asia”, we would like to thank the German Research Foundation (DFG) for funding this event and the Institute for Asian and African Studies for their institutional help. Convened by Toni Huber, the symposium was held at the Central Asian Seminar, Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt University Berlin, 3rd - 5th May 2013. For a conference report, see Schrempf 2013.

woman's lifetime. We have decided, therefore, to avoid arbitrarily categorising their specialisations, so as not to undermine the vital diversity and autonomy of each subject's case.

The articles appear in alphabetical order and suggest a reading across certain overlapping themes; all these women share some fundamental experiences, often facing similar conundrums and social pressures while attempting to define, assume and act out their specialist roles. In various ways, they all encounter or struggle with a "surface politics of the body" within their male-dominated societies, where the gender and bodies of women are defined within strict social boundaries via institutions such as marriage, motherhood, and traditional monasticism, all of which limit women's agency or tend to marginalise their specialist roles.² On the one hand, whenever they transgress these boundaries, conflicts or illness arise. On the other, solutions vary, and the studies and life stories of these women demonstrate their struggles to reassert and reposition themselves accordingly.

1. Agents of social change through innovation

There are novel ways in which women create or take up new roles or gain agency for themselves and others. Hanna Havnevik offers an example of how, in post-socialist urban Mongolia, "female religious entrepreneurs" are creating an innovative kind of New Age specialist, while at the same time they continue to be practising Buddhists. Some of them might still remain closely connected with religious institutions or offer their services in temples, practicing in parallel, an eclectic New Age mix of different ritual healing techniques, divination and clairvoyance for the modern urban everyday life concerns of their clientele. Among these innovators there are also founders of new nunneries—which previously did not exist in Mongolia—who were inspired by global Buddhism, and exiled Tibetan lamas.

At around the same time, and propelled by similar forces, Françoise Pommaret describes how new nunneries were also founded in Bhutan, beginning in the 1990s. Some individual Bhutanese nuns who had studied in Tibetan exile nunneries in India, established these institutions back in their homeland. Inspired by Western feminist Buddhists, such as Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and supported by the royal queens (Ashis), they enabled nuns' education to equal that of monks' by forming an association for nuns.

² Cf. Butler 2010: 184-185.

Pommaret states further, that more and more laywomen interested in practicing religion have joined the recently founded "Black Throema Choe" meditation and study groups. While these meditation practices were once reserved for a few male hermits in the 1990s, certain Tibetan exile masters have made them specifically available to women, empowering them through joint religious practices without having to become celibate nuns. Thus, both lay and monastic religious practices have undergone a noteworthy feminisation in Bhutan.

In eastern Tibet, some female autonomous specialists were also involved in the religious revival after Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Up" (Chin. *gaige kaifang*) in 1980s China. Khandro Rinpoche, discussed by Sarah Jacoby, partly revived and rebuilt some of the destroyed monasteries and sacred places in her area through fundraising, social networking for sponsorship, as well as meditative and ritual activities.

Anne de Sales mentions different innovative female practitioners emerging during and after the Maoist insurrection in Nepal, in connection with the marked outmigration of males during the war, and then for labour abroad. The *matajis* were only a temporary, yet an entirely new group of religious specialists among the rural population of the Kham Magar and one that was exclusively represented by yoginis during the Maoist insurgence. After the Maoists had left, there were more women taking up the role of shamans than usual, even though female shamans were already traditionally part of this institution. At that time, many men left their homes and villages to find work while their wives had to endure a triple work load as mothers, householders and farmers. Therefore, female shamans, having to additionally find the time to learn specific chants that are crucial for ritual efficacy, were not able to learn them by heart. The women fear that this new development compromises the tradition, and at the same time openly express their ambivalent roles. Looking at the recent changes in the shamanic tradition, de Sales asks if they are, in the end, causing it to change.

Françoise Robin explains how Palmo, a professor of Tibetan literature, has created a new space of opportunity for writing and publishing Tibetan women's work within her university department and on China's book market, openly confronting her readers with a confident female gender identity. Moreover, by founding the "Demoness Welfare Association for Women", an NGO with voluntary Tibetan female professionals, including gynaecologists, she started to target rural women's health issues. This association is launching innovative programs and educational projects by teaching rural women and nuns about women's health and hygiene,

encouraging important changes in their lives and self-esteem.

2. *Legitimising institutions—lineage, reincarnation, education*

Autonomous female specialists can have a legitimised place of their own for religious practice if their position is already clearly rooted within a traditional lineage by inheritance. Other legitimising institutions are reincarnation, marriage, or a good secular education. Concerning lineage, Elisabeth Benard explains how a specific religious tradition of some outstanding women called the Sakya Jetsunmas enables their education and social status to be equal to that of their brothers—lineage holders of the great Sakya family—via similar inheritance principles. Even though, like male heirs, Sakya Jetsunmas figure in teacher and disciple lineages mentioned in the *Genealogies of the Sakya Families*, their own biographies are generally left out. This conforms to a dearth of women's biographies within male focused historiographical writings in Tibetan societies and elsewhere.³

Lineage also plays an important part for legitimising the status and socio-religious roles of Khandro Rinpoche (Jacoby) and Khandro Choechen, as discussed by Nicola Schneider. Both have been recognised as reincarnations of famous female deities and historical women, giving them the necessary authority to act as autonomous religious specialists. However, at times, they still have to reassert their roles vis-à-vis male peers.

Theresia Hofer presents us with a counterexample, the portrait of a female doctor who despite her professional expertise, and being a member of a Tibetan medical lineage, is excluded from both official and professional recognition. Her case study and comparison with other female physicians within Tibetan medical lineages in the past seems to confirm that today women are ultimately disadvantaged by their gender. They only receive the same education and status as male doctors if they are the sole heirs to their family lineage, i.e. have no brothers who are traditionally preferred as lineage holders. Despite an increase in equal access to learning and education for Tibetan women since the 1980s, it seems that in her case gender inequality, the old lineage principle as well as her lack of socio-political networks, overrode modern state structures that could have provided her with an equal opportunity.

For Palmo, secular education was the main legitimising factor for her professional success. She became a professor for Tibetan

³ Cf. McGranahan 2010 : 121-125.

literature at a well known university, building up women's literature studies, as well as being actively engaged in setting up health programs for illiterate rural women (Robin).

3. Legitimation by divine forces

It is a characteristic feature among (both male and female) ritual specialists across the Himalayas, Tibet and Inner Asia, that most of them are "called" by divine forces and therefore have to follow this path. If they refuse, other family members may die, they can become "mad" or fall ill. Johanna Prien's biographical fieldnote of a female spirit medium in western Bhutan demonstrates that Am Phub Zam strongly believes that she lost her first child because of her previous refusal of the divine calling. She clarifies that she and her family will only be healthy if she completely accepts her deity's calling. The explanation by another spirit medium from eastern Bhutan, Jomo Dolma, discussed by Mona Schrempf, is similar. She explains that she was already "mad" and ill during childhood, and then also as a young woman, as nobody had recognised her calling. Falling pregnant every year and having had many miscarriages, Dolma explains that the deities were taking her babies away from her, and yet they were ultimately protecting her from the burden of rearing too many children. For both of these ritual specialists, and similarly with the female shamans among the Kham Magar (de Sales), divine forces seem to interfere with their motherhood. They are confronted with an ambivalence that arises out of the ultimate choice of taking on their new roles as autonomous ritual specialists. Others, such as Khandro Rinpoche, have deliberately chosen to abandon their children at certain times in their lives in order to follow their calling.

A divine calling is not only restricted to spirit mediums, but can also play an important role for the process of identifying female reincarnations. Due to divine interference, Khandro Choichen's wish to become a nun was prevented and she had no choice but to accept her calling (Schneider).

4. Juggling social roles and transgressing norms

All the case studies in this volume highlight the dilemmas women are confronted with when following their specialisations, while at the same time they are expected to and/or want to maintain their traditional gender roles: as children for their parents, later as wives of their husbands, and specially as mothers to their own children. While

the ritual healer Am Phub Zam seems to have been able to reconcile motherhood with her profession, Jomo Dolma in contrast had to wait until her child-bearing age had passed to be able to settle as a ritual specialist. Additionally, burdened by the absence of their husbands, female shamans among the Kham Magar only reluctantly accept replacing their male-counterparts; they might be overwhelmed having to juggle all these roles at the same time. Khandro Rinpoche is an extraordinary woman, despite her marriage with a Tibetan official and having five children, she becomes the consort of a high lama, and in the end takes her own male consort.

Some female specialists specifically ignore or oppose socio-cultural norms and female gender roles by choosing to remain unmarried and childless. The professor of Tibetan literature Palmo had to face many challenges by both men and women who cannot (or do not want to) accept her agency, writing openly against the negative female body images and women's gender roles that are determined by Tibetan culture and society. Similarly, the religious specialist Khandro Choechen had to defend her choice of celibacy against a common social practice where female reincarnations such as herself are married to a dominant male partner as his consort (and probably care taker). She instead prefers to be socially and financially independent as a healer. However, to achieve this autonomy, she eventually had to go into exile where her visionary and healing skills as a *khandroma* were recognised by the Dalai Lama himself, as well as by a new community of followers and patients who were more open to the idea of a female master.

Finally, we can also observe changes to tradition in the role of Sakya Jetsunmas who, in the past, were destined to become nuns, but have now started to lead lives as married women and mothers.

Concluding Remarks

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue introduce and elaborate upon alternative perspectives on women's lives as autonomous specialists, positioned beyond or at the margins of religious and other professional institutions. A focus upon autonomous female specialists and the agency they exert within their own societies challenges women's social roles as being either confined to the private household or to a subordinate position in the public sphere. Nevertheless, what surfaces in some of these women's discourses about their lives is a certain ambivalence about their ability or capacity to fulfil their different responsibilities satisfactorily.

By examining these women's lives and their shared struggles for recognition as specialists in their own right, familiar oppositions that are often reiterated in scholarship appear inadequate. These include "Buddhism" versus "folk religion" or "shamanism", institutionalised monastic versus non-institutionalised lay practitioners, and "ritual healing" versus "medicine". By becoming a female ritual healer, Jomo Dolma, for example, transgresses shamanic and Buddhist worlds and the boundaries between this- and other-worldly realms in her healing rituals, being possessed by local deities as well as by a Buddhist one. Furthermore, she reasserts her role by refusing to submit herself to the male Buddhist authorities of a local lama and a spirit-medium.

The same observation is true of general designations used for individual types of specialists, such as "nun", *khandroma* or "spirit medium". The new roles created by female religious entrepreneurs in Ulaanbaatar, for instance, could be described as New Age ritualists or practitioners, but at the same time also as Buddhists. Sakya Jetsunmas are female religious aristocrats and used to be nuns in the past. Today, they prefer to lead a married lay practitioner's life. As for Khandro Choehen, her transformation from a spirit medium to a *khandroma* demonstrates the relative fluidity of autonomous female specialists' roles.

Thus, many of the women under consideration have overlapping multiple and fluid roles, which need to be situated ethnographically and historically but also during their lifetimes. By pointing to these complexities, we wish to contribute to women's studies in general and to the study of some extraordinary women in this region in particular.

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Born to Practice: The Sakya Jetsunma Phenomenon

Elisabeth Benard

(University of Puget Sound)

n *Women in Tibet*, the editors Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik state that “little is known about the actual sociology and experience of Tibetan women.”¹ They express the hope “that more scholarly attention will be directed at preserving and gathering information on contemporary Tibetan women.”² With this paper I hope to contribute to this lacunae. While I was searching for eminent women in Tibetan Buddhism, I was delighted to discover that the distinguished Sakya Khon (Sa skya Khon) family, whose history begins in the eleventh century, has had several eminent female religious adepts and continues so until today. The daughters of the family are referred to as a Jetsunma (rJe btsun ma) or “Venerable Woman”. One can find this title of Jetsunma used for other highly realised female religious adepts outside of this lineage, such as Jetsunma Shugseb (Shug gseb) or Ani Lochen, but in the Sakya Khon family all of the daughters are referred to as Jetsunmas.

In this article, I will concentrate on a few Jetsunmas, both contemporary and historical. The main contemporary Jetsunma is Her Eminence Jetsun Kushok (rJe btsun sKu shog). Named Jetsunma Chime Trinley Luding Rinpoche (‘Chi med phrin las klu sdings), she was born in 1938 in Sakya, and lives today in Richmond, BC, Canada.³ I will concentrate only on her early life in Tibet (1938-1959). Based on extensive interviews with H.E. Jetsun Kushok herself, I am reconstructing this part of her life. Also I will present a brief biography of one of the most renowned Jetsunmas, Chime Tenpai Nyima (rJe btsun ma ‘Chi med bstan pa’i nyi ma) who lived from the mid-eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century. Both these Jetsunmas provide excellent examples of a life of a Sakya “Venerable Woman”. Their lives stand for what is considered as essential in nurturing and providing the best conditions for the spiritual growth in relation to a

¹ Gyatso & Havnevik 2005: 1.

² *Ibid.*: 8.

³ I had numerous interviews with Jetsun Kushok and most were conducted at her home in Richmond, BC, Canada (April 2005, July 2007, August 2009, June 2013 and August 2013).

specific form of “female autonomous religious specialists”.

1. Sources

Though the Sakya Khon family has had many daughters as well as sons, the paucity of information about the Sakya Jetsunmas is disconcerting. There are only a few brief biographies written about some of them. In contrast, the proliferation of elaborate and extensive biographies of the sons who become the throne holder of the Sakya sect, or Sakya Trizin (Sa skya khri 'dzin), is characteristic of the gendered logics of Tibetan historiography as astutely described by Carole McGranahan:

...As crucial as class is on many grounds, I find gender to make a bigger difference than class in making different modes of production or narration.⁴

Such biographies will sometimes mention a sister or daughter but not much more than that. The most extensive, available historical sources for the Sakya Jetsunmas are the Sa skya *gdung rabs* or *Genealogies of the Sakya Families*.⁵ Some of the more famous are the *Extensive Genealogy* or the *gDung rabs chen mo* which was written by Jamgon Amezhab ('Jam mgon A mes zhabs, 1597-1659), the Twenty-seventh Sakya Trizin in the seventeenth century and its continuation by Kunga Lodro or Kunlo (Kun dga' blo gros, 1729-1783), the Thirty-first Sakya Trizin. Dragshul Trinley Rinchen (Drag shul 'phrin las rin chen, 1871-1936), Thirty-ninth Sakya Trizin, wrote the final update.⁶ Within these genealogies, one is still lucky to find the names of the Jetsunmas mentioned at least, or who their parents and possibly their teachers were. Occasionally, if a brother or uncle was an important Sakya Trizin or significant scholar, one will find an episode when they visited Lhasa together or attended a teaching given by an important lama.

In addition to the genealogies, an important textual source for information on Jetsunmas was written by the Thirty-ninth Sakya Trizin Dragshul Trinley Rinchen, who from the time he was eight years old,

⁴ McGranahan 2010: 776.

⁵ There are numerous genealogies of the Khon family, some of the earlier ones written in the fifteenth century are by sTag tshang lo tswa ba Shes rab rin chen and by Mus srad pa rDo rje rgyal mtshan. I thank Cyrus Stearns for this information.

⁶ Drag shul 'phrin las rin chen 2009. Information about the Jetsunmas is interspersed throughout the book.

kept diaries, which were compiled into two large volumes (each is over eight hundred pages) and are known as the *Autobiographical Reminiscences* of Sakya Trizin Dragshul Trinley Rinchen (*rDo rje 'chang Drag shul phrin las rin chen gyi rtogs brjod*). These provide contemporary information especially about two exemplary Jetsunmas. The first one is Jetsunma Tamdrin Wangmo Kelzang Chokyi Nyima (*rJe btsun ma grub pa'i rTa mgrin dbang mo skal bzang chos kyi nyi ma*, 1836-1896) who is one of his principal teachers and his great paternal aunt.⁷ The second Jetsunma is his younger sister, Jetsunma Pema Trinley (*rJe btsun ma Pad ma phrin las*, 1874-c.1950) who is considered a major lineage holder for the important Vajrayoginī teachings and the paternal great aunt of H.E. Jetsun Kushok.⁸

Alongside the textual information there are the oral traditions of the Sakya Khon family, primarily the Dolma Palace branch.⁹ Having known the present and Forty-first H.H. Sakya Trizin for more than three decades, I asked him for his help in this research, which he offered with enthusiasm and interest. His immediate approval of the project opened many doors for me. Due to his consent and support, whomever I asked for an interview, readily accepted. However, the two main people whom I have relied on most are H.H. Sakya Trizin himself and his elder sister, H.E. Jetsun Kushok. Like many Tibetans, they left Tibet in 1959. Their oral information on the topic is invaluable and precious.

2. The Jetsunma phenomenon

Firstly I will provide a brief exposition of the Sakya Jetsunma phenomenon, which is not well-known among neither Tibetans nor Tibetologists. Jetsunma is a Tibetan term that is both a special and uncommon title reserved primarily for particular women practitioners.¹⁰ It is the equivalent of the Sanskrit *bhaṭṭārikā*, a word with many meanings, the most appropriate one being in this context “venerable”

⁷ She is the daughter of the paternal grandfather's uncle, Ngawang Kunga Rinchen (Ngag dbang kun dga' rin chen, 1794-1856).

⁸ See Benard 2012a and 2012b. I will not present their biographies in this article but they are significant Jetsunmas who provide further understanding of the Sakya tradition and help us to understand how H.E. Jetsun Kushok fits into this lineage.

⁹ I interviewed H.H. Sakya Trizin at the Dolma Palace (sGrol ma pho brang) in Rajpur, UK, India and at Walden, NY, USA on several occasions during February 2004, December 2007, June 2012 and June 2013. I also interviewed members of the Phuntsok Palace (Phun tshogs pho brang) family, yet at fewer and shorter times.

¹⁰ In Tibetan, one of the words for a nun is *btsun ma*; but not all Jetsunmas are nuns, nor are all nuns Jetsunmas.

or “person worthy of worship”. It is used as a title for both deities and learned people, especially in Buddhism. It is unclear when the title Jetsun became popular in Tibet, but by the eleventh century, the famous yogi Milarepa (1052-1135) was known as Jetsun Milarepa (rJe btsun Mi la ras pa). Jetsunma, the feminine form, is sometimes translated as Venerable Lady. Compared with the many male spiritual masters who carry the title of Jetsun, there are far fewer females who have this title.

So, who does have this title and why? There seem to be, at least, two important ways of acquiring the Jetsunma title. One is by inherited status; the other by achieved status, that is by developing one’s own spiritual abilities that are then recognised by the religious and lay communities. The two are interrelated or can be overlapping. Inherited status means that by being born as a daughter in either the Sakya Khon family or in the Nyingma Mindroling Trichen (sMin grol gling khri chen) family, one is automatically given this title Jetsunma at birth, since Tibetans believe that baby girls can be born into such families only by their meritorious actions and practices in earlier lifetimes. H.E. Jetsunma Chime Luding Rinpoche is an example of a Jetsunma who was born with this title. She is an extraordinary teacher, who has dharma centers throughout the world. Another amazing and contemporary Jetsunma is Mindroling Jetsunma Khandro Tsering Paldron Rinpoche (sMin grol gling rJe btsun ma mKha’ ‘gro rTse ring dpal sgron) who was born in 1968 in Kalimpong, India.¹¹ She is the holder of both Nyingmapa and Kagyupa lineages and has many disciples in both lineages. Both of these Jetsunmas were born respectively into these spiritual families and received the title at birth.

The second way to receive the Jetsunma title is by developing one’s spiritual practices and subsequent accomplishments, achieving thereby the reputation of an accomplished practitioner. This recognition can be given by the Tibetan community-at-large, as in the case of the well-known Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche (rJe btsun Lo chen rin po che, 1852-1953) from Shugseb, a remarkable yoginī who had numerous disciples and lived for more than a hundred years.¹² Many of her practices were Nyingmapa or Kagyupa based, but she considered herself to be a *rime* (*ris med*), or a non-sectarian, practitioner and was best known for her *choe* (*gcod*) practices.¹³ Another way is to be recog-

¹¹ The Sixteenth Karmapa in 1971 recognised her as a reincarnation of the great *ḍākinī* of Tsurphu Monastery, Khandro Orgyan Tsomo (mKha’ ‘gro O rgyan mtsho mo). As for the title Khandroma, see Jacoby and Schneider in this volume.

¹² See Havnevik 1999.

¹³ *Choe* (*gcod*) or “severing the ego” is a Tibetan Buddhist meditative practice that involves the visualization of cutting up one’s body and presenting it as an offer-

nised by an eminent lama who bestows the title. As a recent example, the British born Bhikṣuṇī Tenzin Palmo, who lived in solitary retreat for 12 years in a cave and had undergone many other rigorous spiritual practices, was honored with the title of Jetsunma by the Twelfth Gyalwang Rinpoche of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage. In February 2008, in an elaborate and public ceremony in the Drukpa Amitabha Mountain, Kathmandu, Nepal, he said that he was bestowing this title onto her “in recognition of her spiritual achievements as a nun and her efforts in promoting the status of female practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism.” He stated:

Men were always given the privilege to do all practices, but it was not given to women. This is very sad. But now it is different. It would be unkind if I would not give the title of Jetsunma to Venerable Tenzin Palmo for the benefit of all females in the world and the Palden Drukpa lineage.¹⁴

The unusual and almost unique status of Sakya Jetsunmas compared to other autonomous religious women in Tibet is all the more significant in the light of other *jetsunmas* and, more generally, a common cultural reluctance to support women and their spiritual practice. Ani Lochen is a prime example of a woman who was mistreated, even by her own teacher. The following incident is only one of many examples of the difficulties that she faced:

Lochen had met her lama in the summer. In winter, he moved from his cave to another small nunnery nearby, where he gave extensive teachings and their food begging alms and wherever Lochen went, people showed her great respects and generosity. Close by was a lama who received far fewer alms than Lochen and consequently highly resented her popularity. Finally, feeling he could bear it no longer, he went to see Pema Gyatso and told him that Lochen received a great deal of offerings. Pema Gyatso asked what was wrong with that and he replied, ‘Nothing, but she goes around saying she is an incarnation of Dorje Phagmo’. Pema Gyatso said nothing, but when Lochen appeared before him a few days later with offerings she received, instead of accepting her gift, he grew very angry and accused her of lying and pretending she was an incarnation of Dorje

ing to others. By being able to do this skillfully, one develops generosity and an understanding of absolute reality.

¹⁴

Cf.

http://tenzinpalmo.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18&Itemid=1, accessed June 2008.

Phagmo. As she stared at him in disbelief, he grabbed her offerings. Climbed up to the roof of the nunnery and flung them down at her along with his boots. Though Lochen was hurt, she crouched down to pick up the boots, and placed them on her head as a mark of respect. After this incident, Lochen continued to attend her lama's teachings though he ignored her.¹⁵

Various texts discussing Tibetan views of women reiterate that women must endure more suffering than men due to their female bodies and their dependency on their families to support them. Many also stress the basic Tibetan view that women by virtue of being born as a female are *skye dman* or of "lesser birth", meaning having produced worse karma than men in their past lives. The possibility of liberation from cyclic existence is remote, since due to their lesser merit, they will have fewer opportunities to practice. Furthermore, women's bodies make them more vulnerable if they choose to live alone in an isolated place. Tibetan spiritual biographies or *namthars* (*rnam thar*; literally "stories of liberation from cyclic existence") frequently recount the difficulties of practice for both women and men. Whereas men are encouraged to be monks and have the monastic community to support them, some women who are spiritually inclined must marry under duress, suffer ignobly under an unsupportive mother-in-law, or else have to sever ties with their families in order to be able to devote their lives to spiritual practices.¹⁶ Comparing the spiritual biographies on female practitioners with those on men, it is rare to find a case where a family provides a daughter with the means and place to pursue concentrated and sustained spiritual practice.

Yet the Sakya Jetsunmas do not face these difficulties. Instead they are akin to the male-dominated prestigious recognised reincarnations or *tulkus* (*sprul sku*). While Jetsunmas are not considered recognised reincarnations the similarities with *tulkus* are noteworthy. First, one is born into the Sakya Khon lineage only if one has already accumulated a lot of merit in their past lives; and many sons are considered reincarnations of their grandfathers or uncles or someone else.¹⁷ Se-

¹⁵ Cf. <http://theyoginiproject.org/yoginis-her-story/wisdom-dakinis#tab-id-10>, accessed October 2015.

¹⁶ For one example, see Schaeffer, 2005: 106. Nun Orgyan Chokyi (O rgyan chos skyid 1675-1729) wants to be reborn as man because of all the difficulties that she faces as a woman practitioner. In her list of difficulties, she includes her "dissatisfaction with the family structure inhibiting (her) ability to practice meditation."

¹⁷ The present H.H. Sakya Trizin is seen as both a reincarnation of his paternal grandfather and the incarnation of Nyingma Terton Orgyen Thrinley Lingpa (gTer ston O rgyan phrin las gling pa, 1895-1945), also known as Apam Terton (A pang or A pong gTer ston).

cond, like *tulkus*, Jetsunmas are given opportunities for spiritual study at an early age. Third, everything is provided for the Jetsunma, and after her death, her property is saved for future Jetsunmas in much the same way that property and belongings of a *tulku* are passed down to the next reincarnation.

The Sakya Khon family began in the eleventh century when Khon Konchok Gyalpo ('Khon dKon mchog rgyal po, 1034-1102) established the Sakya sect seat in a place, which became known as Sakya (lit. "pale white earth"). The family has undergone numerous divisions, but ever since the early nineteenth century, there are two main branches: Dolma Palace and Phuntsok Palace. Until 1959, both had their main residences in Sakya and both provided residences or *labrang* (*bla brang*) reserved exclusively for their daughters. The *labrang* was a place to live, study, meditate and perform religious rituals. Prior to 1959, Jetsunmas were encouraged to live as nuns to pursue religious practice, yet they did not live in Sakya nunneries, but in their own residences, a *labrang*.¹⁸

Considering the original situation, H. E. Jetsun Kushok responded to interview questions as follows:

Q: Why there are so few female lamas?

A: ...Now, after the revolution (1959), it has changed. Otherwise, traditionally, I could not have married. Once you were born a woman in the Khon family, you would automatically become a nun. It was your choice whether you took the vows and became nun or not, but you had to wear the robes. Then you would receive empowerments like Hevajra and Chakrasamvara, and on those occasions you would take Vajrayana vows. In the Vajrayana vows there is a kind of nun's vow included. These are serious vows and therefore you could not marry.¹⁹

Q: So once you were born as a woman into Khon family, you could not lead a worldly life?

A: No, you would always be learning, reciting and meditating. Some nuns were doing handicrafts like sewing, knitting and

¹⁸ Though Sakya and the adjacent areas had nunneries, the Jetsunmas did not live or study at nunneries. See Cassinelli & Ekvall 1969.

¹⁹ All Jetsunmas receive Anuttarayoga empowerments, which is the highest tantric empowerment. When she as a tantric practitioner takes this kind of empowerment, she is required to keep three vows—*prātimokṣa*, *bodhisattva* and tantric vows.

beadwork and so on. These rules were not set by the Tibetan government, but by our family.²⁰

During one of my interviews, H.E. Jetsun Kushok explained that when Sakya Jetsunmas were born, they lived in the Palace and usually stayed until their late teens when they moved to a *labrang*, which was maintained from one generation to the next by the respective palace. Each palace had five *labrang*s. If there were more than five daughters in one family, some of the daughters would share a *labrang*. The daughters were also given nomads with female yaks (*'dri*) and yaks, fields and servants to provide an income. As H.E. Jetsun Kushok exclaimed:

Everything comes together. It is like being born in the heavenly desire realm when everything comes together—servants, belongings and so on. As long as they did their practice and did not misbehave, the family provided everything. When they died, the immediate family could do what they wanted with their personal belongings. But the fields and animals belonged to the *labrang*; they could not be sold. These must be kept for the future daughters.

Some Jetsunmas became great scholars and taught in Sakya and in Kham. Others kept a lower profile and did their practices and chanting quietly and peacefully. Since everything in the *labrang* was set up for practice with meditation rooms, some stayed in the *labrang* for their whole life. Basically it was a life-long retreat. Even if a Jetsunma did not do serious religious practice and simply enjoyed herself, having picnics in the summer for example, she could stay in the *labrang*.

She noted that there were some scandals of Jetsunmas marrying and leaving the Sakya area. However, these were the exception; most Sakya Jetsunmas had excellent reputations as committed nuns who did sustained spiritual practices. Another example of training from an early age comes from the Phuntsok Palace's Jetsunmas, Tsegen Wangmo (Tshe byin dbang mo, b. 1935) and Chime Wangmo ('Chi med dbang mo, b. 1939).²¹ H.E. Jetsunma Tsegen related:

We began studying at age six years old. First, we memorised the Tibetan alphabet, and then we learned how to read and

²⁰ See <http://vajrasana.org/chime1.htm>, accessed May 2009; this was originally from Freeman 1996: 95.

²¹ Personal communication in Jetsunma Tsegen Wangmo's home in Seattle, Washington, USA on August 28, 2007.

write.²² We had to memorise many texts; one of the first ones that we memorised was *Samantabhadra's Aspiration Prayer* (*bZang spyod smon lam*). At eight years old, we memorised the propitiation ritual to the Buddhist protector Mahākāla (*mGon po'i bskang sgo*). We would study every day from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon, with a short lunch break. Our main holidays were on the eighth, fifteenth and thirtieth day of the lunar month. Our first teacher was Ponlop Shakya and our second teacher was Ponlop Kunga.

“When we became teenagers, we moved into a *labrang*,” Tsegen recalls.

When I was fourteen years old, I moved in with my older sister, Thubten Wangmo (Thub bstan dbang mo, 1922-1985) who was living in the Tashi Tse Labrang in the Northern Monastery area. The move was gradual. I would stay for a few days, then return to the palace, then stay longer at the *labrang*, and do this a few times until I moved in permanently. I did several retreats in the *labrang*. My first important one was Vajrapāṇi Bhūtaḍāmara (*Phyag na rdo rje 'byung po'i 'dul ba*). I was in retreat for one month together with my teacher, who was supervising me. I heard that my family was going on a holiday to the hot springs and I yearned to go with them, but I knew that I needed to keep my commitment. My understanding mother gave me many dried fruits after their return.

Later my oldest sister moved to Gyantse and my second elder sister, Kalsang Chodron moved in with me.²³ When I was eighteen years old, I did the crucial Hevajra retreat for seven months. At this time, my brother Trinley Rinpoche stayed at the *labrang*, too.²⁴

In the distribution of residences, H.E. Jetsun Kushok had received the Tashi Labrang also known as Nagso Labrang in the Northern Monastery complex area of Sakya town. In addition, her father had given her Ngatsi Labrang, which had larger landholdings than Tashi Labrang but was not close to the Sakya town. Her maternal aunt,

²² In traditional Tibet, girls from noble families were taught how to read and write but many other children learned only how to read. Tibetans did not deem it necessary to know how to write if one did not have an “official” position or belong to an “official” family.

²³ Jetsunma Kalsang Chodron (sKal bzang chos sgron) was born in 1926 in Sakya and died on 15 December 2007 in Seattle.

²⁴ His full name is Ngag dbang kun dga phrin las bkra shis (1934-1997).

Dagmo Trinley Zangmo,²⁵ advised her to take Tashi Labrang, but H.E. Jetsun Kushok did not want to stay there. Tashi Labrang was not so pleasant since it stood in the town and was situated below and west of the political/spiritual Zhitog-building (*gzhi thog*).²⁶ Furthermore it looked like an ordinary house. On the ground floor of the *labrang* was a protector deity shrine room, which was popular with visiting pilgrims. H.E. Jetsun Kushok felt that the area was too busy and too many people lived near it. She reiterated her desire to live in the Ngatsi Labrang to her aunt, but the latter was not yet persuaded. H.E. Jetsun Kushok elaborated that the Ngatsi Labrang looked like the other religious buildings in Sakya; it was painted in gray and had the distinctive Sakya vertical stripes in red, white and blue.²⁷ Finally her aunt relented, "Since you are a nun, you do not need all of Ngatsi's land for your income. Stay in Ngatsi Labrang, but swap its land with that of Tashi Labrang." H.E. Jetsun Kushok accepted. She wanted to stay in Ngatsi Labrang because it was separate, quiet and next to the Dolma Palace, where her brother lived. So in the end, H.E. Jetsun Kushok got Ngatsi Labrang, but as she remembers wistfully, "Unfortunately within two years, we lost Tibet; so I never had a chance to live there and only stayed briefly."²⁸

²⁵ Dagmo Trinley Paljor Zangmo ('Phrin las dpal 'byor bzang mo, 1906-1975) was the first wife of Jetsun Kushok's and Sakya Trizin's father, since she was unable to conceive, their father married her younger sister, Sonam Dolkar (bSod nams sgröl dkar) who is the mother of Jetsun Kushok and Sakya Trizin. Unfortunately Sonam Dolkar died in 1948 and their father died in 1950. Dagmo Trinley Paljor Zangmo had to handle everything. Both Jetsun Kushok and Sakya Trizin praise their aunt as insightful, persistent and decisive. It was due to her that they were properly trained.

²⁶ See Venturi 2013: 520 ff. Please note that footnote 393 (p. 172), Venturi states that the spelling is inconsistent between *bzhi*, which means four and *gzhi*, which means basis. Venturi opts for *bzhi* or four (referring to floors) but Jetsun Kushok was emphatic that it was *gzhi*, which means basis or foundation.

²⁷ Many Sakya sacred buildings have the distinctive colors of a gray background with red, white and blue stripes. Red symbolizes wisdom or the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, white symbolizes compassion or the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and blue symbolizes power or the Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi. Since the *labrang* was painted in these religious colors, Jetsun Kushok felt that it was a conducive place to do religious practices.

²⁸ H.E. Jetsun Kushok's paternal grandfather's younger brother, Jamyang Thubten Zangpo ('Jam byangs thub sbtan bzang po, 1885-1928) built Ngatsi Labrang. He originally built this as his residence but later it became a *labrang*. According to popular belief, his reincarnation was the Phuntsok Palace's son, Trinley Rinpoche ('Phrin las rin po che, 1934-1997).



Fig. 1. India, 1960s: Dagmo, Sakya Trizin and Jetsun Kushok.
Photo: Courtesy of Jetsun Kushok.

The Jetsunmas were given equal opportunity to study with all the religious preceptors or lamas who taught their brothers. H.E. Jetsun Kushok likes to emphasise that when they lived in Tibet she received the same teachings and did the same retreats as her brother, H.H. Sakya Trizin. One of the most important teachings and practices in the Sakya tradition is *Lamdre* (*Lam 'bras*; "The Path and Result to Liberation"), a complete and gradual system that combines both the sutras (exoteric teachings) and the tantras (esoteric teachings) to provide a guided path to Buddhahood. *Lamdre* emphasises that the mind is the root of both *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, as well as the combination of luminosity and emptiness. Ideally every son and daughter in the Sakya Khon family should receive the transmission and learn how to do the accompanying meditations, chants and rituals explained in *Lamdre*. All sons are expected to become lineage holders of *Lamdre* and to continue its "unbroken" transmission to others.

H.E. Jetsun Kushok was 12 years old and H.H. Sakya Trizin was five years old, when they began their studies of *Lamdre* together, in 1950. It took them almost four years to receive all the teachings and accompanying requisite rituals from various lamas while also being involved in other activities during this time. After much studies and effort, H.E. Jetsun Kushok anticipated with joy to begin this important stage in her religious practice. By late 1954, after completing all necessary preparation, H.H. Sakya Trizin and H.E. Jetsun Kushok were ready to undertake the required long retreat of Hevajra and

Nairātmyā, the principal deities in *Lamdre*, that is based on the *Hevajra Root Tantra*. Their teacher guided them throughout the retreat. H.E. Jetsun Kushok was 16 years old and H.H. Sakya Trizin was nine years old when the retreat began in the seventh lunar month of 1954. They did the retreat in their home, the Dolma Palace, but in their respective apartments.²⁹ The retreat involved the chanting and visualisations of the *Hevajra Sādhana* four times a day, plus the required recitations of the mantras of both Hevajra and Nairātmyā. To perform all the obligations, they stayed in retreat for seven and a half months. H.E. Jetsun Kushok recalled that she and her brother would keep in touch by sending notes to each other via their teacher and they had decided that they would begin and end the retreat on the same days.

Though frequently the daughters were taught simultaneously with the sons, learned the meditations and rituals, and did the required retreats, few became lineage holders and transmitted *Lamdre* to others. However, in 1955, shortly after the completion of the Hevajra retreat, H.E. Jetsun Kushok's maternal aunt, Dagmo Trinley Paljor Zangmo, asked her to give the *Lamdre* teachings. A large group of monks had traveled from Kham to visit Sakya and their hope was to receive *Lamdre* transmission from the ten-year-old H.H. Sakya Trizin. Yet at the time, he was in retreat as part of the preparation to be able to give the major empowerment of Vajrakīlaya. Her aunt, well versed in Sakyapa history, knew that previous Jetsunmas had taught *Lamdre* and she urged her niece who had recently completed the extensive retreat to follow in their footsteps. It was decided that H.E. Jetsun Kushok would bestow on the monks from Kham the short version of Ngor *Lamdre* lineage by Ngawang Chodrak (Ngag dbang chos grags, 1572-1641) together with the accompanying empowerments and other rituals.³⁰

Thus at the young age of 17 she expounded the teachings for three months, and she was the fourth woman in Sakya history to confer *Lamdre*.³¹ By presenting these prestigious teachings, her status was elevated considerably. Next year when she visited Lhasa, she headed the procession with a golden umbrella that was held above her, her head crowned with the characteristic red and gold Sakya hat worn by high Sakya lineage holders.

²⁹ Each apartment had a name—hers was called Tashi Palkye (bKra shis dpal kye), “auspicious circle”, and H.H. Sakya Trizin’s apartment was named Chime Deden (‘Chi med bde ldan), “eternal happiness”.

³⁰ See Stearns 2001: 24.

³¹ The four Jetsunmas who taught *Lamdre* are: Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima (see her brief biography below), Phuntsok Palace Jetsunma Tamdrin Wangmo, Dolma Palace Jetsunma Pema Trinley and present-day Jetsunma Chime Luding Rinpoche.



Fig. 2. Phuntsok Palace Jetsunmas. Photo: Courtesy of Jetsun Kushok.

Though they received the same privileges as their brothers, the Jetsunmas did not have the same obligations or responsibilities. Their brothers, especially the oldest one, were expected to marry and to produce a male heir; sometimes two brothers married one wife to ensure an heir.³² The male family members had to study; they were compelled to be knowledgeable about the significant Buddhist texts, and to be proficient in required religious rituals. They rarely had a choice between a single or a married life. Each was trained to be the next throne holder that is the Sakya Trizin. But only one would inherit this position, either from his paternal uncle or his father. However, the daughters of the family had no such obligations to serve the public. As Phuntsok Palace Jetsunmas, Tsegen Wangmo and Chime Wangmo, have underscored, “We were free. We were encouraged to study and practice (religion), but we could enjoy a more worldly life: it was our choice.” In other words, these Jetsunmas are wonderful yet exceptional examples of Tibetan women who were encouraged by their families and the society to be religious practitioners; and they were supported spiritually, materially and financially to pursue their religious study.

3. *Sakya Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima*

Looking back at earlier outstanding and autonomous religious women in the Sakya Jetsunma tradition, one great Jetsunma stands out.

³² See Travers 2008: 6-7.

Being one of the most eminent, Chime Tenpai Nyima (b. 1756-ca. 1850's) is remembered as an extraordinary practitioner and as teacher to four Sakya Trizins, their brothers, sons and daughters, including many other *tulkus* and significant teachers in the Sakya tradition. Her two most important legacies are that she is the only woman in the transmission lineage of the Sakya Nāropā lineage of Vajrayoginī and accompanying teachings and she is one of the four Jetsunmas who bestowed *Lamdre*. In view of the paucity of information generally available, I will briefly summarise her biography here. For this, I am mainly using textual information based on the final Sakya genealogy updated by the Thirty-ninth Sakya Trizin.³³ This main but brief biography of Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima is embedded in the biography of Kunga Pende Gyatso's (Kun dga' phan bde rgya mtso, also known as E waṃ bzang po, 1766-1788) who was her paternal first cousin and son of Sachen Kunga Lodro. Also, H.H. Sakya Trizin has related his own findings and stories that are known about her to me in interviews.

Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima was born in Sakya in 1756 (the thirteenth sixty-year-cycle, Fire Mouse year) on the 22nd day of the 11th month. She was named Chime Butri ('Chi med bu khrid).³⁴ Her father was Ngawang Thutob Wangchuk (Nga dbang mthu stobs dbang phyug, 1734-1757), younger brother of the famous Sachen Kunga Lodro,³⁵ and her mother was Gerpa Princess Tashi Yangchen (sGer pa'i sras mo bKra shis dbyang can, birth n.d.). But sadly, her mother died shortly after giving birth and her father died the following year.³⁶

From a very young age, Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima studied with her illustrious paternal uncle, Sachen Kunga Lodro. He had a vision of Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po, 1382-1456), the founder of Ngor Ewam Choden (E waṃ chos ldan) Monastery, who had once prophesied that Kunga Lodro would have four pillar and eight beam disciples. In fact, Jetsunma Chime Tenpai

³³ See Drag shul 'phrin las rin chen 2009: 342-343.

³⁴ This name Butri is ironical because it means to bring forth a son. Though this name is given to daughters in Tibet, it seems odd to give it to the daughters of the Khon family who were trained to be nuns.

³⁵ Sachen Kunga Lodro or Ngawang Kunga Lodro (Ngag dbang kun dga' blo gros, 1729-1783) was the Thirty-first Sakya Trizin (1741-1783). He was a great practitioner, teacher, and prolific writer. Many illustrious lamas from various sects studied with Sachen Kunga Lodro, including Jigme Lingpa (Jigs med gling pa, 1730-1798) and the Third Tukwan Lobzang Chokyi Nyima (Thu'u bkwan bLo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, 1732-1802), who received teachings in Sakya while he was visiting central Tibet between 1757-1761.

³⁶ See Kun dga' blo gros 2009: 738 for death of the mother and p. 751 for death of her father.

Nyima became one of the pillars, meaning that she was one of his closest disciples and would continue his teachings.

Sachen Kunga Lodro bestowed on her the important and essential transmissions of both the common *Lamdre* or *Lamdre Tsokshe* (*Lam 'bras tshogs bshad*) and the uncommon *Lamdre Lopshe* (*Lam 'bras slob bshad*) and all of the teachings concerning Vajrayoginī. He bestowed on her many major empowerments including Sarvavid Vairocana (*Kun rig rnam par snang mdzad*), the main deity of the *Sarva Durgati Parishodhana Tantra* ("Elimination of Bad Rebirths") that is performed when a person is recently deceased. She became very learned and the holder of different religious master lineages including *Parting from the Four Attachments*³⁷ and the principal Vajrayoginī (Naro mkha' spyod) teaching cycle. In the Vajrayoginī guru transmission lineage, she is the only female master.³⁸ Sometimes the lineage simply includes only her name, Tenpai Nyima, without the epithet of nun or Jetsunma. Since the name is used for both sexes, one would not know that this master is a woman.

In 1782, when she was 26 years old,³⁹ she took her *śrāmaṇera* (*dge tshul*) vows from the twenty-fifth abbot of the Sakya Lhakhang Chenmo, Jampa Chokyi Tashi (Byams pa chos kyi bkra shis, n.d.) who gave her the ordination name, Chime Tenpai Nyima. In the next year, 1783, her main teacher, Sachen Kunga Lodro died. As a holder of the Vajrayoginī teachings, she was requested to recite the Vajrayoginī prayers and accompanying offerings for 49 days after her teacher's death. The honor of being selected as a young woman to perform these important prayers and rituals indicated her mastery. It is said that the famous Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo ('Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po, 1820-1892) proclaimed that Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima was a veritable Vajrayoginī.

Later in her life, her fame as an emanation of Vajrayoginī spread. She was already elderly when she gave the Vajrayoginī teachings to one of her main disciples, Derge Drubpon Ngawang Rinchen (sDe sge sgrub dpon Ngag dbang rin chen, n.d.) and her eyesight was weak. But her eyesight improved all of a sudden while she was giv-

³⁷ *Zhan pa bzhi bral* by Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (Sachen Kun dga' sNying po, 1092-1158) as revealed by the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. She is also in its lineage just preceded by Sachen Kunga Lodro. See Sakya Trizin 2011: 161.

³⁸ The guru transmission lineage from the twenty-seventh guru is Kunga Lodro (1729-1783), the twenty-eighth is Thartse Je Jampa Namkha Chime (Thar tse re Byams pa nam mkha'i 'chi med, 1765-1820), the twenty-ninth is Jampa Namkha Lekpai Lhundrup (Byams pa nam mkha'i legs pa'i lhun grub, n.d.) and the thirtieth is Chime Tenpai Nyima and the thirty-first is Ngawang Rinchen (Ngag dbang rin chen), also known as Tashi Rinchen, (bkra shis rin chen, 1824-1865), who was the Thirty-fifth Sakya Trizin.

³⁹ Water Tiger year.

ing him the teachings, her short biography states. Later she told her disciple, “Seeing a lama like you in Tibet restored my eyesight.” The present H.H. Sakya Trizin commented that this happened because of their strong lama-disciple relationship. Furthermore, it is said that when she gave Drubpon Ngawang Rinchen the Vajrayoginī blessing (*byin brlabs*), during the inner blessing ritual (*nang mchod*) the ambrosia in the cup started to boil spontaneously. Numerous bubbles surfaced. As the disciple drank the bubbling ambrosia, his understanding of emptiness (*sūnyatā*) expanded.

Her reputation spread. Many masters and *tulkus* from Kham (southeast Tibet) heard about her extraordinary abilities and spiritual insights. Though they did not have a chance to see her, they wanted to receive her lineage teachings of Vajrayoginī and made great efforts to do so. Many important lamas praised her highly. She had numerous disciples all over Tibet. Most of the Sakya Khon family members received common *Lamdre Tsokshe* and uncommon *Lamdre Lopshe* as well as the teachings of Vajrayoginī from her. These members included the four Sakya Trizins: Pema Dudul Wangchug (Padma bdud ’dul dbang phyug, 1792-1853), the Thirty-third Sakya Trizin and founder of the Dolma Palace in Sakya; his daughter, Jetsunma Kelzang Tsultrim Wangmo (rJe btsun ma sKal bzang tshul khrim dbang mo, n.d.) and his son, Tashi Rinchen (bKra shis rin chen, 1824-1865), who became the Thirty-fifth Sakya Trizin. Moreover she taught Dorje Rinchen, also known as Kunga Rinchen (rDo rje rin chen/ Kun dga’ rin chen, 1819-1867), the Thirty-fourth Sakya Trizin, the founder of the Phuntsok Palace; and his son, Nagwang Kunga Sonam (Ngag dbang kun dga’ bsod nam, 1842-1882), who became the Thirty-sixth Sakya Trizin. Other disciples included the two brothers of the founders of both Palaces, Kunga Ngodrup Palbar (Kun dga’ dngos grub dpal ’bar, 1801-1856) and Ngawang Kunga Gyaltsen (Ngag dbang kun dga’ rgyal mtshan, 1792-1841),⁴⁰ and the forty-fourth abbot of Ngor Thartse, Jampa Namkhai Chime (Byams pa nam mkhai ’chi med, 1765-1820)⁴¹ whose reincarnation was Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. Moreover the forty-fourth abbot’s nephew, the forty-seventh abbot of Ngor Thartse, Jampa Kunga Tenzin (Byams pa kun dga’ bstan ’dzin,

⁴⁰ Drag shul ’phrin las rin chen (2009: 397-398). states that the powerful siddha (*grub pa’i dbang mo*) Chime Tenpai Nyima gave Ngawang Kunga Gyaltsen the complete teachings of Vajrayoginī—the blessing, transmission and experiential commentary and the teachings of Hevajra. Note: He has the same father as Pema Dudul and Dorje Rinchen but has a different mother. Ngawang Kunga Gyaltsen’s mother is the younger sister of Pema Dudul’s mother. She is known as the younger Rang Byonma Damtsig Dolma (Rang byon ma dam tsig sgröl ma, n.d.)

⁴¹ It is interesting to note that he was a major disciple of both Sachen Kunga Lodro and Jetsunma Chime Tenpai Nyima.

1776-1862) and many others were her disciples, as were most of the Sakya and Ngor chief lamas.⁴²

She is regarded as a great female siddha or an “accomplished one” and an emanation of Vajrayoginī. Her last residence was the Rigzin Palace (Rig ’dzin pho brang), which was located near the Great Temple (Lha khang chen mo) in Sakya. People called her “the old noble woman of Rigzin Palace” (*Rig rmol rung*) or Jetsunma Modung Chime Tenpai Nyima, since she lived at least into her late nineties. It is unclear when she died but in Pema Dudul Wangchug’s biography, it states that after his death (1853) she was in charge of making *tsha tsha* (relics) deity statues from his pulverised bones. This means that she must have lived until the mid 1850’s.⁴³ When she died, a memorial statue of Vajrayoginī with a beautiful silver crown and ornaments inlaid with precious gems was made in her honor. Her relics were placed in the statue that was located in the Great Temple of Sakya.

It is noteworthy, that many practitioners daily recite the guru transmission lineage of the Vajrayoginī Sādhana without a thought of who this nun may be. Her name is simply intoned with the rest of the lamas in the lineage but when one investigates her biography, one realises her mastery and her pervasive influence among the Sakya Trizins, the Ngor Ewam Choden abbots and significant lamas. This elite group provided the principal teachers for most Sakya monks throughout Tibet. In turn, their training influenced the next generation. It is an extraordinary discovery that a single woman could be so enormously influential on the legacy of popular and profound practice of Vajrayoginī from the Nāropā lineage.

Conclusion

It is to be hoped that when the Sakya genealogies are updated next, the Jetsunmas will insist on having their own biographical chapters written. For more than a millennium the Sakya Khon family has produced extraordinary women practitioners who have had lasting influence. Their hidden world needs to be brought to light and their achievements must surely be recognised in any account of spiritual lives of Tibetan women, past and present. In particular, because their autonomy and recognition is so rare, these Jetsunmas are a wonderful example of Tibetan women who were encouraged by their families and the society to become religious practitioners and even teachers of high social standing. They were supported spiritually, materi-

⁴² Jackson 1989: 57.

⁴³ Drag shul ’phrin las rin chen 2009: 381.

ally and financially to pursue religious study and were recognised by many other practitioners, both females and males.

The tradition can be expected to continue in the future. Though H.E. Jetsun Kushok and H.H. Sakya Trizin had only sons,⁴⁴ the Jetsunma lineage is continuing with H.H. Sakya Trizin's daughter-in-law, Dagmo Kalden Dunkyi (bDag mo skal ldan dun kyi b. 1978 in Kalimpong, India) who is married to his eldest son, Khondung Ratnavajra ('Khon gdung Ratnavajra, born on November 19, 1974 in Dehra Dun, India). Their first child is Jetsunma Kunga Trinley Palter (Kun dga' 'phrin las dpal ster, born on January 2, 2007 in Rajpur, India).⁴⁵ She is being home-schooled and trained in spiritual endeavors. The family has great hope that she will uphold the Jetsunma tradition and follow in her great aunt's and great and great aunt's footsteps.⁴⁶

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⁴⁴ H.E. Jetsun Kushok did have a girl but sadly she died in her infancy.

⁴⁵ You can follow her upbringing in <http://jetsunma.blogspot.com> (accessed September 2015). Also there is a brief article by Sakya Trizin in *Melody of Dharma*, 2011: 28-29. In this issue there is also a section about Sakya Jetsunmas: 22-29.

⁴⁶ More recently Jetsunma Ngawang Tsejin Lhamo (Ngag dbang tshe byin lha mo) was born on April 2, 2011 in Wil, SG, Switzerland to the younger son, Khondung Gyanavajra (born July 5, 1979 in Dehra Dun, India) and Dagmo Sonam Palkyi (bDag mo bSod nams dpal kyi, born 1984 in Wil, SG, Switzerland); see http://www.hhthesakyatrizin.org/pdfs/news_11_daughter.pdf (access date September 2015). And Jetsunma Kunga Chimey Wangmo (Kun 'dga' chi med dbang mo) was born on January 24, 2013 to the eldest son Khondung Ratnavajra and Dagmo Kalden Dunkyi.

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Heroic Destinies and Petty Claims: Women and the Transformation of Shamanic Practices in the Hills of Nepal

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This paper addresses an ethnographic enigma: the sudden refusal by newly consecrated female shamans among the Kham-Magar, an ethnic minority of west Nepal, to perform the founding ritual chants of their shamanic tradition. Whether they will succeed in their attempt to transform the shamanic institution or whether, on the contrary, the institution will let them down remains to be seen. However, investigating their motivations involves focusing on the existential dimension of the shamanic calling as much as the specific cultural features and sociological context. By “existential” I mean simply the vision that these women have of themselves, partly in contrast with their perception of their male shaman counterparts, and the inner debates that their calling entails, given their living conditions. These conditions were greatly affected by ten years of a revolutionary insurrection that led to the fall of the Hindu monarchy and the proclamation of a Republic in 2008. Their biographies will also be set in the perspective of certain shamanic narratives to show how women’s capacity for creation and innovation is closely associated with the transgression of the dominant (and masculine) order.

This study is based on my recent encounters with eight female shamans in a village that I have been visiting for 30 years: four of them are already grandmothers while the other four are mothers of young children. One characteristic of shamans, and I would suggest that this is true of all faith healers, oracles or other inspired religious specialists, is that they have their life story at hand for anyone who asks about how they became who or what they are. They may be more or less loquacious, but once they have complied with the conventions and humbly expressed their ignorance about the origin of their calling, they can tell their story in one breath: their narratives form an important part of their legitimation for being a shaman; these are stories of the revelation through which they discovered who they

really were since their birth without knowing it. Although these biographies share widespread stereotypes, such as their initial illness seen as a sign of their election by their ancestors more personal feelings and concerns find their way through the narrative.

This paper aims first to show the fluctuating character of spirit possession in a community under stress since the turn of the millennium and the necessity, therefore, to study it in time. The second section briefly recalls the structurally central position of the shamans, or *jhankri*,¹ in the ritual life of the Kham-Magar. The third and fourth sections are based on the accounts of several female shamans who describe their predicament. We will try to understand what is at stake for them in their commitment to their calling.

1. *The fluctuating character of spirit possession in a community under stress*

Until the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the absence of roads, the Kham-Magar² area appeared as a remote ethnic enclave. The Kham-Magar inhabit about 30 villages grouped together in the higher valleys of the two districts of Rolpa and Rukum, located in the middle hills of West Nepal. The communities are ethnically homogeneous, with the exception of Hindu service castes such as blacksmiths and tailor-musicians who live on the outskirts of the villages. The Kham-Magar, who used to practise subsistence agriculture supplemented by transhumant pastoralism, are now dependent on the remittances of the increasing number of their family members working abroad. Partly because of their remote location and also for historical reasons that I have tried to analyse in other works,³ the Kham-Magar country provided the rebels with their main refuge during the ten years of the Maoist insurrection (1996-2006). As a consequence, the community suffered from both sides: villagers were caught between the government forces on the hunt for rebels or activists hidden in their community, and the Maoist fighters who punished "traitors"

¹ The Nepali term *jhakri* will be written *jhankri* in the text. The Kham-Magar also use the term *rama*, from the name of the mythic first shaman, Ramā Puran Can.

² "Kham-Magar" is an ethnonym coined by the linguist David Watters who doubted that their Tibeto-Burman language, Kham, was connected to the language spoken by the Magar, *magarkura*. However, the Kham-speakers are registered in the Nepali population survey of 2001 as Magar, hence the difficulty of knowing their exact number. Whatever the real origin(s) of the Kham-Magar, they do not share the same history as the Magar, the most populous minority in Nepal. The Magar are known for their close relationships to the conquering Hindu dynasty and also for forming an important contingent of the British Gurkha regiments.

³ De Sales 2013.

who might have denounced them. Village life was paralysed and the Maoists placed a ban on shamanic ceremonies, and all blood sacrifices. These activities were supposed to epitomise the backward nature of the local religion, contrary to the ideal of the “New Nepal” that the revolutionary movement was striving for.

I made several trips back to the village of Lukum during that time, and in 2003 and 2006, I noticed five elderly women with very long dreadlocks—a new phenomenon in this locality. Siddha-Braha, the village god, was supposed to have “seized” these “mothers” or *mataji*, causing their hair to grow in this spectacular fashion and submitting them to strict rules of purity and occasional shaking. I asked people whether there might be a link between the duress under which the community had been put by the on-going military interventions and this sudden manifestation of the village god. I thought that in this decade of uncertainty and fear, the *mataji* who consecrated themselves to the god of the place might express the community’s need for his protection. However, my suggestion was strongly denied: I should have known that gods do not always reveal their motivation in such a functionalist fashion. In 2013, seven years after the end of the insurrection, there were no more of these “mothers”: the elder ones had died, the younger ones had lost their dreadlocks—that had fallen off, it seemed, in the same spontaneous way as they had grown in the first place. The phenomenon had simply disappeared and was hardly remembered.

In 2010, another fact caught my attention that also motivated me to write this article: four newly consecrated shamans were all young women. However, although they had gone through the traditional shamanic “birth” or *boshine*, they had not learned the chants or, rather, they refused to do so. Kham-Magar shamans learn their chants in two ways: first they are supposed to be taught in their dreams by their invisible master, their ancestor whom they reincarnate; they also have to assist their human masters during the healing séances, repeating the lines after him until they are able to sing by themselves. The main guru of the village, Jode Jhankri, lamented the stubborn refusal of his female disciples to comply with his teaching, fearing that his knowledge would die with him. Indeed, the chants are ritual charters in the sense that Malinowski gave to myths: they introduce the principles of the organisation of society in a narrative mode and keep the memory of the ritual procedures that underpin the healing séances. Above all, what makes séances meaningful is not only the content of the chants but their performance. A pragmatic analysis would show how only the actual performance of the chants might succeed in involving the specialist, the patient, the public and the

spiritual entities into an efficacious séance.⁴ Dispensing the chants would amount to a radical transformation of the shamanic practices of this community. In fact, none of these female shamans were able to perform alone at the time of my visit; they mostly participated in larger shamanic gatherings when all the shamans have to be present. This is the case for the ritual birth of a new shaman or the revitalisation of one of their colleagues, and for the yearly village festival to chase away the “witch of the white clay” (*sara zya*). In these three circumstances that represent, so to speak, the minimum duty of a shaman who wants to remain part of the institution, they participated in the chorus and repeated the lines after the main master. However, they just skipped the much more frequent healing séances.

During my last visit in 2013, I found out that within the three previous years, four more *jhankri* had been “born”— all young men. I did not have an opportunity to see them performing since they happened to be away during my stay, but I was told that they did not know the chants either.

These fast and unpredictable changes that have occurred within the ritual life of this community over the past 15 years demonstrate the necessity and virtues of returning to the field in order to understand them better. The possession of the five “mothers” or *mataji* by the village god had an epidemic but also innovative character at the beginning of the 2000s. It happened within the midst of the Maoist insurrection, a time of chaos that might have fostered the sudden appearance of the *matajis* yet certainly limited it, along with its ending, to a unique and temporary phenomenon. It was a phase that passed. Also, it would have been wrong to suggest that women were taking over the shamanic institution altogether in 2010, since a few years later the new shamans were all males again. Spirit possession needs to be studied over time. It is a volatile, ethereal phenomenon that appears as a cultural response to uncertain times and individual anxieties—it fluctuates.

However, this does not mean that it is not structured. As a matter of fact, the shamanic institution among the Kham-Magar displays such a strong structure that, in my initial works on the subject, this structure tended to obliterate the individuals who embody the institution and make it live. I will first recall briefly a few of the principles at work in Kham-Magar shamanism, before focussing specifically on the existential dimension of these female individuals that I had neglected.

⁴ Such an attempt is to be found in my monograph (de Sales 1991, chapters 11 and 12) and in a more recent article (de Sales 2016).

2. Shamans at the centre of ritual life

Unlike most other places in Nepal, Kham-Magar shamans do not share the ritual life of their community with any other religious specialists, including any priest of the two dominant religions in Nepal, Hinduism and Buddhism. According to I.M. Lewis's binary classification into central and peripheral spirit possessions, the Kham-Magar shaman clearly falls into the first category.⁵ Another character has to fulfil religious duties on a regular basis but he is not a specialist: the son-in-law is accountable for his wife to his wife-givers and subsequently has to fulfil ritual obligations on several occasions in the life-cycle ceremonies, notably weddings⁶ and funerals. Sons-in-law also have to assist the shaman in a séance that takes place in the house of their wife-givers: they start by fetching the religious specialist from his home and carry his paraphernalia to the patient's house. Then the shaman orders them to get all the necessary items (wood, water, animals etc.), which they provide in accordance with the host. They will also have to behead the sacrificial animals at the end of the séance.

During his consecration, the shaman himself, starting with the first mythic shaman, Ramma Puran Can, occupies a position of son-in-law towards the spirits, who are supposed to give him a spiritual wife. The complex *boshine* ceremony may be read as both the rebirth of the shamanic ancestor in the neophyte and the neophyte's marriage with the daughter of the spiritual entities associated with wilderness. It is important to remember that the consecration of a new shaman involves many parties: his ritual fathers, the master shamans who were "born" earlier than him; his own family and close relatives in the patrilineal line, who bear the cost of an expensive ceremony involving many guests; the lineage of his wife-takers through the presence of the son(s)-in-law; and finally, the lineage of his wife-givers who have their role to play at the crucial moment of the ritual climbing of the tree of life.⁷ The ceremony can be more or less developed depending

⁵ Cf. Lewis 2003 (1971). For reasons of space it will not be possible here to elaborate on the relevance or shortcomings of the various attempts to classify the different types of spirit possession. However, on the basis of Himalayan ethnography, Rex Jones improved on Lewis's binary classification with a diagram of four categories differentiated according to the dimensions of time and space: peripheral, oracular, reincarnate and tutelary possessions. The Kham-Magar shaman would belong to the category of "tutelary possession", where time is designated but not space (Jones 1976: 1-11).

⁶ Among the Magar, lineages cannot exchange women directly: ego from lineage (A) cannot take a wife from lineage (B), to which he gave a sister or a daughter. This means that the son-in-law (B) ritually helps his wife-giver (A) to marry into a third lineage (C).

⁷ De Sales 1991: 115-134.

on the wealth of the hosting family but it is a public demonstration of a commitment to a career, which is backed up by the lineage structure of the society and its marriage system. This is illustrated again during the summer exorcism mentioned above, when the shamans are supposed to chase away the witch of the white clay and bring grain from the underworld: a lineage that is unable to send its own shaman to the village festival would have to borrow one from another lineage or pay a fine. It is clear that the shaman occupies a central role in the community and that, above all, his or her career is a collective affair, strictly controlled, as much as it is an individual one. However, with the women's resistance to complying with the tradition, the personal or individual dimension of the equation comes to the fore.

3. *The female shaman's predicament*

The shamanic career is open to women on an equal footing with men. This has always been the case, even when, 30 years ago, shamans counted far fewer women than men. The costume is the same, including the characteristic black velvet pair of trousers of the Kham-Magar shamans. The ritual climbing of the life tree that represents the crucial union between the neophyte and his spiritual wife is also performed in the same way. There is no restriction concerning menstruation. I even saw one female shaman who, as she was putting on her shamanic gear at the beginning of a séance, spotted bloodstains at the top of her pair of trousers—the hidden part of the clothing is not made of the expensive black velvet but of ordinary white cotton. She was not embarrassed one bit and rather than being discreet about it, openly complained that she had had no time to wash her clothes. Her behaviour did not seem to shock people around her partly because, in contrast with high-caste Hindus, there is no particularly strong ritual aversion to menstrual blood among the Kham-Magar. Also, being a shaman, she did not have to bother with female shyness concerning menstrual blood. Indeed, shamans must show confidence and enjoy provoking people with transgressive behaviour.

Parents and relatives are equally involved in a women's career knowing, that once she is married, it is the lineage of her husband that becomes the relevant unit in shamanic ceremonies. This is not connected with the fact that her ancestors may come from her own original lineage (*maiti*).

How are we to understand the fact that women incarnate Ramma Puran Can, the first shaman, who himself had two wives? For the main master of the village, who initiated most of the shamans over

the last ten years, a female shaman can be as powerful as a man as long as she learns the ritual chants. Sex is not relevant here. Supporting this conviction, one female shaman, Janne Jhankri, “the knowledgeable female shaman”, further developed this theme:

I was born a “woman” (*nāmarda*) from my (biological) parents, and then in the middle of my life I was (ritually) born a male (*marda*) because the divinity chose me. And then we have feathers on the head, an arm guard on the wrist, a drumstick in the hand, an iron chain around the neck... What do you think we are? We are *marda*. And after our death we will go as *marda* to Indra Lok.

The use of the word *marda/nāmarda* needs a few comments. Janne Jhankri did not use the Nepali terms, *maili/purus*, the conventional terms for male/female, nor did she use the Kham terms, *kepā/mimā*. The pair of word *marda-nāmarda* conveys the opposition between manly and unmanly qualities, weakness opposed to strength.⁸ Janne Jhankri did not suggest that she literally changed sex when she became shaman, but that she acquired the qualities of a man. Since she was ritually “born” a shaman at the age of 50, it was presumably at a time when she could no longer bear children.

Two other female shamans gave a slightly different answer to the question, insisting that they enter the role the moment they don the costume. Dan Mala Jhankri said: “Look at me, I am a woman. But when we wear our pair of trousers we are like men.” Dil Puri Jhankri clarified: “When we wear the costume, we are Ramma Puran Can, but the costume is very heavy for us.” These two women, still young mothers, did not suggest a transformation of their gender or their “self” as did their elder colleague. With the costume comes the role, but the wearers are not transformed to the point of not feeling the weight of the costume. It is worth mentioning that, unlike Janne Jhankri who had the reputation of knowing the chants, neither of these younger female shamans did. Their commitment to the role was much more tenuous.

Yet another young female shaman, Layan Jhankri, understands her predicament in this way:

I was (ritually) born in the month of June and one month later had to follow my guru to the séance *thum*.⁹ I did not want to

⁸ Nep. *marda*: s. man, male; adj. stout, strong. Nep. *nāmarda*: s. eunuch; adj. Impotent, unmanly (Turner 1931)

⁹ *Thum* comes from Nep. *thumā*: “an uncastrated ram”. “Going to the *thum*” in the Kham language refers to the action of drinking the blood of the sacrificial animal

sing. I would have died if I had not become a *jhankri*. I was very ill and my husband had to take me to a big hospital. But they could not do anything for me. This is why I had to become a *jhankri*. Here, in our village, women are the head of the family and we have a lot to do. I cannot follow my guru everywhere and learn the chants. But I feel shy not being able to sing. But if I sang, villagers would call me to sit (to perform) at their house, and I cannot go. So my guru is unhappy with me. He is very strict. But what can I do? Look, all the male *jhankri* are dying one after the other. Not women. This is why there are so many female *jhankri*!

Layan cannot refuse her election by her ancestor at the risk of dying, but at the same time she cannot perform as a shaman because the long night séances would mean letting her household down. The specification that women rather than men are householders reflects the situation that most of them have to face nowadays: that their husbands have left home—previously to flee the insurrection and now to work abroad.

Layan's statement about male shamans who die young needs clarification. Out of a dozen shamans in the village there are only three whose good reputation means that they are frequently called on to perform. The main guru, Jode Jhankri, is in his mid-50s and does not have a minute for himself. He is called for one séance after another, hardly sleeps and drinks alcohol to keep up. The body of a shaman is put to the test to the point of suggesting that there is an almost sacrificial dimension in his ritual task: he is drained of his own vitality to benefit the households that call him precisely because they lack vitality. However, apart from a share of the sacrificial animal, his payment consists mainly in prestige. However, the socio-economic life of the community is changing, and the increasing importance of the cash economy contributes to make a *jhankri*'s life untenable if the traditional way of retribution of a shaman remains what it used to be. Jode Jhankri is reduced to borrowing money for his children to go to school and to pay for their uniforms and school equipment. The long séances that last up to two days and two nights do not leave him any time to plough his fields, and he has no money to pay a labourer to do it for him while he is performing as a shaman. The praise he receives in return for being the best shaman of the village does not always seem to justify his condition of great poverty. And this circumstance might well be the main cause of the fact that young men

at the end of the séance, and regaining vitality. The term is connected to Sanskrit *thūma*: "virility" (*ibid.*).

choose to work elsewhere rather than continuing their ancestors' tradition.

The refusal by the young female shamans to learn the chants and go on as before reflects their analysis of their "householder" situation and may be at the origin of a transformation of shamanic practices in this community undertaken now by more female shamans than before. However, I would like to draw attention to two features of the women's capacity for creation and innovation: the first is that, in our Kham-Magar case, this capacity is deeply inscribed in the mythical understanding of the world that the shamans develop throughout their chants. The second is that, as we shall see, it carries a price that women pay with personal torment.

4. The ambivalence of creation

It is worth stressing that in the shamanic chants all major human creations are presented as being performed by women, starting with the first human being. We learn that the divine couple, Mahadev and Parbati, have been trying in vain to produce a human child: Mahadev failed to breathe life into the image of the first man that was forged in gold. He was also no more successful in his subsequent attempts trying metals of decreasing quality and value: first silver, then copper and at last iron. Parbati, increasingly worried about being childless, hid from her husband in order to give a human shape to a more trivial mixture of ashes, clay, and the excrement of dogs and chickens. Then, with profuse apologies for this first transgression, she presented the breathing creature to the god of the gods, who frowned but could not undo his wife's creation of life on earth.

In the same way, it is a disobedient daughter who lies at the origin of time on earth: the king of the skies endowed his daughter Somarani with a precious box that he made her promise not to open until she would have reached her husband's kingdom on Earth, which was plunged into eternal night. The impatient girl could not resist opening the box on her way and, to her horror, released nine moons and nine suns that made life on earth impossible. However, she would eventually redeem this first transgression with yet eight more transgressions, involving spitting in the foyer and smearing her snot onto the pillar of the ancestors. Each of these sacrilegious actions involved the disappearance of a star until one sun and one star were left to establish a viable alternation between day and night on earth.

The two examples under consideration show two characteristics—at least in myths—of women's capacity in and for creation. Firstly, it is a result of their transgression of the dominant order. Indeed in

both cases, the men, a husband and a father, are clearly in a position of superiority towards their respective wife and daughter who act against the established rules. The second characteristic is that women introduce life into a lifeless world through impure organic elements—animal excrements, snot and saliva—reminding us again of the human condition. Other examples would develop even further the farcical potential that women’s interventions bring into the narrative, in contrast with the epic inspiration of the chants. It is as if men had to mock what they nevertheless have to acknowledge: women’s capacity for giving life.



Fig. 1. The female shaman Jhankrini Lukum. Photo: Anne de Sales.

I suggest that the complaints of the female shamans that their domestic chores prevent them from fully pursuing their calling as religious specialists draw on the same pragmatic assessment of the situation. The trivial nature of their claims, commanded by the constraints of their daily life, stands in contrast with the heroic figure of the shaman as expressed in their chants. In one chant in particular, Ramma Purañ is described abandoning the field that he was ploughing to follow the messengers who came to invite him for a séance. As he is leaving he cries out to his wives who try to keep him at home, that he is only following his destiny “whether (his) name will be remembered or forgotten.” Fame and social status are what is at stake in a shaman’s career and is put at risk in every séance. If, for the various conjectural reasons mentioned above, women find themselves in charge of the shamanic function in a village deserted by men, then shamanic practices may have to be modified in the line of their petty claims.

However, their position as agents of social change entails personal torment. In the previous interview, the young female shaman Layan

mentioned that, although she did not want to learn them, she felt “shy about not being able to sing the chants.” The following account will develop further this feeling of embarrassment, the fear of losing one’s self-esteem. Sun Rupi is a young woman in her 30s, a mother of four children. Her husband works abroad. She knows that I have been working with shamans for a long time, so before I even have asked any question, she says:

I have four children and I want more sons! I am not a shaman anymore... Well, whether I am or not... I have to say that I quit. But I am the only one who knows, in my heart-soul. The outside world, the others do not know what I have in my heart.

This defensive introduction says it all: the young mother wants to conform to her social role and produce more children, preferably boys. At the same time she suggests that although she has stopped practising as a shaman for material reasons, she has kept her shamanic calling. This is why she insists that nobody knows what she feels in her heart. Clearly having quit her shamanic career is a cause of torment. She then proceeds to relate the story of her election by the spirit of her maternal uncle and all the signs of her shamanic destiny in her early childhood—a long story “that could take a whole night to tell.” Then again she expresses her ambivalence:

I was determined to be a shaman, hoping that in this way I would feel better. I wanted to know once and for all [what it was that made me suffer so much]. Or die. So I did the ceremony *boshine*. But now I am a mother; I do not know anything anymore. I said that my ancestors (*pitra*) left me, but actually they still play me, they still are tormenting me, *kut kut zir zir*. We put our body at risk thinking no matter, even if our ancestors leave us... But why would they leave us in the first place? They do not leave us. I worship my ancestors regularly and I am not as sick as I used to be.

Her speech is complex and contradictory. She hesitates and expresses first the urge of a diagnosis in order to know the origin of her suffering that seems to be as much physical as mental. As in Layan’s case, it is a question of life or death. Then, once she has complied with the ancestors, she feels better to the point that she is tempted to neglect them. But they remind her with their presence; they do not leave her alone. And why would she stop worshipping them when they brought her some relief? It is a rhetorical question, but the rest of the interview develops her predicament further:

After the consecration, one has to learn many things, and learn with one's guru who takes one to many séances, singing, speaking... This is an art (*kala*) that we have to learn. But for women like me it would not make any sense to ask for more teaching from the gurus. I cannot concentrate on the chants. Instead I think, maybe the youngest (of her children) has not eaten yet... and who is going to put the hens into the basket tonight, work in the field tomorrow? I always worry about these things. So how can I learn? But it is a shame not to know (the chants). I feel shy. Sometimes I think that I should learn properly. This is my destiny after all. I made the right predictions on the tree of life (*suwa*).

Sun Rupi needs to remind herself that she could be a good shaman and that she has visionary powers: her first predictions concerning the prosperity of the village on the tree of life, the day of her consecration, happened to be accurate. Also the fact that her ancestors have not left her may be understood as the sign that her calling is still alive; she is still inspired by them. What if we replaced the notion of ancestor by one of muse for the poet or the artist, and the notion of destiny by one of superego that we, Westerners, are implicitly using when we organise our experience? There would not be much difference between Sun Rupi's words and those of any young woman at the beginning of her career, debating between the desire to answer her inner calling and stand out from the crowd on the one hand, and the impulse to conform to a social role on the other hand. Village life does not give individuals many opportunities apart from being a farmer; and for young women who have not had the opportunity to be schooled, being a shaman is also one way to explore a more imaginative path, and, last but not least, to receive respect and additional social status as a shaman. Although human experiences are historically and culturally shaped, they are never so different that they cannot be shared beyond these local specificities.

Conclusion

We have seen, first, that the Kham Magar shamans were central in the community and that the shamanic career was open to both men and women. This remarkable equality principle is contradicted in practice in the case of young female practitioners who, given their family responsibilities, cannot devote the necessary time to their career. The situation seems to have worsened over the past 20 years, that at the same time, have seen significant outmigration by young

men for both economic and political reasons. Women are left alone with responsibility for the survival of the community. We witnessed a rapid increase in the number of young female shamans, but also individual attempts to adapt their calling to their living conditions. These attempts, still marginal, seem to involve a radical simplification of shamanic rituals that are emptied of their fundamental core—the songs—and, therefore, of the necessary control by a master. If this trend continues, then the Kham Magar would be another example of a central shamanic institution yielding to peripheral possession. This process would be comparable with the increasing number of “freelance mediums” in which David Gellner saw a democratisation of the means of religious authority in his study of the Kathmandu valley.¹⁰ This is not yet the case in the village considered, especially since a recent tourist interest in large shamanic gatherings seems to have supported the “tradition”.

This article has also shown that, insofar as they are the drivers of the transformations of shamanic practices women have in fact remained in line with the role they occupy in the chants. In the foundation myth of the Kham-Magar, they are cultural heroes responsible for the creation of life on earth, yet as unsung heroes; the songs ensure that they depict their creations under the most trivial aspects of the human condition—that are nevertheless human for all that. Finally, the biographies of female shamans show their own ambivalence towards the change that they bring, almost unwillingly, into the shamanic institution. Being unable to succeed as a proper shaman hurts their self-esteem, as if this were the price to pay for change.

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Female Temple Founders, Ritualists, and Clairvoyants in Post-Socialist Mongolian Buddhism¹

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In the nineteenth century, Mongolia was perhaps the country in the world with the highest percentage of its male population serving as Buddhist monks. But during the 1920s and 1930s, the religious tradition that had dominated Mongolian life for centuries almost became extinct because of the purges of Stalin and his Mongolian henchmen. In 1937 all monasteries but a handful were destroyed, and in 1958 official figures listed a total of five functioning monasteries with only 200 monks.² In a short period of time, Mongolia went through dramatic and forced changes from being a pre-modern Buddhist society to one dominated by Soviet Communism. Totally unprepared, the population faced socialist modernity accompanied by religious persecution, centrally planned economy, and secular education.

When in 1990 the peaceful revolution ended 70 years of religious repression in Mongolia, multinational capitalism and “late” or “post-modernity”—including globalisation and mediatisation—swept the country. During these last 25 years, Mongolian society and culture have once again changed dramatically. While most of the high Mongolian religious masters perished during the purges in the 1930s and ordinary monks were laicised, there were still many ex-monks alive when democratisation started in 1990. They had kept their religious sentiment alive during the Communist era, passing on teachings to

¹ This article is based on data collected by a Polish-Mongolian-Norwegian research group studying the revival of Buddhism since 1990 headed by Mongolist Dr Agata Bareja-Starzyńska. I thank Ganzorig Davaa-Ochir for his research assistance while collecting data for this paper in 2013 and 2014 and Bareja-Starzyńska for valuable comments.

² It is estimated that the monk population in Mongolia in 1924 was approximately 110,000, while in 1930 it had decreased to 75,000 monks. The final and hardest blow to the Mongolian *saṅgha* was initiated in 1939, when the number was reduced to 15,000 (Moses 1977: 217). Official figures of the Mongolian government in 1958 listed five functioning monasteries with a total of 200 monks, 80 of whom lived in Ulaanbaatar (*ibid.*: 262).

family members and performing rituals in secret. Many young monks, who are today the spearheads of the Buddhist revival, had grandfathers or relatives who were monks in pre-Communist times. After a steady growth of Buddhist institutions and increase in the number of clerics during the first decade or so of democratisation, the number of monks and temples stabilised, and even declined—particularly in the countryside. In April 2013, Geshe Luvsanjamts Davaanyam of the Gandantegchenlin (abbr. Gandan) registration office stated that there were around 2,000 monks and 160 monasteries and temples in Mongolia, while in 1998, the office reported that the numbers had increased to 3,000 monks and 200 monasteries and temples.³ No reliable statistics have been published, however, because of the difficulties in deciding precisely what constitutes a monastery and how to define a monk. I use the terms “monastery” and “temple” in a wide sense since they are, apart from a few institutions, staffed by both celibate and non-celibate part-time clerics who officiate at fixed hours and for set salaries. As a rule clerics do not live in the Buddhist institutions in Ulaanbaatar.⁴

Partly because the Buddhist heritage of Mongolia was largely destroyed, Mongol women aspiring to lead religious lives in the post-Communist era were left with hardly any role models to emulate. This article discusses how contemporary Buddhist women are able to create a new space for their religious activities in the rapidly changing city of Ulaanbaatar, where more than one-third of the country’s population now lives. Although there were individual female religious specialists and practitioners in Mongolia’s past, there were no Buddhist nunneries or nuns, and women interested in pursuing religious careers in modern Mongolia have to find innovative ways for their religious activities by following the examples of old female religious specialists or by adopting impulses from global Buddhism, Tibetan exile Buddhist communities in India, or New Age religions.⁵

1. Female religious specialists in Mongolia’s past

Although they were not ordained as novice nuns, we find scattered historical evidence of a few Mongol women locally recognised as reincarnations of Tārā, for example in the Dambi Ööld Banner, but

³ Interview with Geshe Luvsanjamts Davaanyam, April 2013. See also Bareja-Starzyńska & Havnevik 2006: 219, Sagaster 2007, Teleki 2011 and Even 2012.

⁴ The exceptions are Phetub Monastery (dPe thub bstan rgyas chos 'khor gling) founded in 1999 by Bakula Rinpoche and Dolma Ling Nunnery founded by FPMT.

⁵ See also Humphrey & Ujeed 2013: 363-366.

they had no temples or regular incarnation succession of their own.⁶ The Russian Mongolist Aleksei M. Pozdneyev writes that the reincarnations of the White and Green Tārās (the Tsagaan and the Nogoon Dara Ekh) were the patrons of the Dörbed tribe, and two girls were recognised in the Dörbed Wang Banner (*khoshuun*) for the first time in the mid- or late 1860s.⁷ The Swedish missionary Frans August Larson (1870–1957), who spent forty-six years in Mongolia, writes about four female reincarnations, and says that the first wife of the Eighth Jebtsundampa, Tsediin Dondogdulam (1874–1923), was named a reincarnation of the White Tārā.⁸ Upon her death, the king took a new consort named Geninpil from the Banner of Daichin Jonon Wang. She is reported to have wanted to become an oracle (Mong. *choijin*, Tib. *chos skyong*) and knew *luijin* (Tib. *lus sbyin* or *gcod*) texts well.⁹

Although the Gelugpa (Tib. dGe lugs pa) School was dominant, the meditational and ritual practice of the Red Tradition (Mong. *ulaan shashin*),¹⁰ particularly *luijin* (or *gcod*), was popular in pre-Communist Mongolia and has resurfaced after democratisation. A number of women practised *luijin* in a few Red Tradition temples in Urga or as independent practitioners. Some continued their practices in secret during Communism together with their partners or husbands. For example, Dashdorzh (1919-2004) performed *luijin* in the lineage of Tangtong Gyalpo (Thang stong rgyal po, fourteenth-fifteenth centuries) that was brought to Mongolia by Jagar Monlam¹¹ and transmitted by teachers such as Bavuu Jorvon (late nineteenth century).¹² Tovvudorj (b. around 1905), a devout *luijin* practitioner from Khentii Province, continued *luijin* meditation until she passed away in 2011 at the age of 106.¹³ Some monks lived with their families in the coun-

⁶ Diluv Khutagt [1983] 2009.

⁷ Pozdneyev [1889] 1978: 648-650. This tradition is still alive in western Mongolia today as there are some women recognized as Tārā Ekh in Uvs and Khovd provinces.

⁸ Larson (1930: 109, 110, 127-128), see also Bawden 1997: 23-26, 40 and Batsaikhan 2009: 144-145.

⁹ Batsaikhan 2009: 222-223. For *luijin* in Mongolia, see Bareja-Starzyńska, Ragchaa, and Havnevik 2007.

¹⁰ *Ulaan shashin* refers to non-Gelugpa traditions, see Havnevik, Ragchaa & Bareja-Starzyńska 2007: 226.

¹¹ Contemporary Mongols use Jagar Monlam as the name of a person. Jagar is apparently a Mongol phonetic form of rGya gar which refers to India, while the second part of his name is the Tibetan *smon lam*, which means “prayer” or “supplication”. Tibetan terms were pronounced differently in Mongolia, and 70 years of religious repression resulted in the distortion of names and terms.

¹² Bareja-Starzyńska & Havnevik 2006.

¹³ This *luijin* practitioner was given different names by different informants. For photos, see <http://sakyadhita.org/conferences/10th-si-con.html>, photo gallery

tryside but joined religious ceremonies during important Buddhist days. These married “monks” usually carried out normal family life and held only lay vows. They were called *khodoonii lam* or “country lama”, while their female partners were usually called *togoony hun* “kitchen maid” or *geriin hun* “tent [ger] maid”. In a Buddhisised country like pre-modern Mongolia, it is likely that women assisted their “monk” partners and participated in religious life in various ways. Also religiously inclined women, who after their childrearing and household duties were done, dressed in religious colours, sheared their heads, and spent time reciting prayers and worshipping at Buddhist temples. They were named *chavants*, and some carry out the tradition today.

2. The founding of “traditional temples” and female religious specialists

After democratisation in Mongolia in 1990, elderly monks who had been laicised in the 1930s were eager to revitalise Buddhism. As they passed on their religious knowledge to young Mongols, “traditional” institutions—that is, temples and monasteries where clerics dressed in Buddhist robes perform rituals for the public—were rebuilt. Baku-la Rinpoche (1917–2003), a high reincarnation from Ladakh who served as Indian ambassador to Mongolia from 1990 to 2000, started to offer novice (Tib. *dge btsul ma*) ordination to Mongolian women. The only other high reincarnation in Mongolia at that time, Gurudeva Rinpoche (1910–2009) from Inner Mongolia, followed suit. While nunneries belonging to the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism are scattered over the Tibetan plateau and in the Himalayas, only since 1990 were religious institutions for Buddhist women established in Mongolia.

Women were also active in the founding of new temples both in the countryside and in the city. Namdoldechenlin in Bayan Khoshuu, a *ger*¹⁴ district north of Ulaanbaatar, was jointly established by four men and three women in 1989.¹⁵ During the charismatic Banzar’s (1912–2010) abbotship, up to five women performed *luijin* rituals together with the monks. The temple still welcomes female ritualists, but finds it hard to recruit women today. About ten temples have

(accessed June 2014) and http://danzanravjaa.typepad.com/my_weblog/2008/10/index.html (see 17 October 2008, accessed June 2014).

¹⁴ Name of the Mongolian tent.

¹⁵ The founders of the temple were Banzar, Orolmeg, Zunduikhui, the brother and sister Darisuren and Dulamjav, and the brother and sister Purevsuren and Suren (interview with Dulamjav, June 2014).

been started by women in Mongolia, but only three of them are exclusively for female practitioners.¹⁶ According to the disciplinarian Monkhsaikhan in Namdoldechenlin, more than ten *luijin* temples have branched from Banzar's temple. One of them, Janchiv Dechenlin khiid, was established by Dulamjav (b. 1952), and is the only *luijin* temple started by a woman in Mongolia.¹⁷ The temple, which was founded in 2005, is a family enterprise where Dulamjav's son serves as a director. The temple had 18 monks in 2014. Although started by a woman *luijin* specialist, female ritualists are not recruited.



Fig. 1. Some of the founders of Namdoldechenlin with Bakula Rinpoche in 1989.
Photo: Courtesy of Dulamjav.

Female religious specialists in Mongolia are addressed as *khandamaa* (Tib. *mkha' 'gro ma*), and according to Gantomor, one of the founders of Togsbayasgalant in 1988, Gurudeva Rinpoche chose to address the

¹⁶ The temples established by women are as follows, with *M* indicating male ritualists and *F* indicating female ritualists (if known): Dara ekh, founded by Badamkhand and later renamed Dolma Ling (F); Togsbayasgalant (F); Namdoldechenlin (M & F); Janchiv Dechenlin khiid (M); Dash-khaan, founded by Badamdari (M); Gandan Danjaallin, founded by Enkhsaikhan (M); Tavan khani khiid, founded by Dawa (M); Dechin Jambalin in Khovd, founded by Megjin (M); Khongo Khan, founded by Davaakhuu; Dejid Choinkhorlin, founded by Bumgarav; and Baldan Khajodlin, founded by Khajidmaa.

¹⁷ The temples that have branched off from Banzar's Namdoldechenlin are as follows, according to an interview with Monkhsaikhan in June 2014: Thegchenchokhorlin, Phuntsoglin, Urjinshadublin, Dechen Choeyin devshsunberlin, Tharpalin, late Gaadan's temple, Namdol Dedlin (Ovorkhangai Province), Namdol Chokhorlin (Bayankhongor Province), Urjinkhajodlin, one in Khentii Province, one in Zuunkhuraa town (Selenge Province), Janchiv Dechenlin, Barunn Saler, and Sonom's temple Tashi Chokhorlin.

lay female ritualists as *khandamaa*, a title which is still in use. Bakula Rinpoche, on his side, advised them to wear white Mongolian caftans (*deel*) with red edges and not the monastic robe used by celibate novice nuns in the Tibetan tradition. Presently, Mongol female lay ritualists wear red, maroon, orange, yellow, or pink *deel* made from fabrics such as wool, brocade, or cotton according to season and ritual occasion. Many carry a band (*tashuur orkhimj*), often white with red edges, across their chest. Only Mongol novice nuns wear Tibetan style robes.



Fig. 2. Khandamaas from Togsbayasgalant. Photo: Hanna Havnevik, 2005.

Likewise, the majority of the men entitled *lam* or “monks” in Mongolia today have only taken lay vows (Tib. *dge bsnyen*). They have committed themselves to follow some codes but not celibacy. Even though the law issued in 1934 allowing clerics to marry was abolished in 1994,¹⁸ the tradition of married “monks” continues. When the English terms “monk” and “nun” are used for Mongolian religious specialists, these categories mainly refer to non-celibates.

The only celibate nunnery in Mongolia, Dolma Ling (Tib. sGrol ma gling), was initially named Dara Ekh Temple when Badamkhand, a Mongol former journalist, established it for orphaned girls in 1994. In 2001 it was taken over by Zopa Rinpoche and the global organisation Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) and turned into a celibate nunnery based on the Tibetan model. The attempts to establish a female *saṅgha* in Mongolia after 1990 was supported by Tibetans as well as Western Buddhists, and

¹⁸ Bareja-Starzyńska & Havnevik 2006: 220.

the FPMT brought nuns from Kopan Nunnery in Kathmandu to Dolma Ling to teach Buddhism and to serve as examples of celibate living. Despite the incessant work of the international organisation Sakyadhita to encourage Buddhist women to take full ordination, several of the Mongol nuns sent to India for training disrobed when they returned to Mongolia.¹⁹ In June 2014 there were only three resident nuns in Dolma Ling. Currently Zopa Rinpoche hopes to enlarge Dolma Ling to make space for a hundred celibate nuns.²⁰

3. Divination, astrology, and New Age practices

While the number of celibate Buddhist monastics seems to be decreasing worldwide, the rebuilding of Buddhist institutional life in Mongolia is also facing challenges. The destabilising of the economy during the early 1990s and the transition to a capitalist market economy led to a proliferation of non-normative Buddhist practices where diviners, astrologers, and soothsayers established small businesses, either independently or in newly opened monasteries and temples all over the country. Since the introduction of Buddhism to Mongolia, the cosmology has been shaped by local as well as Tibetan beliefs in spirits as well as by normative Tibetan Buddhism. From the sixteenth century, local shamanistic deities were replaced by Buddhist ones and many of the shamanistic cults were lost. Moreover, like Tibetans, Mongols believe that benevolent and malevolent spirits inhabit a sacred landscape, and through worship and offerings all religious specialists negotiate with these numina in order to obtain benefits such as prosperity and good health and to avert accidents, crises, and natural disasters.²¹ At the eastern gate of Gandan Monastery we find a number of booths where specialists of various kinds offer their services. One sign announces that the diviner's abilities include rituals to dispel black magic, obtain good luck, cure untreatable skin problems, open the gate to business, secure a good rebirth, remove addictions, and expel evil spirits.

¹⁹ See Karma Lekshe Tsomo 2013, and also Berkwitz 2012: 35-38.

²⁰ Interview with Ani Tsenla (Director of Dolma Ling), April 2013, and with Ani Gyalmo (Director of FPMT's Centre in Ulaanbaatar), June 2014. In 2013 there were 74 female temple ritualists in Ulaanbaatar, including 18 celibate nuns. See also <http://www.fpmtmongolia.org/dolma-ling-nunnery> (accessed June 2014).

²¹ See e.g. Davaa-Ochir 2008.



Fig. 3. Diviners' booths at eastern gate of Gandantegchenlin Monastery.
Photo: Hanna Havnevik, 2014.

Norov (in the second booth to the left), a retired math and physics teacher, specialises in helping divorced clients and those grieving a dead spouse to find new life companions. Norov uses palmistry and numerology as divination techniques, which she believes are scientific methods of prognostication, while Narantsetseg, who moved from western Mongolia to Ulaanbaatar in 1991, claims that her clairvoyance and healing abilities are inherited from forefathers in nine generations. Until she became a pensioner, she worked as a mechanical engineer. 26 years ago she became a gatekeeper at Gandan Monastery, where she now serves as a diviner. She usually has a few customers per day, and clients pay up to 5,000 Togrog (USD 2.74) for a consultation.

4. Innovative female religious entrepreneurship

Enkhsaikhan

While divination remains a marginal activity at the “traditional” temples in Ulaanbaatar, three female religious entrepreneurs, each in their way, have experienced great economic success in recent years. In the *ger* district Bayan Khoshuu, we find the new Gandan Danjaallin Temple built in 2013 by Enkhsaikhan. The woman, who is in her 30s, dresses like a fashion model wearing a *deel*-like skirt, high heels and fancily decorated nails. The new building combines Mongolian temple and Christian church architecture. In the fenced compound are rooms for monks to make rituals, a food shop, a small canteen, and toilets. The gate has a video camera surveilling visitors, and a poster saying that clients must come between 08:00 to 08:30 in the morning to get a queue number; the first 30 clients are the lucky ones

who will be allowed access to Enkhsaikhan later the same day.

Enkhsaikhan, whose family came to Ulaanbaatar from Ovorkhangai Province in the 1990s, performs card divination for 5,000 Togrog, during which clients may ask three questions. She also offers ritual protection for a family for one year for 80,000 Togrog (c. USD 44), whereas ritual insurance for private companies costs 274,000 Togrog (USD 150). Since so many demand her services, Enkhsaikhan receives only 30 to 40 visitors per day. Her enterprise is effectively organised by a female assistant who carefully instructs customers to behave well and keep money ready in hand. Clients asking questions about health are transferred to five monks performing dice divinations. In a recent article about Enkhsaikhan's temple, the journalist estimates that her various divinatory activities may give her an income of 5.6 million Togrog (USD 3067) per day.²²

Sarandavaa Bat-Ochir

In Khailaast, another *ger* suburb north of Ulaanbaatar, we find the Mongol Aura and Energy Centre. In the entrance hall a statue of Chinggis Khan meets the visitor, flanked by four great leaders and 36 great kings of the Mongol Empire, along with Chinggis Khan's consorts.



Fig. 4. Chinggis Khan, in the Mongol Aura and Energy Centre.
Photo: Hanna Havnevik, 2014.

²² <http://www.grandnews.mn/content/read/50309.htm>, published 16 May 2014, accessed 11 June 2014.



Fig. 5. One of Sarandavaa Bat-Ochir's diplomas. Photo: Hanna Havnevik, 2014.

The founder, Sarandavaa Bat-Ochir, entitles herself PhD, ScD, and President of the Mongolian Academy of Meditation, Animism, Astrology and Psychology. Sarandavaa explains religion from the point of science and energy.²³ The centre has a number of rooms designed for “energy healing”: a room for water oblation; an oxygen room, where customers can evade air pollution, take oxygen cocktails to dispel tiredness, and get energised from stretching on a mattress with “energy stones”; a room for aura healing, where sand and stones have been collected from every corner of Mongolia, and where sound healing of the seven *chakras* is achieved by hitting metal bowls; a protective deity room, which has the portraits of ten Tibetan deities (Tib. *chos skyong*) along with the King of Water Spirits, and the portrait of a female shaman under a stuffed deer's head. The room has altars with the South Korean, American, and Canadian flags, where customers may pray to obtain visas to foreign countries. Massage benches and healing equipment fill other rooms, and in one of them, the centre's astrologer has her office together with a female therapist performing tantric healing.

In Sarandavaa Bat-Ochir's inner sanctuary, the central image is the Buddhist deity Namsrai (Skt. Kubera), the God of Wealth, and from here she monitors the healing activities in each therapy room on closed-circuit television. Sarandavaa has composed 30 works, she explains, and her qualifications are attested on walls full of diplomas. Since Sarandavaa started her activities in 1993, more than 250,000 customers have consulted her. At present her centre has 20 employees, including three monks; she has made three trips around the entire country and gives five lectures per year. Several photo albums show Sarandavaa performing the ritual Summoning Money (Mongolian *Dallaga*) in large congregation halls where several hundred customers stretch their hands above their heads with paper slips “calling

²³ See Bat-Ochir 2009.

back money”, séances reminiscent of sermons given by Evangelical revivalist preachers. The tenth anniversary of Sarandavaa Bat-Ochir’s centre in 2012 was celebrated with 3,300 people attending.



Fig. 6. The Mongol Aura and Energy Centre’s astrologer.
Photo: Hanna Havnevik 2014.

The next-door building is a temple constructed in a post-modern style, and the sign announces in Tibetan and Mongolian that it is a Tārā temple. On the ground floor is a three-dimensional Twenty-one Tārā mandala. The first floor contains a large labyrinth said to remove the sins of those who pass through it and make childless women fertile. The second floor has statues of the Twenty-one Tārās carved by skilled artists, and on the third floor, in a glass canopy, an enormous statue of Green Tārā is displayed. In an adjacent room, the ceiling is decorated with planetary constellations. According to the guide, the Tārā temple, which was completed in 2013, cost five million US dollars.

Khulan Bagsh

Khulan Bagsh, a woman in her forties claiming clairvoyance and healing power, has for several years counselled 40 to 50 clients per day in her office in Ulaanbaatar. She is a devout Buddhist with strong faith in her deceased monk teacher from northern Mongolia. Her daily religious practice is based on the teaching of the Mahāyāna text *Vajracchedikā* “The Diamond Cutter,” and Tsongkhapa’s (Tsong kha pa, 1357–1419) teaching on the *Stages of the Path* (*Lam rim*). Khulan Bagsh says she follows the spiritual guidance of Tibetan masters such as the Dalai Lama and Jhado Rinpoche, the present head of Gyudtoe (rGyud stod) Tantric Monastery near Dharamsala.

In 2014 Khulan Bagsh reduced her counselling activity to 20 to 25 customers three times a week. Each session has a fixed price, but now she offers deep guidance for life. The NGO she has recently founded has four main activities: publishing Buddhist books and Buddhist comics for children; manufacturing health products for sale; building a counselling centre for students and the business community; and building a nursing home for old people. Khulan Bagsh also plans to establish a Mahāyāna Buddhist centre in South Africa, which she thinks will be completed within the next two years. She does not worry about the finances, saying that the God of Wealth, Namsrai, will take care of that. A young girl with a BA in marketing helps her run the NGO, which wealthy patrons help finance.

5. Female religious leaders between rationalism and re-mystification

After democratisation in 1990, Mongols quickly started to revive their Buddhist tradition in order to create a new national identity. At the same time, many were taken aback by the rapid religious pluralisation brought about by religious freedom stipulated in the new constitution of 1992. After a decade with open borders, the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance reported that its churches in Mongolia were among the fastest growing in the world, and the International Religious Freedom Report estimated in 2010 that there might be more than 100,000 Mongolian Christians. The Mongolian Buddhists, therefore, were faced with stark competition in their revivalist efforts.²⁴

While elements of what may be labelled Mongolian “traditional” Buddhism appeared during the first phase of the revival, innovative organisational measures were needed to compete for customers in a religious market where Christians, shamans, clairvoyants, adherents of New Age religions, and others promised gratification. Although present also during pre-Communist time, soothsaying and various divination methods became a highly visible part of Buddhism during the religious revival after 1990. Although women did not, as a rule, serve as religious specialists in old Mongolia, the spiritual vacuum that surfaced after 70 years of religious repression created a market where they, too, seized the opportunity for professional careers. In the modern city of Ulaanbaatar, religious businesswomen started to combine traditional Buddhist elements with private entrepreneurship. They use modern information technology, marketing models, and publicity strategies and hire assistants, including monks, and marketing agents to make their undertakings efficient.

²⁴ Wazgird 2011.

Mongolian women have not, however, embraced monastic living like many Tibetan women did after political relaxations started in the mid-1980s in Tibetan areas of the People's Republic of China. Although monasticism is strictly controlled by the government, many Tibetan women from the countryside, some with a rudimentary educational background, chose to become celibate nuns.²⁵ Female Buddhist practitioners in Ulaanbaatar, however, have grown up in a highly secular society, received education in a school system built during the socialist time, and served in professional jobs as educators, journalists, and engineers. Though there is strong pressure in Mongolian society on women to marry, they want professional religious lives as well as families; they embrace feminine codes of dress and makeup, and they want to support themselves and their children. As Mongolian Buddhism has no central religious authority to control religious development, women, as well as men, are free to fashion their own religious professional roles. As long as a religious institution is registered and religious tax is paid, there is no governmental interference.

Some of these new female religious entrepreneurs legitimise their activities by referring to Buddhist teachers of the past, displaying their photos in their temples and counselling rooms along with images of Tibetan and Mongol Buddhist deities and ritual objects. In their selective approach to religion, they also act like followers of New Age religions by using, recycling, combining, and adapting existing religious ideas and practices according to their needs.²⁶ Although both celebrated and disparaged by Buddhist norms, Mongol women, in pursuit of their religious and secular aims, are not passively adjusting to a cultural framework and institutional Buddhism that relegates them to the margin of monastic life, but are tackling challenges in remarkable ways to create job opportunities for themselves and others in a society where rapid social and economic changes have made life insecure. For segments of urban Mongols, praying for the well-being of clients and generating economic profit in the name of Namsrai, the God of Wealth, are seen as legitimate goals.

In the rapidly changing religious life of Mongolia several influential Buddhist masters attempt to influence religious development in a normative and modernist direction. Even though some of them try to include women in their visions for a Buddhist future in Mongolia, organised religious life for Mongol women has been neglected. Leaders such as the Dalai Lama and Jhado Rinpoche emphasise the scholastic training of monks and the enforcement of the *Vinaya* and are

²⁵ Particularly in religious encampments (*sgar*) in eastern Tibet, see Jacoby & Terro-ne 2012: 95-98, Joseph 2012: 38-48, and Cho 2013.

²⁶ Hanegraaff [2001] 2009: 352.

supported by representatives of Zopa Rinpoche's organisation, the FPMT, and the Tibetan exile Panchen Oetrul Rinpoche and his Ashral Centre in Ulaanbaatar. In the Dalai Lama's promotion of the new Grand Maitreya Project, with its plan to build a 54-meter-high Maitreya statue and a 108-meter-high stupa surrounded by an ecological city to the south of Ulaanbaatar, he expresses his wish: "We should make efforts to become 21st century Buddhists, eliminating hindrances like superstition. ... Anyone interested should be able to receive a modern and Buddhist education, founded on Buddhist philosophy and science."²⁷

While many educated clerics in the major Gelugpa monasteries in Mongolia support the Dalai Lama's vision of Buddhist modernism, which has features influenced by Western ideological developments such as individualism, scientific rationalism, romanticism, Protestantism, psychology, and modern social ideals and ideas of human rights,²⁸ they still attempt to maintain what they see as Buddhism's Mongolian tradition and customary practices.²⁹ Other local lay ritual specialists, some of them self-made, charismatic female figures like Enkhsaikhan, Sarandavaa Bat-Ochir, and Khulan Bagsh, have responded to post-socialist modernity by emphasising occultism, ritualism, and healing to meet the this-worldly and immediate needs of their clients, many of whom belong to families that have lately migrated from the steppe to *ger* towns at the outskirts of the capital.³⁰ Rapid urbanisation, modest living in *ger* suburbs, without running water and modern sanitation, and jobs in the mining industry and the commercial sector have left segments of the population in insecure and sometimes miserable conditions. In recent years, after Mongolia became one of the most rapidly growing economies in the world, the income increased also in the *ger* towns. Still, many feel disappointed because of failed expectations of upward social and

²⁷ <http://www.ikhmaidar.mn>, accessed 23 June 2014.

²⁸ See e.g., McMahan 2008: 6.

²⁹ The Mongol cleric Nyamsambuu emphasises modern teaching techniques, mindfulness training, and engaged Buddhism in his Jebtsundampa Centre in Ulaanbaatar, and north of the capital, the famous artist Purevbat has built the meditation centre Aglagiin khiid, combining Buddhist pilgrimage and tourism. A substantial undertaking is presently made at the Kalacakra Centre, established by the Mongolian monk Buyandelger, where the entire Tibetan canon will be transliterated from classical Mongolian into the Cyrillic script and carefully modernized by 2016, making the canonical texts available for educated laypeople. See <http://www.chakra.mn> (accessed June 2014).

³⁰ A this-worldly orientation has been an integrated part of Buddhism since its beginning. Likewise, when faced with economic destabilisation and rapid social change, Tambiah (1984) reported the growth of the cult of amulets in Thailand and Gombrich & Obeyesekere (1988) the rapid increase in self-appointed female mediums and occultism in Sri Lanka.

economic mobility and because of the loss of their traditional lifestyles on the steppe. Wealth, success, happy family life, high education for their children, and good health promised by the new female religious specialists, most openly expressed in Sarandavaa Bat-Ochir's ritual for "Summoning Money", make them rush to their temples and centres.

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Gender and Medicine in Kham: An Analysis of the Medical Work and Life of Derge Phurpa Dolma

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This article outlines aspects of the life of Phurpa Dolma (Phur ba sgröl ma, b. 1931) from Derge in Kham, eastern Tibet, who worked as a practitioner of Tibetan medicine. Based on interviews with her I will explore and analyse her experiences and prospects as a physician and compare her situation with extant life writings¹ by and on other female doctors, including Khandro Yangga (mKha' 'gro dbyangs dga', 1907-1973), Lobsang Dolma (bLo bzang sgröl ma, 1935-1989) and Jetsunma Do Dasel Wangmo (mDo Zla gsal dbang mo, b. 1928). Based on such works and considering women's position and situation in other domains of socio-cultural life in Tibet, Gyatso and Havnevik have suggested that perhaps medicine, at least in the modern period, has fostered more of a non-gendered meritocracy than other areas of learning and science in Tibet, not least due to the relatively swift verifiability of its efficacy.² This article engages with that proposition and offers contrasting examples. Upon a close look at the social background of the women doctors whose "success stories" have been written and given the challenges that Phurpa Dolma and other "ordinary" women doctors as householders have experienced, Tibetan medicine might after all not have been the particularly open field for women that Gyatso and Havnevik suggest. In this article Tibetan medicine and the "Science of Healing", or *Sowa Rigpa* (*gso ba rig pa*) will be taken synonymously and practitioners of that tradition referred to as doctors, physicians and *amchi* (*a mchi*) or *menpa* (*sman pa*).

To date, only the life and work of Khandro Yangga and of Lobsang Dolma have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Khandro Yangga was a laywoman from Kham who—next to her wide-ranging medical expertise—became particularly famous for her skill in cataract surgery, and also, for being the first woman to be employed at the Mentsikhang (sMan rtsi khang), the prestigious

¹ I use this term broadly, to refer to Tibetan biographies or *namthar* (*rnam thar*), memoirs, short sketches, reports and the like.

² Gyatso & Havnevik 2005: 13.

Medicine and Astrology Institute, in Lhasa. A short biography of her is found as the only one of a woman among over 55 biographies of twentieth-century doctors included in a collection of physicians' life stories, written by Jampa Trinle.³ Instances in her life have also been highlighted in British colonial and communist writings, as well as in a family memoir.⁴ Lobsang Dolma on the other hand hailed from a family of medical practitioners in Kyirong (sKyid grong) in southern Tibet, where she was taught as the only daughter in the family. She spent much of her working life in exile in India, where she ran a flourishing private practice while also publishing⁵ and teaching students, including her own daughters. The latter maintain their own clinics in India to this day. A book-length study was published on Lobsang Dolma and her lineage and several short sketches have also been provided elsewhere.⁶

Another female doctor, currently much less renowned outside of Kham, is Jetsunma Do Dasel Wangmo (mDo Zla gsal dbang mo), who was born in 1928 into a well-positioned Nyingmapa (rNying ma pa) Buddhist family clan from Golog. She learned medicine from her mother and from other, eminent male teachers during the 1930s and 1940s. After considerable hardship during the reforms, she was allowed to work as a village doctor and later became a professor of *Sowa Rigpa* at the Sichuan Tibetan Language School (STLS) in Kham and later in Dartsedo (Dar rtse mdo), where it was moved. She practices to this day as both a physician and a Buddhist master. Her student Thubten Choedar wrote a *namthar* (*rnam thar*), or biography of her, which also discusses aspects of her medical career.⁷ Do Dasel Wangmo personally composed a short collection of *namthar* of members of the Do household, which also includes an autobiographic sketch.⁸

These three women share the rare distinction of having life writings attached to their names and they are mentioned in Tashi Tsering's valuable list of Tibetan female doctors of the twentieth century.⁹ None of this, however, has been the case for most Tibetan

³ Byams' pa 'phrin las 2000: 458-463; Tashi Tsering 2005: 173-177.

⁴ Adams & Dovchin 2001; Hofer 2011.

⁵ Khangkar 1998.

⁶ Khangkar 1998; Josayma and Dhondup 1990; Tashi Tsering 2005: 177-188; Nor bu chos 'phel & bKra shis tshe ring 2008.

⁷ Thub bstan chos dar 2008; Michalson 2012. See also the translation of Thub bstan chos dar by Schneider 2013.

⁸ MDo Zla gsal dbang mo 2007.

⁹ See Tashi Tsering 2005: 172 f. This list includes, apart from the four women already mentioned in this article, Taykhang Jetsumna Jampel Chodron (bKras khang rje btsun ma 'Jam dpal chos sgron, c. 1882-c.1959); Shingmo Sa Lhamo (Zhing mo bza' lHa mo, also known as Khandro Lhamo, 1916-2003); Tashi

women who entered the medical profession. We barely even know their names, and not even two handfuls of those born prior to the reform era have been mentioned in writing. This lack of any or more detailed information on their lives and work also pertains to Phurpa Dolma, and to a number of female doctors in Central Tibet, of whom I had heard about incidentally or through hearsay. After having succeeded in meeting with them and/or their family members and students, I began to record their stories with the aim of enabling a fuller analysis and comparison on the topic of female *amchi* and *menpa* in Tibet.¹⁰

The following discussion explores the social background and the numerous day-to-day challenges and obstacles regularly encountered by women trying to access and succeed in medicine, even when they had the usual paths to knowledge at their fingertips, such as “great men” as fathers, grandfathers or uncles and the ability to read and write. This article suggests that medical practice, even outside of the Buddhist or government institutions known for being particularly male-dominated, was still governed by the wider male-dominated and androcentric social order that allowed very little room for talented women to prosper.

1. Recording Phurpa Dolma’s life story

On a cold mid-winter morning, my research assistant and I find ourselves in the home of the 83-year old Phurpa Dolma. We have come up a steep and winding path, walking between wooden, brightly-coloured two-storey houses. Below us we see the famous eighteenth-century Derge Printing Press, or Parkhang, with its golden roofs and imposing stone walls painted in dark red. A neighbour points us to Phurpa Dolma’s house and upon calling out for her, her middle-aged daughter emerges and invites us in. As we are led into the kitchen, I notice the entrance hall has its walls stacked high with books and wood. Over steaming cups of salted milk tea and with a stove warming our backs, we are soon poised to hear Phurpa Dolma’s tales—told jointly with her daughter and her son-in-law, who have shared much of her long life (Figure 1). After having carried out a number of oral history interviews with doctors in Central Tibet (who happened to be mostly men) I had embarked on a

Paldron (bKra shis dpal sgron, died c. 1959); Rinzin Wangmo (Rig ’dzin dbang mo); Tinley Dolkar (’Prin las sgröl dkar, 1931-56); Tinley Paldon (’Prin las dpal sgron, b. 1939); and Drungtsho Tsering Peldren (Drung tsho tshe ring dpal ’dren, b. 1965).

¹⁰ See Fjeld & Hofer 2011; Hofer, forthcoming.

project focusing specifically on recording the life stories of female doctors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Central Tibet and Bhutan. In the winter of 2014, this project was now extending to Amdo and Kham.¹¹



Fig. 1. Phurpa Dolma (left) and her daughter Palden Dolma (right) at their home in Derge. Photo: Theresia Hofer, 2014.

Phurpa Dolma's youth and medical formation

Phurpa Dolma was born in 1931, a long awaited child of her parents having had several children before her, all of whom had died. Her birthplace was the village of Ngul Punong (dNgul phu nong), located a short walk above Derge town. It was a loose collection of farmhouses, lying between partly terraced fields and overlooking the tightly-packed houses of Derge town below. Since the eighteenth century Derge town itself had been characterised by a string of three large buildings of secular and religious significance: the Print House (dPar khang), the Derge King's Palace and the Great Derge Monastery (sDe dge dgon chen). The houses of the laity were located around the Print House, while the residences of monastic dignitaries and monks surrounded the monastery, lying at the geographically and symbolically highest position in Derge (Figure 2).

¹¹ I gratefully acknowledge funding for this project from the Nansen Foundation and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship (303139) that brought and then kept me at the University of Oslo. Thanks also to Barbara Gerke for her close reading and comments on previous versions of this article, to Ann Jones for writing inspirations and discussion of feminist topics, and to Thea Vidnes for continued support and her help with copy-editing. I am especially grateful to Heidi Fjeld and my other colleagues in anthropology and Tibetan studies in Oslo, as well as the editors of this special issue for their insightful comments and constructive critique over the past years.

Phurpa Dolma's father was Dramang Lhaje, an abbreviation of Dramang Lhaje Jamyang Sangpo (Grwa mang lHa rje 'jam dbyang bzang po, 1898-1963/5). He initially studied reading, writing and the medical texts with his own father and became a medical practitioner, in the thirteenth generation in his family. He was also ordained for some time at the Great Derge Monastery, complementing his medical training by studying Buddhism. From within his monk's residence he worked as a physician for the monks and also as the personal physician for members of Derge's royal family. On the only depiction I found of him, he is painted wearing his monastic robes (Figure 3). In the late 1920s, Dramang Lhaje however renounced his monastic vows and married Bemo Ako (dBe mo A dkog, n.d.), a woman of the Bemo family, their joint residency thereafter being in Ngul Punong village. He kept using his monk's quarters, however, for medical practice and the manufacture of medicines.



Fig. 2. Lay and monastic residences in Derge, with part of the roof of the Parkhang to the right. Photo: Theresia Hofer, 2014.

Starting from an early age, Phurpa Dolma was taught by her father, first the Tibetan alphabet. She recalled: "There were no pencils and paper at the time. We had to learn to write on a wooden board, on which we put butter and ash. Then we used a stick to write on it and afterwards we cleaned it to start again." Aged 13 she began to train in medicine, which included the study of parts of the first two volumes of the *Four Tantras* (*rGyud bzhi*), *Sowa Rigpa's* canonical work. That said, she described having learned medicine mainly "by experience" and "on the side", meaning besides assisting her father's medical practice, especially in medical herb collection and compounding. She also shared some of the work routines with other

students of his.¹² Her brother, Tsering Dorje (Tshe ring rdo rje), born when she was already nine years old (in 1940), also joined in when he came of age.



Fig. 3. Phurpa Dolma's father, Dramang Lharje Jamyang Sangpo. His image is painted on a large mural at the Derge Tibetan Medicine Hospital, below Yuthog Yontan Gonpo the younger and as part of a group of five famous (male) physicians. To his sides we see medical instruments and a medical bag.

Photo: Theresia Hofer, 2014.

Adulthood and communist reforms

In 1948, Phurpa Dolma gave birth to a daughter, Palden Dolma (dPal ldan sgröl ma), and they continued to live in Phurpa Dolma's family home in Ngul Punong.¹³ During the 1950s, despite having to look after her young daughter and amidst mounting political difficulties in Derge and Kham—the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had advanced and ultimately taken over the area—Phurpa Dolma continued her medical work. She carried on practising from her father's monk quarters as well as using the house in Ngul Punong to dry and prepare medical herbs and other ingredients.

Following the increasing attacks on monasteries and on the former secular elites of Derge during the latter half of the 1950s, 1959 marked a definitive turning point for Phurpa Dolma's family and their medical practice. The family's status and work was criticised within the newly introduced class labels and their medicines and

¹² Initially these included Yeshe Dorje, Lhori Sangpo, Thamka Lhaje and later on also Menpa Soepa.

¹³ The name of Palden Dolma's father and the nature of his relationship with Phurpa Dolma was not mentioned to me during the interview or in my conversations with Phurpa Dolma's family. Palden Dolma was to remain Phurpa Dolma's only child.

instruments were confiscated, temporarily ending their practice. After a while, however, the new leadership presented Dramang Lhaje with two options: to either leave his medical work behind entirely, or to shift it to an official clinic that the local authorities were planning to establish. Similar choices were offered to Phurpa Dolma and her brother. In the current context, these were comparatively benign options, given the tragic fate of many other medical and Buddhist practitioners, which included the deportation into labour camps and prisons, among others.¹⁴ Dramang Lhaje was even consulted over the location of the new medical clinic in Derge, for which he suggested the famous Derge Print House or Parkhang.

In 1959, local Tibetans had succeeded in enlisting the Parkhang as a “protected cultural building” (*rig nas sung cho*), and it thus appeared to be secure from the otherwise rampant attacks on Tibet’s cultural heritage.¹⁵ The building was also conveniently located at the centre of town and stood empty due to the forced end of its printing activities. From a Tibetan perspective, it was probably considered a good place for the practice of or *Sowa Rigpa*, which was a branch of scholarly Buddhist training for centuries and since the Parkhang had held a number of medical texts and block prints.

Only few medicines and raw materials could be recovered after the confiscation. Having no financial support from the authorities, the first obstacles to be overcome were the acquisition of raw materials and the making of medicines. Phurpa Dolma and her colleagues went out to pick medical herbs and her brother secretly acquired 20 to 30 large bags of medical raw materials from Pelpung Monastery (dPal spungs), which had a famous College for the Five Sciences¹⁶ that also taught medicine but lay now in rubble.

These few practitioners then set about transforming the Parkhang into a clinic-cum-pharmacy. While everyone I spoke to referred to the clinic as the Parkhang Menkhang (dPar khang sMan khang, meaning the “Print House Medical Clinic”), the authorities called it the “Co-operative Clinic” (mNyam ’bral sMan khang). Consultation rooms were established in the front courtyard near the entrance doors. One room was given over to medicinal baths, which Dramang Lhaje supervised, and the upper floors and the roofs were used for the drying and production of medicines. Patients had to pay a tiny sum

¹⁴ Gerke 2015; Holmes 1995.

¹⁵ Menpa Soepa, interview, December 2014. On the political situation in Kham during the 1950s and 1960s, see McGranahan 2010; Shakya 1999; and Jamyang Norbu 1986.

¹⁶ The “five major sciences” (*rig gnas che ba lnga*) are part of the classic monastic curriculum of Tibetan Buddhism and entail Buddhism, epistemology and logic, grammar, medicine, and the arts and crafts.

for treatment, which earned the staff a small monthly salary. There were apparently no government subsidies throughout the clinic's existence. Although it is hard to imagine the Parkhang this way today, following Phurpa Dolma's accounts, I was able to imagine the place as it was: a large medical facility where herbs were drying and doctors grounded medicines, nestled between the thousands of block prints stacked up high along the walls and corridors. One of her activities while working at the Parkhang was to look after the building itself. For example, she made sure to remove grass and herbs from the roofs and replace any damaged parts with waterproof materials to stop damage in the rooms below.

From the mid-1960s onwards Maoist fervour reached its alleged highpoint in the retrospectively so-called Cultural Revolution. The work of the Parkhang Menkhang also became more and more disrupted by revolutionary youths, as Phurpa Dolma recalls:

Then we got big problems and it became increasingly difficult to compound the medicines. There was always someone who came to disturb our work. A group of people would arrive and start hitting the doctors and then fights broke out. At that time, we started to sleep on the roof of the Print House and took stones with us. When those people came back again, we threw the stones at them. Our main aim was to protect the Print House and the medical clinic.

Menpa Soepa, an earlier student of Phurpa Dolma's father, heard similar accounts from other medical staff working at the Parkhang Menkhang, which he related to me:

The central government had ordered to protect the Print House from destruction. But local revolutionaries did not care. The doctors stayed inside the Print House and locked the doors from the inside. They distributed the drying herbs and other raw materials throughout the whole building so that if any Red Guard came inside they would argue that the drying herbs had to be left undisturbed, for the masses to be treated. If during that time nobody had been inside the Print House and protected it, it probably would have been destroyed.¹⁷

¹⁷ The story of how the Derge Parkhang survived the Cultural Revolution as the only traditional printing press in Tibet is a fascinating one, which merits detailed research. I have collected a range of accounts that will be discussed in future work.

Following on from these grave troubles in summer 1966 and having succeeded in protecting the Parkhang from destruction (much of the content of Derge Monastery in the meantime had been burnt and the building razed to the ground), the clinic was sometimes open and operating, sometimes not. Phurpa Dolma remembered they could only produce simple compounded medicines and that the "barefoot doctors" (Tib. *smān pa rkang rjen ma*; Chin. *chijiao yicheng*) introduced some basic western medicines into the clinic's repertoire, such as biomedical pills and injections. During the late 1960s and until 1976, her daughter Palden Dolma worked as a barefoot doctor but was mostly stationed in more remote villages. There she met her future husband, Phurpa Dolma's son-in-law, who also worked as a barefoot doctor.

The post-reform period

With several clear signs indicating the imminent relaxation of official policies towards the end of the 1970s, local political and former Buddhist leaders, among them Jetsunma Do Dasei Wangmo, were eager to start printing Tibetan books at the Derge Parkhang.¹⁸ They succeeded and printing recommenced in 1978. This meant, however, that the Parkhang Menkhang had to move. New policies were meanwhile drafted to improve and update medical facilities and eventually the Parkhang Menkhang was relocated to a newly constructed building to the east of Derge town. It became fully integrated into and funded by the government. Called the "Derge Tibetan Medical Hospital", it had out- and inpatient facilities, rooms for staff, a pharmaceutical production unit and plenty of storage space for the medical ingredients (Figure 4).¹⁹

Most staff from the Derge Parkhang moved over to the new hospital and alongside new recruits they were given official contracts and fixed salaries paid by the government. Phurpa Dolma, her brother, and the other senior doctors, Aden and Thamka Lhaje, gave patient consultations, while the latter two were also acting as directors. Phurpa Dolma was still responsible for providing and organising herb collection trips and arranging the materials for compounding but a doctor named Sangye became head of pharmaceutical production. "It was again work, work, work. We had no time to sit around and read books, we were on our feet all day

¹⁸ Thub bstan chos dar 2008: 403.

¹⁹ See dByangs dga' n.d. This source states that it was designated to be at the level of "standard Tibetan medicine hospital".

long," she remembered. Her daughter, who had worked at the Parkhang Menkhang for two or three years after her barefoot doctor assignment, also moved over to the new hospital. After some more training with her mother, her uncle and Thamkha Lhaje, she was officially made a pharmacy assistant, handing out medicines based on the doctors' prescriptions and helping with plant collection at weekends and in her spare time.



Fig. 4. Phurpa Dolma and other medical staff at the Derge Tibetan Medicine Hospital, 1980s. From a photo exhibit at the hospital.
Photo: Theresia Hofer, 2014.

Phurpa Dolma retired in the late 1980s and began to receive a government pension. She could finally rest her tired limbs. Some patients still came to her home for consultations during which she read their pulses and prescribed medicines but due to her age and physical condition she stopped producing her own medicines.

2. Reflections on gender and Phurpa Dolma's positions in medicine

Biographies, communist news items and academic accounts have all offered glimpses into the lives of talented female Tibetan doctors of the twentieth century. They show how some were able to excel in the practice of *Sowa Rigpa*, usually when they had the right connections and/or social rank that allowed them to access medical texts, teachers and implements. There are several reasons why Phurpa Dolma should have followed the footsteps of the likes of Khandro Yangga, Lobsang Dolma and Do Dasel Wangmo who built up a good reputation and independent medical careers. Firstly, Phurpa Dolma's

father—like Khandro Yangga’s father and Do Dasel Wangmo’s mother—was an eminent doctor and willing to teach her. This means that she was part of a family lineage and medical house, as such publically recognised for the transmission of medical knowledge and authority.²⁰ Secondly, having thus learned from him, Phurpa Dolma was able to practice Tibetan medicine, even after 1959, when many others had had to stop due to negatively perceived class backgrounds and it being regarded as a vestige of Tibet’s feudal past. It is possible that her pharmacological expertise helped her to continue and even develop her knowledge and experience further within the officially legitimated space of the Parkhang Menkhang in the years following 1959, as large volumes and a wide range of medicines were produced. Moreover, during the Cultural Revolution despite the upheavals, interruptions and simplification of Tibetan medical compounds (common for the time), she was able to continue her work. And thirdly, by many present and past *amchis’* standards, the expertise that Phurpa Dolma had gained over those years in all the practical aspects of pharmacology and diagnosis should have made her a highly valued practitioner of *Sowa Rigpa* as well as pharmacology, a field within in which practical skill and experience is deemed as particularly crucial.

Despite these favourable circumstances and her evident dedication to *Sowa Rigpa*, Phurpa Dolma currently remains a largely peripheral figure and her story so far unrecorded in writing. There are no modern biographies of her, nor is her name even mentioned in any of the collections of short biographies or the historical sketches detailing the development of Tibetan medical institutions in Derge (written and published, by and large, since the 1990s).²¹ Is this absence and oversight due to the prevalent androcentrism in Tibet, or is it due to her not having been or having been considered an “expert doctor”?

In what follows, I aim to illustrate three ways in which Phurpa Dolma was either excluded or sidelined within *Sowa Rigpa*. How, compared to her brother, other male doctors of her generation, and compared to the high-ranking Nyingma Buddhist nun Do Dasel Wangmo (who also remained in Kham during the reform period and established herself as an independent medical doctor and teacher) she was disadvantaged. These instances will highlight several significant challenges faced by Phurpa Dolma in the medical field, despite her having had some of the best possible circumstances for a woman to enter and succeed in the medical profession. I suggest

²⁰ Fjeld & Hofer 2011.

²¹ See the unpublished paper by Byang dga’, also known as Yangga (n.d.).

that to understand the absence of many expert Tibetan women from the written record we need to better understand the circumstances that prevented them from realising their talents as well as the ways in which male writers and scholars have set standards for what makes an “expert doctor” and hence worthy of being written about.

Textual authority and practical experience

When talking to Phurpa Dolma about her training, one of the striking features in her experience as well as in her accounts relates to the nature of her medical studies. Usually, the first element in the formation of doctors of her generation has been their study and memorisation of parts or the whole of the *Four Tantras*. Although Phurpa Dolma read its first two volumes during her early years of training, she never made a serious attempt to memorise them, nor was she seemingly encouraged to do so. Instead, she recalled her early medical formation in the following way:

From the age of about 13, I needed to do a lot of work, picking medicine, making medicines, etc. I learned all about the plants while doing the work and picking medicines. That’s when my father taught me about the uses and benefits of medicines.

Phurpa Dolma placed strong emphasis on her learning “by experience and practice” and “on the side”. That is, she was not explicitly instructed, like an apprentice would be, but rather through “learning by doing” and by carrying out and helping her father’s medical work.

It was like this: one day I had to pick medicinal plants, the next day clean them, and the third make pills (*ril bu*). I had no time to read books, I simply needed to go and work lots for father—this is how I learned. Only sometimes, for one day or so my father would teach me from the *pecha* [*dpe cha*; a Tibetan-style book], and then the next I had to go and work again. Not even half of my studies were from books, most was based on experience.

Instead of lengthy study and memorisation of the medical texts, which tended to take up at least the first couple of years in most doctors’ training and usually prior to the bulk of their practical training, Phurpa Dolma participated in the daily medical work of her father from the start. Aside from reading the pulse and the

application of external therapies, he directed her mostly to the collection of medical ingredients and medicine production. She thus climbed the hills and pastures surrounding Derge to collect relevant herbs, learning how to identify, prepare and compound them. She also developed her skill in taste, a prime means to ensure the required effect and quality of raw materials and finished medicines. Even though her deep respect for her father and teacher shone through in all her accounts, at times I could not help but perceive that Phurpa Dolma, rather than being groomed seriously to become the family's medical lineage holder, was at least some of the time used by her father as a well-trained labourer for the extremely work-intensive process of making medicines. This likely fitted well with the widespread socio-cultural expectation of women's hard, physical labour.²²

The whole breadth and depth of *Sowa Rigpa* knowledge, especially its textual corpus, was instead imparted to her brother, who began his training in the usual way, with intensive study of the *Four Tantras*. The same was true for Menpa Soepa, who although having started this process under his own father, continued memorising the *Four Tantras* when he became a monk at the Great Derge Monastery and thus student of Dramang Lhaje. Although much younger than her, both of these men studied hard, excelling in their memorisation of the *Four Tantras*. But did only men study the medical texts so thoroughly? It would appear not.

According to Thubten Choedar's biography of Jetsunma Do Dasel Wangmo, she remained the only child in the family after three siblings had died before the age of two.²³ Before she formally ordained at the age of 23, she received her initial instructions on the first two volumes of the *Four Tantras* from Guru Sangpo. She then memorised these and next gained instructions in practical procedures and in the "large Tantra", i.e. the third volume of the *Four Tantras* (basically a clinical handbook), by her mother, Do Tsedzin Wangmo (mDo Tshe 'dzin dbang mo, 1914-1953). Her mother had received parts of the medical lineage of Ju Mipham ('Ju mi pham, 1846-1912), the widely regarded scholar-physician, through his disciple Troru Jampal (Khro ru 'jam dpal, n.d.) and was a practicing physician in her own right.²⁴ Do Dasel Wangmo's studies were clearly supported by her family and its vast network of teachers, and Do Dasel Wangmo's ability to memorise resonates with her early Buddhist

²² This was also the case of the wife and daughters of a physician in Amdo according to Mona Schrempf, personal communication, September 2015. Also see Kleisath 2007.

²³ Thub bstan chos dar 2008: 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*: 16.

training as well as available time to devote to this task. In addition, her education was also not abandoned due to any belatedly born younger brothers, as was the case with Phurpa Dolma.

Phurpa Dolma, on the other hand, as a laywoman was expected to run a household, bring up children and also carry out medical practice, rather than to be mainly involved in textual study and scholarly erudition. What seemed to have mattered most in her situation was the practical knowledge and skill in making medicine. The family practice required multiple, experienced hands in order to run smoothly and medicine making was at first the only domain of medicine where Phurpa Dolma was told to apply herself in. Without continued training and exposure to the texts, which her younger brother enjoyed, her literacy and textual knowledge remained relatively limited. This is comparable to Sonam Dolma, the inheritor of the Nyekhang Medical House in Tsarong District (Tsha rong) in Central Tibet.²⁵

As we will see below, all three male students of Dramang Lhaje, having gained a solid grounding in reading and writing as well as the medical literature, went on to hold significant leadership positions in government hospitals and colleges from the late 1970s onwards. Dramang Lhaje's surviving medical texts were given to Phurpa Dolma's brother after the reforms and she only managed to reclaim one of them following his death aged 65. This was, incidentally, their father's work on the processing of mercury for medical purposes, in Tibetan called *tsotel* (*btso thal*).

Tsotel is an important ingredient for many *rinchen rilbu* (*rin chen ril bu*), or "precious pills", the most sophisticated and complex medicines in the repertoire of *Sowa Rigpa*. According to some texts, women are not supposed to participate in the preparation of *tsotel*, and although not in practice necessarily having been the case,²⁶ Phurpa Dolma did not learn it neither from her father nor during the early 1980s when the making of *tsotel* was taught at her own Derge Tibetan Medicine Hospital by Troru Tsenam (Khro ru tshe rnam, 1926-2004), a famous physician originally from Kham. It was one of the great events of the period and *tsotel* containing and highly-prized "precious pills" are prosperously today made at the Derge Tibetan Medical Hospital today (Figure 5) and also in the private medical pharmacy of Menpa Soepa.

²⁵ Hofer, forthcoming.

²⁶ For in-depth discussion on the historic exclusion of women from making *tsotel*, see Gerke 2013, 2015, and in preparation. In my own research pertaining to women doctors of the pre-1950s period, I only know that Do Dasel Wangmo and the nun Ani Pema Lhamo from Nyemo (sNye mo), Central Tibet have either learned and/or practiced making *tsotel* and/or *rinchen rilbu*.

Division of labour at the Parkhang Menkhang

In line with her experience in collecting medicinal substances as well as their preparation and compounding at home, Phurpa Dolma mainly continued the pharmaceutical production at the co-operative Parkhang Menkhang that started up in 1959. At the very beginning, she went out for several days to collect herbs and then dried them at the Parkhang. Medicines benefitting cold disorders were placed onto the roofs and into direct sunshine, those treating hot disorders were dried in the shade underneath the roof. She also washed the newly arrived raw materials her brother had brought from Pelpung in order to make sure they were clean. Among the recovered medicines were the valuable “six supreme medicines” (nutmeg, cloves, saffron, green and black cardamom, and bamboo pith) from India and Nepal, which would have been impossible to procure without considerable cost (their family wealth had been confiscated and they lacked financial support from the government). These herbal and precious medicines were then processed and compounded into pills and powders. From the available materials Phurpa Dolma recalled making *Agar 35*, which contains 35 ingredients and is a complex medicine to make, as well as others such as *Agar 25*, *Agar 15*, *Agar 8*, *Tsenden 18*, *Dashel Dutsima* and *Truthop Rilkar*. While her father was still alive (he died in either 1963 or 1965) she also procured all the necessary ingredients for two kinds of medicinal baths, which he prepared for patients. One involved the boiling of 25 different herbs and another, five herbs.²⁷ The patients would sit on wooden planks placed over the cauldrons, thus benefitting from the rising steam of the medical baths, particularly well known for treating *drumbu* (*grum bu*), or rheumatism.

As the reforms wore on during the 1960s, the medical compounds became simplified. This was due to the lack of imported ingredients available, and also due to the great demand for medicines. The clinic only had a limited work force, it took time and was hard work to pick herbs and staff had to deal with the disturbances due to changing political demands.

At times of need, the clinic staff also diverged from their remit to treat patients individually. Phurpa Dolma recalled they were once treating an epidemic disease that had befallen the livestock in the area, and—during “the time of the People’s communes”²⁸—made medicinal soups for several hundred Tibetans who were starving and

²⁷ This was most likely the *bdud rtsi lnga lums*, or “five nectars bath”.

²⁸ She used the Chinese term here, *ren min gong she*.

suffering the consequences of forced agricultural collectivisation.²⁹ She had gone out together with others to collect the herbs for these purposes, and subsequently acted as a nurse to those weakened livestock and people in need.

From the point of view of contemporary doctors, some practices in medicine production during that period as recounted by Phurpa Dolma appear as highly unusual and even unprofessional. One of these was that staff used a part of the Parkhang that had previously been used as pit-toilets and re-purposed it for medical production. They freshly covered and sealed the area with earth and then used the space to grind medicines. Another unusual practice was the grinding of the medicines, which was done with the help of small stone mortars—a common method—but also by doctors using their feet to break down ingredients. Medical texts, as well as many doctors today, state that medicines should be considered—similar to Buddhist ritual implements and texts—as something to be revered and therefore not to be touched with the body's lower parts. Medicine should also not be put near places or people considered "impure", and neither should one step over, let alone onto medical ingredients. It seems to me that these practices might have been the only way to overcome the challenging circumstances under which they were operating, or there were other reasons to work this way, possibly connected to the then politically correct way to turn traditional customs on their head.

While Phurpa Dolma's work thus centred on the most physically demanding jobs of picking and preparing medicinal herbs, her colleagues—including her brother—were mostly consulting patients, helping out here and there with the compounding. Phurpa Dolma did sometimes take turns to read patients' pulses and prescribe medical treatments but compared to her colleagues, she gained much less clinical experience during her working life at the Parkhang Menkhang. Nevertheless, she could name in remarkable detail many of the treatments she prescribed, for example to women with pregnancy complications, those experiencing difficult labours, for disorders of the male and female genitals, and facial paralysis. Further research is needed to find out about why she seemed so particularly skilled in treating these diseases, but at least with regard to gynaecological conditions, it fits well into the pattern that female

²⁹ This was most likely connected to the horribly failed experiment of Mao's "Great Leap Forward". Unlike in Central Tibet, this was fully implemented in Amdo and Kham, and is one of the reasons for the much earlier and more violent resistance to Chinese reforms there. Cf. Naktsang Nulo 2014.

menpa were often assigned this aspect of medical practice, also in the new Communist regime.³⁰

Doctors of her generation tended to combine the work of a clinician and pharmacist in equal measure—the two were not yet separate professions, as they tend to be today. A solid grasp of pharmacology was essential to be considered a good doctor and vice versa. Why was Phurpa Dolma mainly collecting and processing herbs, sometimes compounding them and not also consulting patients to the same extent as her colleagues?

She explained this in the following way:

I was the only woman working in the Parkhang. I needed to take care of the Parkhang, keep everything in order and clean. The others ordered me around all day long, and I simply had to say “yes, yes, yes”. And, I was away a lot, picking medicines. Father had taught me about the medicines, so I had lots of experience with the medicines and also the pulse, urine and treatments. But there was very little time for further study; we had so much work to do.

This statement implies a social hierarchy of and between knowledge and practice between her and male colleagues, and especially her and her brother. The lopsided assignment of hard labour is still very common today in the lives of ordinary women and female doctors in eastern Tibet.³¹ Phurpa Dolma carried out menial jobs, including the cleaning and day-to-day maintenance of the building, and was ordered around by her male colleagues, against whom she could seemingly voice little opposition. Together with the hard work of herb collection, this left little time for further study and (the more sedentary) consultations with patients. As we shall see, her lesser textual medical knowledge together with more limited opportunities to see patients, through no fault of her own apart from being a woman, were all likely to have negative consequences for her subsequent prospects as a *menpa*. They perhaps also contributed to her frequently self-deprecating accounts of her own (considerable) expertise, which she described as being “only based on experience”, mentioning countless times, moreover, that she is “not knowledgeable”. Even if this latter habit is also quite a common way of speaking among many knowledgeable Tibetan men, I have never before heard the phrase repeated so many times as in her case.

³⁰ Cf. Hofer 2011.

³¹ Schrempf 2011.

Phurpa Dolma and the Derge Tibetan Medical Hospital

The last phase in Phurpa Dolma's medical career recounted above took place in an era characterised by the abandonment of Maoist policies and a general liberalisation of the economy and Tibetan arts and culture, which started in 1979. In the area of health care and medicine, the official institutionalisation of Tibetan medicine within the Chinese state bureaucracy began. Prefectures and selected counties built up Tibetan medical institutions and turned former physicians into government-employed practitioners. In Derge this shift manifested with the co-operative Parkhang Menkhang in the Print House being moved to the freshly constructed Derge Tibetan Medical Hospital to the west of the town and it becoming fully state-funded. It was organised by departments and the work ranged from clinical care to pharmaceutical production and teaching. To those who had worked at the Parkhang the new facilities seemed unbelievably abundant and the government's salaries extremely generous.

There were now clearly assigned positions and titles available. Yet despite Phurpa Dolma's long-standing experience and seniority in years she did not gain a leadership position at the new institution, unlike all the other doctors from the Parkhang of her own generation, some even younger than her. Aden and Thamkha Lhaje took the positions of director and vice-director respectively, while a new recruit named Sangye became the head of pharmaceutical production. Phurpa Dolma and her brother were initially employed as doctors, yet after a few years he moved to Dartsedo Tibetan Medicine Hospital to work as head of the outpatient department. When Aden retired in 1984, Menpa Soepa joined the hospital and became the new director. It was he, who suggested that Phurpa Dolma could retire early a few years later. The exact reasons for this proposition are unknown to me. Yet she admitted that it came as a relief to her and her joints—she had by then suffering badly from her herb collection trips in all kinds of weather and also had been working hard on often wet ground.

It is striking that Phurpa Dolma in her almost 15 years at the new hospital was not promoted to and or perhaps desired a leadership role. This can either be explained by her generally modest attitude towards her own skills and knowledge as mentioned above, or indeed attributed to the perpetuation of extant androcentrism and discrimination against women in the work place and elsewhere. That her textual knowledge and literacy was limited might have also counted against her. As we have seen, her father's attention shifted towards her younger brother, and Phurpa Dolma did not gain much

in terms of textual training, being mostly occupied with the herb-collection labour for the family's medical practice.

So far, elsewhere in Kham, we only know of Do Dasel Wangmo, who in the post-reform era became the head teacher of *Sowa Rigpa* at the STLS—a prime institution for the study of medicine in Kham. When the school moved from Dzogchen Monastery (Rdzogs chen) to Dartsedo, she was further promoted to become professor of Tibetan medicine. In many other government Tibetan medical facilities that I have visited over the years and that had newly appointed doctors at the start of the post-reform period, I have never yet met or heard of a woman in leadership positions prior to the late 1990s. This somewhat reflected the gender relations common during the pre-1950s Tibetan society and that in some cases still persist today.



Fig. 5. *Mutig 70* precious pill produced at the Derge Tibetan Medicine Hospital in 2014. The small inserted photograph to the right shows the Derge Print House.
Photo: Theresia Hofer, 2014.

Another type of exclusion of female Tibetan medical practitioners that continued in the post-reform period and largely today, is their exclusion from the production of *tsotel*.³² The production of *tsotel* and *rinchen rilbu* are prominently mentioned in the two available short histories of the Derge Tibetan Medical Hospital and they are still made there today, representing some of their most prized medicines (Figure 5). Doctors flocked from all directions to learn this technique from Troru Tsenam and to participate in the 45 day long processing

³² The nun students of Dragkar Lama are known to make *rinchen rilbu*, but I am not sure whether they make the *tsotel* used in these themselves. Personal communication with Nicola Schneider, September 2015. Based on my research in December 2014 at the Tashi Goensar Nunnery near Lhagang, Kham, the local “Peace Medical Clinic” run entirely by nuns, produces a large range of *rinchen rilbu*. Yet, they do not make their own *tsotel*, but instead procure it from the pharmacy of the Dzongsar Medical College.

of mercury and other metals and precious substances. Yet neither Phurpa Dolma nor Palden Dolma participated in these events or even mentioned them to me. From among all women doctors of the pre-1950s period known to us, only Do Dasel Wangmo and the nun Ani Pema Lhamo from Nyemo, Central Tibet, are known to have either learned and/or practiced the making of *tsotel* and/or *rinchen rilbu*.

3. Conclusions

By comparing extant written and oral materials on female doctors in twentieth century Tibet, including new insights gained into the lives of Phurpa Dolma and other women doctors, we can conclude that Tibetan medicine *per se* does not appear to have been a field in which talented women prospered. Rather that the particular social backgrounds and networks of the three well-known women doctors, Khandro Yangga, Lobsang Dolma and Do Dasel Wangmo, made all the difference to their becoming outstanding medical practitioners and teachers. They were fortunate enough to have enjoyed the following three distinct circumstances.

Firstly, they were born or grew up as the only daughter, or among daughters, in families with no sons. They were thus given a solid education and medical training, receiving encouragement from their families and teachers as the perceived “stand-ins” for lacking sons (or, at times, male students). They were therefore groomed as inheritors to the family medical lineages and the medical house. Secondly, they were allowed enough time and space to devote themselves to their studies and their medical work; none of them was impeded by time- and energy-consuming household and family chores. The laywomen, Khandro Yangga and Lobsang Dolma, had sufficient outside help with bringing up children and running the household due to their relatively prosperous backgrounds. Do Dasel Wangmo, being a nun, never had to look after children, partners or households, and was encouraged to pursue her Buddhist and medical studies and work once she had been ordained. Third and finally, all three women came from high-ranked families with vast and influential social and religious networks. They could thus draw on teachers from outside of the family and on means of support inherently linked to these circles. In other words, on this last point we could say that social class overrode gender norms and prejudice. In addition, Do Dasel Wangmo’s mother working as a physician likely provided her with an important female role model.

Taken together with their own hard work, these three women were thus able to establish themselves as independent, successful and

sought-after physicians, going on to become teachers in their own right. In their senior years, they received official recognition and written acknowledgements, earned leadership positions, and were given professional rewards. All three women have also, at some point in their careers, either edited or themselves written medical treatises.

In contrast, the stories of Phurpa Dolma and other women like her, such as Sonam Dolma of the Nyekhang House in Tsarong, demonstrate the countless obstacles many women encountered in the medical field and how difficult it was to overcome these despite their considerable efforts, dedication, expertise and relatively favourable circumstances. They tended to receive a less comprehensive education than men and often lacked extended exposure to and instruction in the medical texts. They had to manage the workloads of the home as well as in the healing profession, and, regarding the latter, often spent a lot of time collecting medicinal ingredients at the expense of other medical work and training. In addition, they suffered discouragement from family and colleagues, worked in all-male environments and lacked female role models. In numerous cases they were not allowed access to the Tibetan medical institutions set up in the post-reform period, or if they were, they do not seem to have been promoted according to their experience and in ways similar to men. And finally, the stories of their lives and work are usually absent from written biographies and other records, either written by others or from their own pens.

The experiences of Phurpa Dolma were likely more common among women in medicine during the twentieth century than those that have come to us through the few cases of written accounts of Khandro Yangga, Lobsang Dolma and Do Dasel Wangmo. The career trajectories of several Central Tibetan female medical practitioners whose lives I researched support this, some of whom have been mentioned above.³³ Yet there are further considerations that support this argument. Most of the times both sons and daughters were born into medical houses, in which case due to male-dominated social organisation, only boys tended to be groomed for the medical profession. The girls, instead, would be considered “lost” to the house as sooner or later they would be married and move out of the parental household, and so it was thought to be imprudent to invest so much in them.

To foster a fuller understanding of women in *Sowa Rigpa*, it is imperative to research women’s social affiliation and rank, as well as their economic status and medical achievements together and more

³³ Hofer, forthcoming.

closely. It is simply not enough that, with less than two handfuls of names of Tibetan medical doctors and sometimes their dates and the names of their fathers, we can deduce that the Tibetan medical domain has offered women greater opportunities to prosper than other fields. Another important task will be to systematically compare accounts by and of women in professional medicine with those dedicated to religious life, as it seems that at least some of the obstacles encountered by female religious specialists were also blocking the way for women in medicine.

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Relational Autonomy in the Life of a Contemporary Tibetan *Ḍākinī*

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Apon first meeting her, Khandro Rinpoche (b. 1954) appears to be a clear example of an autonomous female religious specialist active in Tibet today in the sense that she is unaffiliated with any major religious institution.¹ Usually accompanied by a few attendants, she travels widely in order to give teachings and perform rituals and meditation retreats in caves, mountain hermitages, and monasteries in the eastern Tibetan region. Nevertheless, observing her daily activities and listening to her life narrative underscores the importance of a dense network of relationships with other humans, deities, and sacred lands that make her position as an autonomous female religious specialist possible. This article therefore posits that her “autonomy” can best be understood as an example of what some feminist philosophers call “relational autonomy”, or “the conviction that persons are socially embedded and that agents’ identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity”.² This article pays particular attention to how this constellation of relationships with others, namely Khandro’s family, main guru, fellow religious devotees, *ḍākinīs*, and disciples, as well as generative associations with particular sacred lands, catalysed her apotheosis from laywoman to *ḍākinī*.

Literally meaning “sky-going woman”, *khandromas* (*mkha’ ’gro ma*) are notoriously elusive and multivalent female figures with a long

¹ I would like to thank Khandro Rinpoche for her time and for allowing me to publish her story. Thanks also to Chogtul Rangrig Dorje for sharing his perspectives. Britt Marie-Alm helped me (re-)discover Khandro Rinpoche in Serta after our initial busride acquaintance, and Antonio Terrone made research at Vairotsana Cave much more feasible. Sincere thanks to Mona Schrempf, Nicola Schneider, and Toni Huber for inviting me to participate in the symposium “Women as Visionaries, Healers and Poisoners—Autonomous Female Religious Specialists in Tibet, the Himalayas and Inner Asia”, and for organising the publication of this collection of essays.

² MacKenzie & Stoljar 2000: 4. See also Westlund 2009.

history in South Asian religions who permeate the lines between human and divine, worldly and wise. In Tibet, they can be ethereal goddesses adorning frescos on temple walls, or they can materialise at key moments in Buddhist hagiographies to jar the protagonist into pristine awareness. They can also be human women who are consorts of prominent male gurus and/or gurus in their own right.³

The Khandro Rinpoche that is the subject of this article fits into both of these latter categories. She is not to be confused with the famous daughter of Mindroling Trichen (sMin grol gling khri chen) of the same name who has Buddhist Centres around the globe. She was born in 1954 to ordinary Tibetan householder parents, and raised in the pasturelands of Darlag (Dar lag) County, Golog (mGo log) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP), Qinghai Province, People's Republic of China (PRC). Even though her given childhood name was "Khandrokyi" (mKha' 'gro skyid), or "Happy Dākinī", which is a common girl's name in eastern Tibet, her rise to embodying the title "Khandro Rinpoche", meaning "Precious Teacher Dākinī", is unusual. She was not brought up in an openly religious environment, was married at a young age to a local government official, and had five children before she redirected her energies towards religious pursuits. Based on her narrated life story as she told it to me and also as it is written in her recently published biography, this article will explore the effects of the relationships integral to Khandro Rinpoche's lifestory. These concern not only her religious career, but also the ways in which we understand the roles of women in Tibetan Buddhism, the multivalent significance of *dākinīs*, and the interplay between state control and religious revitalisation in contemporary Tibet.

1. *Khandro Rinpoche and the Vairotsana Cave*

I first met Khandro Rinpoche by chance in the summer of 2004 when I was on a public bus en route westward toward Golog from the city of Barkham ('Bar khams) in the far eastern Tibetan region of Gyalrong (rGyal rong), which is part of the Ngawa (rNga ba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province, PRC. The road west onto the Tibetan Plateau follows the deep gorge carved by the Somang River (So mang chu), which gradually connects the Gyalrong valleys with the expansive high-altitude pasturelands of Serta (gSer rta), Kandze (dKar mdzes) TAP, Sichuan. Not long after embarking on the journey, about 20 kilometres outside of Tugje Chenpo (Thugs rje chen

³ For a selection of scholarship on Buddhist *dākinīs*, see Willis 1987; Herrmann-Pfandt 1992 and 1992/1993; Klein 1995; Gyatso 1998; Simmer-Brown 2001.

po) Township, the bus careened around a Buddhist reliquary stupa and halted on the side of road by the riverbank. The Tibetan bus driver beckoned me to join the file of passengers walking up the steep hillside to a cave complex that I later learned was called Vairotsana Cave. Inside the cave, I briefly met a distinctive-looking middle-aged Tibetan woman dressed in a maroon cloak with long black hair. She offered blessings and short prayers to the bus passengers and other devotees lined up at her door. After this short but fascinating interlude, we all packed back onto the bus and headed for Serta.

Serendipitously, the following year I rediscovered Khandro Rinpoche in a shop in downtown Serta. I noticed her because of her distinctive composure and also because of the unusually beautiful and large coral and turquoise earrings and necklace she wore. She also remembered me from the bus ride encounter the previous year.



Fig. 1. Khandro Rinpoche in Serta, Kandze TAP. Photo: Sarah Jacoby, 2005.

Over the course of several years and on multiple occasions since that time in both Serta and Gyalrong, she spent many hours answering my long lists of questions about her life and her views on what being a *ḍākinī* means. She allowed me to record our conversations and later I asked Tibetans from Golog to transcribe them in Tibetan, which helped refine my understanding of her strong Golog-dialect Tibetan accent. She offered her own suggestions about what is most important to convey about her life as a *ḍākinī* and agreed to let me share her words in print.

My other primary source for the stories of Khandro Rinpoche's life is the 41-page Tibetan-language biography of her authored by Pema

Oesel Taye (Pad ma 'od gsal mtha' yas) in 2006 and published as a booklet for local distribution.⁴ The title of this work, "A Brief Introduction to the Vairotsana Cave in Gyelmo Tsawarong, Eastern Tibet",⁵ casts it more as a pilgrim's guidebook (*gnas yig*) about the sacred cave than as a person's biography. As such, Pema Oesel's choice to frame Khandro Rinpoche's importance as a *dākinī* through embedding her in a particular narrative about Tibetan history associated with the Vairotsana Cave highlights the agentic quality of sacred space, or the ways in which particular places both act upon their inhabitants and are shaped, modified, and revitalised by their inhabitants' practices.⁶

The particular history that Khandro Rinpoche's presence at the Vairotsana Cave invokes is linked to Tibet's golden age of imperial power and conversion to Buddhism during the seventh to ninth centuries. The namesake of the Vairotsana Cave was a renowned eighth-century Tibetan translator who traveled to India to import state-of-the-art Buddhist scriptures into Tibet. According to Pema Oesel's summary of Vairotsana's life, with which he begins Khandro Rinpoche's biography, Vairotsana was summoned by the Tibetan Emperor Tri Songdetsen (Khri srong de'u btsan, eighth century) to Tibet's first monastery, Samye (bSam yas), to receive religious teachings from its founding monastic abbot Santarākṣita and the Indian Tantric master Padmasambhava. Nevertheless, King Tri Songdetsen's Tibetan queen and a faction of his ministers distrusted Vairotsana, heeding slander spread by Indian scholars jealous of his learning. Consequently, he departed for Gyalrong, visiting the area's 38 great holy places, one of which was the Vairotsana Cave that would later be inhabited by Khandro Rinpoche.

A second famous imperial Tibetan personage also distinguishes the history of Vairotsana Cave, namely Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje (Lha lung dpal kyi rdo rje). He was a ninth-century monk who allegedly murdered the Tibetan Emperor Lang Darma (Glang dar ma), whom Tibetan histories remember as one who persecuted Buddhism. Intending to reinstate royal sponsorship of Buddhism by ousting the heretic emperor, Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje fled the murder scene and, according to local lore, sought refuge at the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalrong, where a stupa memorialises him.

These strong ties to Tibet's most powerful dynastic period are vitalised by Khandro Rinpoche's residence at the Vairotsana Cave. They sharply contrast with the austerities of her upbringing during the

⁴ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006.

⁵ *Mdo khams rgyal mo tsha ba rong gi bai ro'i sgrub phug ngo sprod mdor bsdu*; Gyelmo Tsawarong is a longer version of the toponym Gyalrong.

⁶ Vásquez 2011: 261.

1950s-1970s, during which time Tibet experienced extreme hardships along with other parts of the PRC, in particular as a result of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Around the time of her birth in 1954, the PRC formally established itself on the Golog grasslands, transforming her homeland from what had been a polity largely independent of both the Dalai Lama's Central Tibetan government and the Republic of China into the "Golog Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture" (Ch. Guoluo Zangzu Zizhizhou) comprising the southeastern corner of Qinghai Province.⁷ This change of leadership had disastrous and far-ranging effects for Golog pastoralists, including Khandro's family. By the late 1950s, over 50 percent of Golog's livestock had died, causing unprecedented and severe famine in Golog as a result of the mismanagement and unviable agricultural methods advocated by the Great Leap Forward campaign to modernise and industrialise the countryside.⁸ By the late 1960s when Khandro Rinpoche was in her early teens, the Cultural Revolution was in full swing, entailing the collectivisation of Golog's pastoralists into communes and the destruction of all of the region's fifty-plus monasteries. Just as Khandro Rinpoche became physically and spiritually sick of her secular life, Deng Xiaoping initiated a new era of "reforms and opening" (Ch. *gaige kaifang*) that led to the softening of PRC policy against the practice of religion and the rehabilitation of Tibetan lamas who had formerly been imprisoned as enemies of the state, including the lama who would become her root guru, Khenpo Muensel (mKhan po Mun sel, 1916-1993). During the 1980s, as liberalisation policies supported the rebuilding of Tibet's destroyed network of monastic institutions, Khandro Rinpoche dedicated herself to the revitalisation effort wholeheartedly, beginning with helping her guru Khenpo Muensel rebuild his monastery in her home area in Golog. After that she took on the rebuilding of Sera Monastery in the Serta region of Kandze, and most recently the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalrong. Her story of becoming recognised by her community as a *ḍākinī* is thus inextricably linked to the history of Buddhism in Tibet, from the embers of its founding glory still perceptible in places like the Vairotsana Cave to the cycle of religious revival and repression that has characterised Tibet's recent history since the liberalisation policies of the 1980s. What follows are excerpts from Khandro's account of several different stages of this history, drawn from both her written biography and from my conversations with her, beginning with her youth and continuing with her recent projects at the Vairotsana Cave.

⁷ Don grub dbang rgyal & Nor sde 1992: 294. For a synoptic history of Golog, see Jacoby 2010.

⁸ Horlemann 2002: 248.

2. *Childhood, family life, and religious practice during Tibet's Cultural Revolution*

Halfway through Khandro Rinpoche's written biography, following Pema Oesel's account of Vairotsana and his activities at the cave, and after opening verses containing prophecies about Khandro Rinpoche's life and former incarnations, Pema Oesel begins his description of her early years as follows:

The supreme Khandro Rinpoche was born in the wood horse year of the sixteenth cycle (1954) in Chagmo Golog, eastern Tibet. Before long a foreign army came to the fore and instituted democratic reforms. Much agitation proliferated such as the Cultural Revolution and so forth, leading to religious figures' imprisonment. On account of the various disturbances of the times such as the need for manual labor, those who practised the holy dharma became as rare as stars in the daytime. Nevertheless, from the time she was small, she felt renunciation in the form of disgust for cyclic existence and had the altruistic intention to strive to benefit others. She was renown for possessing the complete characteristics of a female bodhisattva such as perceiving all that appears and exists as pure.⁹

In conversations with me, Khandro Rinpoche elaborated that she was born into a family of livestock herders. Her father was born in the late 1920s. She describes him as one who "did not exert himself very much in religious affairs", but who believed in Buddhism and always loved to recite Tibet's most popular mantra *Om mani peme hum* dedicated to Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.¹⁰ Her mother "spent her entire lifetime engaged only in samsaric affairs", according to Khandro, meaning she worked in the household milking livestock, raising children, and cooking, etc. Nevertheless, Khandro qualifies that "My mother was religious; she was a good, kind person." Both her parents attended some degree of Tibetan school in their youth and could write in Tibetan.

Khandro Rinpoche's grandmother and uncle nurtured her religious aspirations, and her parents extolled the importance of having

⁹ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 24; all citations of this work are my translations of the Tibetan original.

¹⁰ All remaining quotations that are not otherwise footnoted are my English translations of Khandro Rinpoche's comments to me in several interviews taking place over the course of multiple years in both Gyalrong and Serta, eastern Tibet.

faith in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha), but otherwise she had few opportunities to practise Buddhism. Even so,

I had one hundred percent faith in the dharma in my mind, but when I was young, due to Chinese oppression, we were not allowed to hold a rosary in our hands. We were also not allowed to recite *maṇi*. Lamas and *tulkus* who had not committed any crime were put in prison. Then even if you thought you wanted to be a nun, there were no lamas or *tulkus* in the region.

Khandro Rinpoche attended school for about two years in Darlag County, where she studied both Tibetan and Chinese languages. She explained to me several times that

When I went to Chinese school, I held the workbook and pen in my hand and with my voice I had to recite the material. If I didn't, the Chinese teacher would definitely scold me. But while I was reciting with my mouth, in my mind I was reciting the refuge prayer.

Though her exposure to Buddhist culture and practice was extremely limited during her childhood, she remembers intensely yearning to practise religion, which she expresses primarily as “the belief that cause and effect are undecieving”, and “giving to the poor and having compassion for others”. She insists, “Even at the risk of death, I did not abandon dharma. I yearned for dharma as a thirsty person desires water.” Khandro notes that a few others close to her during her childhood privately recognised her secret devotion to religion and sensed her future role as a *khandroma*. They included Gyalrong Lama Samdrub (rGyal rong bla ma bSam grub), who “recognised me as a *khandroma* when I was 13 years old. He said that I was an ‘awareness woman’ (*rig ma*), and that I should not fall into *samsāra* (i.e., become a married laywoman).”

Khandro's urge to devote herself to religious practice seems to directly contrast with the prevailing social and religious destruction she describes happening all around her during the Cultural Revolution. But if Khandro Rinpoche's early childhood reflections seem to pit Buddhist devotion against Chinese communist reform, the rest of her life story belies such an opposition. For one thing, she describes all of her six siblings as either “Chinese officials” (*rgya mi las byed pa*) or people married to them. The Tibetan word she used for this means roughly “white collar employee”, or more literally “government office

worker".¹¹ Khandro Rinpoche presents herself as the exception amidst her siblings, who are all placed highly in either local governmental and/or religious ranks:

Aside from me, all my siblings work. I did not want to do that. I did not listen to my parents; I left. I wandered around. Not listening to what my father said, not listening to what my mother said, I left. They said they would give me money. I said I did not want it and left. The others wanted the money!

Khandro described herself several times as "a wanderer", one who left home and refused the status that her family offered her. Nevertheless, aspects of her family's connections, particularly their multiple associations with local political officials and religious leaders, prefigured her own future successful navigations between these parties.

3. Marriage and family life

Khandro Rinpoche's biography by Pema Oesel presents her marriage as imposed upon her and as a cause of misery:

After she gradually grew up, she abundantly possessed all the good qualities of being a capable woman in terms of worldly affairs, so several households requested her as a wife. She replied, "Still I will look after my parents or my old grandmother. Later I will be able to take care of myself. I won't go as a bride." Even though she cried a lot, her parents did not give their permission [to stay home]. They dispatched her to be a bride for a good family that she had never met before who possessed wealth and power in the worldly sense. Though she had abundant worldly pleasures and wealth such as cotton, woolen clothing, and jewelry made of gold, silver, turquoise, and coral, she felt perpetually exhausted by the suffering of cyclic existence and her mind became shrouded in the darkness of misery. At that time during the Cultural Revolution, since it was forbidden to hold a rosary, when it was time to thrash the barley, she counted the grains

¹¹ Specifically, The *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (Krang dbyi sun 1993, vol. 2: 2775) defines it as "1) A [Chinese] government official working within government offices, the armed forces, or the People's Congress, not including common soldiers and those doing minor work, 2) A leader in a position of responsibility or a supervisor, or 3) a worker." She seems to mean the word in either of the first two senses given that she further explained it using the Chinese words *shuji* meaning "chairmen" or "secretary" and *xianzhang*, "county chairman".

and accumulated *maṇi* [mantra recitations]. When it was time to milk [the livestock], she counted *maṇi* with sheep dung. Ultimately after doing it this way, she accumulated about 300 million *maṇi*.¹²

Khandro Rinpoche may have successfully evaded the obligations several of her sisters embraced by becoming wage earners or wives of Chinese officials, but she was not able to avoid her parents' plans for her to marry at the age of 19. She narrates,

I was young when I got married. My husband and I did not know each other; we had never met. Our parents arranged the marriage. For about a month I was depressed and got sick. I did not know him and there was a lot of work to do and I did not know anyone and the place was far away [from my parents' home]—because of these things I was extremely depressed.

The words Khandro Rinpoche uses for becoming a lay householder are *korwa zungwa* (*'khor ba bzung ba*), literally meaning “taking hold of cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*)”, or in other words wasting one's life enmeshed in menial tasks that accumulate further negative karma instead of dedicating oneself to religious pursuits that lead to liberation. The primary mark of “entering *saṃsāra*” or “becoming a householder” is marriage because of the ensuing family responsibilities and economic imperatives entailed in fulfilling them. For a Tibetan laywoman such as Khandro Rinpoche, the relentless labor that followed marriage came in many forms, one of which was rearing five children. Khandro and her husband were pastoralists (*'brog pa*)—they kept a large herd of animals including yak/cow crossbreeds, sheep, and horses—necessitating Khandro to work late into the night milking and tending them. In addition, her husband held a position as a Chinese official in Darlag, which kept him busy working outside of the home and kept Khandro busy cooking and entertaining the Chinese officials he frequently brought home as guests. For a time her mother-in-law also lived with them, needing care at the same time as her five children did. Perhaps her recollection of the long days of endless housework coloured her response to a question I asked her about whether or not it is harder to practise dharma as a female than a male. She replied:

[Lay]women do not have the power to practise the dharma. They are controlled by others. They only work. Even if they want to do a dharma practice, they are powerless to go. I also do

¹² Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 24-25.

not have the full eighteen freedoms and advantages like an ordained monastic does...¹³ In the past the holy men who came before said this: If in the past you did not practise dharma, you will not be reborn in a central land. If you are, you will not have the power to practise the dharma. To explain the reason for this, cause and effect have been mixed up. For me, cause and effect have been mixed up a lot. Because of this, I took birth as a laywoman like this. Again I became a householder (*'khor ba bzung*). Then I cast it away. Then I again became a householder. The reason I did not practise the dharma is that in a past life I accumulated some bad [karma]. The fruition of that is this [female non-monastic] body.

Khandro Rinpoche's explanation for her rebirth as a laywoman as the effect of the ripening of negative karma from misdeeds in previous lifetimes is a common perspective in many Tibetan societies, and one with ample precedent in the eastern Tibetan highlands.¹⁴

However, if this karmic explanation for gender discrimination has a deterministic flavour, it also has a silver lining in Khandro Rinpoche's case. Judging from the frequency and detail with which she mentioned it, a highlight of her life is the recognition of her son Thubten Shedrub (Thub bstan bshad sgrub, b. 1977/78) as a *tulku* while he was still in utero. The first piece of information Khandro Rinpoche offered about her reincarnate son is that he is a disciple of Khenpo Muensel, who "introduced [him] to the view" (*lta ba ngo sprod*). According to Khandro Rinpoche, Thubten Shedrub is the incarnation of two great lamas of the past: Apang Terchen Pawo Choying Dorje (A pang gter chen dpa' bo Chos byings rdo rje, 1895-1945) and Wangchen Dode (dBang chen mdo sde, 1873-?). Apang Terchen

¹³ The eight freedoms and ten advantages include eight conditions that afford one with freedom to practise the dharma including not being born: 1) in the hells, 2) in the ghost (*preta*) realm, 3) as an animal, 4) as a long-lived god, 5) as a barbarian, 6) not having wrong views, 7) not being born where there is no Buddha, and 8) not being born deaf and mute. The ten advantages include five individual advantages: 1) being a human, 2) in a central place, 3) with all one's faculties, 4) without a conflicting lifestyle, and 5) with faith in the dharma and five circumstantial advantages relating to living in a place and time in which: 1) a Buddha has appeared, 2) he has preached the dharma, 3) his teachings still exist, 4) his teachings can be followed, and 5) there are those who are kind-hearted toward others, in particular a spiritual master who has accepted one as a disciple out of his/her extraordinary compassion. For an explanation of these freedoms and advantages, see Patrul Rinpoche 1994: 19-37.

¹⁴ See, for example, the way that Sera Khandro Dewe Dorje (Se ra mkha' 'gro bde ba'i rdo rje, 1892-1940) represented her female body, analysed in Jacoby 2009/2010. Reference to Sera Khandro is particularly salient because Khandro Rinpoche is widely believed in eastern Tibet to be one of her reincarnations.

was a prominent visionary, or “treasure revealer” (*gter ston*) whose main seat was Tsinda (Rtsis mda’) Monastery in Pema County, Golog.¹⁵ Wangchen Dode was a political leader of one of the three main parts of Golog named Wangchen Bum (dBang chen ’bum) and also a founding figure of Nyenmo Monastery on the outskirts of Dzugtrun Township (’Dzugs skrun zhang) on the banks of the Darchu River (Dar chu) in Darlag County, Qinghai.¹⁶

A few years before Thubten Shedrup was born, Khandro Rinpoche gave birth to her first child, a daughter. The daughter married a Tibetan man that Khandro described as a “high Chinese official”. Her third child, a son, is a bus driver.¹⁷ She elaborated more about her fourth child, another daughter, praising her scholastic and religious acumen: “She is a really good girl—she does not eat meat and she has completed her five accumulations.¹⁸ She is religious. She has received many teachings from lamas and has already received Great Perfection (rDzogs chen) teachings.” Khandro describes her as neither a householder (i.e., she is unmarried) nor a nun, but as someone who works in an office (*las byed pa*). Her youngest child is her third daughter, whose husband is also an office worker. While she stresses the virtue of only those children of hers who are directly connected to religious practice, in particular her reincarnate son, she describes her other children as either “office workers” or married to them, mirroring the various positions of her six siblings.

4. Crisis and religious transformation: meeting Khenpo Muensel

Khandro Rinpoche’s transformation from laywoman to *ḍākinī* began in earnest when she became ill in the midst of her busy householder life. According to her biography,

When she was 25 years old, on account of an illness, she became mute. In this degenerate time the great Paṇḍita Vimalamitra returned in the apparitional [form] of a virtuous teacher named Kangsar Khenpo Muensel, who held the treasury of instructions on clear light and who was the crown jewel of the non-sectarian

¹⁵ For a biography of him, see A bu dkar lo 2000: 203-214.

¹⁶ The full name of Nyenmo Monastery is Dar snyan mo ri rnam rgyal dge ldan dgon. For its history, see ’Phrin las 2008: 203-219.

¹⁷ Could he have been the bus driver who initially brought me to the Vairotsana Cave en route to Serta?

¹⁸ The five accumulations refer to the preliminary practices she has completed, including reciting 100,000 refuge prayers, *bodhicitta* prayers, Vajrasattva prayers, *maṅḍala* offerings, and Guru Yoga.

teachings. When he was released on parole from prison in Xining and came back to his homeland for a visit, she was brought before him to request a blessing. When she met the precious lama, she felt joy and sorrow mixed together and could only cry uncontrollably. After just this [meeting], her speech returned and she could move. Khandro offered all her belongings to the lama along with her respect. It seemed as if she could not bear to be separated from him. The lama also treated her dearly with great love and spoke many prayers and prophesied that they would meet again quickly. From that time onward, Khandroma said that her perception transformed into joy and clear rays of awareness. After that, the communist party's minority policy concluded and at the same time as the sun of the spreading of the [Buddhist] teachings newly arose in the sky of the merit of the land of snows, the precious lama was liberated from the fear of legal persecution and his golden face arrived home. Khandro Rinpoche used all sorts of strategies to obtain permission [for Khenpo Muensel] to re-open Tashi Choekhor Ling Monastery.¹⁹

Khenpo Muensel was a monastic hierarch of great learning from the same region as Khandro Rinpoche, Wangchen To (dBang chen stod) in Darlag, Golog. He was educated at Kathog Monastery in eastern Tibet and became particularly renowned for his mastery of the Nyingma contemplative teaching known as the Great Perfection.²⁰ In the late 1970s when Khandro Rinpoche first met him, he was on parole for a brief period in the midst of a 20-year prison sentence in the Xining region. Out of everything Khandro Rinpoche told me about her life, she appeared most enthusiastic that I record and retell the story of how she helped Khenpo Muensel rebuild his monastery called Poenkhör Thubten Shedrub Tashi Choekhor Ling (dPon skor thub bstan bshad sgrub bkra shis chos 'khor gling).²¹ She recounts that after the traumatic years of the Cultural Revolution, Khenpo Muensel had only a few devoted disciples left. When he was released from prison and returned to his home area, he had no monastery and no monastics to teach as all had been destroyed during his long incarceration. Khandro Rinpoche's account of Khenpo Muensel's rebuilding effort highlights how she was able to help him transform from a political prisoner to a monastic abbot:

¹⁹ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 26-27.

²⁰ For a synoptic biography of him, see Nyoshul Khenpo 2005: 524-526.

²¹ For an account of the history of Poenkhör Monastery, see 'Phrin las 2008: 248-250; 254-255.

This is important history: since the lama had no monastery or summer retreat place, he was not pleased to stay in the region and prepared to go to another area. I said don't go. Let's find an opportunity here. We will go and ask the Chinese; they will listen to us. My husband was one of the highest officials in the [local] Chinese government... I went back to him and Chinese officials and begged them. I appealed to my husband on account of our relationship and I also gave other Chinese officials presents of my jewelry and they accepted my request to give the lama the land for his monastery.

Even though initially there were only a few monks and nomadic householders in that area, sure enough, Poenkhor Monastery expanded rapidly after two trucks full of monks arrived from Nangchen requesting ordination vows from Khenpo Muensel.²²

Because of Khandro Rinpoche's instrumental role in helping Khenpo Muensel re-establish Poenkhor Monastery, the two developed a close teacher-student relationship. She reflects, "Because of that [the help I gave him], the lama treated me with great love (*thugs brtse chen po*). Then he was happy because we spread the teachings of full ordination." Even while she remained enmeshed in householder life, Khandro records that "The lama introduced me to the view of the Great Perfection and while I exerted myself in samsaric work, I practised the view." She concluded her oral account of these early years of Buddhist revival in the post market-reform era of Tibet (the early 1980s) with the statement that, "After that, [Khenpo Muensel] built a new assembly hall and meditation centre and so forth and the lama's monastery became quite large. I was able to serve the lama in these ways."

5. Tension between religious and householder life

As Khandro Rinpoche's focus turned more and more toward religion, her manifold responsibilities as a wife and a mother of five children increasingly became obstacles to devoting herself completely to prac-

²² Traga Rinpoche (2002) recounts being one among the large group of the monks along with Garchen Rinpoche, both Kagyu lamas from Nangchen who went to see Khenpo Muensel to request monastic ordination vows in the early 1980s. He says that their group of 54 monks included monks from a Drugpa Kagyu Monastery headed by Khenchen Ade and those from Nangchen Monastery. They traveled for four days to seek ordination from Khenpo Muensel because Khenchen Ade, who had been in prison with Khenpo Muensel for several years, felt that he was a pure monk and had always kept his vows without any breakage.

tising the dharma Khenpo Muensel had taught her. The competing time demands of intensive religious practice and maintaining her household soon led to tensions in their marriage. When Khandro told me about how she thought only of practising the dharma after becoming Khenpo Muensel's disciple, I asked her about her husband's reaction to her newfound religious commitment. Khandro hesitated in responding to this, telling me initially "He gave me a little bit of permission [to practise dharma intensively] but not much. But it's okay. I shouldn't say this." Again she hedged when I asked if her husband was happy that she was meditating. She replied: "He was okay about it, but not very happy. It's not okay to say this [that you aren't happy someone is meditating]; it's embarrassing. But in his mind he was a bit displeased." She elaborated,

It wasn't [my husband's] fault—we had many children and still we had an elderly mother to care for. Not only that, I had to milk the livestock. Really I didn't have much time. For five days in a week, or for one month out of every three months, he would give me permission [to do religious retreats]. It was okay. He was a Chinese official... The work wouldn't be finished—I had to look after the children, milk the livestock, and we had many guests—many Chinese came.

Perhaps one reason for her hesitation to critique her husband for his mixed reaction to her initial devotion to Khenpo Muensel is that the two seem to maintain a civil relationship today, though they live separately. She describes him as "a very kind man. Now he has also become a very religious man." She indicated, however, that this camaraderie was not always the case. In particular, she mentions that he disliked her efforts to care for the local stray dogs in their neighborhood:

At night when I milked the livestock, I used to give the dogs milk when no one was looking. [My husband] quarreled with me for that. I gave the dogs a lot of meat. I had 75 dogs! The officials scolded me, saying I wasn't a good woman. I felt badly [for the dogs, thinking] "Pity—they don't have any food!" They [the Chinese officials] shot them all with a gun and they all died.

Reflecting on the larger tension between devoting oneself to religious practice or caring for one's family, she said:

It is difficult to have a family and practise dharma. Even if you think you want to go [on retreat], your husband won't send you.

If you have many children, you won't be able to go. If you go, [your husband] won't give you food and so forth and then you fight. A bodhisattva wouldn't need to be given food and even if she were verbally abused, she'd still be happy and wouldn't be angry. As for me, I am hard-headed and my husband and I opposed each other. Because of that, accomplishing the dharma was difficult. Being able to accomplish the dharma is as rare as stars in the daytime. It's not good to have a family.

Reasons having a family was "not good" according to Khandro Rinpoche not only pertained to finding time to practise religion. Another significant problem for Khandro with having many children was the suffering she experienced during the long separations from them that she endured for the sake of revitalising religion, which would characterise the next phase of her life.

6. The Sera Monastery years

Khandro Rinpoche spent more than a decade (ca. 1990-2003) away from her family helping to rebuild Sera Tegchen Choekhor Ling (Se ra theg chen chos 'khor gling) Monastery in the Nyi (sNyi) Valley of Serta. Sera Monastery is not connected to the large Central Tibetan Gelug monastery also known as Sera, but is rather a small monastery founded in 1736 as a branch of Pelyul, the large Nyingma Monastery in Kham.²³ Khandro's written biography describes her reasons for settling at Sera:

On account of the power of aspiration prayers made in former lifetimes, she went to the Sera Monastery hermitage for the general purpose of benefitting the teachings and beings at Sera Monastery Tegchen Choekhor Ling in the Serta region of eastern Tibet and for the specific purpose of dispelling the obstacles to the longevity of Chogtul Jigme Gawe Dorje (mChog sprul 'jigs med dga' ba'i rdo rje).²⁴

In conversation with her, Khandro Rinpoche expanded on how she came to spend so many years at Sera and what it meant to dispel obstacles to the life of Chogtul Jigme Gawe Dorje, or Tulku Jigga for short. She explained that her long sojourn in Serta began when she was in her late 30s and went to request teachings from Khenpo Jigme

²³ For a history of Sera Monastery, see 'Jigs med bsam grub 1995: 356.

²⁴ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 30.

Phuntsog (mKhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, 1933-2004) at Larung Gar (bLa rung sgar), a massive religious encampment and scholastic centre established in 1980 by the charismatic Nyingma visionary Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog and populated at times by over 10,000 monastics.²⁵ The teaching that drew Khandro Rinpoche to Larung Gar was on Longchenpa's *Four-Volume Heart Essence* (*sNying thig ya bzhi*), a famous fourteenth-century compilation of Great Perfection teachings. At Larung Gar, Khandro was joined by a throng of lamas and monks who came to receive the important teachings. Already some among them recognised her extraordinary qualities:

When I was at Larung Gar, a Khenpo who was about 60 years old came to me. At that time, I said, "What is the meaning of your coming here? I am an ordinary woman (*bud med*), so please go." He said, "You are an incarnation of Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal (mKha' 'gro Ye shes mtsho rgyal). Until you give me a reading transmission of 'transference of consciousness' (*'pho lung*), I won't go back."²⁶

Initially Khandro thought she would stay in Serta only briefly for the teachings, but her plans transformed, leading her not to see her children for more than a decade so she could help rebuild the monastery and prolong the life of one of Sera Monastery's three main incarnate lamas, Tulku Jigga:

Then Jigga from Sera arrived. He was the sixth in an incarnation line; the others had all died by the age 33. Many lamas prophesied that I was the one who could sustain his longevity (*sku tshе brten ni red*). I said, "I won't stay, thank you. In my homeland, I have my lama [Khenpo Muensel] and also my children and family. I feel badly for them. I won't stay." But everyone cried and said Sera Yangtrul had gone to the Buddhafield [i.e., passed away]. Sogen Tulku had gone to India. The Monastery was empty and falling apart. So I thought that I would stay with him for a little while. That was my reason for coming. I thought I'd request dharma for about a month and go back home. But then I stayed.²⁷

²⁵ See Germano 1998; Terrone 2013.

²⁶ "Transference of consciousness" (*'pho ba*) refers to a meditative practice of ejecting the consciousness of a dying person (or of oneself at the moment of death) out of the body into a Pure Land. For a description of this, see Patrul Rinpoche 1994: 351-356.

²⁷ The three incarnate lamas of Sera Monastery that Khandro mentions were Sera Yangtul Tsultrim Gyatso (Se ra yang sprul Tshul khirms rgya mtsho, 1925-1988),

Sera was once a sizable and prosperous monastery, well connected to and patronised by the Washul (dBal shul/Wa shul) family who controlled Serta prior to its incorporation into the PRC, but it was completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. In 1982 the local Kandze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture People's Government permitted Sera Monastery to be rebuilt with the support of the broader Serta community under the leadership of Sera Yangtrul. By the time Khandro Rinpoche arrived there with Tulku Jigga in about 1990,

The Monastery was falling apart and there were no lamas. I maintained it... You know how big that monastery is, right? Well aside from two or three people, it was empty. There was no meditation centre, no renunciants, no *tulkus*, and no *khenpos*... So I decided to stay for a while. Tulku [Jigga] didn't die. The monastery improved. Now there is a meditation centre, monastic college, more than 100 monks and *khenpos* etc. It is really good. I didn't do this for myself; it was for the benefit of others.

Khandro describes multiple ways in which she contributed to Sera Monastery's restoration. One of these was "sustaining the lama's longevity", which refers to her position as Tulku Jigga's consort. The association between longevity and having a consort relates to the curative potential of "channel and wind" (*rtsa rlung*) practices that sometimes involve visualised or actual heterosexual union. These practices aim at removing obstacles to the smooth circulation of vital essence (*thig le*) within the psycho-physical domain of the subtle body, thereby catalysing spiritual realisation, curing illness, and increasing lifespan.²⁸

Another way Khandro Rinpoche contributed to the restoration of Sera Monastery was helping to rebuild religious monuments and sponsoring the creation of new religious statues to replace those lost during the Cultural Revolution. During her Sera Monastery years she also began performing ritual functions for the surrounding lay community, in particular funerals in which she performed the "transference of consciousness" of the dead:

who had recently died when Khandro arrived at Sera (his incarnation is a young man currently living in Serta), Sogen Tulku Pema Lodoe (bSod rgan sprul sku Pad ma blo gros, b. 1964), who had gone to India and now resides in the United States, and Tulku Jigga, who was the only *tulku* remaining at Sera monastery when she went there.

²⁸ For further analysis of associations between Tibetan Buddhist consort practices, curing sickness, and longevity, see Jacoby 2014: 212-222.

When I was in Golog, lamas asked me to return [to Serta] and sustain their longevity (*sku tshé brten*) so I came. I abandoned my children and husband. I don't know if I sustained Tulku Jigga's longevity or not. After I arrived at Sera Monastery, for 12 years I built statues and performed funerals and built stupas.

In particular, Khandro elaborates that at Sera Monastery she restored the reliquaries built by a former incarnation of Sogen Tulku named Sotul Natsog Rangdrol (bSod sprul sna tshogs rang grol, 1865-1935) and Sera Khandro Dewe Dorje (Se ra mkha' 'gro bde ba'i rdo rje, 1892-1940).²⁹ She erected many types of stupas including a reliquary for Khenpo Muensel, who died in Darlag in 1993 during the time she was with Tulku Jigga. She also commissioned the carving of 100,000 stones etched with prayers (*rdo 'bum*).

Nevertheless, Khandro Rinpoche's sojourn at Sera was not problem-free, even if it greatly benefitted the monastery. One of the painful aspects of Khandro Rinpoche's years at Sera was her separation from her children. Mention of this appears in her written biography as a direct quotation from her: "During the time that we, mother and child, were separated, out of anguish, when we heard each other's voices on the phone line, mother and child both fainted."³⁰

Another painful aspect of her time at Sera appears cryptically in her written biography, in only one sentence:

On account of previous karma and various present circumstances, it became difficult to stay independently at the monastery. Even so, during the time that Khandro Rinpoche remained there, the two factions were cordial and well behaved.³¹

In conversation with me, Khandro clarified that the reason for quarreling toward the end of her tenure at Sera was Tulku Jigga's choice to bring another woman, younger than her, to the monastery as his new consort. Khandro explains,

After that, if he had two wives (*yum*), I wouldn't stay in the house. Then, I came back home and sold all my things and built statues. Maybe I was bad and this other *yum* is good. I don't know. The main thing is that if his *yum* can benefit the monks

²⁹ For more on these figures, see Jacoby 2014, and for a history of Sotul Natsog Rangdrol's abbotship at Sera, see 'Jigs med bsam grub 1995: 355-356.

³⁰ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 32.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 31.

and monastery, then “thanks for one hundred years”.³² That’s what I think.

She insists that being replaced by another *khandroma* did not make her angry:

The Tulku [Jigga] and I are disciples of the same lama. We have requested much dharma together. I thought that to be angry with him would be unacceptable and I prayed to my lama. I didn’t get angry. I didn’t need wealth. I said, “You two live together,” and I left. That is the truth. When I left, many people cried and begged me not to go. But I left with my father. Then I lived at home in Darlag County. [My father] came to get me and I left. By the kindness of my lama, I had enough food and without much to do, I was extremely happy.

Nevertheless, if not anger, she did seem to question what type of benefit this new *khandroma* could bring Sera Monastery, for she mentioned that the monastic population declined significantly after she left. Though Khandro left under strained conditions, she maintains close ties to many affiliated with Sera and remains invested in helping to make it a thriving religious centre. She says, “I love Sera Monastery and have a strong connection there [even though] I left like that.” These days she returns periodically to Sera to give “transference of consciousness” teachings to monastics and elderly laity in the area.

7. Life as the *ḍakinī* of Vairotsana Cave

The next phase of Khandro Rinpoche’s life took place at the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalrong where I initially encountered her. The concluding paragraph of her biography chronicles her activities at the cave:

In 2003, she came east to the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalmo Tsawarong and built a reliquary for the precious lama [Khenpo Muen-sel] made out of brass and gold, a statue of Guru Rinpoche, and many high quality “enlightenment stupas” made of earth and stone. She said, “During the time that the precious lama was alive, because he delighted in the monastic teachings, ransoming the lives [of animals], offering butter lamps, and so forth, [I did these things] to repay his kindness.” With this in mind, she

³² “Thanks for one hundred years” (*kha dro lo brgya*) is a Golog expression meaning “thank you very much.”

established a summer retreat at Siddhi Dechen Ling, rebuilt the monastery, and taught some devoted and fortunate disciples the instructions for the oral lineage of the Great Perfection and the explanation on the profound path of “transference of consciousness”. Furthermore, she practises meditation inseparably from ransoming [animals’] lives, offering butter lamps, and so forth. Her virtuous enlightened activities proliferate expansively, and she remains a refuge for the Buddhist teachings and all beings.³³

Khandro Rinpoche’s story of reviving religion at the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalrong is not only rich with associations with Tibet’s golden age of imperial might and Buddhist efflorescence as discussed earlier in this essay, but also to a network of people active today in the eastern Tibetan religious scene with whom Khandro Rinpoche’s emerging identity as a *ḍākinī* continues to take shape. Important among them is Chogtul Rangrig Dorje (mChog sprul rang rig rdo rje, b. 1966), a *tulku* from Dungkar Sangngag Mindroling (Dung dkar gsang sngags smin sgrol gling) Monastery in Serta who spends time with her at the Vairotsana Cave and is the main sponsor for her building projects there.³⁴

Chogtul Rangrig Dorje described himself to me as the reincarnation of Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje, the monk who allegedly murdered the anti-Buddhist Tibetan Emperor Lang Darma before seeking refuge at the cave, thus providing a direct link between Tibet’s imperial past and his presence at the site. In his younger years, Chogtul Rinpoche was a fully ordained monk at Dungkar Monastery, but more recently he has become a non-celibate religious specialist (a *ngagpa*) and a “treasure revealer” who lives with Khandro Rinpoche as his consort. He told me that he first met her in the early 2000s at a Buddhist feast offering (Tib. *tshogs ’khor*, Skt. *ganacakra*) at Drongri (’Brong ri), or “Wild Yak Mountain”. Drongri is the most sacred mountain in Serta. Its sacrality derives from its dual credentials as the abode of the Bodhisattva of Compassion Avalokiteśvara and the Tibetan land deity (*gzhi bdag*) Drongri Mugpo (’Brong ri smug po), whom the Washul family that ruled Serta for centuries considers to be their paternal ancestor.³⁵ Chogtul Rinpoche met her again some time later at a sacred cave also located in Serta called Arinag (A ri nag) in the Do (rDo) Valley. Arinag is famous for being the meditation cave of important Nyingma lamas of the past including Patul Rinpoche (dPal sprul o rgyan ’jigs

³³ Padma ’od gsal mtha’ yas 2006: 35-36.

³⁴ For a brief history of Dungkar Monastery, see ’Jigs med bsam grub 1995: 328-331.

³⁵ For more on Drongri and its significance in Serta, see Jacoby 2014: 113-120. For a Tibetan account of the mountain, see *gTer gnas ’brong ri’i dkar chags* in dGung lo 1989: 4-53.

med chos kyi dbang po, 1808-1887) and Ju Mipam Rinpoche ('Ju mi pham 'jam dbyangs rnam rgyal rgya mtsho, 1846-1912). Chogtul Rinpoche recounts that after Khandro Rinpoche led a large feast offering at Arinag Cave, both of them stayed at the cave for a one-month meditation retreat. When I asked Chogtul Rinpoche how he knew that Khandro Rinpoche was a *khandroma* appropriate to be his consort, he replied that he had received prophecies indicating as much and that he knew that she was an authentic *khandroma* because "all the lamas said she was, so I thought so too". When I probed further about who "all the lamas" were, he specified that Khandro Rinpoche's root lama Khenpo Muensel was central among them.

When I asked Khandro Rinpoche why she came to Vairotsana Cave given that it is quite a distance from her homeland, Chogtul Rinpoche interjected with the short reply, "We came here because of a prophecy." Khandro elaborated, saying,

I first came here thinking only of my next life. I put the many teachings that my root lama gave me into practice for the purpose of my next life. I didn't listen to my parents' advice. I left my spouse and children and belongings behind and came to the Vairotsana Cave. I put my faith in Vairotsana and that is why I came here to do retreat.

Though I did not inquire, she also offered the following information, which seems to be her explanation for why she resides with Chogtul Rinpoche instead of alone at the cave:

When I came here earlier, I bothered only about my next life. For the purpose of repaying my lama's kindness, I wanted only to stay alone without any consort (*grog*s). I wanted to cut my long hair and be a nun. Lama Akhyab (A skyabs) and Lama Rindzin Nyima (Rig 'dzin nyi ma) told me not to be a nun. They said that if I stayed like that (not a nun), the benefit I would bring beings would be greater so I didn't cut a tuft of my hair.

One of the first projects Khandro Rinpoche embarked upon was building a stupa down by the riverbank below the cave complex. Another *khandroma* was instrumental in helping her "open the site" for the stupa, namely Khandro Choedroen (mKha' 'gro Chos sgron), wife of Tulku Tenpe Nyima (sPrul sku bsTan pa'i nyi ma), also from Serta. She and her husband, who is a descendant of the nineteenth-century visionary Dujom Lingpa (bDud 'joms gling pa), as well as Serta Tulku Dongag (gSer rta sprul sku mDo sngags) served as the main sponsors for the stupa project. Khandro explains that their general purpose in

erecting the stupa was so that “All sentient beings completely pervading space would be greatly benefitted by this.” In particular Khandro Rinpoche commented that the stupa possesses special healing powers:

We [she and Khandro Choedroen] thought that the stupa was an extraordinary one. To tell you how that was, it benefitted many insane and sick people. Then when the consecration time came, many good signs emerged such as rainbows shining in the sky and so forth. Not only that, from that time forth the local community (*tsho ba*) was without illness and amassed wealth, livestock, and food. The harvest was excellent as well. I think things such as these are good omens.

When I interviewed Khandro Rinpoche in Serta in 2005, she was in the midst of gathering resources to build a small monastery near the Vairotsana Cave. She told me of her aspirations in the following words:

In order to restore the Vairotsana Cave and the Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje stupa, I’m going to stay there. Also I have started a summer retreat there... Two or three years ago [in ca. 2003] I had about 20 old men and women ordained and founded a monastery. I am trying to build a small monastery there as a residence for them. Now there are many people inviting me to China. I don’t want to go, but I really want to build a monastery. In order to do that, I need money. When I stay [here in Tibet], I don’t get money. I think sometimes I’ll have to go to China. Also sometimes I’ll have to sell my things. If I can solicit donations from my family and my friends, I wonder if I can find a way not to go [to China]? I don’t want to build a big monastery; it would be too hard to build. Just a high quality small one. If I can build a community of pure monastics, I think it would be good.

Though she presented China as the land of golden opportunity for financing religious reconstruction projects, she also spoke of the China fundraising option with hesitance, alluding that cashing in on Chinese interest in Tibetan Buddhism also carried the risk of selling out on one’s intentions to practise the pure dharma devoid of the eight worldly concerns of gain and loss, fame and infamy, praise and blame, pleasure and sorrow.



Fig. 2. Siddhi Dechen Ling Monastery at the Vairotsana Cave built by Khandro Rinpoche. Photo: Sarah Jacoby, 2007.

By 2007, Khandro's fund raising challenges were solved and her monastery Siddhi Dechen Ling (Siddhī bde chen gling) was complete, consecrated at the end of that summer. She never did have to make that China fund raising journey to build Siddhi Dechen Ling, because Chinese funds came to her. Khandro explains that Chogtul Rinpoche became the main sponsor for the project, and that he was able to fund this through the generosity of his main sponsor, a devout Chinese woman from Beijing. Khandro counts her as one of her disciples and speaks highly of her kindness.

Khandro spoke of her motivations for building Siddhi Dechen Ling, which were to further the ordained lineage of Buddhist monastics in Tibet, especially in memory of her many teachers who have either passed away or left Tibet:

When I was here doing retreat, the Gyalrong people didn't have wealth, food, or clothes, and they didn't have dharma. On account of this I had compassion for them and sold my jewelry and fixed up the cave. Then Lama Wish-fulfilling Jewel [Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog] went to the Buddhafield. We all cried a lot. I told [my disciples], "Don't cry. For the purpose of the Buddhist teachings, the lama lost his life force. It is for the purpose of the Buddhist teachings. Crying now will do nothing." Our root lama Khenpo Muensel also has passed away. Khenpo Choying Khyabdal (mKhan po Chos dbying khyab brdal) also has passed on. The Dalai Lama has gone to India. The Panchen Lama has

also gone to the Buddhafields. Have compassion for all the Tibetan people who rely on them. Now if we can preserve the monastic teachings, that is the aspiration of the lamas. This is the way to serve the Buddha's teaching. I came to this cave and we all spoke and founded a summer retreat. But we didn't have a building for our summer retreat. I told Tulku Rangrig that we needed a bit of money and he gave it to us. The Chinese also supplemented that a bit. Then we built this assembly hall.

This latest monastic revitalisation project is thus one along a continuing line of restoration projects Khandro Rinpoche has devoted herself to ever since 1978, when Khenpo Muensel cured her silence and the PRC initiated its liberalisation policies following the Cultural Revolution. First she contributed to securing Poenkor Monastery building rights for Khenpo Muensel in the early 1980s, then she helped Tulku Jigga restore Sera Monastery in the 1990s. Now if the clusters of boys I have seen sitting on benches in front of Siddhi Dechen Ling learning how to read Tibetan scriptures in preparation for their ordination serve as any indication, her new Buddhist revitalisation project is flourishing. According to Khandro, she and Chogtul have "only a small number of Chinese disciples, and hence not much money", but the community is quickly growing.

8. *Khandro's activities at the Vairotsana Cave*

Observing Khandro Rinpoche's everyday life at the Vairotsana Cave and listening to stories about her, a series of functions connected to being a *khandroma* emerge:

Curing the sick

At Vairotsana Cave, I heard one reason why Khandro's presence at the cave has been so well received by the locals from Khandro Rinpoche's close attendant, who is a nun from a different part of Gyalrong. Khandro's attendant told me that in the early phase of Khandro's sojourn at the cave, the daughter of the local community's leader (*tsho dpon*) had a three month-old son who inexplicably became gravely ill. The Chinese doctors could do nothing to save him and he died. The leader's daughter was devastated and took her baby to Khandro Rinpoche to be blessed, only to have her bring the baby boy back to life! When I repeated this story back to Khandro Rinpoche, she did not deny it but said, "I was able to benefit their young son a bit.

His daughter's son didn't die. The Chinese couldn't cure him but I helped them a bit." Judging from the many Tibetan devotees I have witnessed hiking up the hill to receive blessings, divinations, and cures from Khandro, her reputation as a healer has spread beyond these rarefied cases. Khandro assented to this interpretation, saying, "Yes, many sick people and especially insane people come. In those situations, I turn my prayer wheel and pray for the sick to bring them a bit of benefit." Lest she appear too self-congratulatory about her curative powers, she followed this acknowledgement by saying, "I can't benefit sentient beings. Day and night I always have the intention to benefit beings, but I can't do it."

In any case, the stupa Khandro Rinpoche and Khandro Choedroen built below the Vairotsana Cave is also known for its special curative powers. In Chogtul Rinpoche's words: "Blessings reside here [at the Vairotsana Cave area]—if sick people come here and do prostrations and circumambulations, they are cured of disease." This connection between the cave and curing sickness predates Khandro Rinpoche's presence there according to Pema Oesel Taye's account of the eighth-century Vairotsana's promise to protect his devotees from illness if they offer prayers and prostrations at the site.³⁶ Currently Khandro's appeal as a healer and the cave's renown as a curative centre are working to reinforce each other.

Acting as a support for treasure revelation

On a more esoteric level, it became clear as I got to know Khandro Rinpoche better that she has gained recognition by some Tibetan visionaries known as "treasure revealers" (*gter ston*) as a consort endowed with the special capacity to aid in their revelation process, which is a power associated with being a *khandroma*.³⁷ The "treasure" (*gter ma*) tradition is a Tibetan system of revelation attributed to imperial Tibetan personages, central among them Padmasambhava, who hid sacred objects and scriptures for future discovery by specially designated treasure revealers. Treasures appear in the forms of "earth treasures" (*sa gter*), which are objects such as ritual implements or chests (*sgrom*) containing scriptures, and "mind treasures" (*dgongs gter*), which are visions appearing in treasure revealers' minds.³⁸ Specifically, *khandromas* can aid revelation because of their ability to arouse meditative bliss in the treasure revealer. In his work *Wonder Ocean: An Explanation of the Dharma Treasure Tradition*, the third

³⁶ Padma 'od gsal mtha' yas 2006: 16.

³⁷ For further explanation of this, see Gyatso 1998, ch. 6 and Jacoby 2014: 204-212.

³⁸ For more about treasure revelation, see Thondup 1986; Gyatso 1986, 1993.

Dodrubchen Jigme Tenpe Nyima (rDo grub chen 'jigs med bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1865-1926) of Dodrubchen Monastery in Golog explained,

Furthermore, in order to arouse the accomplishment from their depths, the teachings which have been concealed in the natural sphere of the luminous state (*A 'od gSal Gyi Khams*) [of their minds], it is also necessary to have the spontaneously arisen bliss (*Lhan sKyes Kyi dGa' Ba*) which can be produced by a special consort who has made the appropriate aspirations in the past, and who is to become the key to accomplishment. That is one of the reasons why all Tertons happen to have consorts.³⁹

Khandro Rinpoche was reticent to discuss this, or even to acknowledge that she played any role at all in helping treasure revealers discover their sacred missives. When I asked her if she was a "treasure revealer" herself, she denied it. However, Chogtul Rinpoche explains his transition from a celibate monastic *tulku* at Dungkar Monastery in Serta to a non-celibate treasure revealer at the Vairotsana Cave to be a result of his "reliance upon Khandro Rinpoche". He said he received prophecies indicating that she was his authentic consort and that as a result of his connection with her, he can produce revelations. He considers the written scriptures he reveals in reliance upon her to be theirs together: "Her treasures are the same as mine. They are one. Whatever appears to her appears to me."

Khandro Rinpoche also aided the Serta-based treasure revealer Rindzin Nyima in discovering at least one of his treasures. She narrates that at the conclusion of a one-month retreat at Drongri in Serta, she went to get water from a nearby river that was a site in which Sera Khandro had revealed treasures nearly a century ago. There, a snake serving as a "treasure protector" (*gter srung*) lead her to find a "treasure chest" (*gter sgrom*) in the form of a distinctive rock at the water's edge. She then offered the object to Lama Rindzin Nyima, who extracted a scripture from the chest. She showed me the actual handwritten scripture that Rindzin Nyima had dictated to his scribe after Khandro offered him the chest, which was written in printed Tibetan on notebook paper.

Teaching the dharma

One of Khandro Rinpoche's main functions as a *khandroma* is transmitting the lineage of her teacher Khenpo Muensel, called the *Long-*

³⁹ Thondup 1986: 107.

chen Nyingtig (*kLong chen snying thig*) or “Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse”, to select disciples. Khandro mentioned that she began teaching when she was about 40 during her time at Sera Monastery. Specifically, she says that the impetus came from the incarnation of one of Khenpo Muensel’s root lamas, Khenpo Ngagchung (Ngag chung), also called Khenpo Ngawang Palzang (Ngag dbang dpal bzang, 1879-1941). Khandro reported that his incarnation named Sangye Tsering (Sangs rgyas tshe ring) of Nyoshul Gar (sMyo shul sgar) encouraged her, saying that

I should exhort my disciples to complete the five accumulations and then that I must give them an introduction to the nature of mind and a reading transmission of transference of consciousness and so forth. Although I thought it best to just sit around reciting *mani* since I have no knowledge, I was unable to resist the lama’s command that I needed to teach.

Khandro Rinpoche told me that she begins teaching disciples by asking them to contemplate the “four reversals” (*blo ldog rnam bzhi*) that inspire renunciation from worldly concerns including contemplating the difficulty of being reborn with the freedoms and advantages, the impermanence of life, the defects of *samsāra*, and the principle of cause and effect. According to the *Longchen Nyingtig* lineage, these contemplations take 100 days to complete. Following this, she instructs her disciples to complete the “five accumulations” (*bum lnga*), including reciting the Buddhist refuge prayer more than 100,000 times, followed by the *bodhicitta* prayer, Vajrasattva practice, *maṇḍala* offering, and guru yoga, which take approximately six months to complete (if practised full-time). Then, Khandro Rinpoche teaches “transference of consciousness” (*pho ba*), the contemplative practice preparing one for successfully navigating the process of death and transmigration to one’s subsequent rebirth. According to Khandro Rinpoche, “A real *ḍākinī* is able to transfer a person’s consciousness.” She gave the following examples to illustrate her point:

For example the wife of Marpa did transference of consciousness for her son Darma Dode and was able to direct him to the Pure Land; she was a real mother. Yeshe Tsogyal went [to India] in search of a consort and after seven days she revived the son of a king. When Yeshe Tsogyal performed transference of consciousness, she got a dead person to rise and walk away.

Likewise, Khandro Rinpoche has become particularly renowned for her skill in this practice, which she learned from Khenpo Muensel and

has taught since her residence at Sera Monastery. These days her instructions are in demand at Sera and beyond; in the first decade of the 2000s she gave several teachings on the transference of consciousness to monks at Dungkar Monastery and to disciples at Drongri, both in Serta County, as well as several in Gyalrong. After Khandro Rinpoche's disciples train in preliminary practices and transference of consciousness, she gives them an "introduction to the nature of mind", in which she "teaches them about the origin, abiding, and movement of mind". She summarises the dharma that she teaches to be mainly Great Perfection. She clarifies that, "After [my] disciples completely finish their five accumulations, whether they are monastics or householders, men or women, I teach them a bit of Great Perfection." The instructions Khandro Rinpoche received from Khenpo Muensel and her results from putting these into practice have earned her renown as a meditator and a teacher of this pinnacle contemplation on the nature of mind within the Nyingma School. Her comment that she teaches Great Perfection not just to monastics but also female and male householders resonates with the popularity she holds among laywomen that I have noticed particularly in the Serta area. Khandro acknowledges the special affinity she has with laywomen in both Golog and Gyalrong:

Women come to me crying. They have faith in me, but I don't have any power. I teach them transference of consciousness, how to write, and I give them blessings and so forth... I have also taught women in this neighborhood [Serta] a lot. Secretly, I give women many explanations. In Gyalrong I have taught them many explanations and they know [dharma]. In addition, at Dungkar Monastery I also have many disciples who are old ladies and nuns.

Among the many laywomen who count themselves as Khandro's disciples are a shop owner in downtown Serta as well as the mother of a prominent Sera Monastery *tulku*, who both spoke to me about Khandro with effusive praise.

Conclusion *Relational autonomy beyond binary oppositions*

The first impression one gets from seeing Khandro Rinpoche in action is that she is an autonomous religious leader, beholden neither to one particular religious institution nor one geographic space. Though she is firmly tied to one major religious lineage as the disciple of Khenpo

Muensel and a practitioner of Great Perfection, she is constantly on the move, traveling to Golog's sacred mountains and caves including Arinag, Dzongne (rDzong gnas), Drongri, Drakar Dreldzong (Brag dkar sprel rdzong), Sotog (bSo thog), and Amye Machen (A myes rma chen), where she performs frequently month-long retreats. Additionally, she travels to monasteries and hermitages around eastern Tibet, particularly Dungkar and Sera Monastery in Serta, among others, and of course to the Vairotsana Cave in Gyalrong. At these religious centres she gives teachings, especially on transference of consciousness practices.

And yet, for all her activities as a solitary religious specialist traveling widely, meditating in caves, leading rituals, and bestowing blessings on devotees, her account of her life accentuates key relationships with others that have made her position as an autonomous religious specialist possible, such as her family connections to both local political offices and religious institutions, her close connection to her guru Khenpo Muensel, her important but challenging relationship with Tulku Jigga, and most recently her productive partnership with Tulku Rangrig Dorje, to name just a few. It is also important to note that many of these relationships took place in environments charged with strong religious and cultural significance, making these sacred sites more than backdrops for the human dramas unfolding on their terrains, and, in Khandro Rinpoche's case, integral parts of her formation as a *khandroma*. In particular, during the decade she spent at Sera Monastery, people began perceiving her as an incarnation of another *khandroma* who lived for many years at Sera Monastery, Sera Khandro. This association helped make sense of her position as Tulku Jigga's consort at the time and continues to augment her stature as a *khandroma* today. At Vairotsana Cave, Khandro Rinpoche's objectives to rebuild monastic Buddhism were reinforced by the cave's ties to imperial Tibetan personages involved in the early proliferation of Buddhism in Tibet, such as Vairotsana and Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje, whose physical presences live on in the cave's sacred architecture. Proximity to the contours of Vairotsana's body imprinted in the cave wall and the stupa honouring Lhalung Pelkyi Dorje not only inspires Khandro Rinpoche and Chogtul Rangrig Dorje to continue their work, but provides a culturally intelligible mold for others, importantly Khandro Rinpoche's biographer Pema Oesel Taye, to tell their story of propagating Tibetan Buddhism.

Khandro Rinpoche's account challenges key oppositions scholars often apply to the study of religion, such as monastic/lay and institutional/non-institutional religion. Visiting Khandro Rinpoche at the Vairotsana Cave provides a startling contrast to the more typical four-fold Buddhist social hierarchy, in which monks have the highest posi-

tion, followed by nuns, laymen, and laywomen, respectively.⁴⁰ Take, for example, figure 3, which is a common situation in which to find Khandro Rinpoche. I took this photo from the doorway to her room at the cave, where devotees enter to receive Khandro's blessing. She sits upraised on a low mattress in a position of prominence, while her partner Chogtul Rinpoche sits next to her, beneath her on a rug.



Fig. 3. Khandro Rinpoche seated in her room at the Vairotsana Cave, with Chogtul Rangrig Dorje. Photo: Sarah Jacoby, 2007.

On the one hand, this image reverses the far more common hierarchies of male teacher on upraised cushion and female devotee beneath, monastic above and lay patron below. Even so, her account does not flatten out distinctions between lay and monastic entirely, for she presents her life as an example of how difficult it is to negotiate being a wife and mother as well as being a dedicated practitioner of Great Perfection contemplative practices. But her narrative also demonstrates the ways in which she created space for both at different times in her life. Today Khandro Rinpoche is neither nun nor lay householder, in the sense that she has never taken monastic vows and also has renounced her lay status, given away much of her worldly possessions such as jewelry and fine clothes, and dedicated herself full-time to cultivating her own religious practices and performing rituals on behalf of her patrons.⁴¹ Her identity as a nonmonastic female religious specialist therefore demonstrates the inaccuracy of bi-

⁴⁰ For a study of the four-fold Buddhist *saṅgha* in early Indian Buddhism, see Skilling 2001.

⁴¹ In this sense of being neither nun nor laywoman, she follows in Sera Khandro's footsteps, who described herself in similar terms (*jo min nag min*). For a discussion of this, see Jacoby 2014, ch. 4.

nary opposites such as monastic/lay for understanding Buddhist social contexts.⁴² Applying such an interpretive scheme on Khandro Rinpoche's life story and activities reifies an opposition that is rarely present between monastic institutional Buddhism and nonmonastic autonomous religious specialists including many religious positions associated with women such as *khandromas*, "revenants" (*'das log*), and oracles/diviners.⁴³ Let alone endorsing such an opposition, Khandro Rinpoche's life's work is dedicated to rebuilding monastic institutions as a primary way to contribute to Buddhist flourishing, a mission she dedicates to the memory of her guru, the monastic abbot Khenpo Muensel.

Another binary often applied to the study of religion in Tibet that is belied by Khandro Rinpoche's life story is the opposition between PRC state control and Tibetan efforts to revitalise religion. The nearly complete state repression of religion during her youth as well as the efforts to which she went to help Khenpo Muensel procure a permit to rebuild Poenkhör Monastery underscore the power of various levels of the state to control religious affairs in Tibet. And yet, Khandro Rinpoche's story of the revival of Buddhism in Tibet in the post-market reform era from the early 1980s forward is not only a story of Chinese political control and Tibetan religious resistance.⁴⁴ For one thing, the "Chinese officials" (*rgya mi'i las byed pa*) she most often dealt with on the local county level in Golog were not always Chinese, but often Tibetans occupying positions within the Chinese state. Not only were they Tibetan, but according to Khandro Rinpoche one local prominent "Chinese official" who was instrumental in restoring Khenpo Muensel's monastery was her husband. Others who have supported her religious endeavours include her siblings, sister and brother-in-laws, children, and sons-and-daughter-in-laws. Khandro Rinpoche speaks about the extreme repression she and those close to her experienced during the difficult years of the 1950s until the 1970s, such as Khenpo Muensel's 20-year prison sentence, but her story also illustrates the complex ways in which religious and state authorities in contemporary Tibet coexist, interrelate, and at times even reinforce each other. Khandro Rinpoche's ability to navigate between state officials and religious institutions is a product of her status as neither life-long renunciate nor householder, embedded in familial and religious relationships that enable her to thrive as a *dākinī* in Tibet today.

⁴² For an insightful analysis of the shortcomings of such binaries, see Salgado 2013: 54-58.

⁴³ For further information about Tibetan women as "revenants" and oracles/diviners, see Pommaret 1989; Havnevik 2002; and Diemberger 2005.

⁴⁴ For more on the repression and revival of religion in Tibet since its incorporation into the PRC, see Goldstein & Kapstein 1998; Barnett & Akiner 1994.

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Empowering Religious Women Practitioners in Contemporary Bhutan

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Women practising religious activities in the Himalayas was a neglected topic for a long time. Only at the end of the twentieth century, we find that addressing the issue of gender became a more prevalent topic in all fields, including academic publications in the specific area of the Himalayas and Tibet.¹ It is characteristic that these studies have mostly been done by women academics and that within the academic field we find a similar gender dichotomy as in the societies studied. Men would study male religious figures while women would study female religious practitioners. Are these gender-oriented studies influencing the findings and would the academic discourse be different if this was not the case?

It might be useful to define first the scope and the methodology of this paper. This article is an overview of different religious women practitioners in contemporary Bhutan and their emerging socio-religious roles. It is based on fieldtrips, interviews, participant observation extending over 30 years and a few written sources. As the Bhutanese society is evolving very quickly due to socio-economic development and rural-urban migration, this article does not pretend to represent a definite overview on religious women practitioners in Bhutan to date. However, it is possible and also useful in light of recent social changes, to structure their practices into four major groups, and emphasise their recently changing, and in part newly evolving socio-religious roles. In order to assist the Bhutanese to read this article, the Tibetan and Dzongkha terms are spelt as they are in Bhutan with their corresponding Wylie transliteration at first use in brackets whenever possible.

In Bhutan, religious women practitioners belong to four main

¹ Amongst others, see Pommaret 1989; Havnevik 1989; Gyatso & Havnevik 2005; Diemberger 2007; Schneider 2013, Jacoby 2014 and Schrempf 2015b. On nuns and women in Buddhism, see also the numerous writings of Karma Lekshe Tshomo. Exceptions, i.e. male academics working on women, are Edou 1996 and Schaeffer 2004.

categories, which can overlap in the course of a woman's lifetime. Of course, the validity of the general term "religious women practitioners" could be questioned since every Bhutanese woman practices some kind of religious activity. However, by this term I mean women who for a large part of their lives have engaged in religious activities and whose religious roles are specifically recognised by the society. The four main categories of religious women practitioners are: Firstly, nuns (*a ni, anim*); the second category concerns wandering nuns, meditators, household nuns, and "short-term" nuns. The third category comprises a diverse group of female lay religious practitioners who include elder women living a religious life without being formally a nun, female partners of male religious practitioners called *sangyum* (*gsang yum*) or *khandro* (*mkha' 'gro*) who can also have their own religious practices, and, last but not least, a newly emerging group of practitioners of the Black Throema Choe (*Khros ma nag mo gcod*). The fourth category concerns female intercessors, such as *neljorma* (*rnal 'byor ma*), *pamo* (*dpa' mo*), and *delok* (*'das log*).

In this paper, I am focusing on nuns and the Black Throema Choe, as both represent a rather new and increasingly popular development among religious women practitioners in Bhutan. Also, nuns are included as a category in their own right within the framework of "autonomous" religious women in the sense that they depended to a large extent on some specific initiatives by "autonomous" nuns and lamas, beginning in the late 1960s. In the past decade in particular, their popularity has sharply risen. By 2013, small nunneries had cropped up all over Bhutan, 26 of them hosting about 1,000 nuns altogether.² They are organised either under the state Drukpa Kagyu ('Brug pa bKa' rgyud) monastic body or established by independent Nyingmapa (rNying ma pa) lamas. Many of these nunneries are led by head nuns, and no longer by monks. The recent increase in laywomen practitioner groups of the Black Throema Choe, however, indicates a general shift among the younger generation of Bhutanese women towards organised popular Buddhist groups practicing as lay religious women that offer an alternative to the male-dominated religious establishment.

1. Nuns

A central role model for nuns and a distinguished female religious figure is Ani Choeten Zangmo (A ni mChod rten bzang mo), the

² Cf. Bhutan Nuns Foundation 2013: 4.

daughter, or grand-daughter, of Pema Lingpa (Padma gling pa, 1450-1521) who fled Bumthang toward the East to escape a noble suitor. She settled to meditate in Drametse (dGra med rtse). Only recently has she gained a certain public prominence alongside the importance given to Drametse Monastery, promoted by the government.³ Ani Choeten Zangmo is said to have established the monastery together with her brother Kuenga Wangpo/Kuenga Gyaltshen (Kun dga' dbang po/Kun dga' rgyal mtsan, sixteenth century). However, not many historical details of her life have emerged and there are several conflicting Bhutanese versions of her ancestry.⁴ The place she founded in Drametse was first a nunnery and the nuns were called *tsunmas* (*btsun ma*). Interestingly, the dancers of the Drametse Cham who are lay practitioners don monks' robes and are also called *tsunmas*, a term that is usually reserved for nuns. The latter, however, never take part in the ritual masked dance of the Drametse Ngacham (dGra med rtse rNga 'cham).⁵

More recently, another nun has attained nation-wide fame. Ashi Wangmo (Ashi dBang mo, b. 1911?), the Second King's sister, never married but became a nun in Tshurphu (mTshur phu) with the Sixteenth Karmapa Rangjung Rigpai Dorji (Rang 'byung rig pa'i rdo rje). Being very talented, she is known to have composed songs about him as her teacher and the impermanence of human existence. She lived at the Jangchub Choeling (Byang chub chos gling) Monastery in Lhuntse (lHun rtse) and was responsible for enlarging it.⁶

However, these extraordinary religious women practitioners are clearly an exception in Bhutanese history. Traditionally speaking, being a nun in Bhutan was more of a last resort than a real choice. There were very few nunneries in Bhutan—the most famous being Kila (sKyid la) and Jachung Karmo (Bya kyung dkar mo). Girls were brought to the nunneries at a young age, often because of poverty or slight mental or physical infirmity; and they had very little prospect of learning anything besides prayers. The nunneries were always supervised by a superior monastery and lacked any kind of autonomy or sanitation facilities.

This started to change in the early 1990s when young well-educated teenage girls decided to become nuns voluntarily and out of vocation. This seems to have been a direct consequence of their Western-based education, a system already established in the mid-1960s by the Bhutese government. As there was no proper centre of learning for nuns in Bhutan at that time, they first went to different

³ Institute of Languages and Cultures 2009.

⁴ Imaeda 2011: 64-67.

⁵ Institute of Languages and Cultures 2009: 116.

⁶ Sonam Nyenda 2012.

nunneries in northern India established by exiled Tibetan lamas. There, they were exposed to different ideas, such as the wish for equal social status with monks, as advocated by famous female Western Buddhists, such as Karma Lekshe Tsomo who was unheard of in Bhutan. Ani Sonam Wangmo (bSod nam dbang mo), alias venerable Tenzin Dadon (bsTan 'dzin dar sgron, born in 1977), is such a pioneering nun who in 1993 decided to study at the Jamyang Choeling Institute—a non-sectarian “nunnery institute” founded by Karma Lekshe Tsomo near Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh. Tenzin Dadon is now pursuing a PhD on the subject of gender and religion at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur.⁷

Meanwhile, times had changed for women who wanted to pursue the life of a nun. Several high lamas began to understand the need for nunneries to be built within the country and established religious centres for women in Bhutan. Some of the most famous nunneries are Kunga Rabten (Kun dga' rab rten) in Trongsa (Krong gsar), founded by Khenpo Tshultrim (mKhan po Tshul khriims), a Tibetan Karmapa lama, back in 1968;⁸ Zilukha in Thimphu, established by a Tibetan lama considered as the reincarnation of Chagzampa/Thangtong Gyalpo (lCags zam pa/Thang stong rgyal po, 1385-1464) in the 1980s; Wang Sisina (Wang si si nang) near Thimphu, established by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (Dil mgo Khyen brtse, 1910-1991) in the 1980s; Pema Choeling (Padma chos gling) in Bumthang, established by the Tenth Gangtey Trulku (sGang steng sprul sku, b. 1955) of the Pema Lingpa tradition in 2001,⁹ and most recently, in 2008, the Wolakha Sangchhen Dorji Lhuendrup ('Og la kha gsang chen rdo rje lhun sgrub) Nunnery founded by the father of the Queen Mother Ashi Tshering Yangdon, under the auspices of the Drukpa monastic body in Punakha. These nunneries consist of 70 to 170 nuns each and offer a monastic curriculum as well as meditation practices.

Some of the nuns who got their training in India also came back to teach under the supervision of a male abbot and these nunneries started to recruit young girls who wanted to be nuns. Today, fewer and fewer girls enter a nunnery and certainly no longer for reasons of either their family's wishes or because of poverty. The education system that is supported by the government and socio-economic

⁷ Tashi Namgyal 2012.

⁸ Cf. www.khoryug.com/monasteries-pages/karma, accessed July 2015, and <http://www.bhutanculturalatlas.org/1088/culture/sites-structures/other-places-of-interests/places-of-historical-religious-interests/karma-drubdey-palmo-chos-kyi-dingkhang-nunnery/>, accessed September 2015.

⁹ “Pema Choling nunnery”, in *Bhutan Cultural Atlas*: www.bhutanculturalatlas.org/950/culture/sites/pema-choling-nunnery, accessed September 2015.

development more generally have provided girls with other alternatives.¹⁰

Yet, in 2009, during the first conference for nuns in Bhutan, Ani Yeshe Choden (A ni Ye shes chos sgron), the head of the Karma Dhupdhey (Kar ma sgrub sde) Nunnery in Kuenga Rabten, Trongsa, critically remarked: “Everyone expects nuns to take equal responsibility of spreading the Buddha dharma like the gelongs (monks), but where is the equality when we lack even the basic facilities to carry out our daily routine?”¹¹

In the same year, the Bhutan Nuns Foundation (BNF) called Druk Ani Zhitshog (‘Brug Ani zhi tshogs) was established by HM the Queen Mother Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck.¹² She writes about the motives for becoming a nun:

Many of our young girls and women join nunneries in search of a peaceful, selfless and spiritual approach to life. Others seek refuge from poverty and challenging social situations; others are motivated by the search for an alternative or religious education.¹³

The aim of the BNF is:

...to encourage and watch the growth of the nuns’ learning and the development of their skills and capacities related to health, nutrition, hygiene and sanitation, all of which benefits not only the nuns themselves but also their communities. Further, to strengthen their network, BNF provides exposure tours, conferences, workshops, visits and study exchanges to broaden the nuns views and to empower them—recognizing the great potential and importance of putting Buddhist practice into everyday action.¹⁴

The BNF does not get involved in the proper religious curriculum but rather acts as an umbrella organisation for the welfare of nuns and the nunneries. Moreover, in December 2013 it conducted an international conference where the question of *gelongma* (*dge slong*

¹⁰ For the situation of Tibetan nuns in eastern Tibet and in exile, see Schneider (2013) who presents a thorough picture of the evolving conditions of the nuns in two different contexts.

¹¹ Cf. <http://www.bhutanmajestictravel.com/news/2009/bhutanese-nuns-conference.html>, accessed July 2015.

¹² Cf. www.bhutannuns.org, accessed July 2015.

¹³ Cf. Bhutan Nuns Foundation 2013: 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 6.

ma/ bhikṣuṇī) ordination was openly discussed.¹⁵ In May 2014, the BNF organised for the very first time a high-profile *getsulma* (*dge tshul ma/ śrāmaṇerikā*) ordination held at the the Wolakha Nunnery in Punakha, presided over by the Je Khenpo (rJe mkhan po), the head abbot of the Drukpa Kagyu order of Bhutan.¹⁶ In the following year (March 2015), it laid the foundations for a Training and Resource Centre for Bhutanese Nuns in Tsalumaphey (rTsa lu ma phe) in Babesa (Ba sbe sa) near Thimphu.

On April 26th, 2015, HM the Queen Mother Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck launched a new curriculum to upgrade the Wolakha Nunnery to a Buddhist college up to Masters level.¹⁷ The Je Khenpo stated on this occasion:

The new curriculum was required because the nuns have been following the same curriculum meant and developed for monks. The curriculum for monks not only has contents developed for monks, but also has rules specifically for them. Most textbooks had little information for nuns.

For the first time in May 2014, four nuns from the Wang Sisina Nunnery completed the nine-year course in advanced studies of a Nyingma Buddhist curriculum, set up by Dilgo Khyentse Yangsi (Dil mgo Khyen brtse yang srid) Rinpoche, and received their master certificates.¹⁸ Yeshey Choden, an 80-year old nun from Wang Sisina summarises the evolution of nuns' studies stating simply: "Today nuns have plenty of time to study, with plenty of teachers at the nunnery. It is much better being an *anim* today."

Nuns' further autonomy was demonstrated by 50 nuns of the Pema Choeling Nunnery in Bumthang reading the *Dolbum* (*sGrol ma 'bum*) text on the different Tārās for ten days at the Memorial Chorten in Thimphu in October 2015. The donations collected are being used to construct a stupa and classrooms at the nunnery.¹⁹ Such a

¹⁵ On this discussion among the Tibetan nuns, see Schneider 2013: 305-331.

¹⁶ Cf. www.bhutannuns.org/first-getsulma-ordination-in-punakha, accessed July 2015.

¹⁷ Cf. Dawa Gyelmo 2015.

¹⁸ Honour *Kuensel*, 19 May 2014, 1, URL : www.kuenselonline.com/picture-story-567/#.VWMoQaZfeAE, accessed May 2015.

¹⁹ The head of the institute, Ani Tshe ring dpal mo, says they started this reading in 2014 for the benefit of the people at the Zang mdog dpal ri, a private temple in Thimphu. In 2015 they moved to the Memorial Chorten where they can benefit more people and are reading the text specially for the well-being of the Fourth King who is 60, the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo and the Je Khenpo of Bhutan. Cf. sKal bzang dbang phyug 2015.

prominence of nuns gathering and performing at a national religious landmark also shows how much they have achieved in 30 years.

All of these endeavours can be traced back to some extraordinary Bhutanese nuns first seeking education outside of Bhutan, and are also aided by the support of high-ranking monastic authorities and exile-Tibetan lamas, and, last but not least, royal support by several ladies of the royal family (Ashis). These developments have empowered the nuns, and enabled the recognition of their by now accepted socio-religious roles in society, having transformed their traditional low social status into an accepted path for religious practice among women. At present, another tacit agenda is to have their own centres in Bhutan, which can provide a proper education to the nuns without them having to go to India or to Nepal. Aspirations are running high. Several Bhutanese nuns have joined the Twelfth Gyalwang Drukpa's Monastery of Druk Amitabha near Kathmandu and one of them, Jigme Wangchuk Lhamo, aged 16, has become a Kung-fu master in the monastery.²⁰ After the 25th April 2015 earthquake in Nepal, the Washington Post ran a feature on the 2nd May 2015 titled "How Kathmandu 'kung fu nuns' sprang into action after the quake".²¹ In this article, one nun seems to summarise the aspirations of the young nuns all over the Himalayas, including Bhutan:

The 26-year-old nunnery is a unique example of a gender reverseal in the rarefied world of monastic life, where monks often occupy positions of power, leaving nuns the menial chores. But here in Ramkothe, the kung fu nuns learn everything that men do: plumbing, electrical fitting, computers, riding bicycles, the English language and of course, praying.

"In many monasteries women are not given a chance to rise up the hierarchy. Nuns are typically made to cook, clean and serve the food, while monks take big decisions and run the administration-just like it is in many of our families," said Jigme Yeshe Lhamo, 26, an office administrator who fled her home in India to join the nunnery a decade ago.

This kind of discourse is also prominent in a 2011 documentary film *Daughters of Dolma* shot in the nunneries of Karma Ngoedhon Oesal Choekhorling and Karma Samten Ling Nunneries in Nepal.²² The present Gyalwang Drukpa is very active in promoting the

²⁰ Cf. <http://soundcloud.com/.../lets-talk-about-it-with-the-kungfu-...>, accessed June 2015.

²¹ Lakshmi 2015.

²² Cf. Miklos & Co 2013.

Drukpa School in different domains, and especially nuns' rights and education.

Within one generation the society, at large, has become much more respectful of the nuns' status and of their religious abilities due to some extraordinary nuns taking the lead. Many families now ask nuns to do their house rituals as the nuns have a reputation of being more "serious" than their male counterparts. However, this trend might also be due to the shortage of male religious practitioners to cater for an increasingly affluent society in need of rituals. In any case, it seems that social transformations in society have enabled women to choose the education that they want and to lead more equal lives when compared to their fellow monks to whom they had been subordinate before.

2. *Wandering nuns, meditators, household nuns, and "short-term" nuns*

After having finished their formal religious studies in a nunnery, some nuns do not wish to be part of a religious institution but prefer to spend time in meditation and practice in remote holy places supported by friends and family. In winter they go on pilgrimages and listen to high lamas' teachings. These more unorthodox nuns could be called "wandering nuns".

These nuns are not completely on their own, but follow their lama's religious instructions. They can also communicate with their teacher by mobile phone or by WeChat app, which has become a very popular medium among both monks and nuns. This application has really changed the lives of practitioners who can keep abreast of the latest places of teachings, instructions and other religious news. As their designation indicates, the wandering nuns move a lot, so one could also consider them "itinerant". They have their lay sponsors with whom they can stay and who assist them financially in return for prayers at their homes.

As for sedentary nuns who are members of a nunnery, in case of health or domestic problems, they can leave the monastery and go back to live with their family for an extended period of time, and if they wish, they can rejoin the nunnery. While they are at home, they become "household nuns" performing domestic works for their family as well as prayers.

In September 2015, the official monk-body (*gzhung grwa tshang*) started an initiative by which laywomen could become nuns for a short time:

Five women were the first group of lay people to take

advantage of Zhung Dratshang's initiative to allow people outside religious bodies to allow them to practise the dharma and to experience life of practitioners. The Zhung Dratshang's Leytshog Lopen conducted a ceremony on August 26 during which the women donned nun's habit took vows and ordination meant for common people. They did not have to shave their heads, however. The women, who are all from Thimphu, will observe rituals and devote their time in prayers and meditation.²³

3. Female lay religious practitioners

Elder women who want to lead a religious life without being a nun can choose to become a devotee of a high lama, or the partner of a religious practitioner (*sangyum*, *khandro*, *ani*), and/or practitioners of *choe* (*gcod*).

Elder women living a religious life

Many elder women are called *ani*, despite the fact that they often might not have taken the *getshulma* vows, do not wear a nun's robe and do not shave their hair. They simply abandon the colourful Bhutanese dress for good in favor of a maroon Tibetan dress. These women, usually elderly, decide to live a religious life after their children have found a job. They may live with them, with their husbands or near a monastery. Their religious practice essentially consists of chanting *mani* and other simple prayers, spinning prayer-wheels, as well as doing prostrations and circumambulating stupas and temples.

These activities also characterise the daily lives of elderly ladies in rural and urban settings where they meet at the same place everyday, such as the Memorial Chorten or Changangkha (ICang sgang kha) temple in Thimphu. While praying, they also socialise and enjoy their reunion with old friends.

Lama's partners

Being the partner of a high lama, often a reincarnation, is a status which is highly aspired to, both historically and at present, especially

²³ Kinga Dema 2015.

in the countryside. Besides religious activities, this role requires a certain amount of social and managerial skills. These women go by different names, *sangyum*, *khandro* or *ani*, which can be related to the local usage of a term in the region or to a lama's preferences. However, if his consort used to be a nun before her marriage, her designation *ani* usually remains. In Bhutan, the epitome of a *khandro* as a lama's partner is Khandro Sonam Peden (bSod namdpal sgron, thirteenth century). She was the consort of Phajo Drugom Shigpo (Pha jo 'brug sgom zhig po, 1184-1251) who introduced the Drukpa Kagyupa School in Western Bhutan. Today, some female partners of Rinpoches are teachers or entrepreneurs and in this case, they juggle between three roles: Lama's religious partners, household heads and professionals.

Being a lama's partner is an elevated position for a woman but it is not an easy one to uphold. Besides being a religious practitioner on her own and considering the lama as her guru, she must be conversant with his lineage, the teachings, the rituals and assist her partner in managing his schedule. She has to be pleasant to devotees and be ready to offer endless cups of tea. She has to be ready for her husband to go off on religious calls at a moment's notice. She manages the private household of the lama, but should not get involved in the lama's religious estate. For the society at large, the partner of a lama is responsible for the welfare and health of the lama rather than being an autonomous religious practitioner in her own right, as some of the examples of *khandromas* from Tibet demonstrate in this special issue.

However, the status of a "consort" has become ambivalent in more recent times, especially among urban Bhutanese. A satirical Tibetan blogger wrote recently:

These monks can't keep a family or a wife. The head of these monks is a lama who can himself keep a wife or girlfriend as he wants. People call this wife or girlfriend a "consort" or a "secret wife" with great respect.²⁴

The Throema Nagmo practitioners

Many laywomen today in Bhutan practise a specific form of *choe* that belongs to the Throema Nagmo (Khros ma nag mo), the "Wrathful Black Ḍākinī" practice. This is a rather new socio-religious phenomenon practiced by groups of female lay practitioners that has

²⁴ Gurgon Kyab 2015.

emerged in the past 15 years. Because of its rising popularity, especially among Bhutanese women, some conservative voices view it with suspicion. Traditionally, *choe* practice was undertaken only in a few remote places in eastern Bhutan mainly by hermits (*mtshams pa*) and male lay religious practitioners called *gomchen* (*sgom chen*) belonging to the Nyingmapa tradition. However, the number of *gomchen* is declining steadily in Bhutan.²⁵ We also do not have a proper documentation of *choe* practice in Bhutan and so the information is scant.

It seems, however, that in the mid-twentieth century the current practice called the Dudjom Kalikruddha or Throema Nagmo was introduced to eastern Bhutan by Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje (bDud 'joms 'jigs bral ye shes rdo rje, 1904-1987) who was born in Pemakoe (Padma bkod), southern Tibet. His father, the famous Nyingmapa "treasure revealer" (*gter ston*) Dudjom Lingpa (bDud 'joms gling pa, 1835-1904) from Golog (mGo log) had revealed what became known as the Dudjom Tersar (*gter gsar*) tradition, the "New Treasures of Dudjom Rinpoche",²⁶ among them the Throema Nagmo Choe practice that focuses on a form of the Black Vajravāhī.

A contemporary Bhutanese narrative claims that it was Guru Rinpoche himself who gave the initiation to Lama Kota from eastern Bhutan in the disguise of an old Tibetan monk in Sengye Dzong, a famous hermitage and pilgrimage place in northeast Bhutan.²⁷ When Lama Kota returned to Yonphula temple (Yon phul la) in eastern Bhutan, he passed on the teaching to his son Lama Karpo (dKar po), (mid-twentieth century).

Several years later in the 1950s, when Dudjom Jigdrel Yeshe Dorji was consecrating the renovated Trashigang Dzong, Lama Karpo, who was also participating in the ceremony, was summoned by Dudjom Rinpoche who inquired about his lineage. Lama Karpo narrated the entire episode of his father's encounter with Guru Rinpoche as an old Tibetan monk at Sengye Dzong and how his father was able to receive the Throema Nagmo teachings from him. Dudjom Rinpoche, who spoke Tshangla, the east-Bhutanese language

²⁵ Tsering Wangdi (2015) mentions, "While most *gomchens* have migrated to urban areas for better livelihoods, some have taken up farming activities and no longer perform rituals. And the younger generations don't see any career opportunities in religious organisations. A former *gomchen*, Tshering Samdrup, said that parents no longer enroll their children in *goendheys* and *goenpas*. The government's education policy of 'no child left behind' could have further affected enrolments."

²⁶ An example of this practice can be viewed at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCVW-eV___c, accessed July 2015.

²⁷ "How 'Throema' (khros ma) ritual originated in Eastern Bhutan", *Bhutan Times*, 16 July 2006.

also spoken in his birth place Pemakoe, then predicted that the eastern region of Bhutan would be the base for disseminating the teachings of Tersar or "The New Treasures".

Dudjom Rinpoche later revised and composed most of the *Throema* scriptures and gave all the necessary and appropriate instructions of the *Throema* to all the practitioners in Bhutan, in particular to Yonphula, Lama Karpo and Lama Chimi. The basic text from Dudjom Lingpa is called the *Nye brgyud gcod kyi khrid yig gsal bar bkod pa legs bshad bdud rtsi'i rol mtsho*.²⁸

The Dudjom Throema Nagmo, "The Wrathful Black Ḍākinī practice", is part of the introductory *ngondro* (*sngon 'gro*) of the Dudjom Tersar.²⁹ While it lies beyond the scope of this article to retrace the Throema Nagmo history, it is important to document it in the context of female religious lay specialists in Bhutan since the Tersar teachings are so important. It is somewhat surprising, however, that Bhutan is mentioned only in passing in the English biography of Dudjom Rinpoche.³⁰

When Dudjom Rinpoche was about seven years old, he had a teacher called Lama Khedrup, a disciple of Dudjom Lingpa, and "a great Black Throema yogi who had practised in the 108 cemeteries."³¹ Dudjom Rinpoche had his first visions of the Black Throema when he was only ten years old.³² The Black Throema is considered a wrathful

²⁸ It is "a detailed introduction to the practice of the *gcod* teachings according to the revelations of bDud 'joms glin pa" focussing upon *Ma gcig khros ma nag mo* (subtitle). The colophon title is *bDud 'joms khros ma nag mo'i khrid yig chen mo* and its authors are Padma lung rtogs rgya mtsho (1891-1964), main author, and bDud 'joms gling pa (1835-1904), contributing author."

sPrul sku Padma lun rtogs rgya mtsho 1978. At least another, much more ancient text, also deals with this deity cycle the *Khros ma nag mo'i sgrub thabs dbang rjes gnung* by 'Gyur med rdo rje (gTer bdag gling pa 'gyur med rdo rje, 1646-1714) and given the attachment of Dudjom Rinpoche to the Mindroling (sMin grol gling) tradition, he certainly knew about it.

²⁹ Two of the four main cycles of Dudjom Lingpa, the *Dagnang Yeshe Drawa* (*Dag snang ye shes dra ba*) cycle ("The Wisdom Net of Pure Visions") and the *Choenyi Namkhai Longdzoe* (*Chos snyid nam mkha'i klong mdzod*) cycle ("The Vast Space Treasury of the Nature of Reality"), contain *choe* practices based on Throema Nagmo.

³⁰ Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal 2008. Dudjom Rinpoche's connection to Bhutan started as early as the 1930s and from the 1950s onwards, he had a great following, especially in eastern Bhutan as he spoke the language. His son Dungsé Trinley Norbu (gDung sras Phrin las nor bu) married Jamyang, the granddaughter of the famous Bhutanese lama Sonam Zangpo (bSod nams dbang po, 1888-1982), a disciple of Togden Shakya Sri (rTogs ldan Sa skya sri, 1853-1919). Their children are Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche (rDzong gsar mkhyen brtse Rin po che) and Garab Rinpoche (dGa' rabs Rin po che) who is the Tersar Lineage holder in Bhutan.

³¹ Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal 2008.

³² *Ibid.*: 53.

form of Vajravārāhī or Dorje Phagmo (rDo rje phags mo) who subdues the Ego, and the importance of Vajravārāhī in the Pemakoe landscape is well-known. She is also assimilated as Yeshe Tsogyal (Ye shes mtsho rgyal, eighth century) and represents the female wisdom energy.³³

Although a proper documentation of the Black Throema teachings in eastern Bhutan is not available, they started to take on a country-wide importance with Dungse Garab Dorje (gDung sras dga' rab rdo rje), the grand son of Dudjom Rinpoche, around the year 2000.³⁴ Being a very charismatic teacher, Dungse Garab Rinpoche, born in eastern Bhutan (date of birth unknown), founded the monastery of Rangjung Woesele Choeling (Rang 'byung 'od gsal chos gling) in 1989 with just some few monks and nuns in eastern Bhutan.³⁵ Because of increasing interest, in 1993, he established a separate nunnery nearby, called Thegchhog Kunzang Chhodon Nunnery (Thegs mchog kun bzang chos sgron). He took on disseminating the Black Throema practice amongst laywomen, and teaches that "the body is the basis of the accomplishment of wisdom and the gross bodies of men and women are equally suited. But if a woman has strong aspiration, she has higher potential."³⁶ In this way he also appealed to many ordinary laywomen aspiring to religious practice but not being able to do so as a nun.

He commands a huge following with 25 mainly Black Throema Choe groups in Bhutan, each of them having between 500 to over 1000 members, as well as other *choe*-groups in Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. Moreover, since his father's death in 2011, he has taken over his father's centres abroad and is acknowledged as the spiritual and physical heir to the Dudjom teachings along with one of Dudjom Rinpoche's reincarnations, Sangye Pema Zhepa (Sangs rgyas padma

³³ According to Troma (sic) Nagmo, <http://yangrig.org/node/51>: "The Dalai-Lama in an effort to clarify the distinction between Tārā and Troema, posted the following from notes (March 1987) on a teaching by Ven. Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche, in preparation for the empowerment for Troema Ngondro by H.H. Dudjom Lingpa: Troema is inseparable from the lama as Dharmakaya: Kuntuzang-mo (Prajnaparamita), Samboghakaya: Dorje Palmo (Vajravarahi), Nirmana-kaya: Troema (Vajra Khrodikali). The essence of Troma Nagmo is Yeshe Tsogyal. Troema Nagmo means black wrathful lady, she shows the powerful nature of Yeshe Tsogyal and Khandro Tuk Tik, the heart essence of the dakini."

³⁴ Dungse Garab Rinpoche is the grand-son of Dudjom Rinpoche, the son of Dungse Trinley Norbu (1931-2011), and the younger brother of Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche (b. 1961).

³⁵ Cf. <https://www.facebook.com/rangjungmonastery>. Next to the Thegchhog Kunzang Chhodon Nunnery, Garab Rinpoche also has established an old people's home and four retreat centers in east Bhutan.

³⁶ Dowman 1984: 86.

bzhad pa, b. 1990).³⁷

In 2007, 5000 copies of a book in *poti* format were printed, the *Comprehensive Short Throema Tsok Recitation, Throedring (Zab gter mkha' 'gro khros ma'i las byang 'bring po'i tshogs skong 'don 'grigs)*.³⁸ This book is used for practice by the Black Throema practitioners, along with the large *choe* drum, which represents the dwelling-place of the *dākinī*,³⁹ and a red shawl.

The practitioners, from both sexes or also only women, assemble several times a month in small groups to perform the ritual together. In urban centres, it is done in private houses after office hours. It lasts for about two hours and they concentrate on the *choe* practice of ego-cutting but also on removing obstacles and praying for the welfare of all sentient beings. The melody of these chants is probably amongst the most beautiful in the religious music of Tibetan Buddhism. The devotees, men and women, now wear a kind of uniform with a dark red religious lower garment (*sham thabs*), a white shirt and a shawl with a white stripe between dark red stripes.⁴⁰

Several times a year Dungse Garab Rinpoche conducts large meetings, so-called *drubchen* (*sgrub chen*) with *tshogkor* (*tshogs skor*), that thousands of devotees attend. They are staged in eastern Bhutan, the Thimphu Memorial Chorten (built after his father's visions) or in India. In April 2014, Dungse Garab Rinpoche invited Dudjom Rinpoche's reincarnation, Sangye Pema Shepa to conduct a Black Troema initiation at the Memorial Chorten in Thimphu. Around 50,000 people attended, amongst them 20,000 Bhutanese lay practitioners.⁴¹ In October 2014, Garab Rinpoche conducted a three-day retreat in Paro where his father was cremated. A short video shows the extent of his followers, mostly from eastern Bhutan as Garab Rinpoche speaks in Tshangla.⁴² Very striking are the small white tents, which were unknown in Bhutan and are associated with *choepa* (*gcod pa*) in Tibet, called *coggur* (*cog gur*).⁴³

³⁷ Sangye Pema Zhepa is the grandson of Dudjom Rinpoche and the son of Dola Tulku.

³⁸ This book published in 2007 by Khaling Karma contains the classical Tibetan text and an English translation. The preface explains that it was a "first special edition exclusively for the Bhutanese Throema practitioners by Khaling Karma under the spiritual permission and blessings of His Holiness Dungse Garab Rinpoche, President, Rangjung Woesel Choeling Nyingmapa monastery, Trashigang, Bhutan."

³⁹ On the *gcod* drum, see Cupchik 2013: 113-139.

⁴⁰ This shawl is typical of lay practitioners from eastern Bhutan.

⁴¹ bsTan 'dzin rnam rgyal 2014: 8.

⁴² Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdhGq1t-pd>, accessed July 2015.

⁴³ Samten Karmay, oral communication, 15 June 2015.

Women make up the majority of the Black Throema followers. They have a great devotion for the female Black Throema practice corresponding with the female form of this *dākinī*. This practice allows ordinary women to engage in a religious activity that empowers them as women in ways that go well beyond the spinning of prayer wheels. As members of these groups, they are acknowledged as having the same degree of awareness and socio-religious status as men, a novelty in Bhutanese monastic society.

4. Female Intercessors

In the past, female ritual specialists or “intercessors”, as I call various forms of female mediums and/or shamans as explained below, played an equal role in the ritual life of Bhutanese villages and were on par with their male colleagues. In contrast to male-dominated monastic Buddhism, this was a field where they could find a space and a status without having to compete with the male establishment, which looked down on them. Today, however, such intercessors—whether male or female—are becoming more rare.

These specialists consider themselves as Buddhists but with a special authorisation that is often attributed to Guru Rinpoche, or to the worship of and being possessed by local deities, male or female. It might be an artificial Western attempt to try to divide them into the different categories of mediums and shamans, so it is best to use the following local terms, or simply call them “intercessors”.

In Bhutan, according to different regions, women intercessors have different names, *neljom* (*rnal 'byor ma*) in western Bhutan, *pamo* (*dpa' mo*) all over Bhutan, *jomo* (*jo mo*) in the east. Yet their socio-religious role is very similar and healing is their main function. Possessed by a local deity, male or female and even Gesar,⁴⁴ they intervene through different rituals in order to restore the health of a patient. In their local cosmology, illness is generally perceived as being caused by a patient's offence to the local deities. The offences are not voluntary and are caused by polluting or disturbing them and their abodes through human activities and unbecoming behaviour. The local deities, who have been studied elsewhere,⁴⁵ are ambivalent and can harm if offended. They can steal or injure the vital principle (*srog*) or the “soul” (*bla*) of the person who once fallen ill as a consequence, then needs to call upon an intercessor to identify the cause of the illness, pacify the deity and restore health.

⁴⁴ Schrempf 2015a: 623-632.

⁴⁵ Pommaret 1996; 2004.

Women intercessors are common all over the Himalayas and basically fulfill the same functions as their male colleagues. However, their appearance and *modus operandi* vary according to local circumstances, though some form of possession is a trait common to almost all except for the *delok*.

Many caveats notwithstanding, we might discern a pattern among these intercessors in Bhutan following linguistic lines. Western Bhutan with its Central Bodish languages is more akin to Sikkim and Chumbi (Gro mo) valley in Tibet, while eastern Bhutan with its East Bodish languages would be closer to Arunachal Pradesh.⁴⁶ This hypothesis, which still needs careful assessment, would in a way vindicate the Bhutanese traditional perception of Bhutanese as a population that is divided into "Westerners" and "Easterners", yet this is not our topic here.

The *delok*, "those who come back from the netherworld", are much less common than the other intercessors and have a different function and *modus operandi*.⁴⁷ I will not deal in detail with the description of the women who are *delok* as this phenomenon has now been well documented.⁴⁸ The *delok* "die" and then travel into the netherworld—hells, and less often paradises. They come back to earth to tell people what they have witnessed and bring messages from the dead to the living. Their experience becomes a healing narrative, helping their clients to solve problems and losses of everyday life.

My research in Nepal and Bhutan in 1980-1984 led to the discovery that a few *delok* still existed at the time and some of them practice even today, mostly in peripheral regions, far away from centralised powers. In particular, they seem to be only women while men—albeit rare—do appear in the historical tradition.⁴⁹

This research also showed that the *delok* did not just travel to the netherworld once, as the biographies let us suppose, but at regular intervals during séances which occurred on auspicious days of the month. In fact, these *delok* are more akin to shamans, but shamans who have been Buddhicised in such a way and for such a long time that they had lost the memory of their shamanistic origin.⁵⁰ One could perceive of them as "dozing shamans" to quote the great

⁴⁶ In this line of research, Huber (2013) makes a convincing attempt to redefine the *srid pa'i lha bon* through an eastern Trans-Himalayan connection. See also Bodt 2012.

⁴⁷ See the biography of a twentieth-century female *delok* (Dawa Drolma 1995).

⁴⁸ Pommaret 2010 (1989) & 2012; Cuevas 2008; Prude 2011.

⁴⁹ Pommaret 2010 (1989) & 2012.

⁵⁰ Pommaret 2010 (1989).

anthropologist Philippe Sagant from an article about the Limbu shamans of Nepal.⁵¹

After an initial crisis or sudden illness, which causes their first “death” and travel to the netherworld, the *delok* “dies” for several hours on auspicious days of the Buddhist calendar. These days are known by the people who will come and ask her about news from their deceased relatives, and which merit-making actions they should perform for the deceased in order to speed their release from hells.

The *delok* is the person who can deal with the world of the dead, which ordinary beings cannot reach. Because the *delok* blurs the boundaries between the worlds of the dead and the living, she is seen as a potential threat to ordinary people and therefore her presence used to not be permitted during funeral rites or births. There is also a fear of herself becoming polluted (*sgrib*) by these lifecycle events.

However, the function of the *delok* goes beyond being a messenger between the living and the dead. As a woman, she is seen as being closer to everyday life worries of ordinary people. Through her trance and contact with dead relatives and ancestors as well as the Lord of Death (*gShin rje*), she advises the living on problems affecting them personally, in their family or the community. She exhorts her clients to behave in morally right and appropriate ways and thus restores the socio-religious order of these Buddhist communities.

While death is usually dealt with by a lama, i.e. a Buddhist specialist, restoring both the socio-cosmological and physical order among clients, patients and whole village communities, coupled with travelling to the other world are characteristics that are usually associated with the shaman’s role. It must, however, be stressed that the modern *deloks* are not aware of this shamanistic underlayer and are strongly set in their Buddhist beliefs. This is reinforced by the fact that the biographies of the *deloks* of the past, which they often receive through oral transmission, also obliterated any shamanistic aspect. These biographies are Buddhist parables on leading a morally pure life by strictly adhering to Buddhist ideology.

However, being women on the fringes of Buddhism, the *delok* neither threaten the established religious order nor interfere with the religious functions of *gomchen* (*sgom chen*) or monks concerning soteriological rituals.

This fundamentally ambiguous situation of the *delok* dealing with both Buddhist and shamanic worlds—a fact which they are not even aware of—probably allowed them to survive until today. As autonomous religious women, they are allowed to play a role in a

⁵¹ Sagant 1979: 244-247.

male-oriented religious context because they do not contest the monastic hierarchy and they reiterate the Buddhist world-view. Existing alongside the religious establishment, they are not potentially dangerous for the monks' supremacy in soteriological rituals yet deal with ordinary peoples' issues mediating between the dead and the living in an "unorthodox" yet socially accepted way.

Recent research on *delok*, 30 years after my initial research, prompted me to revisit my former informant, the *delok* in Khamdang, eastern Bhutan, as well as to meet two other *deloks*, one in Gongthong in the east, and one in Paro, in western Bhutan. While the Khamdang *delok* fully assumed her *delok* function, the two others were much more ambivalent about their ritual roles. The Gongthong *delok* (personal interview May 2014) simply refuses to be a *delok* anymore as she is frightened that her body would be cremated before she returns to earth. She spends much of her time listening to lamas' teachings and going for meditation retreats in holy places. The Paro *delok* (personal interview in April 2012) first described her initial disease and trip to the netherworld in a very classical way. While she receives guests in her altar room, sitting on a throne, she has (re)defined herself as a *khandro* which implies a higher status than a *delok*. She also maintains good relations with the monastic establishment. This development indicates that in remote places of eastern Bhutan, there might be more female intercessors surviving modernity and out-migration than in western areas with the socio-religious centers of Thimphu and monastic Buddhism.⁵²

Conclusion

The *delok* and other female intercessors have survived for centuries as a living tradition fulfilling diverse yet defined socio-religious functions in rural settings. Their village communities respect them as women who are endowed with special powers and consider them as needed. However, in the last 30 years in Bhutan, modernisation, education, access to healthcare and rural-urban migration as well as a certain homogeneisation of Buddhism have challenged their long-term right to exist, potentially deminishing their socio-religious relevance in contemporary Bhutan. From what has been described in the first part of this paper, it appears that better living conditions, equal opportunities in religious education and status recognition are drawing women instead to the nunneries or to alternative ways of

⁵² See Schrempf, this issue, and my forthcoming book with Guyer-Stevens.

practising religion, as laywomen, such as the Black Throema Choe practitioners.

This development in Bhutan is quite different from contemporary China where in the wake of a general revival of shamanic activities, female shamans are active but have a low status. Mayfair Yang suggests that:

...womens' bodies are more sheltered from modern discipline, or more often marginalised from modern institutions, and therefore more immune or resistant to the disciplinary and ideological ravages of modernity. This may explain why more women than men become spirit mediums in contemporary China.⁵³

In contemporary Bhutan we witness on one hand a decrease in religious women practitioners wanting to take on or continue their role as rural community-based intercessor on the fringes of Buddhism with an often ambivalent social status. On the other, there is a clear increased interest among women to become urban and monastic-centered or lay Buddhist devotees. The gender and status issues, which are usually not articulated openly in rural areas, are now publically discussed in the media. In contrast to female village intercessors, nuns and lay religious practitioners are now acquiring transformative powers, asserting equal rights for women and their needs in a discourse, which is institutionally supported by the Bhutan Nuns Foundation as well as by many lamas. Because of education and status evolution, nuns are now slowly being seen as role models and are in a position to be free from worldly chores and attachments.

Many questions remain open and can only be answered by future developments: Will the next generation in rural areas signal the disappearance of the female (and male) shamans and mediums due to a lack of communities' and patients' interest or socio-religious purpose, given the strong outmigration among villagers? Would this bring upon the demise of local beliefs and deity cults or will only male shamans continue as intercessors? Generally speaking, can these intercessors survive as healers in a country where the rural set-up is being drastically transformed and education, communication and health facilities cover 95 % of the population?

Be it as it may, what this article shows is the "fluidity" of the Bhutanese society and its ongoing transformations in the field of female religious practitioners. The categories Buddhist or non-

⁵³ Yang 2015: 86.

Buddhist, married or unmarried, lay or cleric seem to be less relevant in the course of a woman's lifetime. What seems to matter, however, is that women tend to now organise themselves in groups and associations, trying to gain more public recognition, training and certification, while searching for an equal status with male religious practitioners.

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Fieldnotes on my Stay with a *Neljom* Teacher and her Disciples in Western Bhutan

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During my first period of field research,¹ I had the opportunity to stay with a *neljom* (*rnal 'byor ma*)² and her family in a village in Wangdue Phodrang, Bhutan. *Neljom* and their male equivalent, *paowo* (*dpa' bo*), are spirit mediums who are consulted by members of the lay community for the diagnosis and resolution of a wide range of problems, as well as for conducting regular protective rituals.

1. Setting

My research in Bhutan took place between January and June 2015. I spent the entirety of this period living in a village in the center of western Bhutan, around 70 kilometres distant from Thimphu, the capital. The village's four households form a line, which runs along a small farm road parallel to the Punatsangchhu River at an altitude of 2,600 metres. The *gewog* (*rged 'og*) subdistrict consists of seven smaller villages with a total of around 400 adult inhabitants.³

I was hosted by the family of my main research subject and interview partner, Am Phub Zam. Together with her husband, Ap Pema Khandu, Am Phub Zam has five children, all of whom had

¹ I would like to thank the editors, Mona Schrempf and Nicola Schneider, for inviting me to contribute to this special issue. Also, I am deeply grateful to my supervisor Toni Huber, Dasho Karma Ura and Dorji Gyaltzen from the Center for Bhutan Studies, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for financial support, Karma Tshering for his assistance in organising my stay, and my interpreter Sangay Dorji.

² Dzongkha terms will be given in a phonetic spelling. Since many words in the ritual context derive from Classical Tibetan or as it is called in Bhutan *choekey* (*chos skad*), I will add the spelling according to Wylie transcription in brackets—where possible—in order to facilitate the comprehension of language and context for the reader.

³ Information obtained at the *gewok*'s administration office, number of people registered as legal voters as of 2010.

married and moved away from home by the time of my stay with them. Both my host parents being in their mid-sixties, they had invited Am Phub Zam's two younger, unmarried cousins, Ugyen Zam and Tandin, to live with them and help them care for the farm as they are both not married. The youngest member of the household is Tandin's son Gyem Dorji, three years old.

Bhutan has a wide variety of local ritual specialists. In general, they can be described as contact persons, healers or mediators for the village community depending on their individual field of expertise.⁴ With regard to *neljom* and *pawo* discussed herein, I provisionally use the term "spirit medium" in addition to the general designation "ritual specialist", although a comparative discussion of descriptive terms applied to such roles will be undertaken when my field studies are completed. The deity plays an important role in the performance of their rituals. Each *neljom* and *pawo* has her/his personal *lha* or "deity", which is invoked in the majority of rituals that they perform. A detailed description of how and what kind of rituals *neljom* and *pawo* perform will be given below.

Am Phub Zam's story

Am Phub Zam is a good example of an autonomous female ritual specialist. Being a *neljom* for almost 30 years, she has come to be regarded as an important figure in her own and the neighbouring villages.

Am Phub Zam was around 20 years old when she first felt an affliction caused by a *lha*. At that time she was pregnant with her second child. Her first child, three years old, became very ill and died, as did several of her family's cattle. She was told by an "astrologer", a *tsip* (*rtsis pa*), that she had been chosen by a *lha* to become a *neljom*, but she did not want to accept this fate. The symptoms of her illness suddenly decreased and, following her recovery, she experienced no other illness for a period of nearly 15 years. In the early 1990s, she fell ill again while her second youngest daughter Chado also became ill and almost died. Neither the medical professionals at the hospital nor rituals performed by other ritual specialists were able to cure the child. Consulting a *tsip*, she again was told that she had to accept the *lha* and her destiny to become a *neljom* in order to save her daughter's and her own life. This time, she also received a great deal of encouragement from the village

⁴ For further information on the diversity of ritual specialists in Bhutan, see my unpublished paper *The Traditional Ritual Specialists of Sikkim and Bhutan* (2014).

community and, responding to both personal and local social pressures, she decided to pursue her calling. Under the influence of the *lha* she went to the *pawo* Ap Domchu, a *pawo* of a neighbouring village, and stayed with him for roughly two months. She claimed that she was led there without being able to control her steps. The *pawo* accepted her as a student and thus became her main teacher, *loepoe* (*slob dpon*). During this phase of initiation, the future specialist must become accustomed to the influence of the *lha* and has to learn how to control the possession by the deity. In this period, the most important ritual is called *thru*⁵ which later developed to be my main area of interest and which I will describe below.

The *lha* can be a local deity and also the spirit of a deceased person. After the death of a *neljom* or *pawo*, the *lha* will look for a new host. This can be anyone, and consanguinity or other features like gender do not have any influence. In Am Phub Zam's case, the *lha* was called *phajo* and came to her from the neighbouring village, where it had been with the *pawo* Ap Phuba before. *Phajo* is a rather high ranking *lha* who is the spirit of a Tibetan saint, which enables her to be a teacher herself.⁶

As soon as Am Phub Zam was able to control the *lha*, she became Ap Domchu's disciple in order to learn the rituals which have to be performed throughout the year. There are four objects that are required to begin the training, all of which must be purchased in advance: the *ringa* (*rigs lnga*, a ritual crown), *dati* (two-sided drum), *tip* (bell) and a scarf. I was told that those objects can be bought at stores and no special preparation is needed to be able to use them. The training with the *loepoe* consists of learning words and chants, that have to be recited before the possession and which have the purpose of praising the personal *lha* in order to invoke it. The second important aspect of the training relates to the construction of the altar and the creation of *tom* (*gtor ma*) that are put on the altar as representations of different *lha* and local deities. Many of the rituals described below contain a section where the *pawo* or *neljom* enters a state of possession by the personal *lha*. When invoking the *lha*, the deity will possess the spirit medium and replace her/his consciousness in order to vocalise the "advice" (*don*) through the spirit medium's mouth. This can be diagnosis and cure of illness,

⁵ The formal spelling *khru* "ablution" could not be verified, but it is highly likely in relation to the observed practice.

⁶ Reported by Am Phub Zam. According to Toni Huber, "*phajo* is a respectful Tibetan kin term meaning 'father' and common in the dialect of Lhodrag (Lhobrag) immediately north of Bhutan. It is a frequently occurring title in association with both Buddhist lamas and various types of autonomous ritual specialists in Bhutanese cultural history." (Personal communication, 9th October 2015).

advice concerning ritual practices a household should execute throughout the following year or the resolution of problems.

2. *Rituals performed*

During my fieldwork, I found there are eight different rituals of which I myself witnessed six.

Lhabse is a protective ritual, which is performed for the well-being of a *neljom* or *pawo's* household. It is carried out every three years and takes three days to perform. The Lhabse will be performed between December and March, preferably on auspicious days as according to the Bhutanese lunar calendar in January or February. The two related occasions where I attended it were the 14th-16th February at Am Phub Zam's house and 16th-18th February 2015 at Am Nakum's house. The shift from one ritual venue to the other when the whole group of participants moved a few kilometers during a few hours, was made due to the 15th and 17th February (26th and 28th days of the 12th Bhutanese lunar month) being two very auspicious days on which the important sections of the ritual, that always take place on the second day of proceedings, must be performed.

A newly discovered medium must perform the Lhabse annually in the first three years. Other specialists of the same teacher-student group are invited in order to enhance the efficacy of the ritual. The Lhabse takes place in a hut which is built only for this purpose on the first day of the ritual and which will be torn down immediately after the last session of chanting on the third day to prevent evil spirits from entering the place. Inside of the structure an altar is built, a portion of raw rice will be spread on a tarpaulin on the ground and the *tom* will be placed on top. Meat and money will be offered several times during the ritual. A pig's head will also be placed next to the altar at the wall of the hut, and is adorned with butter similar to the *tom*. I was told that some time ago a pig would be slaughtered for the ritual, but this custom had been banned by the government and religious authorities. On the second day, people from the village will come to watch the mediums perform in a state of possession by the deity and offer money to the altar and the ritual specialists.

The largest annual protective ritual is known as Bongo. It is carried out for the protection and well-being of a whole village. Am Phub Zam and her four colleagues met in a small hut in the fields of a neighbouring village. The hut, which is permanent, is built of stone and will be used every year for the Bongo. Each year, one village family sponsors the ritual, supplying the officiants with both food

and *doma*.⁷ The five specialists and Au Wangmo, the sponsor, stayed in the hut for four days. Each day, sessions mainly consisting of the mediums chanting and being possessed by their *lha* were carried out with different procedures.



Fig. 1. Lhabse altar with pig's head, *tom* and offerings. Photo: Johanna Prien, 2015.

On the final day, during the largest section of the ritual, the other villagers came to watch and make money offerings. Later, I learned that the villagers were actually not interested in organising the Bongo anymore. As a consequence, it was only staged according to the recommendation of the local head administrator, generally called *gup* (*rged 'og pa*), as it is part of the five-year plan of the Gross National Happiness Commission⁸ to preserve the culture of the region and to support local customs. Three other Bongos that were supposed to take place in the *gewok* were cancelled.

There are two rituals for the purpose of protecting a single household. As they differ only in small details, for the purpose of this paper I decided to describe them in combination. For the rituals Khandum soe ni and Nyep soe ni (or Chundu), which are addressed to the local deities Khandum and Chundu respectively, an altar with *tom*, and meat and incense offerings is prepared. In the main part of the ritual Am Phub Zam will be possessed by her *lha* in order to tell the family members which actions have to be done in the house (e.g. new prayer flags should be put up, the local deities like *lu* (*klu*) should be offered foodstuffs). The ritual ends the next morning with the dismantling of the altar. Whether the Khandum- or Nyep-ritual is performed appears to depend on the family's particular tradition.

⁷ Unripe betel nut that is chewed due to its mildly intoxicating effect.

⁸ Gross National Happiness Commission, *Eleventh Five Year Plan*.

Another ritual which must be carried out regularly but is not often performed in practice is Mem kelwa soe ni. The ritual is directed to a local female deity called Mem and is meant to enhance the agricultural yield. It took place in April, around the time the people began the annual cycle of farming work in the fields. The Mem ritual is exclusively for female participants. Men are not allowed to watch or be in the vicinity while the ritual takes place. We prepared a special dish in one of the neighbor's houses called Menge. With four other women and the five-year-old son of one neighbour we went into the forest where a fire of pine and rhododendron was made and food offerings were prepared. During the ritual, one of the younger women explained to me that Am Phub Zam is possessed by the Mem herself instead of by her personal *lha*. I asked her the reason why men are not allowed to attend the ritual, and she told me that the female Mem does not like to see men and it might happen that she makes the *neljom* run into the forest. Only five minutes later, Am Phub Zam, who was standing in the clearing, singing the Mem's advice suddenly vanished into the forest. One of the women immediately jumped up in pursuit and they both fell to the ground. Am Phub Zam was brought back to the altar without "waking up" and an old lady quickly put a cloth that she wore around the boy's waist to imitate a women's garment called *kyira (dkyi ra)* in order to prevent further confusion.



Fig. 2. Am Phub Zam (third from left) and her disciples invoking their *lha*.
Photo: Johanna Prien, 2015.

There are two types of divination (*mo*) called *lama* and *choma*, which are the most commonly performed irregular rituals. For minor problems and health issues, a layperson will come to Am Phub Zam's house to consult her. For the *lama*-ritual she uses offering plates made

out of bamboo (*bangcu*) full of raw rice over which she will first recite several verses. Then she takes a small amount of grain, throws it into the air and catches a few of them. An uneven number of grains indicates a “yes” or positive answer in response to the question, while an even number of grains is taken to indicate a “no” or negative response. In general this ritual reveals which local deity has been offended and thus caused the problem for the afflicted persons and also which kind of offering has to be made in order to solve the problem.

When the problem is more serious, the divination called *choma* will be performed. This did not take place during the period that I stayed in the field, but Am Phub Zam told me that she would also build a small altar and use her four ritual objects. She will become possessed, and the *lha* will diagnose the illness or problem more precisely than a lama, indicating any offering needed to effect a cure.

Personally, for me the most interesting ritual was the above mentioned *thru* or *thru bab*. It concerns only *pawo* and *neljom* and is applied when the ritual specialist is in her/his initial phase of practicing, or later when the specialist has become ill due to *drib* (*sgrib*, “pollution” or impurity).

Am Phub Zam and her disciples had similar experiences during the initial phases of their becoming *neljom* and *pawo*. They felt dizzy and weak for longer or shorter periods of time combined with fainting and paralysed limbs. Also, mental disorientation is very common. The afflicted person will walk long distances without being conscious or, perhaps, feel attracted to special places like mountain tops or certain trees. In addition to that, all of them experienced the loss of family members, disease among their cattle and bad harvests.

All of them were unhappy about their destiny and first tried to withdraw or even “chase the *lha* away”. Am Nakum, one of the *neljom* disciples, told me that she had done such a ritual with an “astrologer” (*tsip*) and it seemed to work at first, but two or three years later the symptoms came back and she had to accept her fate. The *neljom* Am Namgay Lham went to a monastery to escape the *lha* by “changing her clothes” and becoming a nun, but this was not successful either. She even went as far as Sikkim to consult a female ritual specialist there, but received the same diagnosis of having to accept the *lha*.

All of them consulted different types of specialists like “astrologer” and Buddhist lama (*bla ma*) and received different diagnoses and treatments. But in the end, they all had to recognise that it is impossible to escape their fate since otherwise they would die.

Am Phub Zam's students told me that their *lhas* took them to Am Phub Zam's house. She cared for the confused future disciples even if they came to her at night. The most important step to begin a successful initiation is identification of the personal *lha*, as it must be addressed and spoken to in order to invoke it. Am Phub Zam will start the *thru*-ritual by invoking her own *lha*. The atmosphere is intended to enable the afflicted person to identify the *lha* and the *lha*'s previous human host. For the identification, it is important that the afflicted person accepts the fate of becoming a *neljom* or *pawo* completely. This is particularly well evinced by the following description related to me by Am Phub Zam:

If you accept it completely without any doubt, then only the *lha* will react. But people will not accept this unless they become so ill that they are in a state of dying. On the last stage only they understand. And when the *lha* comes the victim becomes frightened. If it is for sure a *lha* then after praying for my *lha* I will perform a *serkem*-offering" (*gser skyem*) and start reciting the first verse of any performance called *machegom*. After performing the *machegom*, when it comes to the end, the person will be reacting; shivering, breathing fast—if it really is a *lha*. In some cases the victim comes to me in the evening and then we perform the *thru* and directly they accept it, and they can speak out the name of the *lha*. This is an easy case because the person him- or herself is sure to accept it. This is what they have to think. This is a little simpler task. In some cases if the student does not react, then the teacher himself/herself becomes sick. For those who are simple, in those cases the person has to be with the teacher for at least two months because the *thru* has to be performed every day in the evenings and in the mornings.

Am Phub Zam's disciple, Am Namgay Lham, was a very difficult case. It took one year until she was able to identify the *lha*. Am Kunga Om told me that, as a group, they spent many nights performing rituals, invoking their own spirits in order to create an atmosphere that would help Am Namgay Lham to recognise her *lha*. When this finally worked Am Namgay Lham directly officiated the protective ritual called *lhabse* at her home.

Towards the end of my stay in Bhutan, a woman named Am Khandum around 50 years of age visited Am Phub Zam together

with her daughter and her grandson.⁹ She had suffered for three years from body pain, especially in her back. Now the daughter's husband had recently died and she had been told by Am Phub Zam that a *lha* wanted to use her as a medium. She had first consulted Am Kunga Om who referred her to Am Phub Zam as she herself is not able to perform a *thru*, due to her *lha* being of lower status.

To me, Am Khandum seemed very shy and quiet and was obviously unsure about what she was supposed to do. In the evening a small altar was set up and we (the daughter, Sangay and I) sat down at the back wall. I was again allowed to film and set up my camera in a corner of the room. Am Phub Zam put the ritual crown *ringa* to her head and gave an additional bell to Am Khandum. She started by reciting a verse and invoking her own *lha*. In between she gave advice to Am Khandum regarding when to ring the bell, and so forth. Nothing happened. Am Khandum did not seem to feel anything or be influenced by what was happening around her. Am Phub Zam tried a few changes. She put her *ringa* on Am Khandum's head, she asked her to try a standing position, but Am Khandum was still untouched by the ritual. After half an hour of effort they stopped.

Of course I would have liked to have known what would have happened had I and my camera not been in the room. I had asked repeatedly if the officiants were comfortable with both my presence and the presence of the camera, but Am Phub Zam told me explicitly that the camera was no problem at all. Still, I think that Am Khandum felt distracted by my presence.



Figure 3. Performance of *thru* for Am Khandum (left).
Photo: Johanna Prien, 2015.

⁹ This woman is from Changze, a village where people are believed to unwillingly poison the food. Before I met her I was told by others not to eat anything she had touched or given to me. She and her daughter brought food and prepared it since they were requesting Am Phub Zam's service, and we all ate it. Later I asked Am Phub Zam, and she said she did not believe in the poisoning.

Thrue is also used when a ritual specialist is ill and if the reason for this is not local deities but the breaking of a rule that is supposed to sustain purity, which causes *drib*. These rules include staying away from places where a child has been born recently (as long as a cleansing ritual for the household has not been carried out by a monk) or a person has died. Also, objects that belonged to a person that has died should not be touched and the approaching death of a member of the household can cause "impurity" (*drib*). Due to this rule, hospitals are a very bad place for *neljom* and *pawo*, as there are always a number of dying and newborn people in them. Concerning diet, there is one special rule: *neljom* and *pawo* cannot eat meat from animals that have been killed by tiger, leopard, bear, eagle and fox. Meat from an animal that has been killed by a wolf does not pose a problem, however.

When these rules are ignored—which normally happens unknowingly or cannot be avoided—the medium will become ill. The *lha* will feel attacked or insulted and will "send" an illness to the specialist. In the case of the above mentioned meats the symptoms are often stomach pain, vomiting and headache, but in general any disease might be caused by "impurity" (*drib*). The *pawo* or *neljom* will visit Am Phub Zam if possible, and in more serious cases she will go to their abodes. I witnessed a *thrue* ritual when Am Namgay Lham was ill and came to her house to consult her. As always, a small altar was arranged and Am Phub Zam and Am Namgay Lham took up their ritual objects, sat in front of the altar and started reciting verses. Am Phub Zam sprinkled some of the *thrue chu* on herself and then on Am Namgay Lham who, as a consequence, was suddenly possessed by her *lha*. Tandin put her in an upright position and Am Phub Zam also stood up. Am Namgay Lham started singing about the cause of her illness (*don*) and Am Phub Zam continuously sprinkled a large amount of water on her face. Am Namgay Lham's eyes were slightly twitching when the water hit her face but she did not open them.

After "waking up", Am Namgay Lham took the bowl of *thrue chu* outside and put some of the water on her hair, washed her face and rinsed her mouth with it.

The *thrue* is supposed to have an immediate cleansing effect and Am Namgay Lham stated that she felt much better afterwards. In case the illness is not completely cured after one *thrue*, the *pawo* or *neljom* has to come back until he or she is cured. I was told that it never happened that the ritual did not work at all.

When I came to the village in January, Am Phub Zam had not yet arrived. As early as the time when I was organising my trip, I had heard that she was ill and that she would have to spend some time in a hospital in Kolkata. In an interview, I later asked her about this

illness and she told me that she had experienced pain and bleeding from her abdomen. She went directly to the next health post and the small hospital in Bhajo (“Wangdi Town”) and was referred to a hospital in Kolkata. The daughter who had accompanied her told me that a small tumor in her uterus had been detected. In Kolkata she received radiation therapy and medication.

Am Phub Zam told me that her stay in the hospital had caused a number of problems and that she felt very weak and ill. In the two weeks after coming back she did stay in her room a lot and took rest. When the *lhabse* was performed at her home in February, a *thru*e session was included as well in order to cleanse her of the *drib* from the hospital. In her own case Am Phub Zam has to perform the ritual for herself as there is no other teacher or *neljom* with a higher ranking *lha* than hers.

3. Pluralism

There are many different types of ritual specialists in the region of my field studies. On one occasion I went to another village together with Am Phub Zam, in order to watch an annual protective ritual performed by a male *chom*.¹⁰ The *chom* apparently is a ritual specialist who is somehow higher ranking than *pawo* and *neljom*. I was able to interview him during the preparation of his ritual and he told me that he recites Buddha’s words directly, which is the reason for his rituals being regarded more effective. He also has a personal deity, a female *lha* named Lhamo Remate. He even dressed in women’s clothes for the performance of the ritual because of his *lha* being female.¹¹ However, the *neljoms* and *pawos* I met did not dress according to their *lha*’s gender.

The *chom*’s ritual was much bigger and more elaborate than the ones I had seen before. The food offerings were more expensive and as payment he received more money than *neljoms* and *pawos*. Since this family did not invite a *neljom* or *pawo* for an annual ritual, my personal impression is that the *chom*’s ritual is regarded as being more effective or potent than the ritual performed by *neljoms* and *pawos* and thus wealthy families would rather invest in the *chom*.

¹⁰ The term *chom* might correspond to *jomo* (*jo mo*) used in eastern Bhutan to designate certain spirit mediums who get possessed by the mountain goddess Ama Jomo alias Lhamo Remate (see Mona Schrempf’s contribution in this volume), but a linguistic connection could not be verified to date.

¹¹ The same kind of dress code applied to male *jomos* in eastern Bhutan (Mona Schrempf, personal communication, October 3, 2015).

I tried to observe Am Phub Zam and see how she reacted during his performance. She behaved like a normal spectator, neither more curious nor having a negative attitude towards the *chom*. During the ritual the family members and some of the spectators, including Am Phub Zam, made prostrations towards the altar he had built. They also received a *sunki*, a blessed thread, which they wound around their wrist.

Apart from consulting *neljoms* and *pawos*, laypeople do also contact ritual specialists like Buddhist lamas and “astrologers” (*tsip*). I conducted interviews with both types of specialists to find out more about their view on the mediums. Both told me that they think *neljoms* and *pawos* are doing an important job and are significant members of the society. Still, when I asked if they would consult them themselves or let their family members go there to ask for advice, they both directly said no, they would never do that. The Buddhist lama, however, told me about a ritual where *pawos* or *neljoms* co-operate with lamas and *tsips*. This ritual is known as *tercha* and is performed to release the soul of a deceased person that is still roaming around. This can happen when an individual dies because a local deity has been angered by the individual’s behavior. All three ritual specialists have their separate tasks in the ritual, which involve caring for the roaming soul of the deceased, the local deity and the initial cause of the illness (e.g. environmental pollution). As the deceased in this case had died before the curing offering had been made, the deity had not yet been appeased and the soul could not be liberated. Unfortunately I only heard about this ritual right before the end of my field research and could not find out more about it.

Talking to lay members of the community I rarely heard negative statements about the mediums. The grandson of Am Kunga Om told me that many people feel sorry for *pawos* and *neljoms* as they accept a great deal of suffering and hardship for the purpose of helping everybody else. On the other hand, I was told that some people think of the spirit mediums as being impostors. Also, people increasingly prefer consulting the medical health posts and hospitals with biomedical professionals. Also three of the *neljoms* confirmed that they feel embarrassed when being called a *neljom* in public.

4. Outlook

The youngest of the mediums I worked with is 53 years old. I did not hear of any young disciples in the area. Am Phub Zam repeatedly told me that there would be many new *neljoms* and *pawos* in a few years when the current ones had died and the *lha* would search for

new “hosts”. Personally, I am afraid the number of ritual specialists will decrease in the near future. Many people, especially the younger generations, do not take the practice of ritual specialists seriously anymore or have less faith in the spirits and deities. I met a lot of people, including Am Phub Zam’s own children, who did not want to believe or understand why I am doing research on this topic as, according to them, there is nothing special or important about it.

I hope to be able to do more field research on the topic, not only to record what is there now but also to observe future developments.

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Caring for Women's Words and Women's Bodies. A Field Note on Palmo and her "Demoness Welfare Association for Women"

Françoise Robin

(INALCO, Asies)

n a warm afternoon in August, I asked Palmo (dPal mo),¹ "What kind of people do you recruit to work with you at the 'Demoness Association'?"² We were in the empty apartment of her relatives in Xining where she was staying temporarily. She crouched down next to me, holding my hand, and said:

First, women. Not just that, but warm (*sha tsha*) and respectful (*rtsis bkur*) women. With ethics (*kun spyod*). Women who are not afraid to take other women's hands, as I am doing now with you, to listen to them, however uneducated they are. When we go out to the field, we cook with these women, we laugh with them, we share their lives. We don't stay at fancy hotels. Sophisticated women, proud women, and of course women who cannot speak fluent Tibetan cannot work with us. We also need women doctors, of course. And women in good health, because we go out to the fields in the winter, we carry heavy stuff, we travel long distances over uncomfortable roads and we stay in places that are Spartan at best. And we still have to be fit for the few days we are in the fields. Women who have health problems, women who have problems with their husbands, or mothers with newborn children—we cannot hire them, I am sorry to say. We need women who can dedicate one hundred percent of their time to our activities, when we are out in the field.

¹ In Amdo dialect, her name is pronounced Huamo; but I keep it here in the standard Tibetan transcription, Palmo.

² Throughout this article, I use abbreviated terms, such as "Demoness Association" (*Srin mo tshogs pa*) for its complete name "Demoness Welfare Association for Women" (*Srin mo bud med rogs skyor tshogs pa*).

These may be demanding requirements for recruitment, but Palmo has managed to form a core group of committed Tibetan women who each take their turn to carry out voluntary women-focused activities under the umbrella of the Demoness Welfare Association for Women, founded by Palmo in 2009. While the combination of women's health and women's literacy is a common feature of public health agendas world-wide, the interests of this association reflect those of the founder. Her specialisation and interests lie in two apparently unrelated fields and make up the core of this grass-roots association—women's writings and women's health. This short field note will briefly introduce Palmo and the three specific fields of actions of her association: women's literature, rural women's health and nuns' health.



Fig. 1. Palmo in Xining. Photo: Françoise Robin, 2015.

Palmo is a modern female intellectual, a professor of Tibetan literature in the Tibetan Studies department of the Northwest Nationalities University (Tib. Nub byang mi rigs slob grwa chen mo, Ch. Xibei Minzu Daxue) in Lanzhou (Gansu Province). She was born in 1968 into a community of pastoralists north of Kokonor lake (mTsho sngon po) as the daughter of an active woman cadre and an unassuming father. In our conversations over the years, Palmo repeatedly expressed her admiration for sacred women from Tibetan history, such as Machig Labdroen (Ma gcig lab sgron, 1055-1149). She has also great admiration for Sera Khandro (Se ra mkha' 'gro kun bzang bde skyong dbang mo, 1892-1940) and is familiar with her writings. Presently, she is about to publish—in Tibetan—one of the

rare autobiographies written by a woman, Orgyan Chokyi (O rgyan chos skyid, 1675-1729). She had come to know about this text through the work of a western scholar, Kurtis Schaeffer, who published an English translation of Orgyan Chokyi's autobiography in 2004.³

1. Words and Literacy

The Demoness Association was founded in 2009. The name “demoness” (*srin mo*)—familiar to Tibetans (and Tibetan specialists)—sometime invokes ambivalence, while at other times it is seen as provocative. Yet it was consciously chosen by Palmo to signify women and strength,⁴ indicating a will to work for women's empowerment.⁵ From its inception, the association and its board, which currently has 13 members, have been active in two fields, targeting two widely differing groups of women on the Tibetan plateau: pastoralists and farmers in rural areas whose access to health is highly limited and often problematic, and at the other end of the spectrum, highly literate, well educated and usually urban women who face problems and discrimination concerning access to the Tibetan language literary scene. This seemingly odd duality of focus clearly reflects Palmo's own training, personality and ideals, and also reveals the uneasy space occupied by Tibetan women in the Amdo (A mdo) part of Tibet.

A poet and writer herself, Palmo experienced firsthand the dearth of opportunities for women writers. The world of Tibetan language

³ Schaeffer 2004.

⁴ Two important demonesses are attested to in Tibetan mythology: one is the formidable “supine demoness” or ogress (*srin mo*) believed to be located under the land of Tibet. That demoness had to be pinned down via temples and stupas built on her joints, for Buddhism to be able to spread in Tibet and further beyond in the Himalayas. For details, see Gyatso 1987, and Mills 2007 for a geomantic reassessment of Gyatso's feminist reading of the myth. Another demoness is the alleged and mythical mother of the Tibetan people: this “mother demoness from the rocks” (*ma brag srin mo*) mated with a monkey, an emanation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteśvara (*sPyan ras gzigs*), engendering offspring who are considered to be the ancestors of the Tibetan people. According to this legend, Tibetans inherited compassion from their father and aggressiveness from their mother. It is not clear from which demoness the association takes its name, although the latter seems more likely.

⁵ Not everyone seems to appreciate the association's name. Some men express puzzlement and even dislike at a name that they associate with hostility and aggressiveness. As Gyatso has shown, the demoness can be considered the symbol of an ignorant pre-Buddhist Tibet that has to be tamed by Buddhism. By claiming to restore the demoness, and to assert its feminine identity, Palmo might have wished to challenge the sometimes negative Tibetan Buddhist images of women's “lower birth” (*skye dman*) associated with this formidable creature.

literature differs little from similar fields elsewhere and can be described as being undoubtedly androcentric. According to my estimate, writings by women have accounted for only two to eight percent of all published literary material in Tibet since 1980s.⁶ This can be explained only partly by the comparatively low percentage of women attending school in the 1980s up until the mid-1990s, at least in most Amdo areas. The few literate women who were bold enough to submit their writings to editors and publishers faced numerous hurdles until the early 2010s before their works would see publication.

In literary journals, sending a piece of literature signed by one's name (names are often gendered in Tibet) meant being classified according to one's gender. In the case of women, this often meant being put on hold by a journal editor, usually a man, who would wait until he had enough material to insert a special "women's writing section" in an issue. In publishing houses, the problem is largely financial, as most books published in Tibetan language have to be self-financed by their author, even if printed by an official publishing house. With an inferior level of education, and hence with lower wages and less financial independence, women are less likely than men to meet the financial criteria imposed by publishers.⁷ As a consequence, few women writers reach the stage of publication, often keeping their writings for themselves and never seeing them in print.

Palmo, aware of this critical situation, strove to change it through her Demoneess Association. She started publishing books and collections of texts by women authors only, beginning with an anthology of women's poetry,⁸ for which she obtained support from a New York-based development organisation, the Trace Foundation. In 2011, she launched a four-volume collection covering diverse literary genres written by Tibetan women writers only (fiction, poetry, essays and poetic prose).⁹ In 2014, this time with support

⁶ Robin 2015. This figure is valid for publications that are mixed in terms of the gender of the authors (magazines, anthologies). Still, from the year 2000 onwards, women have started publishing women-only books and anthologies, a change which can be attributed in good part to Palmo's actions, as will be seen in the present article. For a general survey of 25 years of Tibetan women poetry, see Robin 2010.

⁷ According to Palmo this difference of treatment is also at work in the salary received by the authors: a male author receives 100 yuan for 1000 characters, but a woman author is only paid 80 yuan.

⁸ dPal mo 2005a.

⁹ See dPal mo 2011.

from the state, she edited a collection of five single-author volumes.¹⁰ Another five-volume set is planned for 2015 and a third for 2016.

Palmo is presently preparing a trilingual encyclopaedia (Tibetan, English, Chinese) of famous women in Tibetan civilisation and a collection of writings by famous women in Tibetan history. She had launched a woman's journal (Tib. *Gangs can skyes ma'i tshags par*, "Journal of Women from the Land of Snow") in 2009 but it was temporarily halted by the authorities, who regarded its content as being problematic. She has organised two women-only literary competitions: one for adult writers, and one at the privately run "Girl School of the Grassland" (*rTswa thang bu mo slob grwa*, 500 pupils), founded by the monk Jigme Gyaltzen ('Jigs med rgyal mtshan) from Ragya (Ra rgya) monastery (Qinghai Province).

As she recalled in 2015, although she had already proved that Tibetan women writers are as worthy of publishing their literary works as men are, she still had to face discriminatory behaviour on the part of male literature professionals. In one instance, a male editor at a publishing house declined to attend the launching ceremony for one of her collections. In another case, a publisher was reluctant to print what he considered to be too many copies of one of her anthologies, but in fact, the initial print run of 3,000 copies was sold out in seven days. Palmo and her Demoness Association have also promoted a more unusual initiative: book fairs by female students. These are held at the university where she teaches. Through these endeavours, Palmo demonstrates that women writers exist and produce interesting literature in Tibet, nurturing a field of women's literature and defusing a common prejudice about the impossibility of women being on a par with men in the field of literary achievement. In itself, this active involvement with literature is noteworthy, as she is the sole Tibetan writer I know of who has no institutional support but has actively launched such important social activities in the field of literature.

2. Rural women's bodies

However passionate Palmo may be about literature, words, and the fate of Tibetan language, she is a woman above all, and a woman who claims her feminine identity with pride. In her poem "I am a woman", she enumerates and claims for herself the different parts of her womanly body. Rather than lament what is commonly a subject

¹⁰ mTsho 2014; Tsho ring dbyangs skyid 2014; Kha ba lha mo 2014; rTogs sad lha mo 2014; dPal mo 2014.

of shame in traditional Tibetan society, on the contrary, she boasts about it.¹¹ She finds the miserable health condition of many rural women of her age and older (that is, above 45) distressing; she had tears in her eyes when we were talking about it in August 2015. How come, she thought, that she was still in a good shape while women of the same age as her but living in rural areas age quickly and suffer countless health problems? This assessment led her to diversify the activities of the Demoness Association. From women already quite privileged, endowed with high educational and social capital, and little physical disabilities, the efforts were directed towards the other end of the female spectrum, that of uneducated, illiterate Tibetan women, and their relationship to their body.

Palmo believes that adult rural Tibetan women, i.e. most of the women of her generation, suffer from hastily implemented and badly adapted birth control policies starting in the early 1980s and going on for 15 to 16 years. According to her observations, they have often undergone sterilisation after their first or second child, perhaps not under constraint, but with certainly very limited information, scant instructions in terms of hygiene and self care, and hardly any possibility to confide to their husbands. Here, Palmo's analysis agrees with Mona Schrempf's formula: such birth control policies have left these women "*scarred by, and scared of, the state's facilities associated with birth and birth control*".¹² In the Mongolian Autonomous district of Sogdzong (Sog rdzong, Chin. Henan, rMa lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai), according to Palmo's own findings, seven out of ten women above 40 years of age had been sterilised. "Contrary to city women and Han women," she said, "Tibetan women as well as most women from a minority rural background had not been informed of alternative contraceptives (coil, condom) back in the 1980s and 1990s, and underwent sterilisation in massive numbers for want of a better method—hence the current problems."

Speaking no Chinese, having no personal savings, isolated in the countryside, surrounded by women as undereducated as them, having internalised the shame associated with women's status and diseases, living in a world where power and knowledge holders (village leaders, lamas, doctors) are overwhelmingly male, these women had often to keep silent about their sickness, being deprived

¹¹ dPal mo 2005b. See Robin 2013 for a partial translation of this poem and for a discussion of the topic of the literary relationship of today's Tibetan women poets to their bodies.

¹² Schrempf 2011: 342; my emphasis. Schrempf also stresses the often limited medical skill or even malpractice, especially during former, occasionally practiced mass-sterilisation campaigns.

of any possibility to ask even basic questions. Moreover, their education has hardly encouraged them to take time to reflect upon themselves and their feelings, be they physical or psychological.¹³

Thus began the aim of members of the Demoness Association to work in the ambit of Tibetan women's health, temporarily putting a halt to its literary-focused activities. I asked Palmo in what way the implications of the work of the Demoness Association in a field like women's health collide or interfere with that of the omnipresent and powerful state-run All-China Women's Federation (Chin. *Quanguo funu lianhe hui*), with its many local branches and subbranches covering the whole country.¹⁴ In what way could the Demoness Association differentiate itself? Palmo's findings also reveal that in rural areas state-run health organisations invite more suspicion than trust on the part of Tibetan women.¹⁵ First, it consists mainly of Han Chinese women with little cultural sensitivity and no knowledge of Tibetan language and culture, and little material in Tibetan language, a problematic barrier when one is to communicate with and establish trust-based relations with women patients whose mastery of Chinese is at best paltry.

Also, according to Palmo's contacts in the field, members of All-China's Women Federation are seen as perfunctory bureaucrats whose main role consists in monitoring women's reproductive affairs, as well as ensuring that top-down campaigns are implemented with as few efforts as possible, demonstrating limited genuine interest in their job and in the targeted audience. "Whether they do something or nothing, it's all the same," summarised one of Palmo's co-workers. Moreover, in the sensitive field of Sino-Tibetan interaction, the Chinese state's "benevolence" and "care" are in fact often perceived with suspicion as the invisible hand of the state, even by the few politically savvy yet illiterate women for whom the state's interference in their reproductive capacity is met with reluctance and mistrust.

Between 2009 and 2013, the Demoness Association organised 13

¹³ When visiting a rural village in Dobi (rDo sbis, Xunhua district, Qinghai province), ten years ago, leisurely sipping a cup of tea with the male members of the family I was staying with, I was told by my young male Tibetan friend that it was common to frown upon a woman who pauses to drink between meals, as it implies that she privileges her own comfort over what are conventionally considered more pressing domestic tasks.

¹⁴ In fact the same question could have been asked regarding the Demoness Association's literary activities. The dearth of women on the literary scene was noticed by Hartley 2005 and Gyatso & Havnevik 2005.

¹⁵ This coincides with Mona Schrempf's research findings on contraception, women's reproductive health and health-seeking behaviour (Schrempf 2011).

field trips to Amdo-speaking parts of Qinghai and Gansu provinces.¹⁶ Most trips lasted for three or four days, and an average of 130 women attended the training sessions. These were arranged in agreement with local leaders and go-betweens, thanks to the intervention of members of the Association who hail from different parts of Amdo and enjoy good connections with local leaders.¹⁷ Field trips take place during a holiday when the members of the Association are free,¹⁸ on a voluntary basis, and consist of a team of four to six women in general. There has to be at least one woman doctor who specialises in gynaecology (literally “women’s diseases”, *mo nad*), ideally two, as well as a few accompanying women. All are Tibetans as Tibetan language is mandatory, lack of access to health for rural women being often due, among others, to the cultural and language barriers experienced by illiterate and monolingual women patients facing Han male doctors. The Demoness Association asks the local leaders to publicise the visit of the voluntary team, and to have a location arranged for them that can host as many women as possible in the villages visited. During the first two years (2009, 2010), women did not dare (or bother) to attend, and women above 35 were too ashamed to stay and watch, for example, pictures of male sexual organs. Now, Palmo and the doctors demonstrate the use of protection by using bananas, otherwise women would run away before the end of the presentation. In other words, the Association adapted a more pragmatic audience-oriented strategy.



Fig. 2. First evening of the field trip in Xunhua District (Qinghai Province).
Photo: Courtesy of Demoness Association, 2011.

¹⁶ The activities were stopped in 2014 and, in 2015, nuns were targeted, as will be seen below.

¹⁷ The importance of not being a stranger for this kind of initiative to be successful is also stressed by Schrempf (2011: 339).

¹⁸ Either in the summer or in one of the “golden weeks” of China, i.e. around May 1st and October 1st.

Palmo says with a sigh:

Human beings are greedy, it is their nature. So now we announce that we will distribute little presents for free, at the end of the presentation, to make sure these women stay till the end.

Presents consist of women's underwear, a novelty for many women above 50, as well as towels, contraceptive ovules and cream. Once everyone (up to 100 women, no men) is gathered, a now well-conceived 45-minute video-presentation is shown on a wall or on a makeshift screen.¹⁹ Palmo begins with a 10-minute general introduction, deflating suspicion by making clear she is not sent by the state (*gzhung gis btang ni ma red*) but that she has come as a voluntary member of a Tibetan women's association, with a pure heart (*lhag bsam*). This preliminary session confirms the significance of the trust factor, as already noted by Schrempf.²⁰ She tells her female audience that they should not feel shy about buying sanitary towels, and she explains how to use them. She encourages them to compare the necessary and useful purchase of sanitary towels every month, representing a maximum of ten yuan, to the price of cigarettes spent by their husbands—a not only useless but also harmful as well as expensive purchase, since the budget dedicated to cigarettes can run up to 300 yuan per month. She is then followed by a female doctor, wearing a white coat to indicate that she has the credentials to speak with authority.²¹ The latter talks about birth control, reproduction, hygiene, and maternal care, while presenting on a screen tailor-made bilingual (Chinese-Tibetan) pictures and photographs to her audience. Women can also individually consult doctors who then take careful notes of their medical records.

Soon after the first trainings started, women felt that their husbands needed to be educated too about male and female health and sex-related diseases, and requested that the presentation be given to them as well. Even the otherwise audacious Palmo felt too shy for that. However, a female doctor volunteered to take up the task, gathering men separately to teach them about reproduction and

¹⁹ Palmo explained that they have developed three different types of presentation according to the targeted audience: farmers, herders and students (in the latter case they insist on birth control and contraception, but not so much on hygiene, which is a familiar topic to them).

²⁰ See Schrempf 2011: 333 ff.

²¹ The use of a white coat can be double edged: it may also lead to an ethnic misidentification, i.e. being associated with Chinese doctors more than with being a Tibetan (see Schrempf 2011: 335 for an example).

health. This woman doctor, Palmo added with satisfaction, has given such a talk in front of a total of 10,000 persons, including men: “She is really brave!”²² In a world where women rarely speak in public (the only public arena where they are conspicuous is the singing scene), a woman speaking about private health problems to men is indeed rare enough, and thus important to mention in this context.



Fig. 3. A Tibetan woman doctor showing a picture of a foetus on a makeshift screen during a field trip, Xunhua District (Qinghai Province).

Photo: Courtesy of Demoness Association, 2011.

Things did not go smoothly at the start. Apart from initial reluctance and shyness shown by rural women, among men negative comments could also be heard. Audiences in the male-only training sessions would crack dirty jokes at the female doctor, but Palmo intervened and said she would not allow this to happen any longer. The fact that Palmo is herself divorced with no children, an unusual and frowned upon situation in traditional Tibetan society, invited many derogatory comments on the internet, where Palmo regularly presents the Demoness Association’s work. These comments heavily attacked her private life. Initially disturbed by such misplaced comments, she decided not to read them any longer and deterred her colleagues from reading them too, urging them to carry on instead with their work. However, from 2012 onwards there has been a shift, she said, and now the Association receives so many invitations for workshops in remote rural areas that they are unable to take them all up.

²² *sPobs pa chen po*.

3. Nun's bodies

Encouraging literary practice among women with high cultural capital and improving health among women with low economic and cultural capital could be seen as covering the whole range of most women problems. What were the plans of Palmo's Association for the future? Palmo replied that younger women, even in the countryside, now have much better access to education than their mothers. They are more educated in terms of hygiene, contraception, and childcare. As a consequence, health, birth control and mother-child related education developed by the Demoness Association will hopefully become a thing of the past within 10 years, she estimates.²³

Yet, Palmo found that there is still one category of women who has escaped her Association's attention: nuns. The idea occurred to Palmo when in 2013 two of her female students invited the Demoness Association to two nunneries, located not far from their own homelands in Amdo and Khams, in today's Ngaba (rNga ba) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province: Jogoen Yishin Khachoeing (Jo dgon yid bzhin mkha' spyod gling), which hosts 500 nuns (175 were present at the workshop), and then Khyungchue Jogoen (Khyung mchu'i jo dgon, 200 nuns). The two students told Palmo that, through their nun relatives currently living there, they have heard of urgent health problems that needed to be addressed. When Palmo put forward the idea to the board members of her association—a team of committed, urban, educated Tibetan women—for approval, it was met with surprise and disbelief. Why focus on nuns' health? Having (in theory) no sexual activity, they do not need any information about birth control or sexually transmitted diseases. But Palmo retorted that nuns have health problems like everyone else (she listed stomach, kidney and liver conditions; menstruation as well as breast-related problems).²⁴ They also tend to neglect or be shy about hygiene (or cleanliness, *gtsang phra*). More specifically, said Palmo, their meditative practice (*mtshams*) leads to specific problems "as they sit for too long on the ground."²⁵ Of course, they have no one to confide in, being particularly shy (*bag khums*) about their body and these problems.

So it was agreed to establish contact with and visit these two

²³ Again, this coincides with Schrempf's findings (2011: 344).

²⁴ On the topic of nun's diseases, see the very informative article by Schneider 2012.

²⁵ According to Nicola Schneider, in the 1990s, a Chinese physician from Belgium started medical consultation with nuns at Serthar (gSer thar) monastery. It was found out that they had a very specific problem: their womb was literally "rotten" due to long meditative sessions sitting on an often cold and moist ground, with little protection (personal communication, Paris, 18 October 2015).

nunneries. Palmo hired two drivers and teamed up with three women doctors from Qinghai (among whom a gynaecologist was able to discreetly borrow an ultrasound machine from her hospital over the weekend, bringing it back at the end of her field trip). Between April 10th and 13th, 2015, they visited these two nunneries next to Larung Gar (Bla rung sgar), after a very long car ride. At first, Palmo said, like everywhere else, nuns would look down and stay mute; they were too “embarrassed” (*bag khums*) to ask questions or even to admit interest in what the Demoness team had to tell them. Yet, as time went on, they became more daring and open. The doctors also distributed medicine. The work with nuns is only beginning. Through Choephel Zangpo (Chos 'phel bzang po), a committed activist fighting Aids in Qinghai, and his association “All-Loving Volunteers for the Prevention of Aids” (Kun brtse e 'gog rang 'dun pa), whom Palmo met in 2012 in Chengdu, the Demoness Association is now deploying its two-pronged activity once more in the direction of another nunnery: the main nunnery (*jo mo dgon pa*) in Larung Gar, which houses up to 5,000 nuns according to Palmo's own estimate. Having met two female masters of studies (*mkhan mo*) there last year, and under the supervision of Khenpo Tsultrim Lodroe (mKhan po Tshul khirms blo gros), they have jointly produced two books about women's health, as well as three series of books about the writings of famous Tibetan religious women,²⁶ thus showing concerns that converge with those of Palmo and her association.

4. Dissenting voices

This brief note would be incomplete if dissenting voices were not granted space. I will leave aside men's doubts about and disagreement with the Association's actions and, perhaps more accurately, about Palmo as a person herself, and focus on critiques from Tibetan women who know her activities well and sometimes even work for her. Critiques are rather minor but they show that the educated feminine ground in Amdo today does not speak with a single voice. The first critique I heard came from a rather well established woman writer: to her mind, Palmo and the general approach of her association is too aggressive and confrontational, and this could turn out to be more counterproductive than beneficial for the women's cause. The woman writer claimed that in its present

²⁶ In one interview, Palmo mentioned 16 books in that collection, but it appears that the collection contains 15 titles altogether.

state, Tibetan society needs a gentler approach if it is to succeed in raising women's rights and literacy level. Moreover, in terms of women's health, she thought that the All-China Women's Federation was reasonably efficient and responsible, having been herself a member of a local section of the All-China Women's Federation; thus she passed milder judgement on this state-run organisation.

The other critique that I heard came from a woman who is closer to Palmo but who, out of respect to her and her hard work, and in regards of their respective hierarchical stance, did not dare voice her remarks too openly, adding that Palmo was so dedicated that it would seem ungrateful or unfair to criticise her. This literature-loving woman confided that the focus on literature appears now to be anachronistic: "We don't need to nurture women writers now. We are in a new age." This statement does not imply disillusion or a lack of interest in literature, but testifies to this woman's pragmatic observation of a shift in intellectual practices in Tibet today. At the time of this writer's teenage years and young adulthood, literature was one of the only fields where one could operate as an educated Tibetan woman (or man) outside of the Party. Today, new entrepreneurs are mushrooming and videos and films have replaced short stories and poems as markers of ethnic identity; social activism has become a viable option.

5. *New directions*

Palmo is somehow aware of this modern shift: for the fourth literary prize awarded to girls schooled at the "Snowland Girls' School" (*Gangs can bu mo slob grwa*), poetic composition was forbidden and only short literary essays (*lhug rtsom*) were accepted.²⁷ Moreover, Palmo has started to organise workshops at her university to empower educated women and encourage them to be able to compete on the job market with their male counterparts. The latter are often more daring than women students who are expected to be quiet, self-effacing and obedient. It is also important to note that the Demoness Association's activities extend beyond women's literature and health: in 2011, an ex-student of Palmo, who was then working in Shanghai, secured support from 10 Han Chinese sponsors for the Association. They came as tourists to Kangtsa (rKang tsha) and

²⁷ I was lucky to be in Xining at the time of deliberation and to be included in the jury, a team of five adult readers (four women, one man). 50 short pieces were competing, most dealing with teachers' and parents' kindness or missing one's family and homeland. Few demonstrated any literary skill, although the jury agreed that spelling and syntax were generally good.

pledged to help children in need (boys and girls alike), from Tsochang (mTsho byang), Chabcha (Chab cha), and Chentsa (gCan tsha), for two to three years of schooling.

Still, literature features prominently for Palmo. She has set up a WeChat conversation group, called “Kitchen” (Thab tshang), with over 50 members, in which news about women’s literature is shared. She hopes that after solving women’s health matters, she will be able to return to literature, her original focus and locus of interest. But she adds upon reflection that there is yet another direction in which she would like to extend the association’s activity: legal counselling for women. Wife beating is not uncommon in Tibetan rural areas, but most women do not know that they would have the law on their side if they reported the abuse.²⁸

The phone rings again. It is the editor from the Sichuan People’s Press calling to urge her to submit all manuscripts in time for next year’s publication—Palmo later stresses that this publishing house has never published any text in Tibetan language: their collection will thus be the first one. Palmo promises and hastily calls her writer female friends telling them not to waste this opportunity. The new collection benefits from a grant and authors will be paid for their books, reversing the usual trend of self-financing. Moreover, a combination of quality and quantity (*rgyu spus dang grangs ka*) will definitely install women’s writing in the Tibetan literary scene, she hopes. And so goes the busy life of Palmo, professor, writer, poet, health counsellor, team leader, a dedicated defender of Tibetan language and literature, a committed lay social activist engaged in providing health care for women and nuns and striving for more gender equality in Amdo.

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²⁸ This objective may indicate a new direction for the defence and promotion of women’s rights in Tibetan areas. Rajan (2015) has shown that Tibetan women’s empowerment activists tend to overlook domestic violence in Amdo (and in exile as well). She links this silencing with the commonly-held imperative among Tibetans, at a time of ethnic and cultural survival anxiety, to “maintain a dignified stance” to the outside world, thus denying any major flaw in Tibetan society.

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Self-Representation and Stories Told: the Life and Vicissitudes of Khandro Choechen

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In Tibetan Buddhism, the female figure of the *khandroma* (*mkha' 'gro ma*) is an elusive one, especially in her divine form,² but also when applied to a particular woman. Most often, *khandroma* refers to a lama's wife (or his consort)—who is usually addressed by this title—, but there are also other female religious specialists known as such. Some are nuns, like the famous Mumtsho (Mu mtsho, short for Mu med ye shes mtsho mo, b. 1966) from Serthar,³ yet others are neither nuns nor consorts. All can be considered, in varying degrees, as holy women or female saints. However, Tibetans distinguish them also according to their respective religious realisations, thus saying that only some are full-fledged *khandromas* whereas others are not.⁴ Even though frequently revered by their followers, these women are usually only locally known, that is in a given religious community.⁵ Merely a few have reached fame in the wider Tibetan region and even rarer still are those who have been the subject of written texts, be it biographies, autobiographies or be they just mentioned a few times in other texts.⁶

The purpose of this article is to document the life and the vicissitudes of a contemporary *khandroma*, Khandro Choechen. Born in c. 1961 in Kham, she fled from Tibet only recently, in 2004. Since then, she first settled in India, Dharamsala, and then migrated to

¹ This paper could not have been written without the financial help of the Centre de Recherche sur les Civilisations de l'Asie Orientale and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, to whom I owe special thanks.

² See, for example, Gyatso 2001: 249.

³ See Schneider 2015a: 466-467.

⁴ Personal communication with Garje Kamtul Rinpoche, March 2011. It is interesting to note that during my fieldtrips I was frequently warned of the numerous "fake" (*rdzun ma*) *khandromas*, a qualifying term that seems to refer especially to some consorts of lamas.

⁵ Ra se dKon mchog rgya mtsho 2003: 139.

⁶ In the last years, several autobiographies of women have been discovered, translated and analysed, see e.g. Havnevik 1999; Schaeffer 2004; Diemberger 2007; Bessenger 2010; and Jacoby 2014.

Seattle, United States.

Khandro Choechen is believed to have several extraordinary spiritual qualities: she is a “treasure revealer”, *tertoen* (*gter ston*), she is well-known for her healing capacities and she regularly experiences “pure visions” (*dag snang*), enabling her to pronounce prophecies (*lung bstan*), amongst other things. In addition, she has been recognised as a *tulku* (*sprul sku*) of a long female line.

I will first give an overview of Khandro Choechen’s life story, taken from her short autobiography and supplemented by our conversations and information given by her family members living in Tibet.⁷ I will then analyse her social and religious status proposing that she can be considered as an autonomous female religious specialist. Indeed, Khandro Choechen is one of the few female religious masters who is neither married, nor a consort of a lama or a nun, thus challenging traditional female roles and gender relations in both kinship and the religious setting.

1. Khandro Choechen’s life narrative

Khandro Choechen was born in Kham-Minyag (Khams Mi nyag), in a small village called Basey (Bal bsed), situated between Ranaka (Ra rnga kha) and Lhagang (Lha sgang) on the northern road, which links Dartsedo (Dar rtse mdo; Chin. Kangding) with Lhasa. Her parents were farmers and had already three children, all girls. This was a disaster for her father who wanted to have at least one son, but Khandro Choechen only smiles at this idea saying that after the birth of her youngest sister, they were like the “Five Long-life Sisters” (Tshe ring mched lnga) goddesses.

As is the case for many religious masters, Khandro Choechen’s birth was announced by a miracle: when her mother came back from the fields one day, a nine-pointed ritual dagger (*rdo rje rtse dgu*) fell from the sky right in front of her feet. Other villagers witnessed the event and soon after rumor spread far and wide announcing that a *tulku* would soon be born to father Tsewang (Tshe dbang). But the latter was very disappointed when he discovered that his wife had

⁷ Her autobiography (see under mKha’ ’gro Chos spyen 2014) is included in a text bearing the title *A Short Biography of the Wisdom Dakini, Khandro Chöchen of Minyak* (the original title in Tibetan being *Dznyiāna dakki Mi nyag mkha’ ’gro Chos spyan ma’i rnam thar mdor bsduṣ bzhuḡs*), which might be published soon, but distributed only privately. The full text consists of 71 pages, with 27 pages being reserved for photos. There are 12 chapters, eight of which are original and in Tibetan language and four are English translations. The chapter with the autobiography *per se* is a little longer than five pages. I am presently preparing a monograph, which will present the biography together with my personal research.

given birth to another daughter and subsequently left the family. However, when Zenkar Rinpoche Thubten Nyima (gZan dkar rin po che Thub bstan nyi ma, b. 1943), the religious hierarch of the region and a well-known Tibetologist, got word about this, he invited the mother together with her baby to come and meet him.⁸ According to Khandro Choechen, he presented her with several hats while playing with her, but she was not interested. Finally he took a Padmasambhava lotus-crown, which attracted her attention and made her smile, and put it on her head giving her the auspicious name Choechen (Chos spyan), or “Dharma Eye”.⁹



Fig. 1. Khandro Choechen in her room in Dharamsala.
Photo: Nicola Schneider, 2012.

During her childhood, Khandro Choechen did not like to play with her peers. She also would not participate in activities in school, dreaming instead of flying to distant lands surrounded by mountains, above which a huge man appeared giving her a big smile. At that time, she did not understand what was happening to her; only later did she realise that these were her first visions of Padmasambhava, the eighth-century Indian saint to whom Tibetans attribute the introduction of Buddhism. When she told her mother and a Rinpoche who lived with them at this time about her experiences, she only got scolded. This was during the Cultural Revo-

⁸ Zenkar Rinpoche himself does not remember this event. Khandro Choechen’s mother told the story of the miraculous birth and first encounters to her daughter.

⁹ “Chos” means dharma and “spyen” is the first syllable of Chenrezi (sPyan ras gzigs; Skt. Avalokiteśvara), the Bodhisattva of Compassion, whose emanation on earth is the Dalai Lama.

lution (1966-1976) and her family was already facing trouble, so they did not want her to cause further difficulties. Thus they decided to take her out of school and sent her to herd the cattle on the mountain instead.

Over the next few years, Khandro Choechen experienced more and more visions, most of them seeing the same man returning in different guises, either as an old man, or as a young one. Furthermore, she discovered several statues hidden as “treasures” (*gter ma*),¹⁰ but left most where she found them while loosing many others. She only kept one, which she says is with Khenpo Dorje Tashi (mKhan po rDo rje bkra shis, b. 1963), a famous lama and her distant relative, currently living in Minyag Dora Karmo (Mi nyag Do ra dkar mo) where he founded a school and a retreat center.¹¹ During one of her visions she also received a few so-called “*dākinī*-letters” (*brda' yig*), letters in the form of little objects, which only religious masters with particular capacities can decipher. She gave these to the Rinpoche to decode while he was staying with her family.

Shortly after the Cultural Revolution, at the age of approximately 15, Khandro Choechen wished to become a nun. In order to do so, she went to Lama Tsephe (Tshe 'phel, 1917-1998) who was staying in Lhagang at the time.¹² But as the lama was about to cut her hair, there was a cracking sound and sparks burned his hand. This episode was interpreted as an auspicious sign that her destiny was to occupy another religious role. Rumors spread again far and wide and nobody else would deign to ordain her as a nun.

Khandro Choechen never wished to get married like her sisters. Instead she did her best to avoid the many suitors who were keen to take her as their wife, thinking she would be the ideal Tantric consort. Notable among these was Khenpo Achug (mKhan po A khyug, 1927-2011), a famous “treasurer finder” himself and founder of the religious encampment Yachen Gar (Ya chen sgar), in Peyul (dPal yul), Kham.¹³ He tried to persuade her several times to become his wife because according to a testament given long ago to him by his own master, Khandro Choechen was his prophesied consort. Thus he had done his best to identify and find her. However, his efforts were to be in vain. She did not accept his proposals and even

¹⁰ “Treasures” can be objects or texts said to have been hidden by Padmasambhava and his consort Yeshe Tsogyal (Ye shes mtsho rgyal, eighth century) to be discovered by a predestined person, *tertoen*, at a more propitious time for the spread of Buddhism, see Tulku Thondup 1986.

¹¹ On Khenpo Dorje Tashi, see Ragaini 2008 and Tan 2010.

¹² On Lama Tsephe, who later founded a nunnery, see Thub bstan chos dar 2003 and Schneider 2013: 109-114.

¹³ On Khenpo Achug and his role in the religious revival in Tibet, see Terrone 2009.

went into hiding in the pasturelands above her natal village to avoid him as well as all the other suitors.

Meanwhile, she took every chance to attend religious teachings and to make contact with religious masters. Her sisters describe her as running after each visiting religious dignitary in a way that is normally considered unsuitable, especially for a girl—because of such behavior provoking “shame” (*ngo tsha*) in the case of women—, but she would not listen to their advices. Thus during her life in Tibet, Khandro Choechen got the opportunity to follow the teachings of several famous religious masters. The most important for her spiritual development was Tsophu Dorlo Rinpoche (mTsho phu rdo lo, 1933-2006?), the head of a Nyingmapa (rNying ma pa) monastery in Nyarong (Nyag rong), who was a married *tulku* of Han Chinese origin. He used to take Khandro Choechen with him to different sacred places in Minyag and Nyarong, but also on pilgrimage in Mainland China (namely Chengdu and Emeishan). Other renowned masters from whom she received teachings were Khenpo Choekyi Dragpa (mKhan po Chos kyi grags pa, 1916-2005) from Lhagang and Motsa Rinpoche (rMog rtsa rin po che) from Kathog (Kaḥ thog) Monastery.

To people of her natal village, as well as in the adjacent Sengge Monastery, Khandro Choechen was first known as a *lhamo*, a female “spirit medium” or “oracle” (*lha pa*; *lha mo* being the female form). I was told that most of these religious specialists in the region are male. Furthermore, people said that mediums risk turning crazy if they do not prove their ability to cope with the local deities. Khandro Choechen herself thought at the time that she must be some kind of “spirit medium”. In fact, she was only identified as a *khandroma* once she had reached exile. Even Motsa Rinpoche, with whom she spent a lot of time during her last two years in Tibet when staying in Kathog Monastery, was pleasantly surprised when he learnt that the Fourteenth Dalai Lama had personally recognised her.

While in her early forties, Khandro Choechen had a vision of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara calling her to come to him. So she decided to go to India to meet his emanation, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. According to Khandro Choechen, something special happened when she met His Holiness for the very first time. It was during an audience organised for newcomers in Dharamsala. Many Tibetans were waiting impatiently, pushing each other so as to get a better view of their spiritual leader. Khandro Choechen preferred to stay back and was finally called by the Dalai Lama himself. He took her hands and looked into her eyes as she cried. He then told her to come back soon. A week later or so, a car from his Private Office was sent to the Tibetan Reception Center where she was staying, to take her

back to his residence. He asked her many questions, among them if she knew, who her previous incarnations were, but she could not respond. Some time later, he asked the famous visionary Garje Khamtul Rinpoche (sGar rje Khams sprul rin po che, b. 1928) if he could find out through visions, who her previous births were. This is what he did: one night, during a meditation session, he had a dream about a nun who was in reality Yeshe Tsogyal, the Tibetan consort of Padmasambhava, the eighth-century saint. She approached him saying that she had come back as Khandro Choechen and then she recited all the names of her incarnation lineage.¹⁴ The next day, Garje Khamtul Rinpoche wrote a poem in which he repeated what he was told during his dream and brought it to the Dalai Lama. The latter gave his approval in the form of a recommendation letter, thus officially recognising Khandro Choechen as a *khandroma*.¹⁵ Furthermore, he gave her a Padmasambhava lotus-crown, which she now wears during official ceremonies such as those organised in the main temple in Dharamsala.

Since her official recognition, Khandro Choechen has benefitted from several privileges: she was given an apartment by the Private Office of the Dalai Lama, is allowed to sit near him during teachings and ritual sessions, and she has regular private audiences with him during which she passes on prophecies she receives during her “pure visions”. At the same time, she started to build up a network of disciples, among them many Tibetans, but also foreigners from Taiwan, Brazil, Germany, and the United States. Her patrons invited her several times abroad. In 2013, she decided to settle down in Seattle where she is currently staying.

2. *Khandro Choechen's religious world*

Khandro Choechen wears long hair, but neither in the Tantric dreadlock style, nor in the well decorated and arranged style typical for Minyag women. Instead, she arranges her hair meticulously in a plait. Together with her dark-red monastic style dress, one immediately understands that she neither belongs to the monastic community nor is she a simple married woman. This means that she is independent of the two statuses normally designated for Tibetan women, keeping a considerable degree of autonomy.

¹⁴ For a detailed presentation of her lineage, see Schneider 2015a.

¹⁵ Both, the poem and the recommendation letter have been integrated into the above-mentioned biography of Khandro Choechen; they are respectively dated March 24, 2007 and April 18, 2009. Tashi Tsering Josay has done an analysis of the lineage, also included in the biography.

Since she reached India, Khandro Choegen lives on her own, surrounded by her devoted assistant, the monk Norbu, sent by their common religious master Motsa Rinpoche in order to help her and her adoptive son, Tenzin. The latter came together with her from Tibet but has since left to join a monastery where he was recognised as the incarnation of a lama from Minyag. Norbu is the one who takes care of her daily needs and household chores, attending to cooking, washing clothes,¹⁶ and cleaning the apartment, but also looking after religious affairs, like scheduling appointments and receiving disciples. From early morning to late night he is busy with these daily necessities, allowing the necessary time for her to pursue religious practices.¹⁷

Khandro Choegen is not an erudite religious practitioner like those we can find sometimes in Tibet spending years with scriptural studies and/or Buddhist debates. On the contrary, she has only a rudimentary knowledge of written Tibetan. Like we have seen, she hardly went to school when she was young and at this time had learnt Chinese language. Later, she was encouraged by her religious teachers to study Tibetan, but refused to do so, saying this was pointless for her. Only when she reached India and the Dalai Lama exhorted her again to learn Tibetan, did she start doing so. Thus up until now, she is more fluent in written Chinese.

Khandro Choegen is spending most of her time with meditation, either in her own room or in places she is visiting. Meanwhile Norbu ensures that visitors, noises and even impurities like bad smells or any kind of dirtiness do not disturb her. He knows that it is of utmost importance to protect her in these moments because it is during meditation sessions that she usually experiences visions, and the environment she lives in needs to be kept pure at all cost. According to Khandro Choegen, different buddhas and bodhisattavas appear to her regularly. She cannot name them, with the exception of the most important ones that are Avalokiteśvara and Padmasambhava;¹⁸ others are only faces with which she is familiar. Sometimes they take her to travel to distant lands and mountains and at other times, they give her instructions and prophecies, which she eventually writes down. In general, she conceals her visions, keeping them secret from her family and entourage. Only those with special spiritual capacities are allowed access, mostly for the purpose of deciphering the messages and prophecies contained in her visions. The Dalai Lama

¹⁶ It is interesting to remark that Khandro Choegen only washes her own underwear, a task, which, she says, is not suitable to leave for others.

¹⁷ He says about himself that he is Khandro Choegen's *zhabs phyi*, the honorific form for "assistant".

¹⁸ Both are also mentioned nominally in her autobiography.

and Garje Khamtul Rinpoche are among those chosen ones. However, according to the latter, her prophecies are not that exceptional or extraordinary. Instead, he says, her healing faculties can be considered remarkable.

Since young age, Khandro Choechen started to develop her healing capacities. She was then staying around the Nyingmapa Monastery Sengge (Seng ge), situated close to where she was born. Many local people came to seek help from her. However, she says that she felt sometimes tired to spend all her time healing and that is also one of the main reasons why she left for India. However, once she reached the exile community, she quickly became well-known and a new network of patients emerged.

The healing method used by Khandro Choechen is very exhausting for her. It works roughly as follows: she first listens to the patient's story and then asks for some additional information, such as the patient's astrological sign, name and mother's name—the father's name seems to have no importance—all these being essential for her diagnosis.¹⁹ She then enters into a meditative state—with her eyes lifted up—while turning her prayer beads. After staying like this for a minute or two, she gives a blessing and instructions on religious practices to be done, or sometimes asks for additional information if necessary. Norbu assists all the séance, taking notes of what is said by the patient and especially of the recommendations, which he then hands over to the latter. When asked about what exactly happens during these moments, Khandro Choechen told me that she first transfers the disease from the patient's body into her own, thus evacuating the illness from the patient's body. She then invokes Padmasambhava, Avalokiteśvara or other deities who help her to expel the disease from her own body. This healing method can only be used for diseases, which are related to karma; according to herself, she is unable to cure other diseases. Furthermore, if the patient's karma is very bad, she experiences great difficulty expelling the disease from her own body. She is thus incapable to get rid of it and this might cause great suffering to her own body.

Most of Khandro Choechen's patients have heard about her from other people who have consulted her previously with success. For many of them also, it seems to have been the only solution to their problem. They have seen different doctors and also other healers beforehand who were unable to help them. However, some people also come just to ask for advice on family matters or when they need to make an important decision, like for example: "How is a family member in Tibet doing these days?"; "Why does a niece seem to have

¹⁹ For an example of a healing session, see Schneider 2015b.

gone crazy and what can be done?"; or "How will the life of such and such person be if he or she goes to the West?" Even though Khandro Choechen cannot intervene in these cases directly or "see" what a particular faraway place looks like, she says that through her visions, she can perceive what happens or will happen to a person living at the other end of the world.



Fig. 2. Khandro Choechen gives blessings to Chinese disciples in Dharamsala; her assistant Norbu watching closely from the background.
Photo: Nicola Schneider, 2011.

Among the patients with physical suffering, several cases of diseases related to water-spirits (*klu*, Skt. *nāga*) seem to stand out. In Tibetan culture, these *lu*-spirits are believed to inhabit the physical environment: trees, the underground and water sources (lakes, rivers, etc.). They are portrayed as the protectors of the life-giving waters of the world and therefore are venerated by humans, and especially by women.²⁰ In contrast, if somebody acts disrespectfully to their habitat, it is also harmful to the *lu*: they get sick and people in turn catch the same disease.²¹ Thus, the physical state of human beings reflects that of the *lu* and the *lu* needs to be healed as well.²²

Lu-related illnesses affect the sensory perception, the nervous system (like in the case of leprosy), skin, common sense (like insanity), and sense of discernment.²³ Although traditional Tibetan

²⁰ Karmay & Sagant 1998 : 205-206.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 206.

²² Lalou 1938: 4.

²³ Vargas 2009: 368.

medicine has its own explanations and treatments described at length in the *Four Tantras (rGyud bzhi)*, contemporary medical practitioners in Tibet and in the exile community often do not know how to handle these diseases.²⁴ This is why they tend to send their patients to religious specialists who have the ability to deal with *lu*-spirits.²⁵ Khandro Choegen is one among these rare specialists. She can diagnose *lu*-diseases thanks to her faculty of clairvoyance by detecting what kind of disrespectful act has caused a *lu*'s anger and by directing the patient in the various steps she or he must take to treat and pacify it. This means that she not only communicates with those realms lying beyond the human world, but also with those who are lying beneath.²⁶

Lu-afflictions are not the only cases that Khandro Choegen encounters during her consultations. Among the patients, who are in large majority women, I noted also several cases of "heart disease" (*snying nad*) and more generally speaking of "wind disorders" (*rlung nad*), both being related to mental distress to which women are particularly prone according to Tibetan representations.²⁷ Thus we might say that Khandro Choegen is a female healer who takes charge of typical "female" disorders. It would be interesting to study and compare more female healers of this kind in order to get a better understanding of women healers' roles in ritual medicine.

Since settling in Seattle, however, Khandro Choegen does not give consultations anymore, except to a few former patients who contact her through WeChat-application.²⁸ Instead, she says, she concentrates on larger health issues affecting human beings these days, such as dementia, for example. Although, she has never learnt any formal medicine, she wants to elaborate her own way to better understand the causes of diseases through her faculty of clairvoyance in order to intervene at the root cause of the disease and be able to treat people even ahead of time. Her assistant Norbu, who is not allowed access to her visions, says that he is impressed by her many successes in treatment of diseases and the explanations she can give

²⁴ Vargas 2009, 2010.

²⁵ Personal communication with a doctor from Mentsikhang (India) and Dr. Yeshe Donden (Ye shes don ldan) from Dharamsala.

²⁶ I am inclined to say, after Macdonald (1981: 74) and Karmay & Sagant (1998: 209), that Khandro Choegen has the power to move freely up and down the cosmic axis.

²⁷ For "heart disease" and women, see Bassini 2006; on "wind disorders" and the connection with women, see, among others, Janes 1999, Jacobson 2007, and Dachille-Hey 2011.

²⁸ WeChat is a mobile phone application, which makes it possible to send written and oral messages, as well as photos and films. Tibetans from Tibet and exile largely use it today also for religious purposes.

about the physical body and its disorders without ever having studied under the guidance of a doctor. For him, she is exactly what a *khandroma* has to be.

3. *On the necessity to be humble and discreet*

As in many religions, the status of women in Tibetan Buddhism is marked by ambivalence. Generally speaking, women are considered to be inferior in many ways: they are said to have low merit—this is reflected by one of the terms used for “woman” (*skye dman*) meaning literally “low birth”—and they are considered ritually impure in several regards. This is especially true in the institutional context of monasticism, where nuns consequently do not enjoy the same privileges as monks. However, in Tibetan Buddhism, we also find exalted female symbols and highly revered women whose status contrasts the general picture of asymmetrical gender representations. Some researchers have argued that these “autonomous” women serve as some kind of role models, especially for nuns, but more generally for all Tibetan women. Without going into detail of these discussions, I would like to reformulate the question asking instead what do these renown women have in common or not with laywomen and nuns? And how do they make it possible to obtain more autonomy for themselves?

Up until now, we have heard of Khandro Choegen’s achievements as they are told in her autobiography and orally in interviews, but also through my observation of her daily life. We have noticed, for example, that she did not gain prominence because of her family connections or because of belonging to a particular religious community.²⁹ In the contrary, most probably her father would have been there to assist, had she been the son he had hoped for. Instead, he decided to leave the family and even later, when he came back again, did not care for his daughter’s religious career. Thus Khandro Choegen had to find her own way to engage in religious practice. Her first option was to become a nun, a typical step for women looking for an alternative to the householder’s life. However, this was “prevented” by a higher order, it seemed, as the incident concerning her haircutting ceremony has shown. In the end, she had no other choice than to impose herself to religious masters during teachings, thereby disregarding conventional female behavior, which dictates that women are devout and submissive and not allowed to get close to male practitioners, especially when the latter are celibate.

²⁹ These two points have been suggested by Martin 2005: 80-81.

One of her earlier religious masters was Khenpo Choekyi Dragpa, a well-known monk-lama from Lhagang who was the principal initiator of religious revival in the region after the Cultural Revolution. Two of his disciples, Khenpo Dorje Tashi and Lama Drugdra Gyatso ('Brug grags rgya mtsho, b. 1968), act today as his heirs, the first being responsible for the monastic college built by his master and the second having inherited the nunnery founded by Lama Tsephel.³⁰ It is less, maybe even not at all, known that Khenpo Choekyi Dragpa had also a particular female disciple.

However, the two main disciples of Khenpo Choekyi Dragpa did not welcome Khandro Choechen when she was joining his teachings. They tried to diminish her by various means. For example, they both rebuked her for not being literate and therefore scolded her for being unable to grasp the meaning of esoteric teachings. Not only that, according to Khandro Choechen herself, she often became the subject of their teasing. Up to now, both show their doubt about her being a *khandroma*, in contrast to Motsa Rinpoche, who was also her religious master, but a married lama.

While staying in Kathog Monastery and studying under Motsa Rinpoche's guidance, Khandro Choechen was treated differently. When participating in regular assemblies held by monks, she was attributed one of the high seats (this is where Norbu noticed her for the first time). Even though she was not allowed to stay with monks in their quarter, she was given a room in the adjacent retreat center, where other women used to stay.

Nonetheless, this does not imply that those *khandroma* who are married have more facilities or face fewer hindrances than the ones encountered by Khandro Choechen. While recounting her own experiences, Khandro Choechen told me also some stories about another *khandroma* whom she knew personally, Khachoe Wangmo (mKha' spyod dbang mo, d. 1987), the spiritual consort of her lama Tsophu Dorlo, from Nyarong. Not everybody appreciated Khachoe Wangmo during her lifetime, despite the fact that she was a prodigious "treasure revealer" and worked in a close relationship with a highly respected lama.³¹ One reason was her geographical origin: she was from Gyalrong (rGyal rong), a region situated further northeast and regarded by some Tibetans as not being part of Tibet. Another was her religious affiliation: she was not a Buddhist like Tsophu Dorlo and the community around him, but a Bonpo (*bon po*). However, in the eyes of Khandro Choechen and Norbu, the principal explanation is that people from Nyarong have no trust in women,

³⁰ For Khenpo Dorje Tashi and Lama Tsephel, see above.

³¹ An account of Khachoe Wangmo revealing a "treasure" can be found in Hanna 1994.

even when they are highly accomplished like she was.³²

Following this conversation, Khandro Choegen explains that it is not always easy to be a *khandroma* and that this status also attracts many jealousies and pettiness. These in turn led her to remain discreet, if not hidden from the public. Usually she rarely goes out, preferring people to meet at her home—and this even in the United States where she currently lives. Furthermore, she rarely joins in with public events, such as collective rituals for example, since her participation implies that she is installed on a high seat, consistent with her status. Yet, when a woman takes up a high rank generally occupied by men, rumors rise almost automatically among Tibetans. Fearing the consequences this can lead to, she prefers to avoid altogether such situations, saying there is no “benefit” (*phan thog*) for her Buddhist practice, to the contrary, it might even be wrong to do so.

In recent years, and more precisely since Khandro Choegen reached exile, attitudes with regard to her gender have changed. Her age plays a significant role, since she is no longer considered a threat to the celibacy of monks—a “sexual” threat, which seems to be the main reason for ascetic misogyny found in many Buddhist texts.³³ More importantly, her environment has changed. To start with, the Dalai Lama, known for his favourable position towards women and female religious practitioners, has given her a lot of support by facilitating her integration into a religious hierarchy that is usually reserved for men—a fact, which is underlined also in her biography by including his recommendation letter. Secondly, through her healing capacities, she has built up a network of people that are more open minded with regard to gender issues, especially some women. Some of them come from Taiwan or the West and are even overtly feminist, looking specifically for a female religious master. Together with the Dalai Lama, they not only recognise and respect her spiritual capacities, but also support her economically, a subject I cannot go into detail here.

To sum up, Khandro Choegen is facing the same gender rules and restrictions than other Tibetan women, nuns included. She might have overcome some of these unwritten rules and expectations by forcing her way into masculine circles and by joining a community with more modern ideas on gender, gaining thereby some form of autonomy. But at other times, she feels she has to adapt and carry on

³² According to Khandro Choegen, Khachoe Wangmo had great spiritual power: when she reached out her hands, food would land in there. According to Tsering Thar (2003: 440), Khachoe Wangmo’s biography can be found in Dragwen Monastery, in Nyarong.

³³ See, for example, Sponberg 1992.

her status as a woman by remaining humble and discreet, two typically female virtues in Tibetan culture.

Conclusion

Khandro Choechen's social and religious status seems to me best described as autonomous. Neither married nor a nun, she depends on nobody else and is thus totally free to pursue her religious career as she wishes. However, to achieve this autonomy, she had to overcome different obstacles, some involving difficult decisions. First, she wanted to become a nun, but was prevented to do so by divine forces beyond her own will. She accepted it and searched for an alternative solution to pursue her religious goal. She then had the opportunity to become the wife of a famous lama, promising her a brilliant future and a socially accepted role. However, she declined to be the partner of an elderly man—which would have meant her submission with regard to both, her age and gender—preferring instead a more arduous way by searching for religious teachings in an exclusively male-dominated environment. She thus had to face rejection and teasing in Tibet, but eventually received the support and some kind of informal recognition from several religious masters, who were willing to support an extraordinary visionary woman like her.

In her autobiography, as well as in her oral accounts, Khandro Choechen explains her departure from Tibet as following the calling from the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. However, it is also possible to interpret her flight as an escape from the pressures of a traditional society, which makes life difficult for women, even when they have already proven to have some spiritual realisation. The new environment she found in the exile community made it much more easy for her to pursue her religious search and ambitions, not only because public teachings are more frequent and easy to obtain, but also because the religious hierarchy, aware about modern Western ideas on gender equality (even though not necessarily sharing them), is more inclined to accept female practitioners. First among all, is the Dalai Lama. By recognising her as a *khandroma*, he not only acknowledged her spiritual achievements, but also opened her a door to the usually male religious hierarchy. Furthermore, determining and approving her lineage gave her official legitimation that she could not obtain in Tibet, where doubt was an attitude she often experienced.

Khandro Choechen's life story illustrates some of the difficulties also met by women of high status when they wish to pursue an

autonomous religious life. As women, they are compelled to behave according to Tibetan ideas and representations of gender. If not, they face harsh criticism, as shown by Khandro Choechen's experiences in Kham-Minyag. That explains why she has decided to comply with some of these rules by cultivating humility and discretion. This was not an easy decision and would not have been possible without her faithful assistant Norbu taking care of her daily needs and religious affairs. At the same time it makes her appear even more outstanding, not only because she represents a successful healer, but also because she cultivates virtuosity and discipline, two important attributes for a religious specialist.

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Becoming a Female Ritual Healer in Eastern Bhutan

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This article focuses on the life story of a 67-year-old female ritual healer, a spirit-medium named Jomo Dolma who lives in eastern Bhutan.¹ Her autobiographical narrative oscillates between the reality of a difficult child- and adulthood and her experiences of a dream-like state of “another” world through which she is guided by helper spirits until she finally becomes a female ritual healer called *jomo* at age 45. Frequently ill already as a child, she slowly builds up a strong relationship of mutual respect and trust with a group of four children. They are her helper spirits whom she plays with until they eventually become her future protective deities. These spirits enable her to cope with her own illnesses and later on also to fight illness-causing evil spirits afflicting her patients. She interprets her own personal illnesses—such as frequent fainting, being sick, and sometimes becoming “mad” *nyospa* (Tib. *smyos pa*)²—retrospectively as cases of “pollution” *drib* (Tib. *sgrib*) caused by certain foods as well as by *kyedrib* (Tib. *skye grib*), “birth pollution”, and *shidrib* (Tib. *shi grib*), “death pollution”.³ While her biography reflects the daily hardship of a poor householder, farmer, and

¹ My three month long ethnographic pilot study on ritual healers in Trashigang (bKra shis gang) and Trashiyangtse Districts (bKra shis gyang tshe rdzong khag) in eastern Bhutan and also far western Arunachal Pradesh, India, during 2011 was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and has been facilitated by the Centre of Bhutan Studies (CBS) and the state government of Arunachal Pradesh. I am indebted in particular to Dasho Karma Ura and Dorje Gyaltsen. I also thank Toni Huber and Johanna Prien for sharing some of their fieldwork data and experiences with me for comparative purposes.

² For the Tshangla term *nyospa*, see Egli-Roduner 1987: 41. In this article, certain words, mainly those to do with deities and cosmology, are clearly derived from Tibetan as a liturgical language and given in Wylie transcriptions marked in brackets as Tib. if they share the same meaning, while Tshangla words are given in a simple phonetic transcription only, such as *jomo*, if they maintain a specific local meaning that is different from Tibetan.

³ These are commonly known forms of pollution avoided by different types of ritual specialists in the eastern Himalaya.

mother of five living children more generally, she interprets her exceptionally frequent, almost annual miscarriages ultimately as an act of "protection" caused by her helper spirits to prevent her from an even larger hardship of needing to raise more than 20 children.⁴

After no longer being able to conceive at the age of 42, Jomo Dolma enters a transitional phase of three years of intensive learning, and is finally initiated as a *jomo*. Her initiation resembles a shamanic ritual journey to the palace of the local mountain goddess Ama Jomo, located on Mount Kunka (Kun mkhar) in the pastoralist area of Merak (Me rag)/Sakteng (Sag steng) on the border area with Arunachal Pradesh, India. Ama Jomo becomes her main protective deity. While she clearly identifies as being a *jomo*, she also gets possessed by Gesar (Tib. Ge sar), a well-known warrior "hero" or *pawo* (Tib. *dpa' bo*) of Tibet.⁵ Jomo Dolma explains that after she became a *jomo*, the knowledge of "doing *pawo*" was transferred to her from two neighbouring *pawo* practitioners who had passed away and whose children were not interested in continuing their fathers' calling.⁶

Jomo Dolma's life story reveals a fascinating, hybrid cosmology that is situated within her local landscape and populated by non-human agents—both shamanic and Buddhist—and merging with her everyday life. Learning how to ensure the support of protective deities and how to win the fights over illness-causing spirits also seems to mirror the battles in her own life. Her life story also demonstrates, on one hand, how blurred boundaries can be between daily and other-worldly realms, and between certain ritual healers such as *jomo* and *pawo*. On the other, she learns to be self-assertive towards certain male Buddhist authorities who challenge her. Having overcome several challenges to her *jomo* status and authenticity made by a *terdag* (Tib. *gter bdag*) spirit-medium and a Buddhist lama of the Gelugpa (dGe lugs pa) school, Jomo Dolma emerges as an experienced autonomous female ritual specialist in her own right, who also takes on ritual responsibilities for other neighbouring households to ensure their health, vitality and fertility.

⁴ On the frequency of low fertility and high infant mortality in the region, see the detailed study of Wikan & Barth 2011.

⁵ Gesar also possesses other ritual healers called *pamo* (*dpa' mo*) and *pawo* (*dpa' bo*); cf. Schrempf 2015a.

⁶ The reason why she calls herself a *pawo* rather than the feminine form *pamo* is probably to emphasise her "inheritance" of two local *pawo* transmissions formerly maintained by two deceased male mediums in the area (cf. Johanna Prien in this collection on a *pamo* from western Bhutan).

1. On *jomos*

Jomo Dolma was said to be the most experienced among the three female ritual specialists known as *jomos*⁷ in Jamkhar Gewok ('Jam mkhar rged 'og), my fieldwork site.⁸ We had been advised to approach these *jomos* first by asking them to come to the office of the local elected official (*gup*).⁹ We were warned that these *jomos* would be very "shy". I was also told that two of the three female *jomos* had already stopped performing *jomo* healing rituals. And only one of these women actually appeared to our meeting at the *gup*'s office. She gave the impression of being very nervous, and obviously felt uncomfortable with the presence of the *gup* who was making snide remarks about her during our conversation, since she was a little drunk.¹⁰ This *jomo* explained that she wanted to give up her *jomo* role since she was also a farmer and the mother of small children whom she could not leave unattended. She also mentioned the compulsory drinking of homebrewed alcohol, *ara*, as an important part of replenishing a household's "vitality" (Tib. *g.yang*) during the annual rituals called *shagspa* she

⁷ While we still know too little about ritual healers called *jomo* (not be mistaken with the Tibetan term for "nuns") to make general statements on their frequency and distribution, it is safe to say that they are mostly female ritual specialists for healing and divination. They are possessed by Ama Jomo, a local mountain Goddess from eastern Bhutan. It is possible that since there seem to be no *pamo* (*dpa' mo*) in this area that *jomo* is a term used more generally for female ritual specialists. Based on my fieldwork, I know of only four *jomos* in the area of Trashigang and Trashiyangtse, among them one male *jomo* who had inherited the possession by Ama Jomo from his grandmother. In their unpublished report on village healers in Bhutan, Meyer & Sihlé (n.d.) found only 6% of their sample of ritual healers to be identified as *jomos*. Cf. also Johanna Prien's fieldwork in Western Bhutan on the *chom* who probably represent a similar ritual specialist.

⁸ *Gewoks* are the smallest administrative units of Bhutan with elected local officials called *gup*. See Government of Bhutan 2009.

⁹ In Bhutanese media, healers are variously called "village", "indigenous" or "traditional" healers (even though the latter term is usually reserved for *Sowa Rigpa* [*gso ba rig pa*] practitioners called *drungtso*). They are often accused of "dangerous", unhygienic, sometimes even abusive practices (see, for example Wangdi 2011). Generally speaking, the main media attention they receive is focused on a particular technique of sucking the disease out of the patient's body by mouth that public health officials have addressed in hygiene campaigns targeting "village healers" (on the uneasy relationship between public health physicians—both biomedical and "traditional" *drungtso*—and ritual healers, see Pelden 2011, 2013).

¹⁰ It is not uncommon among both male and female villagers in eastern Bhutan to drink homebrewed *ara* and be mildly intoxicated during the day.

performed in neighbouring households. *Ara* is often also given as payment to such ritual specialists, and is a common and socially important offering by a host to any guest.¹¹

I finally met Jomo Dolma at her home, some weeks later. In contrast to her colleague, she was not "shy", and clearly identified herself as a practicing *jomo* with a certain pride. Indeed, she came across as a most self-assured and independent woman with a lively, charming and captivating personality. She constantly made jokes about her husband, but also about herself. Her grandson was usually climbing all over her while we talked sitting cross-legged on the floor, laughing casually at the side with and about him. Only when we were served food by her daughter who lived next door and who cooked for the whole household, did Jomo Dolma sit alone by herself, further away from us. She explained that she had to follow certain strict food taboos otherwise she would get "sick" or *digpa*.¹² In order to be able to address the local deities for help during her healing rituals, it is of fundamental importance to stay "pure" or *zang* (Tib. *bsang*), she explained. Maintaining these food taboos are therefore as important for her own health as they are to maintain her healing powers. She has to avoid polluting or proscribed foods (they seem to be reserved for the gods), such as pork, fish, eggs, and garlic at all costs. Eggs, for example, she explains to me, are (a symbol of) *sog* (Tib. *srog*), the "life force" that she is supposed to prolong rather than consume. Eggs are also used in rituals as offerings to local deities. Her daily food was therefore always prepared separately from that of her family, so that it would not be contaminated by other foodstuffs. Also, she has to avoid any other polluting substances—such as animal dung that she had to collect during her childhood and that make her sick. She further expounds that she needs to avoid "polluting" crowds of people during festivals where many people dwell who eat unclean foods and thus could be polluting her.¹³

During several of my encounters with her at her home and when I accompanied her to her patients, we talked about her life, her spirits, and how she learnt about them. There was ample time, especially while making the different *torma* (Tib. *gtor ma*) offerings

¹¹ This also means that *ara* cannot be refused, especially not when the household's vitality is concerned.

¹² Jomo Dolma used the term *digpa* more in the sense of "pollution"—eating the wrong foods or having contact with polluting things—rather than its formal Buddhist sense of "sin" (Tib. *sdig pa*).

¹³ While her husband was present at the annual pilgrimage festival in Gomphukora, Jomo Dolma herself indeed did not attend; cf. Schrempf forthcoming.

and representations of various spirit abodes for her *jomo* or *pawo* altar which alone took almost two hours to prepare. Her explanations were very clear and eloquent. Slowly, her complex cosmology became clearer for me. She also reiterates it during her healing rituals, calling and invoking all these deities and spirits, and sometimes embodying them in her possessed state in a dialogic manner, switching between languages and personalities, as if in a ritual drama and battle for achieving healing and health.



Fig. 1. Jomo Dolma at her home in Jamkhar Gewok.
Photo: Mona Schrempf, 2011.

2. *Jomo Dolma and her healing rituals*

Jomo Dolma is a Tshangla speaker in her late sixties, a farmer, and the wife of a another type of ritual specialist. Introducing herself at the first time of our meeting, she says matter-of-factly, "We have four daughters and one son—all are alive."¹⁴ One of her daughters lives in a house next door together with her own two little children and her husband. In the future, Jomo Dolma wants this daughter to take over her *jomo* performance, but this ultimately depends upon whether her main deity will then accept her. The household has a modest amount of land that hardly sustains them, and a couple of cows, hens, and some pigs. The extra income as a

¹⁴ Oral interviews of Jomo Dolma's life story were mostly recorded during December 2011, and simultaneously translated by Dorje Gyaltsen from Tshangla into English. In March/April 2012 I revisited Jomo Dolma for follow-up interviews with Jigme Choeden as translator.

jomo—though modest—is much needed. Jomo Dolma performs two types of rituals: individual healing rituals for curing (*rimdro*; Tib. *rim 'gro*) and annual household rituals for vitality (*shagspa*). Patients or clients request her to perform them at their own homes. The individual healing rituals are usually up to four hours long. She first makes a divinatory ritual called *mo* in order to decide whether to perform as *jomo* or as *pawo*.

Mo is necessary for finding out the cause of disease, for prognostication and for decision-making related to ills and problems, whether it be a lost cow or marriage problems, an examination at school, or the right choice of a hospital. As part of a healing ritual, *mo* is usually done at the initial phase and once more (at least) in the end, as a means of "diagnosing" the cause of illness, to address the right deity or spirit with the right offerings in the right direction, and finally testing the outcome or undertaking for further pronostication, if necessary. The healer can also use a *mo* by itself, and if it is an easy matter, the household is simply told what kind of ritual should be done at their own home. Ritual healers prognosticate by performing such a divination by "seeing" the cause of the illness in a *drey* (Tib. *bre*), a standard measuring container, filled with raw rice in which usually three incense sticks are planted. The local spirit causing the illness is identified, as are his or her direction, and the necessary offerings to be prepared. This spirit previously had been angered unknowingly and then inflicted illness onto the culprit by stealing the patients' "soul" (Tshangla *yong*; cf. Tibetan *bla*), and sometimes, in more severe cases, even the patient's "life force" *sog* (Tib. *srog*).¹⁵

As *jomo* Dolma gets possessed by the eldest daughter of Ama Jomo, Sergyi Lhamo (Tib. *gSer gyi lha mo*), and as *pawo* by Gesar. Both rituals are performed in order to retrieve the patient's stolen soul, which is considered the actual cause of illness.¹⁶ Jomo Dolma claims, however, that Gesar is "stronger" and is needed if a patient's illness is more difficult to heal. While she builds up her *jomo* altar towards the downside of the hill or mountain, using many banana leaves, flowers and elaborate food offerings, she sets up the Gesar altar towards the uphill side. The latter altar has already been described in detail elsewhere, and it resembles more of a Buddhist altar.¹⁷ For performing *pawo*, she uses ritual

¹⁵ On different soul or life principles (cf. also Dakpa *phla*) and healing rituals in Bhutan, see Dorji 2004, 2007, 2009; Huber 2015a, b; Schrempf 2015a, b.

¹⁶ The soul is usually brought back in the form of a spider, see Schrempf 2015b.

¹⁷ When she performed a *pawo* ritual in her own house for some of her family members, the altar set up towards the up-hill side also had the direction of north (i.e. Tibet, where Gesar comes from). Cf. Schrempf 2015a.

implements given to her from two former and now deceased *pawo* in her neighbourhood, especially their *pocha* and *mocha*,¹⁸ a sword and a crown (*rigs lnga*). She had received their knowledge by transmission after these *pawos'* children did not want to take over their fathers' roles.

Next to individual healing rituals, Jomo Dolma also performs annual household rituals during the 9th lunar month as a form of thanksgiving after the harvest, as well as a kind of protection from diseases. In particular, this ensures the vitality and fertility of the household members, animals, and crops evoked for the coming agricultural year. Her husband, the *phrami*, takes over other specific annual household rituals called *menchang*.

I was particularly interested to hear how she describes what in English we would term "possession" but is better described as an "embodiment".¹⁹ She explained the local Tshangla term *djab* (Tib. *rgyab*, "the back") as meaning that the deity is "standing behind" her during the healing ritual. After identifying the respective spirit with the help of a *mo*, she first calls and invokes the main protective deity which then comes down to her, literally standing behind her. Also, this deity protects and helps her in her fight with evil spirits or "demons" called *dued* (Tib. *bdud*) whom she encounters during her soul-searching journey, and whom she also embodies at times during her healing rituals, changing her voice and sometimes language. In a manner of speaking, her main deity is "backing" her up during her ritual search and fight. When this begins, Jomo Dolma starts yawning or shivering. At the end of her possession, an officiant, often a household member of the patient whom she advises what to do and what to offer during the ritual, is supposed to stand behind her. Once the protector deity leaves her body, she could fall backwards, since the deity has left the supporting position. Once her normal state of consciousness returns—during the possession it has been temporary displaced

¹⁸ *Pocha* and *mocha* are two woven baskets, containing sacred objects that are also placed onto the altar during healing rituals. Jomo Dolma took great care not to place them into "polluting" places.

¹⁹ "Possession" was used by my English translator for *djab*, however, possession is usually connected with an inability to recount what happened during an episode due to displacement of the consciousness principle; the ritual specialist's own claims of memory loss also legitimize the idea that they were possessed. Jomo Dolma simply seemed to be both, "possessed" and "embodying", according to my observations and her explanations of *djab* (see below). Thus it remains unclear whether she is actually a spirit-medium or a shaman (cf. other discussions in this volume, see Pommaret, Priens, and more below). "Embodiment" is probably the best term for her ritual technique, as defined by Sidky 2010: 231, "The embodiment of spirits does not result in the replacement of the shaman's personality or loss of memory."

into a cone shape made of butter set onto the tip of an arrow that is stuck into a large *drey* next to the altar—she once again begins yawning or shivering. Sometimes exhausted, she will fall backwards to recover.

3. Jomo Dolma's childhood and life as a householder and mother

Jomo Dolma began her own life story as follows:

When I was forming in my mother's womb, my mother dreamt of a beautiful flower garden, in which a beautiful girl in a white dress was walking around. My father dreamt of a big silver sword (*batang*). When he took it out of the sheath it started to burn like a flame. My parents wondered about what their dreams could mean. "Could our daughter possibly be a *khandroma*?"²⁰ My grandmother used to tell me this story.

I was born on the 8th day of the 8th lunar month of the Bhutanese calendar. My parents were so poor and innocent, they could not keep me clean. When I was about six years old, my parents made me work hard—I had to carry pig shit and cow dung. Working like this, I barely survived. I felt constantly dizzy and sick. I fainted often. First my parents thought I am lazy. My father hit me sometimes. I was not able to work properly. Then they thought I had epilepsy²¹ so they tried to pollute me again to drive it out, like burning cow dung in front of me.²² But I got only worse. My parents thought, "Let her die." I also wanted to die.

After I was constantly sick, my parents let me do other work tasks such as gardening work, digging in the field. After I stopped eating meat, I began to dream about walking around in a beautiful flower garden, along with four children, two boys and two girls. I used to wonder about who they were and what this could mean. I always kept

²⁰ In this instance, the term *khandroma* (Tib. *mkha' 'gro ma*) is used in the sense of a female human reincarnation of a higher being (see also Jacoby and Schneider, this volume). However, in Jomo Dolma's complex cosmology, there exist various types of *khandroma* deities with a specific meaning that are different from most of the other *khandromas* mentioned in this volume (see in more detail below).

²¹ In Tshangla *shai nad* (cf. Egli-Roduner 1987: 41), possibly related to Tibetan *gza' nad*, a planet-caused affliction usually translated as "epilepsy".

²² My interlocutor explained this as a popular treatment for driving evil spirits out of the patient's body.

thinking about this. They took me to wild places, into the thick forest, sometimes onto the top of a tree, or a rock. When I felt sick, they also took me away to a pure place, to the top of a tree or where the cows were herded to keep me away from polluting places and people. I also had a lot of trouble with my family and suffered for years because of that.²³

In my memory, it is like a dream; sometimes I cried when someone was born in the neighbourhood; then I had to leave. Later, even when my own daughter gave birth, I had to leave her, I couldn't help her because of *kyedrib*. I laughed when someone died, and had to leave because of *shidrib*. Sometimes I was just happy. My protector gods made me feel like that—very unstable, kind of mad.

When I was alone at home, and even though all doors and windows were closed, the two boys and two girls (her helper spirits) still came to visit me in the house. They took me away through a small hole in the wall, or they would come through the side of the house with windows and take me to the high mountains, and other remote pure places where no-one else goes. Then they would tell me, "let's go fast, let's leave", pushing me. Sometimes they took me to a shrine (*choerten*; Tib. *mchod rten*), sometimes to the white flags (Tib. *dar shing*) of villages where I sat on the top.

Jomo Dolma stresses that despite the fact that her parents were poor, she comes from a "pure" lama lineage *rig zang* (Tib. *rig bsang*). Five generations ago, her ancestor, a lama from Sombrang (Tib. *gSum 'phrang*) in Bumthang,²⁴ had moved to Mongar. His son called Sonam Tshering then came to Jamkhar to settle down. She still venerates her ancestral deity, whom she calls Sombrang Tsen.²⁵ Also, when she performs annual thanksgiving rituals for local households, she performs the Sombrang style of "calling back the life essence" or *tseku* (Tib. *tshé 'gugs*) and "calling back vitality" *yangku* (Tib. *g.yang 'gugs*), rituals that she says were inherited from her lama lineage. Her family background might

²³ Jomo Dolma got lost many times as a child, wandering around, but also later as a married woman. To walk by oneself as a woman, in particular in "wild" places, is a social taboo. It is connected with "madness" since spirits and other non-human beings, such as *shindre* (*shi 'dre*) and *sondre* (*gson 'dre*), can dwell there, afflict the wanderer and can cause disease.

²⁴ On Sombrang, one of the oldest datable Bhutanese monasteries, cf. Ardussi 2004.

²⁵ *Tsen* (Tib. *btsan*) are warrior-type spirits who mainly dwell on rock cliffs. They are often depicted as red in colour and are carrying weapons.

also play a role in her sometimes ambivalent attitude towards being a *jomo*, as she once told me, "I should have never married but become a nun, or a *khandroma*."²⁶

She continued,

My parents married me off when I was 19 to a man 13 years older than me. After one year I gave birth to a girl, then each of the following three years another girl was born, and finally, in the fifth year of my marriage, I had my fifth child, a boy. People used to tell me "If you would have given birth to five daughters, your daughters could have become *khandromas*."

After having given birth to five live children, I still became pregnant each of the following 13 years. But I had only miscarriages, altogether 21. I had still-born twins and then again in the next year twins who were born but did not survive long after birth and, at last, four—two boys and two girls—at once. None of them survived.

"It was easy for me to give birth, I had no pain," she explained to me. "I even had to wear a belt when I was pregnant so that the baby would not fall out," she said laughing. I asked her several times about the number of still births and miscarriages she had because I could not believe that I had understood properly. "Yes, it is true. All were taken by my protectors," she confirmed. Her protectors apparently did not allow her to give anymore births after her five children, because they did not want to burden her with more children and more housework. She also did not go to the hospital when she was about to give birth because of her protector deities. She would have gotten sick there, since it is a "polluted" place; "There is a lot of *kyedrib* and *shidrib* that would have both polluted me and them," she explained. Otherwise, her protector deities would have left or punished her, beating her with stinging nettles.

Among her protectors, the female deities called *khandromas* play a central role. There are two main types of *khandromas*, whom she keeps referring to and has very different relationships with;

²⁶ Diemberger's account of a female oracle (*lha mo*) in South Tibet is a similar case in that female ritual specialists might transgress certain religious and social roles more often, such as between being a nun or a medium, or struggling with married life, having children, and performing a religious role at the same time. In Diemberger's case, the woman first got married, then ran away and became a nun, yet fell pregnant, then turned "mad" and was finally recognised as a medium; cf. Diemberger 2005: 119.

one is benevolent and protective, the other dangerous and wrathful. Among the first group, there is a well-known protective group of female deities called *khandro denga* (*mkha' 'gro sde lnga*) or "five classes of *ḍākinī*". On her altar, when she performs as *pawo* and is possessed by Gesar,²⁷ they are represented as a group of five *torma* (*gtor ma*), placed high onto the altar and protect her during ritual healing sessions. Then there are the two Tantric consorts of Guru Rinpoche (Gu ru Rin po che) or Padmasambhava—Yeshe Tsogyal (Ye shes mtsho rgyal, eighth century) and Lhacham Mandarava (Lha lcam Man dha ra wa)—who have left their foot prints at some special local places of Guru Rinpoche's sacred meditation place, Gomphukora (sGom phug skor ba).²⁸ This place, an important pilgrimage site, lies right below Jomo Dolma's home. When we walked around Gomphukora together, she pointed several vital places out to me where the *khandromas* had performed certain things, or Yeshe Tsogyal was taking a bath in the river near a group of colourful flags. In contrast to a Drukpa monk who also explained this sacred landscape to me in detail—stressing the main deeds of (the male) Guru Rinpoche who slayed the demon in all sorts of elaborate ways and meditated at a near-by cave—Jomo Dolma's interpretation was clearly focused on the divine female agency associated with this place, the *khandromas*. As a third type of localised *khandroma*, she pointed out a large white-washed *khandroma* stone in the middle of the main road leading up to Gomphukora when coming from the West, as an important place of worship for obtaining fertility. Also the Drukpa monk confirmed this. This white conical stone has many small stones lining up on its flatter slope, like little "children", and cars have to drive around it. Pilgrims come and pray for children here at this stone. Nearby, the local "owner of the land", the *nepo* (Tib. *gnas po*), has his own site of worship, and is also a spirit that was addressed in her healing rituals.²⁹

However, belonging to the wrathful type of *khandromas*, there are also some who can afflict women specifically. Shaza Khandro eats her own children's flesh until they are five years old, and Yiza Khandro drinks her own children's blood and causes miscarriages.³⁰ Child mortality—especially up to the age of five—

²⁷ See photo in figure 2, number 3 in Schrempf 2015a.

²⁸ Cf. Schrempf 2013 and forthcoming.

²⁹ Cf. my film on the Gomphukora Tshechu, Schrempf 2013.

³⁰ Child-devouring, blood-drinking and flesh-eating *khandroma*, such as Shadza Khandro (Tib. Sha za mkha' 'gro), come from the Indian Tantric context via Tibetan Buddhism (cf. Jacoby 2014, p. 135).

was very common in Bhutan.³¹ It is also attributed to some form of "curse" (*karam*).³²

After almost 20 years of having given birth or becoming pregnant each year, and after so many miscarriages, her pregnancies finally stopped for three years in a row. At that time, she also asked a lama to do a *mo*-divination for her. He predicted that she would become a special person after three years. Then when she was 45 years old, and after she had been trained for three years with proper instructions and repeated tests undertaken by her helper spirits, she learnt that the two girls who regularly appeared to her were actually the daughters of Ama Jomo, called Drowa Zangmo and Tendrel Zangmo. The two boys were the sons of Gesar who is the second main protector god possessing her when she is performing healing rituals as *pawo*.

All the time, my protectors asked me questions, like "What *tsen* is this? What is that one called?" "This is Serbu Tsen," I would say. "What do you offer to him?" In the beginning, I did not know and would answer, "Right now, I don't know. But my parents used to do such offerings."

Slowly she learnt the different names of all the deities and spirits in this local cosmos, and taught by her helper spirits, also what kind of offerings they require, how to address them properly, and where they dwell. After these three intensive training years (i.e. after she had stopped getting pregnant), finally she was ready for the initiation to become a *jomo*.

4. Initiation into being a *jomo*

Jomo Dolma's helper spirits called her and announced:

The time has come for you to be tested. We have always been protecting you since a long long time. We have been wearing out iron shoes for many years, just for you. If you

³¹ Wikan & Barth 2011.

³² When I met another healer in Phongmey district, a *menpradkhan* or "medicine scratcher", he told me that among his 10 children only one son had survived. He was sure that it was due to a "curse" that haunted him. His house was surrounded by *karam shing*, protective phalluses stuck erect into the ground to ward off evil influences. He was convinced and deeply regretted it that at the time he did not have enough money to finance the proper rituals necessary for stopping his children from dying.

listen to us, and follow us completely, you will be fine; from now on we have only nine days and nine nights left to be together with you. You have to show now what you have learnt from us.

They took her to a huge palace (Tib. *pho brang*). Pointing at one house, dark black in colour, they asked her, "These houses are very black. What do you think this is?" She answered, "This is the protector's place; it is a nine storey house, has a nine storey kitchen, and nine storey toilet houses. Each storey has a mountain, a *choerten* shrine, a *lhakhang* (Tib. *lha khang*) temple, a male lay religious practitioner (*gomchen*), and also a "demon" (Tib. *bdud*). While she was circumambulating around the palace, she met a lot of people, and had to address all of them. They seemed to be working there. She saw people inside and outside the palace, speaking all kinds of languages, also people with swords and shields, who later turned out to be Gesar's soldiers (*dmag dpon*). Some of them were carrying bows and arrows, others guns. They asked her in Tibetan language, "Where are you from? What is your birth year and name?"³³ "What are you doing here?" Others spoke in Dzongkha with her. On top of the palace she met the famous warrior brothers Phala Phila from Kurtoe (sKur stod). She also met Gesar himself, and even his enemy, Hor Gonsar Gyelpo, an evil nine-headed king. This way, all these beings also got to know her by name, her birth year and birth place, details which are important Jomo Dolma stressed, so that she can directly address herself to them, asking for their help during healing rituals to retrieve the stolen souls of her patients.

Finally, at the *lhakhang*, she personally encountered Ama Jomo. On Ama Jomo's right side Gesar was standing, surrounded by his own two assistants who turned out to be the two boys who were her earlier companions, and to her left the two brothers Phala-Phila. She also recognised her "two girls" surrounding Ama Jomo. Then she was handed a box full of deities by them, and whom she was supposed to identify and explain by name. Since she did her job well, she was given a "key" for Sergyi Lhamo, the eldest daughter of Ama Jomo who from then on became her main protector deity and by whom she is possessed when she performs as *jomo*.

All this was real, not a dream, Jomo Dolma claims. Her helper spirits, the two boys and two girls, had taken her to that strange

³³ This is a characteristic question for "identifying" a healer but also a patient, so that both can be recognised by the deities and spirits whom the *jomo* addresses.

palace and told her to circumambulate it nine days long. At the time she did not know this, but later she realised it was her initiation into being a *jomo*—the deities also reaffirm this. She was not allowed to sleep during that period. She was also taken to many other places by her protectors. However, according to conventional perceptions of reality, she was actually dwelling in her own house, and from behind her, her helper spirits would tell her that she should instruct her children to burn incense in front of her, to make smoke offerings (*sang*; Tib. *bsang*), and offer her a cup of alcohol *ara* and water. In this manner, her helper spirits were actually teaching her how to offer to the deities. Now, when she gets possessed the two boys and girls are always there. Especially Tendrel Sangmo: she is behind (*djab*) her, while Drowa Sangmo is in front.



Fig. 2. The *jomo* altar and offerings are set up. Jomo Dolma will take a seat in front of it on a specially prepared white cloth, the seat of her deity by whom she will get possessed.³⁴ Photo: Mona Schrempf, 2012.

When Jomo Dolma performs as *jomo*, she wears women's clothes, a *kyira*, but no crown, and builds up a special altar for Ama Jomo and her nine (sometimes seven) daughters. The altar is directed towards the downhill side of the patient's house. It is made out of seven *kyiras*—and also a *go* or male dress for the

³⁴ For this purpose, a swastika of rice grains is layed out underneath the white cloth. It is also used as another divinatory device at the end of the ritual.

(male) mountain god Tsongtsongma, residing to the north of Ama Jomo—hanging over a horizontal bamboo stick (*dang shing*) that is normally used for hanging up clothes in houses. For the *jomo* ritual it is used as a backdrop, while the altar tables with offering for various deities, and also for the spirit who has stolen the patient's soul, are placed in front. A beautifully adorned and elaborate low altar is built up using banana leaves, many different offering bowls with water, food and flowers, as well as a large basket with raw grain into which a sword is stuck for Hor Gonsar Gyelpo, the enemy of Gesar, and arrows for Gesar himself. For over 25 years now she has been, as she words it, "doing *jomo*" (see Fig. 2 and 3).



Fig. 3. After retrieving the patients' soul in the form of a spider, Jomo Dolma also gives blessings and protection cords to the patient, and any household members or neighbours who are present. Photo: Mona Schrempf, 2012.

5. *Ama Jomo, jomos and Buddhist challengers*

Jomo Dolma's main protective deity, the mountain goddess Ama Jomo,³⁵ is located not too far from her home place, in the

³⁵ One other female mountain deity, also called by the title "Aum Jomo" in Bhutan, with the full name Aum Jomo Dagam, specifically controls the weather, and takes care of the fertility of animals. Whether she is the same or different from the Ama Jomo from Sakteng, I do not know; however, she also protects from diseases, likes young men and dislikes fertile women, since she is unmarried, so people say; cf. Penjore 2003.

pastoralist area of Merak (Me rag)/Sakteng (Sag steng) in Trashigang Dzongkhag.³⁶ Ama Jomo resides at the mountain top, near two lakes where a shrine has been built for her worship. For the local population of pastoralists—who according to their own migration myth were guided to this place from the southern Tibetan region of Tsona (Tsho sna) by Ama Jomo, and still speak a nomadic Tibetan dialect—she is their natal deity (*skye lha*). She is worshiped in particular to protect against all kinds of diseases and other calamities, such as natural disasters, as well as to generally ensure prosperity and fertility among couples. At Ama Jomo's sacred places, pilgrims also make "golden beverage" offerings (Tib. *gser khyem*) when they are sick. When there is a drought, the whole village performs *sang* (Tib. *bsang*), a smoke purification, at her shrine. An annual pilgrimage is dedicated to her worship, performed between the 15th day of the 7th and 8th lunar months. At her temple pilgrims make "offerings" *tshog* (Tib. *tshogs*) and partially circumambulate a lake. There is also a lot of singing, dancing and drinking among the pilgrims. As part of the pilgrimage, a special stone is venerated where couples make smoke- and butter offerings to Ama Jomo for fertility, while an upper circumambulation path just below the summit is only accessible to pre-pubescent girls and to men. The goddess is described as having a jealous character, especially when fertile women approach her. This is why they are forbidden to ascend to her summit, the most sacred space, otherwise they would fall off the mountain.³⁷

Also known as Jomo Kenga (Jo mo sKu mkhar), Ama Jomo resembles a white *khandroma*, yet also has fang teeth, a symbol of her wrathfulness, wears the jewelry and crown of a bodhisattva, and rides upon a white horse or mule. In the *jomo* healing ritual performed by Jomo Dolma, Ama Jomo is not directly represented. According to Jomo Dolma, for *jomos* who get possessed by this female deity it is strictly forbidden to visit her mountain. They would die if they did, she claims, that is, they would be killed by the goddess.

Until about 20 years ago, Jomo Dolma claims, there used to be several *jomos* in Merak/Sakteng. It seems that their practice was challenged by a lama called Kushu Guru who "subdued" (*dam tagpa*) all of them, and their practice has now died out in this area.

³⁶ On the people of Merak and Sakteng and references to Ama Jomo, see Wangmo 1990; Pelgen 2007; Dompnier 2007; Karchung 2011; Wangchuk, Dhammasaccarn, Tepsing 2013.

³⁷ According to my informant Jigme Choeden from Phongmey, who worships Ama Jomo and has performed her pilgrimage several times; cf. Pelgen 2007.

With noticeable pleasure Jomo Dolma recounted how some years ago, another lama of this area, Sakteng Lama Neten (Sag steng bla ma gNas rten), fell sick and had approached her for a healing ritual. One of his eyes was swollen, his hands and legs were in pain, and he could find no cure. He had heard of Jomo Dolma in Jamkhar and had sent a car to pick her up and deliver her to his place in order to heal him. However, she refused the first time. She had to be careful of such a high ranking lama who was also a *dzongkhag* administrator and, in particular, of this area where *jomos* had been actively subdued. Then Lama Neten brought gifts for her, and she finally consented. When they met, she said to him, "I do not deserve to heal you."³⁸ Yet Lama Neten insisted, "You have healed others, so you can heal me." Jomo confronted him, "How come you have no *jomo* or *pawo* in Merak Sakteng?" He replied, "We cut off (*djadpa*) such things here in Sakteng." Jomo Dolma then recounted her exchanges with the lama.

I told him: "But here is Ama Jomo's place. We are also some kind of gods. And you are even a lama! You are not supposed to touch me, because of my protective deities; they take possession of me." Lama Neten was very much in pain, crying.

He said: "You claim you are a *jomo*," and then asked a question to test me. "You are not going to Ama Jomo, why is that so?" I answered him, "We cannot go physically, since we 'meet together in consciousness' (*namshe nangkha*). When I meet Ama Jomo in my consciousness (Tib. *rnam shes*), she is standing right behind me. Wherever I go, I have to go through *namshe*, also when I visit Dorje Den."

I asked him back: "You are saying you are a lama, following The Three Jewels.³⁹ Even if you are a lama, you are not supposed to touch me."

"Give me five 'incense sticks' (*poe*)," she said. I put the *poe* into my divination device (*drey*). Lama Neten requested again, "Please cure me." But I said, "Today is not a good time, not even for consulting the *mo* divination." It was not an auspicious day.

Lama Neten had offered me to stay there overnight. But I preferred to stay at my parents' home, so four monks accompanied me, sent by Lama Neten. But I didn't sleep because they were talking the whole night. I took a bath in

³⁸ Here she implies her much lower social status.

³⁹ Jomo Dolma means Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha.

the morning and went back to Lama Neten. I asked for three incense sticks and blew mantra onto him. The eye and legs of the lama were already getting a little better.

The lama insisted, "I want to see your *mo*." I said, "I know your *lha*—Phoblha and Drublha are your *tsen* (Tib. *btsan*) of Merak/Sakteng." The Lama wondered, "How come that our *lha* are different from what you say, we have only been following Kunglha and Kyelha." I replied, "Your *tsen* is Drublha but you are not following him properly. Your Phoblha and Drublha are not properly worshipped, why? If I don't follow all these gods, such as *tsen* and others, then harm will come to me, too. So why are you not following it? If I go blind after doing this ritual what will I do?" He answered, "But you are a *jomo*, you will not become blind."

She started preparing the *mo*, and asked for a standard measurement (*drey*) full of raw rice. But they first brought a big bowl of rice instead. When she finally had the right device, she did *mo* and said:

Your *tsen*, *kyelha* (Tib. *skye lha*) and *yul lha*, all are upset with you. All the local deities are catching you, they are about to subdue you, that is why you are in such a pain. I heard that one lama Kushu Guru in Sakteng had subdued all the *jomos*—why? We as human being are staying together with these deities, and if you harm us they will be harmed as well. You are harming local deities, and that's why you are now harmed by them. Now I will prepare all the proper offerings for your local gods and ask them for their protection.

She prepared special offerings for *tsen*, *dued*, *lu* (Tib. *klu*) and the like and sent them off with two monks to be brought to a special place. She made a protection cord (Tib. *srung ma*) for the lama to tie around his hands, legs, and head. She also prepared "mantra butter" (*sngags mar*) against his pain, to be applied and massaged. Already after a few days, the lama was fine. Now Lama Neten stays somewhere in Thimphu, she heard.

Jomo Dolma also told me about a kind of religious contest instigated by a local "treasure owner", a *terdag* (Tib. *gter bdag*). He wanted to challenge the authenticity of the *jomos* from Jamkhar. Some *terdag* in Bhutan are said to be extremely wrathful when they are possessed by Zoro Ragye (Zo ra rva skyes), a well-known local "treasure owner" and guardian deity in his own right,

residing in Sengedzong, at the northern border with Tibet.⁴⁰ There exists a hybrid pan-Himalayan Tibetan Buddhist-shamanic healing cosmology in which higher ranking Buddhist and lower ranking local deities also structure the social hierarchy among ritual healers. The latter belong to the shamanic or folk religious end of the spectrum of healing practices and deities. They are often either recognised by a higher-ranking Buddhist authority or might be challenged or banned as not being authentic.⁴¹ Two of the three *jomos* from Jamkhar followed the *terdag's* call and were tested by him. They both either stopped practicing as *jomo* or claim to have done so. "I simply did not go," Jomo Dolma said with a smile. "If he wants something from me, he can visit me here at my home."

A chance encounter we both had with a local Buddhist cleric also indicated certain tensions between Jomo Dolma and a monastic authority of this area. When Jomo Dolma was guiding me around the sacred pilgrimage site of Gomphukora located just below her home, we met a monastic official who was organising the upcoming festival at Gomphukora. I previously had extensive contact with him, so he recognised me. He seemed to be surprised to see me together with Jomo Dolma, and obviously felt uncomfortable with her presence at "his" place. I watched them talking together, and noticed that Jomo Dolma did not submit herself to the usual devout and submissive body language expected of Bhutanese women towards monks and lamas. The next time I met this monk by myself, he asked me, quite frankly, what connection I had with "that woman". He warned me that she was dangerous, and that I should not give her my name and my birth year—implying she could curse me if she wanted. Clearly, the recently increased presence of Drukpa monastic authorities in this area, occurring parallel to a simultaneous opening of the area for tourism and newly introduced state religious dance (*'cham*) festivals at Gomphukora, had also caused a shift in local socio-religious power relations between clerics and *jomos*.⁴²

⁴⁰ Cf. Aris 1979: 301, fn. 4.

⁴¹ Cf. Day 1989 on the social hierarchy among spirit-mediums in Ladakh and their social stratification; Gellner 1994 on gender difference between higher-ranking male and lower ranking female ritual healers who get possessed in Nepal; Samuel 1993 on the local ritual cosmos; Schrempf 2010 on a cultural logic of healing among lay Tibetans in Amdo. On the locally and historically specific, complex interactions between "shamanic" and Buddhist ritual specialists, see a useful summarising discussion in Balicki 2008, introduction.

⁴² On the pilgrimage festival of Gomphukora and the role of the Drukpa Kagyu monastic congregation from Trashigang Dzong, as well as its recent history, see Schrempf (forthcoming).

I think this is not just a coincidence. The percentage of women among “lower ranking” or at least ambivalently perceived ritual village healers is certainly larger than among other more “orthodox” religious specialists accepted by Buddhist institutions, such as the *terdag*, who also perform healing rituals.



Fig. 4. Jomo Dolma performing as *pawo*, possessed by Gesar.
Photo: Courtesy of Gerhard Heller, 2011.

Discussion

Jomo Dolma’s life story is certainly unique in its detail, such as her many miscarriages, and her many years of physical and mental suffering before she finally becomes a *jomo* at a relatively late stage of her life. While many ritual healers who are possessed by deities complain about having been “forced” by their deity to become and remain a ritual healer, becoming and finally performing as a *jomo* must have been a redemption for Jomo Dolma. She was able to reconcile her multiple miscarriages and asocial behaviour, or madness, by experiencing and performing as *jomo*. Additionally, her *pawo* performance complies with other ritual healer’s legitimacy and agency of being chosen by a spirit, in this case Gesar, who previously inhabited a known *pawo* in her area, integrating her into the existing socio-ritual landscape of her immediate surroundings.⁴³ Becoming a *jomo* thus allowed her to reposition herself within a society that tends to often exclude women with such a fate as having miscarriages, often interpreted as a “curse”, or worse, accusations of being “witches”. In this way Jomo Dolma was able to re-make her tortured self by gaining a

⁴³ On women with fertility and marital problems and socially accepted possession as a form of embodied resistance, and even as a kind of feminist discourse, see Boddy 1989.

new identity as *jomo*, controlling the forces that previously were responsible for her disturbed social self as a child and mother.

Jomo Dolma's life story is also an example for how blurred and sometimes futile boundaries are, whether they pertain to emic or etic categories. She could be called both a shaman and a spirit-medium; the former in terms of her ritual journey to Ama Jomo during her initiation which is also dramatised during her healing performance; the latter while she is possessed by her main protective deity, Ama Jomo, and also by different spirits navigating through her local cosmology for retrieving the stolen soul of her patient. Also, by being both a *jomo* and sometimes a *pawo*, she transgresses gender identities that are usually maintained by either female or male ritual practitioners. While she defends her identity as *jomo* towards male Buddhist authorities who challenge her, she is sometimes ambivalent about being a *jomo* nevertheless, and would be rather *khandroma*. Also, she has integrated and localised her main Buddhist deities into her healing cosmology. In her healing rituals, one of the main causes diagnosed as spirit attacks come from not properly worshiping local and especially ancestral deities (see the example of the Sakteng Lama). In that sense, she comes across as a defender of an old both local(ised) and pan-Himalayan hybrid cosmology which transcends the boundaries that institutionalised Buddhism and also modernity have so carefully established in an hierarchical manner, with Buddhist deities, represented by lamas and *terdag*, and physicians at the top of a socio-medico-religious hierarchy that is often also male-dominated in terms of their representatives in this world.

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