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FEMALE INCARNATION LINEAGES: SOME REMARKS ON THEIR FEATURES AND FUNCTIONS IN TIBET¹

NICOLA SCHNEIDER

While male incarnation lineages are well known for the religious, political and social roles they played and continue to play in Tibetan societies, not much is known about female lineages, of which there are only very few. A decade ago, the French Tibetologist Anne Chayet raised the question of whether there has been some kind of deliberate restriction on female incarnations, pointing to the fact that several famous historical women are said to have been reborn as men, as was the case for Tsong kha pa's mother, Shing bza' a chos, for example.² Another, more recent, instance is the famous Rje btsun Lo chen Rin po che from Shug gseb Nunnery in Central Tibet, who indicated that she might reincarnate as a boy.³ Her incarnation was found in 'Chi med rdo rje, the son of Bde skyong dbang mo from the Phreng ring family. Born in 1953, he lives as a layman in Lhasa. However, the 14th Dalai Lama and the 16th Karmapa have also recognized a female incarnation: Rje btsun Padma, daughter of Kazi Bsod nams stobs rgyas (1925–2009) from Sikkim, previously stationed in Tibet and former disciple, together with his wife, of Shug gseb Lo chen Rin po che.⁴

In the following article, I would like to consider some of the known female incarnations and lineages in the light of results from previous studies of incarnation and the *sprul sku* tradition.⁵ I will then proceed by examining some of them closely in an attempt to determine if it is possible to detect features that may be specific to female lineages.

¹ This paper is based on field research carried out with the support of the Centre de recherche sur les civilisations de l'Asie orientale, to whom I owe special thanks.

² Chayet 1999: 66. Two other examples are cited by Anne Chayet: Padma gling pa (1450–1521), who was considered to be an emanation of the princess Padma gsal (daughter of Khri Srong lde'u btsan), and 'Jigs med gling pa (1730–98) who mentions Ye shes mtsho rgyal as one of his former incarnations.

³ Havnevik 1999: 123.

⁴ Havnevik 1989: 76, 82.

⁵ Wylie 1976; Ray 1986 and 2001; van der Kuijp 2005; Tulku Thondup 2011.

THE TWO BEST-KNOWN FEMALE INCARNATION LINEAGES

Two female incarnation lineages are particularly well known today: that of Rdo rje phag mo from Bo dong pa Monastery of Bsam sdings in Central Tibet, near Yar 'brog Lake,⁶ and the lineage of Gung ru mkha' 'gro ma from the Dge lugs pa monastery of Bla brang brag dkar in A mdo, Gan rgya.⁷ According to Migyur Dorje Madrong, it is with the former that the practice of recognizing female incarnations started.⁸

Both these lineages are constituted of almost successive incarnations, that is, not long after the death of each holder, the next incarnation was born and installed (albeit with some exceptions). Thus they can be qualified as quasi-regular incarnation lineages. The emanations of both lineages were mostly nuns who had their seat in a monastery reserved for monks, although we know that the Rdo rje phag mo was also surrounded by female disciples acting as her personal assistants. Both female *sprul skus* were living and teaching in their respective monasteries, but they do not seem to have been the *mkhan pos* or abbots of these monasteries; they were rather teaching masters (*bstan bdag*). Finally, we can find at the source of these lineages, in the part of their biographies dealing with the "history of their previous births" (*'khrung rabs*), female deities such as Tārā, Vajrayoginī or Samantabhadrī. They are followed, in descending order, by (semi-)legendary figures such as the two consorts of Padmasambhava—the Indian princess Maṇḍāravā and the Tibetan lady Ye shes mtsho rgyal, who happens also to be one of the 25 enlightened disciples of Padmasambhava⁹—and by historical women like the famous Ma gcig lab sgron (c. 1055–1143), a disciple of Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas, to whom is attributed the introduction of the *gcod* practice to Tibet.¹⁰

⁶ Cf. Diemberger 2007; Tashi Tsering and K. Dhondup 1979; Bkra shis tshe ring 1993; and Ra se dkon mchog rgya mtsho 2003: 140–45.

⁷ Cf. Bkra shis tshe ring 1994; Chayet *op. cit.*; and Ra se dkon mchog rgya mtsho 2003: 145–49. Bkra shis tshe ring (1994: 22) cites three other female incarnation lineages: Rgyal yum o rgyan bu khrid, Rgyal rtse rgyang ro dpal sding rje btsun and La stod pa'i brag dkar rje btsun. In an oral communication, he told me that the first lineage nearly died out in the 19th century and the second actually stopped in the 1950s, with nobody trying to find a successor at the time.

⁸ Migyur Dorje Madrong 1997: 73.

⁹ For a detailed elaboration of the two lineages, see Bkra shis tshe ring 1993: 38–40 and 1994: 40–41. Diemberger (2007: 325) gives a slightly different version of the Rdo rje phag mo lineage.

¹⁰ For more information on the *gcod* practice and its lineage, see Kollmar-Paulenz 1993.

These characteristics of the *'khrung rabs* seem to be true for other, if not all, female incarnations. For example Shug gseb Lo chen Rin po che was also held to be the incarnation of Ye shes mtsho rgyal, as well as of Ma gcig lab sgron. Furthermore, in the *'khrung rabs* part we often find Dge slong ma dpal mo, the legendary Indian nun who is said to have introduced the *smyung gnas* or fasting practice to Tibet¹¹ and the famous Snang sa 'od 'bum, heroine of a theatre play.¹²

This short outline of the two best-known female lineages in Tibet already suggests certain distinctive features. First, both these female lineages are constituted of a lineage of successive historical women or rebirths of virtuous or meritorious teachers (Tib. *sprul sku*; Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*),¹³ whom we will not consider in detail here.¹⁴ Secondly, both lineages are linked to a particular monastery, of the Bo dong pa school for the Rdo rje phag mo and the Dge lugs pa for the Gung ru mkha' 'gro ma.

Let us see now if these characteristics feature in the lives of other known female incarnations.

WOMEN FROM THE SMIN GROL GLING TRADITION

The monastery of Smin grol gling, southeast of Lhasa, was founded in the 17th century by the famous treasure-revealer Gter bdag gling pa (1646–1714). It belongs to the Rnying ma pa school and by tradition, the heir of the monastery is a descendent of the founder's family, a married religious figure. At least two women from the Smin grol gling family were outstanding in the 17th and 18th centuries: Lha 'dzin dbyangs can sgrol ma, the mother of Gter bdag gling pa, and Mi 'gyur dpal sgron (1699–1769), his daughter. Whereas the first is less well known to posterity,¹⁵ Mi 'gyur dpal sgron became famous for her teachings; there is also an extensive biography of her.¹⁶

¹¹ Cf. Vargas 2003.

¹² Cf. Allione 1984: 60–140. There are several Tibetan versions of her *rnam thar*; see for example 'Gan 'khur pa don grub 1980.

¹³ Tulku Thondup 2011: 22–23.

¹⁴ See note 8.

¹⁵ Her biography can be found in the *gsung 'bum* of Lo chen dharma shrī 1999.

¹⁶ Cf. Khyung po ras pa 'Gyur med 'od gsal 1984 [1782]. Brief outlines of her biography can be found in Ra se dkon mchog rgya mtsho 2004: 118–19 and on the monastery's website: <http://mindrollinginternational.org/mindrollinghistoryproject/>.

Mi 'gyur dpal sgron was from a family with several important practitioners: her paternal grandfather and great grandfather were already famous masters. It was from her father that she received her first tantric initiations, and she undertook several meditational retreats. She then took ordination as a nun from her uncle, Lo chen Dharma shrī (1654–1717), also a great scholar, who transmitted many teachings to her. Forced to flee the invasion of the Dzungar Mongols in 1718 when she was twenty years old, she left for Sikkim where she conferred numerous teachings on her followers, including the king.¹⁷ When she came back to Central Tibet two years later, she and her brother, Rin chen rnam rgyal (1694–1758), restored Smin grol gling Monastery. When she was 36 years old, she transmitted the *gter ma* teachings of her father, as well as the *Snying thig*, to an assembly of 270 disciples. She also founded a nunnery, Bsam gtan rtse. Furthermore, she composed several religious texts and created archives to protect the teachings of the Smin grol gling tradition. She appears in two transmission lineages: that of the *gter ma* attributed to her father and that of the tradition of Smin grol gling. According to her biography, she was considered to be an emanation of Ye shes mtsho rgyal and Snang sa 'od 'bum, two of the (semi-)legendary ladies whom we have already discussed. Her incarnation was discovered recently in the nun Mu mtsho (short for Mu med ye shes mtsho mo), the niece of Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs (1933–2004), the famous master who initiated a religious revival after the Cultural Revolution in his religious encampment Bla rung sgar in Gser thar, Khams.¹⁸

Born in 1966, Mu mtsho has been brought up by her uncle and followed his teachings from a young age. According to her disciples, from early childhood she displayed all the signs of a Buddha: that is, she studied and practised religion diligently and showed great compassion for all beings.¹⁹ She was also recognized for her abilities to teach the

¹⁷ Mi 'gyur dpal sgron played an important role in the development of Buddhism in Sikkim. Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia (2014: 74) writes: "Her time in Sikkim was a historic occasion for both the Mindroling tradition and the Sikkimese Buddhism. While there, she transmitted many important teachings and consolidated the position of the Mindroling tradition in Sikkim."

¹⁸ For more information on Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, see Germano 1999.

¹⁹ See the collective writings in her honour: *Rje btsun ma mu med ye shes mtsho mo'i bstod pa phyogs bsgrigs tshangs sras dgyes pa'i rol mtsho*, 2000. To this day, one biography and a short outline of her life have been written, see Nyag rong a bkra 2000 and "Mu mtsho sprul sku dang de'i slob tshogs kyi skor", 2002.

Buddhist doctrine, and in 1988 Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs appointed her abbess of Padma mkha' 'gro'i 'du gling Nunnery, which he established inside Bla rung sgar.

Mu mtsho used to accompany her uncle during his diverse trips to China and abroad. When they went to India from 1989 to 1990, several high-ranking lamas, among them the Dalai Lama, recognized her as the incarnation of the nun Mi 'gyur dpal sgron. She was later brought to Rnam grol gling Monastery, in South India, where an enthronement ceremony was organized in her honour by Pad nor Rin po che (1932–2009). Several years later, her enthronement was celebrated in Tibet itself: first in Smin grol gling, then in Nyag rong and finally, in 1998, in Bla rung sgar itself. According to information obtained by one of Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs' nephews, it is said that when Mi 'gyur dpal sgron visited Nyag rong in the past, she announced her future incarnation by prophesying that she would come back to Ja bzi dgon pa, sheltered by a peacock-feather umbrella. Thus as her legitimate rebirth and in the presence of 60 religious dignitaries, Mu mtsho became the teaching master of the nunnery attached to Ja bzi dgon pa.²⁰ The ceremony in Bla rung sgar itself was the most spectacular: thousands of disciples are said to have come for the event to receive her blessings and to bring her offerings.²¹

However, Mu mtsho is not the only woman to continue the legacy of Mi 'gyur dpal sgron. Ever since, it has been a custom that the daughters of the heir to the Smin grol gling throne take care of the nunneries attached to Smin grol gling Monastery, as explained by the daughter of the current Min gling throne holder (*khri chen*), Mkha' 'gro chen mo Rin po che Tshe ring dpal sgron (1967–), also known as Min gling rje btsun ma.²²

Mkha' 'gro chen mo Rin po che is not only the heiress of the Smin grol gling female lineage, but she has also been recognized as the incarnation of another famous woman: Mkha' 'gro o rgyan mtsho mo (born in 1898), the consort of the 15th Karmapa Mkha' khyab rdo rje (1871–1922). A native of a modest family from Western Tibet, she was discovered when she attended the religious teachings once given by

²⁰ Cf. *Khams phyogs dkar mdzes khul gyi dgon sde so so'i lo rgyus gsal bar bshad pa nang bstan gsal ba'i me long*, vol. 1, 1995: 262.

²¹ Video images of this ceremony exist and show that she received money, bricks of tea, carpets, statues, different religious objects, a car, as well as several *gter ma*.

²² See Anonymous, "Interview with Khandro Chenmo Rinpochey" 1992.

the Karmapa in Yangs pa can. According to testimonies, at that time a rainbow appeared over her head and he immediately recognized in her the spiritual partner (*rig ma*) who would be necessary for him to extend his life.²³ Thanks to the daily purification practices performed by Mkha' 'gro o rgyan mtsho mo, the life of the Karmapa is said to have been prolonged by three years, an achievement that brought her the honorific title *mkha' 'gro chen mo*. At the death of her partner, in 1922, she was only 25 years old and she decided to become a nun, settling down for that purpose at the hermitage of Mtshur phu. She remained there for the greater part of her life, practising humbly. She also considered herself as a nun of Sga lo Nunnery, a branch of Mtshur phu, where she occupied the seat and to which she is said to have left all her possessions. According to oral accounts, she was a discreet person who lived in confinement, conversing only with her close relations or nun followers, and receiving the nickname of "hidden *yoginī*" (*sbed pa'i rnal 'byor ma*). Shortly before her death, her nun disciples asked her to be incarnated. She is said to have answered that she was going to be reborn in Zangs mdog dpal ri, the terrestrial pure land of Padmasambhava.²⁴ Finally, her incarnation was found in the monastery called Zangs mdog dpal ri in Kalimpong where she was born as the daughter of the Min gling throne holder. The discovery was made by the 16th Karmapa personally and was confirmed by other great masters, such as Dil mgo mkhyen brtse Rin po che.²⁵ Finally, after repeated requests by the nun followers of the former *mkha' 'gro ma*, an enthronement ceremony was organized, the girl being only nine years old at that time.

Thus the current Mkha' 'gro chen mo Rin po che is the holder of two lineages: that of the hereditary family lineage of the Min gling rje btsun ma which belongs to the Rnying ma pa school and that of the Mkha' 'gro chen mo from the Bka' brgyud pa school. Besides, she is one of the rare female masters to travel abroad regularly to give teachings.

Yet, Mu mtsho and Mkha' 'gro chen mo Rin po che are not the only current female holders of the Smin grol gling tradition. At least one more contemporary woman has been mentioned to me as being the in-

²³ Cf. Grong khyer lha sa'i u yon lhan khang 1999: 39. According to another version, she was discovered and brought to Mtshur phu by a search party sent out by the Karmapa; cf. Kunsang and Binder Schmidt 2005: 56.

²⁴ Anonymous, "Interview with Khandro Chenmo Rinpochey": 62.

²⁵ Simmer-Brown 2001: 182–85.

carnation of Mi 'gyur dpal sgron: Mkha' 'gro chos spyan. As for the former two, her lineage is not a successive one. But before examining her lineage, let us see briefly who this woman is and how her lineage came to be known.

THE *DĀKINI* MKHA' 'GRO CHOS SPYAN²⁶

Mkha' 'gro chos spyan was born around the year 1961 in a small farming village, Bal bsed, in the Tibetan region of Khams-Mi nyag situated today in Dkar mdzes Prefecture (Sichuan Province). As in the case of many incarnations, miracles preceded her birth: when her mother was pregnant, one day, while returning from the fields, a very tall ritual dagger fell in front of her feet, an event which was interpreted as an auspicious sign by eyewitnesses. Accordingly, when the girl was about three years old, the mother brought her to A lag Gzan dkar Rin po che (b. 1943), one of the high religious dignitaries in the region. The latter showed her several objects, among them a hat of Guru Padmasambhava which she immediately started to play with. The lama interpreted this as a special sign and therefore gave her the name Chos spyan, "Eye of the Dharma".

At the age of seven Mkha' 'gro chos spyan was sent to school, but because she regularly experienced visions (*dag snang*) during classes, which would have constituted a danger for the whole family during the Cultural Revolution, her mother and a religious master, who happened to live with her family at this time, decided to send her to herd the cattle instead. When she was around 14 years old, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, she decided to become a nun and went to a renowned local lama to get her hair shaved, as is traditionally the case for boys and girls who want to join the monastery. But when the lama began to shave her head, the strands of her hair made a cracking sound and sparks were emitted, preventing him from doing so. This was interpreted as a sign that she should not become a nun, but should instead continue her practice as a lay woman destined to play a special role. According to a Tibetan viewpoint, she would have been the ideal bride for a renowned

²⁶ The following section is a summary of Mkha' 'gro Chos spyan's autobiography of approximately six pages, supplemented by my own discussions with her. For instance, her autobiography is kept secret and will be distributed only privately.

lama looking for a female tantric partner, but she decided not to marry and sent all her suitors off.

While in Tibet, Mkha' 'gro chos spyen received religious teachings from some of the foremost lamas of her native region. These included: Mtsho phu rdor lo (1933–2004), a married lama and head of an important incarnation lineage from Nyag rong; Mkhan po Chos grags (1916–2005), a lama from Lha sgang (Chinese Tagong) who was the master of the most important contemporary lamas in Mi nyag and also the founder of a monastic school; and Rmög rtsa Rin po che from Kaḥ thog Monastery further north in Khams. While having a little house built beside the one of her mother, she also used to stay in a couple of monasteries for monks to receive religious teachings or to stay in retreat. Having the capacity to heal people through her “pure visions” (*dag snang*), a faculty which is considered very rare, she was remembered by most people to be a kind of oracle (*lha pa*) or fortune-teller (*mo pa*), two kinds of religious specialists who are often regarded with suspicion when young because of their propensity to become mentally disturbed. Only later, after having proved her extraordinary spiritual capacities through prophecies and as a *gter ston ma*, was she recognized as a special religious person.

When in her early 40s she had a vision of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, calling her to come beside him. So she decided to go to India to meet the 14th Dalai Lama, the emanation of Avalokiteśvara. According to her own account, the first time she obtained an audience with the Dalai Lama, as one of many other Tibetans who had recently arrived in Dharamsala, he took her hand for a while, telling her to come back soon. A week later, a car was sent to the Reception Centre, where she was staying together with other recent refugees from Tibet, to take her to His Holiness' palace. There he asked her if she could remember her previous incarnations, but she had to decline. However, from this moment on, the Dalai Lama took special care of her, giving her accommodation and the necessary subsidies. From this day on also, rumours about her began to circulate, to the effect that she might be a *mkha' 'gro ma*, a living *dākinī*.²⁷

Because Mkha' 'gro chos spyen had no memories of her previous lives, the Dalai Lama asked a renowned visionary, Sga rje Khams sprul

²⁷ *Mkha' 'gro ma* or *dākinī* are tantric female divinities who appear to the meditator in order to guide him. In Tibet, it became a popular convention to call either the wife of a high lama or a special female practitioner *mkha' 'gro ma*. See, for example, Herrmann-Pfandt 1992 and Simmer-Brown 2001.

Rin po che (b. 1928), if he could confirm her identity. So he did. One night, during an intensive meditation session, he had an encounter with a nun whom he perceived as Ye shes mtsho rgyal reciting for him the lineage of Mkha' 'gro chos spyan. The next morning, he wrote his vision down, in the form of a poem, which he brought to the Dalai Lama for confirmation. After having approved the lineage thus envisioned, the Dalai-lama invited Mkha' 'gro chos spyan to his palace again where he gave her a special Guru Padmasambhava hat, as well as a complete set of religious objects (a bell, a *damaru* and so forth).

THE INCARNATION LINEAGE OF MKHA' 'GRO CHOS SPYAN

Mkha' 'gro chos spyan is one of the very few women who have been recognised as an incarnation by the 14th Dalai Lama himself; to my knowledge, the only other women who have been recognised so far by him are Mu mtsho—though I am not aware of the existence of a whole lineage—, the above mentioned Rje btsun Padma and the 12th and current Rdo rje phag mo living in Lha sa.²⁸

Let us now take a closer look at Mkha' 'gro chos spyan's lineage as it is described in Sga rje Khams sprul Rin po che's three-line stanza poem, by first enumerating the mythical, legendary and historical emanations mentioned:

- A. Samantabhadrī (Tib. Chos sku yum chen mo)
- B. Vajravārāhī (Tib. Rdo rje phag mo)
- C. Dpal sku dpal ldan phreng
- D. Maṇḍāravā
- E. 'Phags shing shākya
- F. Bkra shis khyi 'dren ma
- 1. Kong jo (seventh century)
- 2. Ye shes mtsho rgyal (c. eighth century)
- 3. Lha lcam padma gsal (ninth century)
- 4. Ma gcig lab sgron (c. 1055–1143)
- 5. Jo mo sman mo (1248–83)
- 6. Kun dga' 'bum mo (15th century)
- 7. Mkhār bza' chos kyi sgron
- 8. Bdag med ma (11th century)
- 9. O rgyan bu 'khrīd (17th century)
- 10. Kun dga' lha mdzes ma (16th/17th century)
- 11. Padma mtsho

²⁸ Jangngöpa Tseyang 2014: 84.

12. Mi 'gyur dpal sgron (1699–1769)
13. Tshe dbang lha mo (d. 1812)
14. Bu mo mkha' 'gro ma (19th/20th century)
15. Mkha' 'gro chos spyen (b. c. 1961)

In the first part of the poem, the history of the previous births (*'khrung rabs*) is given, and in the list above (A to C), we typically find three female deities: the well-known Samantabhadrī and Vajravārāhī, as well as Sprul sku Dpal sku dpal ldan phreng from the lineage of the medicine Buddhas.²⁹ The next part (D to F) is dedicated to legendary figures or three of Padmasambhava's five consorts: Maṇḍāravā from India, 'Phags shing shākya from Nepal and Bkra shis khyi 'dren ma from Bhutan.³⁰

The lineage continues with historical women starting with three imperial ladies (1 to 3): Kong jo, the Chinese princess and wife of Srong btsan sgam po (617?–650); Ye shes mtsho rgyal, who is said to have been the wife of Khri srong lde'u btsan (790–844) before becoming the consort of Padmasambhava,³¹ and Padma gsal, the daughter of Khri srong lde'u btsan. Next (4 to 6), we find Ma gcig lab sgron and the two treasure-revealers Jo mo sman mo³² and Kun dga' 'bum mo.³³ The next three women (7 to 9) were all consorts of important figures: Mkhar bza' chos kyi sgron was one of the legendary King Ge sar's wives,³⁴ Bdag med ma, the companion of the famous translator Mar pa chos kyi blo gros (1012–96) and O rgyan bu 'khrid, the consort of the prolific *gter ston* Stag sham nus ldan rdo rje (1655–?).³⁵

The next group of three women in Mkha' 'gro chos spyen's incarnation lineage (10 to 12) is somehow heterogenous. The first, Kun dga' lha mdzes ma from 'Phyongs rgyas stag rtse (Central Tibet), was the mother

²⁹ My thanks go to Tashi Tsering, director of Amnye Machen Institute, for this information.

³⁰ The poem reads Bkra shis khyi 'dren ma from "Mon yul sman ljongs," which can be understood as a frontier region. Mkha' 'gro chos spyen says that her predecessor was from Bhutan.

³¹ For a recent textual study about Ye shes mtsho rgyal, see Gyatso 2006.

³² Jo mo sman mo was the consort of Guru Chos kyi dbang phyug (1212–70). For more details, see Dargyay 1998: 119–23; Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 771–74; and Allione 1984: 205–12.

³³ Kun dga' 'bum mo was one of the hundred principal *gter stons*. See TBRC P5910 and Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 72 n. 1020.

³⁴ My thanks go to Sga rje Khams sprul Rin po che for this information.

³⁵ Among other texts, Stag sham nus ldan rdo rje wrote one of the existing biographies of Ye shes mtsho rgyal.

of the great Fifth Dalai Lama, to whom Mkha' 'gro chos spyan says she feels a special bond.³⁶ Padma mtsho is known to have been a famous religious practitioner from Khams (born at a place called Tsha wa dpal shod); it is said that she was able to transform urine into gold and that her urine was collected to write the *Bka' 'gyur* and the *Bstan 'gyur*.³⁷ The last one, Mi 'gyur dpal sgron, we have already discussed in detail. The next three women (13 to 15) are all from Khams: the queen Tshe dbang lha mo (d. 1812) from Sde dge,³⁸ Bu mo mkha' 'gro ma, who was the consort of the treasure-finder Las rab gling pa,³⁹ and finally Mkha' 'gro chos spyan herself.

Mkha' 'gro chos spyan's lineage is interesting in several ways. First, it is not a regular lineage because her previous incarnations are not successive. On the contrary, there is a certain amount of chronological disorder in the presentation. Indeed, most of Mkha' 'gro chos spyan's predecessors were married women or consorts and several were famous for treasure-revealing or other spiritual qualities related to tantric practices. The latter is also true for Mkha' 'gro chos spyan. In contrast to most of her previous births, however, she decided to be celibate. Neither a nun nor a consort, she stands out, not only in her lineage, but also when compared to the other two contemporary incarnations of Mi 'gyur dpal sgron who are both ordained nuns. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in Mkha' 'gro chos spyan's incarnation lineage there seems to be a process of "imperial legacy" in play as shown by Hildegard Diemberger in the case of the Rdo rje phag mo.⁴⁰ By linking Mkha' 'gro chos spyan to previous famous women from Khams, like Padma mtsho, the queen Tshe dbang lha mo and Bu mo mkha' 'gro ma, a spiritual bond is not only established between past and present generations, but also to the local royalty and to a particular geographical area.

THE 'BRI GUNG MKHA' 'GRO MAS

The next and final example I would like to present concerns the so-called 'Bri gung mkha' 'gro mas who have their seat at Gter sgron

³⁶ Little is known about the Fifth Dalai Lama's mother; he mentions her only casually and without any apparent sentiment in his autobiography, cf. Karmay 2014.

³⁷ Oral communication with Tashi Tsering and Sga rje Khams sprul Rin po che.

³⁸ Cf. Ronis 2011.

³⁹ Cf. Pistono 2011: 104–6 and 2014: 81–86.

⁴⁰ Diemberger 2011.

Nunnery, formerly administered by 'Bri gung thil Monastery and situated nearby, to the east of Lhasa, in the county Mal gro gung dkar. It is not considered an incarnation lineage, the few known *mkha' 'gro mas* having been appointed to this status because of their meditational realisations and at an advanced age.

Ne ne chos ldan bzang mo or Chos drung Rin po che seems to have been the first known great meditator from Gter sgrom Nunnery.⁴¹ Born in northern Tibet in 1886, she was related to Stag lung tshe sprul Rin po che. She is said to have run away from an arranged marriage, engaging instead in extensive religious practice.⁴² She wandered around for several years, staying in meditation retreat in different places, among them the caves of Gter sgrom Nunnery—where Ye shes mtsho rgyal is said to have meditated with Padmasambhava. There she gathered many disciples and finally became the abbess for the residing nuns. Considered to be an emanation of Ye shes mtsho rgyal, she is said to have been highly revered by all the people of the region.⁴³ She organized many fasting sessions (*smyung gnas*) with the nuns, gave them initiations and left even her footprint on a rock.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it is said that she was the secret consort of Stag lung ma sprul Ngag dbang bstan pa'i nyi ma (b. 19th century).⁴⁵ At the time of her death in 1958 (in the 1940s in other sources), she is said to have declared that she would not return. However, at her disciples' request, she agreed to send an emanation in male form. Several decades later, in 1982, a young boy, said to have been born to a virgin, was recognized as her incarnation by Stag lung tshe sprul Rin po che.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, this incarnation is not the only person to continue her legacy. When still alive, Ne ne chos ldan bzang mo appointed Shes rab mthar phyin (1927–79), who had been a close disciple for more than ten years, as her successor in the nunnery, and thus as the next 'Bri gung mkha' 'gro ma.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Although it is said elsewhere that the mother of Kun dga' rin chen (the 16th lineage holder of 'Bri gung, 15th/16th century), Rin chen dpal mo, was the first great female meditator. Cf. Grong khyer lha sa'i u yon lhan khang 1996: 93.

⁴² Cf. Kunzang Dechen Chodron (n.d.) and Manshardt 2007: 63–6.

⁴³ Testimony by Ani Gomchen, former disciple of Ne ne chos ldan bzang mo, in Taklha 2007: 80.

⁴⁴ Cf. Taklha 2007. See also Havnevik 1989: 69.

⁴⁵ Manshardt 2007: 64.

⁴⁶ Kunzang Dechen Chodron (n.d.).

⁴⁷ On the life of Shes rab mthar phyin, see Manshardt 2007: 11–42. Kunzang Dechen Chodron (n.d.) gives 1929 as her birth date.

Like Ne ne chos ldan, Shes rab mthar phyin was a great meditator nun considered to be an emanation of Ye shes mtsho rgyal. From childhood on, she was introduced to the religious life by her pious father and later went to 'Bri gung thil Monastery where she learnt from several famous masters. Like her predecessor, she kept her hair long and wore the traditional Tibetan laywoman's dress (*phyu pa*). In 1959, she fled to India, where she stayed mostly in the retreat places of Mtsho padma, the famous lake connected with Padmasambhava, and Spang sgang Hermitage, near Manali. She spent time with famous masters like Khu nu Rin po che (from Kinnaur) and Mkhan po Thub bstan (from Spang sgang Hermitage); Dbon sprul Rin po che from Mtsho padma was one of her students. It is said that people, and especially disciples, paid great respect to her—sometimes even showing fear. She is also one of the few nuns who conferred novice ordination (*dge tshul*) on other women.⁴⁸ When she died, in 1979, a small golden *sku gdung* containing her bone relic was built; it is kept by Dbon sprul Rin po che. In addition, a big yellow stupa containing her relics has been built next to the circumambulation path around the lake.

Today, at least two women are said to be 'Bri gung mkha' 'gro mas. One is Bstan 'dzin chos sgron, who is in her 60s and was responsible for the rebuilding of Gter sgrom Nunnery after the Cultural Revolution, where she is still staying. The other is Dkon mchog mkha' 'gro, in her forties, who was ordained in Gter sgrom Nunnery. She studied under different great masters, undertook several long retreats and currently lives and teaches in Sweden. Like their predecessors, they both wear their hair long.

CONCLUSION

Female incarnation lineages are much less numerous than male ones, and the examples given above, especially the last one of the 'Bri gung mkha' 'gro mas, also show that the few that do exist are irregular insofar as they do not involve successive incarnations. The cases of the Rdo rje phag mo and the Gung ru mkha' 'gro ma (albeit with some adjustments) seem to be exceptions. The monasteries to which these women are connected seem to play an important role, at least for the

⁴⁸ LaMacchia 2008: 56.

perpetuation of their particular transmission lineage and of their status. Mkha' 'gro chos spyan, who is neither a nun nor a consort or married wife, is an exception.

It may also be noted that most of them, like Mi 'gyur dpal sgron, Mu mtsho, Mkha' 'gro chen mo Rin po che and the previous 'Bri gung mkha' 'gro mas, were born in families with other famous religious practitioners, a fact that might have an influence on the recognition and installation process. However, except for the Rdo rje phag mo and the Gung ru mkha' 'gro ma, none of these women seems to have had, or have, any political authority. Furthermore, there seems to be some kind of “inflation”, as already observed by others for male incarnation lineages: several women claim to be the descendants of Mi 'gyur dpal sgron and to be 'Bri gung mkha' 'gro mas. The same is true for the subsequent incarnations of another famous female practitioner: Se ra mkha' 'gro Kun bzang bde skyong dbang mo (1892–1940). According to Sarah Jacoby there are currently four persons considered to be her emanations.⁴⁹ This is not unusual in the sense that Buddhas and adepts are considered to be able to manifest multiple *sprul skus* simultaneously.⁵⁰

Finally, it is interesting to note that many of these women are referred to as either *mkha' 'gro ma* or *rje btsun ma*—the first being a religious title which is exclusively feminine and the latter being used for eminent ladies⁵¹—rather than as *sprul skus*, which seems to be a referential term mostly used for men.

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⁴⁹ Namely, these emanations are: the great grandson of Se ra mkha' 'gro's consort Dri med 'od zer, named Phrin las bstan 'dzin; the daughter of Rdzong gter Kun bzang nyi ma (or Rdzong sprul Rin po che), Lha lcam Chos kyi sgron ma; Mka' 'gro Rin po che from Dar lag (Mgo log); and, according to rumours, also Sras mo Sarasvatī, the elder daughter of Bya bral Rin po che. Cf. Jacoby 2014: 321–24.

⁵⁰ Tulku Thondup 2011: 19 and Ray 2001: 378.

⁵¹ The title *rje btsun ma* is frequently used for highly realized women, such as Shug gseb Lo chen Rin po che, and all the daughters born into the Sa skya 'Khon family (Benard 2014). It was also used for the imperial ladies, cf. Uebach 1994.

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