

Editorial

Female Specialists between Autonomy and Ambivalence

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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 Choechen'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 Choechen, 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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