

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 khrim), 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.bhutanulturalatlas.org/1088/culture/sites-structures/other-places-of-interests/places-of-historical-religious-interests/karma-drubdey-palmo-chos-kyi-dingkhag-nunnery/>, accessed September 2015.

⁹ “Pema Choling nunnery”, in *Bhutan Cultural Atlas*: www.bhutanulturalatlas.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 nam dpal 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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