

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

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

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

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Gyatso 2001: 249.

<sup>3</sup> See Schneider 2015a: 466-467.

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

<sup>5</sup> Ra se dKon mchog rgya mtsho 2003: 139.

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

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

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

### 1. Khandro Choechen’s life narrative

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>11</sup> On Khenpo Dorje Tashi, see Ragaini 2008 and Tan 2010.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. *Khandro Choechen's religious world*

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

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed presentation of her lineage, see Schneider 2015a.

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>18</sup> Both are also mentioned nominally in her autobiography.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>19</sup> For an example of a healing session, see Schneider 2015b.



gone crazy and what can be done?"; or "How will the life of such and such person be if he or she goes to the West?" Even though Khandro Choechen cannot intervene in these cases directly or "see" what a particular faraway place looks like, she says that through her visions, she can perceive what happens or will happen to a person living at the other end of the world.



Fig. 2. Khandro Choechen gives blessings to Chinese disciples in Dharamsala; her assistant Norbu watching closely from the background.  
Photo: Nicola Schneider, 2011.

Among the patients with physical suffering, several cases of diseases related to water-spirits (*klu*, Skt. *nāga*) seem to stand out. In Tibetan culture, these *lu*-spirits are believed to inhabit the physical environment: trees, the underground and water sources (lakes, rivers, etc.). They are portrayed as the protectors of the life-giving waters of the world and therefore are venerated by humans, and especially by women.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, if somebody acts disrespectfully to their habitat, it is also harmful to the *lu*: they get sick and people in turn catch the same disease.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the physical state of human beings reflects that of the *lu* and the *lu* needs to be healed as well.<sup>22</sup>

*Lu*-related illnesses affect the sensory perception, the nervous system (like in the case of leprosy), skin, common sense (like insanity), and sense of discernment.<sup>23</sup> Although traditional Tibetan

<sup>20</sup> Karmay & Sagant 1998 : 205-206.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*: 206.

<sup>22</sup> Lalou 1938: 4.

<sup>23</sup> Vargas 2009: 368.

medicine has its own explanations and treatments described at length in the *Four Tantras (rGyud bzhi)*, contemporary medical practitioners in Tibet and in the exile community often do not know how to handle these diseases.<sup>24</sup> This is why they tend to send their patients to religious specialists who have the ability to deal with *lu*-spirits.<sup>25</sup> Khandro Choechen is one among these rare specialists. She can diagnose *lu*-diseases thanks to her faculty of clairvoyance by detecting what kind of disrespectful act has caused a *lu*'s anger and by directing the patient in the various steps she or he must take to treat and pacify it. This means that she not only communicates with those realms lying beyond the human world, but also with those who are lying beneath.<sup>26</sup>

*Lu*-afflictions are not the only cases that Khandro Choechen encounters during her consultations. Among the patients, who are in large majority women, I noted also several cases of "heart disease" (*snying nad*) and more generally speaking of "wind disorders" (*rlung nad*), both being related to mental distress to which women are particularly prone according to Tibetan representations.<sup>27</sup> Thus we might say that Khandro Choechen is a female healer who takes charge of typical "female" disorders. It would be interesting to study and compare more female healers of this kind in order to get a better understanding of women healers' roles in ritual medicine.

Since settling in Seattle, however, Khandro Choechen does not give consultations anymore, except to a few former patients who contact her through WeChat-application.<sup>28</sup> Instead, she says, she concentrates on larger health issues affecting human beings these days, such as dementia, for example. Although, she has never learnt any formal medicine, she wants to elaborate her own way to better understand the causes of diseases through her faculty of clairvoyance in order to intervene at the root cause of the disease and be able to treat people even ahead of time. Her assistant Norbu, who is not allowed access to her visions, says that he is impressed by her many successes in treatment of diseases and the explanations she can give

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<sup>24</sup> Vargas 2009, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication with a doctor from Mentsikhang (India) and Dr. Yeshe Donden (Ye shes don ldan) from Dharamsala.

<sup>26</sup> I am inclined to say, after Macdonald (1981: 74) and Karmay & Sagant (1998: 209), that Khandro Choechen has the power to move freely up and down the cosmic axis.

<sup>27</sup> For "heart disease" and women, see Bassini 2006; on "wind disorders" and the connection with women, see, among others, Janes 1999, Jacobson 2007, and Dachille-Hey 2011.

<sup>28</sup> WeChat is a mobile phone application, which makes it possible to send written and oral messages, as well as photos and films. Tibetans from Tibet and exile largely use it today also for religious purposes.

about the physical body and its disorders without ever having studied under the guidance of a doctor. For him, she is exactly what a *khandroma* has to be.

### 3. *On the necessity to be humble and discreet*

As in many religions, the status of women in Tibetan Buddhism is marked by ambivalence. Generally speaking, women are considered to be inferior in many ways: they are said to have low merit—this is reflected by one of the terms used for “woman” (*skye dman*) meaning literally “low birth”—and they are considered ritually impure in several regards. This is especially true in the institutional context of monasticism, where nuns consequently do not enjoy the same privileges as monks. However, in Tibetan Buddhism, we also find exalted female symbols and highly revered women whose status contrasts the general picture of asymmetrical gender representations. Some researchers have argued that these “autonomous” women serve as some kind of role models, especially for nuns, but more generally for all Tibetan women. Without going into detail of these discussions, I would like to reformulate the question asking instead what do these renowned women have in common or not with laywomen and nuns? And how do they make it possible to obtain more autonomy for themselves?

Up until now, we have heard of Khandro Choegen’s achievements as they are told in her autobiography and orally in interviews, but also through my observation of her daily life. We have noticed, for example, that she did not gain prominence because of her family connections or because of belonging to a particular religious community.<sup>29</sup> In the contrary, most probably her father would have been there to assist, had she been the son he had hoped for. Instead, he decided to leave the family and even later, when he came back again, did not care for his daughter’s religious career. Thus Khandro Choegen had to find her own way to engage in religious practice. Her first option was to become a nun, a typical step for women looking for an alternative to the householder’s life. However, this was “prevented” by a higher order, it seemed, as the incident concerning her haircutting ceremony has shown. In the end, she had no other choice than to impose herself to religious masters during teachings, thereby disregarding conventional female behavior, which dictates that women are devout and submissive and not allowed to get close to male practitioners, especially when the latter are celibate.

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<sup>29</sup> These two points have been suggested by Martin 2005: 80-81.

One of her earlier religious masters was Khenpo Choekyi Dragpa, a well-known monk-lama from Lhagang who was the principal initiator of religious revival in the region after the Cultural Revolution. Two of his disciples, Khenpo Dorje Tashi and Lama Drugdra Gyatso ('Brug grags rgya mtsho, b. 1968), act today as his heirs, the first being responsible for the monastic college built by his master and the second having inherited the nunnery founded by Lama Tsephel.<sup>30</sup> It is less, maybe even not at all, known that Khenpo Choekyi Dragpa had also a particular female disciple.

However, the two main disciples of Khenpo Choekyi Dragpa did not welcome Khandro Choechen when she was joining his teachings. They tried to diminish her by various means. For example, they both rebuked her for not being literate and therefore scolded her for being unable to grasp the meaning of esoteric teachings. Not only that, according to Khandro Choechen herself, she often became the subject of their teasing. Up to now, both show their doubt about her being a *khandroma*, in contrast to Motsa Rinpoche, who was also her religious master, but a married lama.

While staying in Kathog Monastery and studying under Motsa Rinpoche's guidance, Khandro Choechen was treated differently. When participating in regular assemblies held by monks, she was attributed one of the high seats (this is where Norbu noticed her for the first time). Even though she was not allowed to stay with monks in their quarter, she was given a room in the adjacent retreat center, where other women used to stay.

Nonetheless, this does not imply that those *khandroma* who are married have more facilities or face fewer hindrances than the ones encountered by Khandro Choechen. While recounting her own experiences, Khandro Choechen told me also some stories about another *khandroma* whom she knew personally, Khachoe Wangmo (mKha' spyod dbang mo, d. 1987), the spiritual consort of her lama Tsophu Dorlo, from Nyarong. Not everybody appreciated Khachoe Wangmo during her lifetime, despite the fact that she was a prodigious "treasure revealer" and worked in a close relationship with a highly respected lama.<sup>31</sup> One reason was her geographical origin: she was from Gyalrong (rGyal rong), a region situated further northeast and regarded by some Tibetans as not being part of Tibet. Another was her religious affiliation: she was not a Buddhist like Tsophu Dorlo and the community around him, but a Bonpo (*bon po*). However, in the eyes of Khandro Choechen and Norbu, the principal explanation is that people from Nyarong have no trust in women,

<sup>30</sup> For Khenpo Dorje Tashi and Lama Tsephel, see above.

<sup>31</sup> An account of Khachoe Wangmo revealing a "treasure" can be found in Hanna 1994.

even when they are highly accomplished like she was.<sup>32</sup>

Following this conversation, Khandro Choegen explains that it is not always easy to be a *khandroma* and that this status also attracts many jealousies and pettiness. These in turn led her to remain discreet, if not hidden from the public. Usually she rarely goes out, preferring people to meet at her home—and this even in the United States where she currently lives. Furthermore, she rarely joins in with public events, such as collective rituals for example, since her participation implies that she is installed on a high seat, consistent with her status. Yet, when a woman takes up a high rank generally occupied by men, rumors rise almost automatically among Tibetans. Fearing the consequences this can lead to, she prefers to avoid altogether such situations, saying there is no “benefit” (*phan thog*) for her Buddhist practice, to the contrary, it might even be wrong to do so.

In recent years, and more precisely since Khandro Choegen reached exile, attitudes with regard to her gender have changed. Her age plays a significant role, since she is no longer considered a threat to the celibacy of monks—a “sexual” threat, which seems to be the main reason for ascetic misogyny found in many Buddhist texts.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, her environment has changed. To start with, the Dalai Lama, known for his favourable position towards women and female religious practitioners, has given her a lot of support by facilitating her integration into a religious hierarchy that is usually reserved for men—a fact, which is underlined also in her biography by including his recommendation letter. Secondly, through her healing capacities, she has built up a network of people that are more open minded with regard to gender issues, especially some women. Some of them come from Taiwan or the West and are even overtly feminist, looking specifically for a female religious master. Together with the Dalai Lama, they not only recognise and respect her spiritual capacities, but also support her economically, a subject I cannot go into detail here.

To sum up, Khandro Choegen is facing the same gender rules and restrictions than other Tibetan women, nuns included. She might have overcome some of these unwritten rules and expectations by forcing her way into masculine circles and by joining a community with more modern ideas on gender, gaining thereby some form of autonomy. But at other times, she feels she has to adapt and carry on

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<sup>32</sup> According to Khandro Choegen, Khachoe Wangmo had great spiritual power: when she reached out her hands, food would land in there. According to Tsering Thar (2003: 440), Khachoe Wangmo’s biography can be found in Dragwen Monastery, in Nyarong.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Sponberg 1992.

her status as a woman by remaining humble and discreet, two typically female virtues in Tibetan culture.

### *Conclusion*

Khandro Choechen's social and religious status seems to me best described as autonomous. Neither married nor a nun, she depends on nobody else and is thus totally free to pursue her religious career as she wishes. However, to achieve this autonomy, she had to overcome different obstacles, some involving difficult decisions. First, she wanted to become a nun, but was prevented to do so by divine forces beyond her own will. She accepted it and searched for an alternative solution to pursue her religious goal. She then had the opportunity to become the wife of a famous lama, promising her a brilliant future and a socially accepted role. However, she declined to be the partner of an elderly man—which would have meant her submission with regard to both, her age and gender—preferring instead a more arduous way by searching for religious teachings in an exclusively male-dominated environment. She thus had to face rejection and teasing in Tibet, but eventually received the support and some kind of informal recognition from several religious masters, who were willing to support an extraordinary visionary woman like her.

In her autobiography, as well as in her oral accounts, Khandro Choechen explains her departure from Tibet as following the calling from the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. However, it is also possible to interpret her flight as an escape from the pressures of a traditional society, which makes life difficult for women, even when they have already proven to have some spiritual realisation. The new environment she found in the exile community made it much more easy for her to pursue her religious search and ambitions, not only because public teachings are more frequent and easy to obtain, but also because the religious hierarchy, aware about modern Western ideas on gender equality (even though not necessarily sharing them), is more inclined to accept female practitioners. First among all, is the Dalai Lama. By recognising her as a *khandroma*, he not only acknowledged her spiritual achievements, but also opened her a door to the usually male religious hierarchy. Furthermore, determining and approving her lineage gave her official legitimation that she could not obtain in Tibet, where doubt was an attitude she often experienced.

Khandro Choechen's life story illustrates some of the difficulties also met by women of high status when they wish to pursue an

autonomous religious life. As women, they are compelled to behave according to Tibetan ideas and representations of gender. If not, they face harsh criticism, as shown by Khandro Choechen's experiences in Kham-Minyag. That explains why she has decided to comply with some of these rules by cultivating humility and discretion. This was not an easy decision and would not have been possible without her faithful assistant Norbu taking care of her daily needs and religious affairs. At the same time it makes her appear even more outstanding, not only because she represents a successful healer, but also because she cultivates virtuosity and discipline, two important attributes for a religious specialist.

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