

# “I am a god, I am a god, I am definitely a god” Deity Emanation and the Legitimation of Sönam Peldren

Suzanne M. Bessenger

(Randolph College)

**S**cholars and non-specialists alike are familiar with the Tibetan “tulku” (*sprul sku*) institution, most often thought of as the uniquely Tibetan institutional practice of selecting certain young children and “recognizing” them as reincarnations of deceased religious teachers. Numerous ethnographic and literary-historical descriptions document this process;<sup>2</sup> several films and autobiographies explore the experience of these figures;<sup>3</sup> a non-heritage tulku even commented on his own experiences in a paper entitled, “So What’s It Like to Be A Tulku? Western Reincarnations and Their Roles Within the Tibetan Tulku Institution” at the conference which led to this special issue.

As Diemberger and others have pointed out, however, “the notion of a *tülku*, a Tibetan word that literally means ‘the emanated body of the Buddha,’ with which most reincarnations are currently designated, encompasses both incarnation and reincarnation.”<sup>4</sup> In his seminal 1978 analysis of the historical roots of the reincarnation system in Tibetan Buddhism, Wylie distinguishes between the long-standing Mahāyāna tradition of recognizing an historical personage as an emanation-body (*sprul sku*, *nirmāṇakāya*) of a buddha or bodhisattva, and the related but distinct Tibetan tradition of recognizing successive human rebirths as incarnations of both a deity

---

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute, for “discovering” the biography of Sönam Peldren, and for preserving this remarkable piece of literature for posterity. Thank you also to Sarah Jacoby for her extensive and insightful comments on the chapter, not all of which I was able to incorporate due to time constraints, but which will certainly enrich my future work on the subject.

The Tibetan for the quote in the chapter title is *lha yin lha yin lha yin nges*.

<sup>2</sup> Aziz 1976; Bärlöcher 1982; Tenzin Gyatso 1991; Brauen ed. 2005; Chayet 1985; Diemberger 2007; Tsering 1993; Tsering 1994.

<sup>3</sup> *My Reincarnation* 2012; *Tulku* 2001; *Unmistaken Child* 2009; Trungpa 2010 (4<sup>th</sup> edition); Norbu and Turnbull 1968.

<sup>4</sup> Diemberger 2007, 242. See also Germano and Gyatso 2000; Van der Kuijp 2005; Wylie 1978.

and an historical figure.<sup>5</sup> Wylie points out that belief in the ability of a Buddha to emanate in human form “dates from the early days of Mahāyāna Buddhism and is widely accepted in conjunction with the *bodhisattva* ideal.”<sup>6</sup>

Twenty-seven years later, Leonard van der Kuijp picked up the thread of Wylie’s discussion of the historical roots of the Tibetan tulku institution.<sup>7</sup> While devoting the bulk of his article to refining Wylie’s claims about the historical basis of the practice of recognizing humans as reincarnations of previous human Buddhist masters, van der Kuijp also discusses early Tibetan examples of the Mahāyāna tradition of recognizing human emanations of specific bodhisattvas. Pointing specifically to the eleventh-century “Kakholma Testament” (*bka’ chems ka khol ma*) and its assertion of the “ontological equivalence of Songtsen Gampo with Avalokiteśvara” as one of the earliest (if not *the* earliest) Tibetan instances of recognizing Avalokiteśvara as the patron bodhisattva of Tibet, van der Kuijp suggests that the innovation was followed by other eleventh-century Tibetan works’ elaborations on “the motif of the ‘Three Protectors of Tibet,’” in which the Tibetan rulers Songtsen Gampo, Tri Songdetsen, and Ralpachen were retroactively equated with Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, and Vajrapāṇi, respectively.<sup>8</sup> By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Tibet, according to van der Kuijp, such claims of deity emanation had spread and were used both to explain and enhance the power and prestige of contemporary religious figures, with lineages such as the Sakya recognizing its religious leaders as emanations of Buddhist deities.<sup>9</sup> While going on to note that “equating Bodhisattvas with rulers was not new, neither in the Subcontinent nor in early Tibet,” van der Kuijp concludes that the idea that specific, recognized, and powerful bodhisattvas could take (and, indeed, had taken) human form as political rulers had no precedent in Tibet prior to the eleventh century.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to these examples of retroactively recognizing the emanation status of previous historical figures, and of deity emanation as one of many interpretative strategies with which to enhance religious reputations, we understandably have less information about the process by which a charismatic, non-

---

<sup>5</sup> The word *yang srid* is also sometimes used to describe the reincarnation of an historical figure, although this term is used to refer to the rebirth of ordinary sentient beings in samsāra as well.

<sup>6</sup> Wylie 1978, 579.

<sup>7</sup> Van der Kuijp 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Van der Kuijp 2005, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Van der Kuijp 2005, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Van der Kuijp 2005, 28.

institutionally affiliated individual in Tibet, a “self-made saint,” relies on the older, Mahāyāna hermeneutic of deity emanation to establish his or her own public religious persona, to the near total exclusion of other forms of legitimation. This use of the hermeneutic of deity emanation is particularly veiled in the case of historical figures that existed on the margins of political, social, and religious institutions of authority. This chapter explores how one such marginal Tibetan figure and her biographers appear to have relied on culturally accepted ideas about the ability of the divine to manifest in this world in order to establish her religious authority, with little recourse to other avenues of legitimation.

### 1. Background

The figure at the center of my discussion is a Tibetan woman named Sönam Peldren (*bsod nam dpal 'dren*). Sönam Peldren's dates are still unclear. While her termini may be anywhere from the late-twelfth to the mid-sixteenth century, we have good reason to narrow this down considerably: 1328-1372 represents her most likely lifespan.<sup>11</sup> Sönam

---

<sup>11</sup> Sönam Peldren's exact historicity remains elusive. The biography of Sönam Peldren, discussed further below, is unusual in that it provides specific dates (that is, a day, month, and year) for almost all of the episodes it describes from Sönam Peldren's life. Unfortunately, the text never references the twelve-year Tibetan calendrical cycle (*rab 'byung*) of those dates: thus, the text does not provide information that allows readers to discern in which year (within a 60-year cycle) the events took place. Moreover, the biography portrays Sönam Peldren's life as marked by an almost total lack of contact with religious and political institutions and teachers; although this absence of clear religious and political affiliations is one of the more interesting features of Sönam Peldren's legacy, as I discuss below, the lack of reference to historical events, institutions, or noteworthy persons deprives the reader of clues that would allow us to infer exactly when Sönam Peldren lived.

The biography states that Sönam Peldren was born “at dawn on the seventeenth day of the tenth month, in the kingly year of the earth male dragon, on the first day of the new year” (*de nas gnam lo rgyal po pa pho 'brug gi lo zla ba bcu pa'i tshes bcu bdun snga dro la / ye shes dbyings kyi mkha' 'gro ma / skar ma rgyal la legs par 'khrungs /*) and that she died on the “twenty-third day of the fifth month of the water male mouse year” (*chu pho byi ba lo zla ba lnga pa'i nyi shu gsum gyi nyin par /*). As these passages do not specify the exact twelve-year Tibetan calendrical cycle of either the earth dragon year of her birth or the water mouse year of her death, the reader is left to decipher exactly when Sönam Peldren's 44 years of life took place.

The text contains references to just two religious teachers, both unnamed: one is identified simply as the *Taklung lama* (*stag lung*) and the other as the *Barom lama* (*'bab rom*, most likely a variant spelling of *'ba' rom*). As both the *Taklung* and the *Barom* lineages of the *Kagyü* (*bka' brgyud*) school were initially established in the

Peldren was an ostensibly illiterate nomadic woman who, despite lacking religious training, practice, and connections to religious institutions, possessed a strong religious vocation. She was born in Central Tibet in Dam Shö (*'dam shod*) near the Nyenchen Thanglha (*gnyen chen thang lha*) mountain range.<sup>12</sup> She lived and traveled in central Tibet until the age of thirty, at which point she traveled with her husband and fellow nomadic group to eastern Tibet, or Kham (*kham*s). Sönam Peldren traveled in Kham for the next fourteen years until her death at age forty-four in a place called Ya Nga (*ya nga*) near what is now the city of Chamda (*lcam mda'*) in today's Driru county (*'bri ru*; sometimes also called Nakshö Driru, *nag shod 'bri ru*) in the Tibet Autonomous Region.<sup>13</sup>

The most extensive source of information we have about Sönam Peldren is a text that we may consider Sönam Peldren's biography, although the work lacks a comprehensive title.<sup>14</sup> I have two versions of the text;<sup>15</sup> both versions are molded into the form of Tibetan

---

mid-to-late-twelfth century, it seems likely that the earliest Sönam Peldren could have lived would be 1268-1312 or 1328-1372.

Sources external to Sönam Peldren's biography help establish a back-end date for Sönam Peldren's lifetime. According to Hildegard Diemberger, an unpublished sixteenth- to seventeenth-century text, "The Collected Works of Bodong [Choklé Namgyal]" (*dpal de kho na nyid dus pa las bo dong chos 'byung*), asserts that Chökyi Drönma (*chos skyid dron ma*, 1422-1455), founder of the Samdhing Dorjé Phakmo (*bsam ldng rdo rje phag mo*) institution and lineage, had previously incarnated as Lakṣmīkarā, Maṇḍaravā, Sönam Drenma (supposedly the consort of Phakmodrupa Dorjé Gyalpo,) and "as the ḍākinī Sönam Peldren at Dam Shöd in Kham." Diemberger 2007, 72-3.

Given Sönam Peldren's biography's brief allusions to Kagyu lineages, and assuming that the "History of Bodong" is correct in claiming that Sönam Peldren lived before Chökyi Drönma, Sönam Peldren's dates can be narrowed to 1268-1312 or 1328-1372. For the sake of simplicity and until this timeframe can be further refined, I simply use the later, more conservative time frame of 1328-1372.

<sup>12</sup> According to Bellezza, *'dam shod* is also called *'dam-shod snar-mo*, and approximates the present day *'dam-gzhung* county. Bellezza 2005, 180. Thank you to Jann Ronis for this reference.

<sup>13</sup> See Riwang Tenzin 2002, 368-374 for more information about *ya nga*.

<sup>14</sup> *Bsod nam dpal 'dren rnam thar*, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>15</sup> The biography of Sönam Peldren briefly mentions that multiple versions of Sönam Peldren's life story exist in varying stages of completeness; former residents of the nunnery associated with Sönam Peldren informed me that there are many copies of different versions of the biography of Sönam Peldren in and around her death site in Ya Nga Chamda village.

I am currently in possession of copies of two different versions of Sönam Peldren's biography. I received the first version of the text, or "Manuscript A", from the historian Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute in Dharamsala, H.P., India. This text is handwritten, in cursive script (*dbu med*) and contains single-sided folios numbered to 251, some of which are now missing. The second version of the biography is a copy of a text belonging to a monk named Tenzin Engsal (*bstan 'dzin dbyings gsal*, phonetic transcription of his design), originally

spiritual biography known as “liberation story” or *nam thar* (*rnam thar*), replete with divisions common to the genre such as outer, inner, secret, and songs of realization.<sup>16</sup>

The work’s authorship is attributed primarily to Sönam Peldren’s husband, Rinchen Pel (*rin chen dpal*), with the text containing multiple descriptions of his recording Sönam Peldren’s words throughout the course of their married life. While the text presents itself as the written transcription of a cohesive biography orally narrated by a single storyteller, we must handle the label “biography” carefully, along with our assumptions about authorship practices that we attribute to the term. As Gyatso observes about Tibetan writing practices:<sup>17</sup>

What is labeled biography not infrequently turns out to have been dictated by the subject to a scribe. Even biographies composed centuries later reproduce passages, from either oral or written sources, that originate with the subject. On the other hand, works that are considered autobiography are often completed and sometimes edited by the subject's disciple.

The text's own description of Sönam Peldren’s collaboration with scribes, its emphatic attribution of the composition of “songs of realization” (*mgur*) to Sönam Peldren herself, and its extensive first-person quotations of Sönam Peldren’s speech, render it plausible that Sönam Peldren herself was involved in some capacity in the composition of aspects of her life story; these and other features also make it reasonable to consider the text a document composed and

---

from Chamda near Sönam Peldren’s death site, and currently residing in Dharamsala, H.P., India. Tenzin Engsal generously allowed me to photocopy his personal copy of the Sönam Peldren biography, which he received from his teacher Khadro Kunsang Sangmo (ca. twentieth century). This text, or “Manuscript B,” is 472 double-sided folios long, or 944 folio sides total; its text is handwritten in a large, clear cursive on new yellow paper; and it seems to be a facsimile, as is evidenced from double-printing on several folios.

The different manuscripts have many spelling variations and differing section titles between them. Moreover, Manuscript B features additional words, lines, and even short passages that are wholly missing from Manuscript A. A more significant difference is that Manuscript A contains three additional sections not found in Manuscript B, including an unusual feast offering (*tshog*) of which Sönam Peldren is the recipient. Manuscript B, on the other hand, contains the autobiography of Rinchen Pel, which accounts for the text’s vastly greater length.

<sup>16</sup> For discussions of the various meanings and translations of the Tibetan term *nam thar*, see Gyatso 1998, 6 and Schaeffer 2004, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Gyatso 1997: 103.

compiled over time by multiple authors and scribes, including the subject herself.

According to this biography, one of the most distinctive features of Sönam Peldren's life was her repeated claim that while her external appearances were admittedly humble, they masked an internal reality of enlightened realization. Sönam Peldren called on many images of female enlightenment to describe her internal reality; most specifically, Sönam Peldren claimed that although she appeared to have an ordinary female body, in actuality she was an enlightened emanation form (*sprul sku*) of a buddha. The precise identity of the source of this enlightened emanation varies throughout the course of the text. As is discussed below, the biography's opening stanzas trace Sönam Peldren's genesis both to the "great mother" emptiness (*yum chen*) and to Dorjé Naljorma (*rdo rje rnal 'byor ma*, Vajrayoginī).<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the narrative voice refers to Sönam Peldren throughout the text with the generic title "*ḍākini*" (written as the phonetic transcription of the Sanskrit term, *dA ki ni*; the variant terms *ḍākima* and *ḍākki* also appear in the text in reference to Sönam Peldren). In yet other places, both the narrator and Sönam Peldren herself discuss the saint as an emanation of the wrathful Buddhist goddess Dorjé Phakmo (*rdo rje phag mo*) and her body as a "conqueror's mandala" (*rgyal ba'i dkyil 'khor*).<sup>19</sup>

The biography tells us that Sönam Peldren's husband and community met these varied claims to divinity with bewilderment at some times, and at others with outright scorn and ridicule. After a miraculous death, however, Sönam Peldren's professions of divine identity were corroborated by her previously skeptical husband, first when Rinchen Pel discovered relics in his wife's remains, and later again when he experienced a series of posthumous visions of his wife, who appeared before him in the glorious form of Dorjé Phakmo.

In this chapter, I focus on three, qualitatively different examples of both Sönam Peldren and her biographer(s) using the hermeneutic of deity emanation to assert her religious pedigree. Following a brief introduction to these passages, I discuss what is unusual about the appearance of deity emanation in the Sönam Peldren biography.

<sup>18</sup> *Bsod nam dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 1b.

<sup>19</sup> *Bsod nam dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 43b.

*2. Narrative Voice: Using Hagiographical Conventions to Trace  
Sönam Peldren's Emanation Status*

The first example of the text's use of deity emanation to establish Sönam Peldren's religious authority is found in the biography's opening passage. This passage explicitly asserts that Sönam Peldren is the final product of a series of unfolding layers of a divine source that the text alternately labels the "Vajrayoginī" and "Dorjé Naljorma."<sup>20</sup> Because the text takes great care to detail Sönam Peldren's precise relationship to this divine basis, I quote the opening passage in full:

Homage to Vajrayoginī!

While in general the Great Mother, who produces and sports with all the Buddhas of the three times, arrives in many [forms], the Conqueror Dorjé Naljorma is herself unique. Furthermore, Dorjé Naljorma is said to be three: the meaning of Dorjé Naljorma, the sign of Dorjé Naljorma, and the form of Dorjé Naljorma.

Regarding the meaning of Dorjé Naljorma: the meaning is described in the "Perfection of Wisdom"; the emptiness of appearance, the emptiness of sound, and the emptiness of awareness are indistinguishable, and [they] are the abiding manner of mind itself. It is also said in the Great Mother "Perfection of Wisdom" that the natural condition of the ground is called the Great Seal.

Regarding the sign of Dorjé Naljorma, it is said: "Of all the seed syllables, 'Ah' is supreme, arising and emanating from the center of the navel. Praise to and prostrate before the venerable queen who subjugates the sky-goers!" The meaning of this phrase is this: the inner heat at the navel resides as a mass of light in a short 'Ah.'

Finally, the form of Dorjé Naljorma is said to be three: the Truth Body Wisdom Sky-Goer, the Enjoyment Body Wisdom Sky-Goer, and the Emanation Body Wisdom Sky-Goer.

Regarding Truth Body Wisdom Sky-Goer: [this is] the Great Mother, who creates and sports with Dorjé Chang and all the assorted Bliss-Goers in the Highest Pure Land.

---

<sup>20</sup> Please note that where the Tibetan text uses transcribed Sanskrit, I give the transcribed Sanskrit term. Where the Tibetan text uses a Tibetan name for a place, human, or deity, I give the Tibetan in phonetic transcription. I translate all other terms into English.

Regarding the Enjoyment Body Wisdom Sky-Goer: Orgyen Jalendra, the twenty-four lands, and the thirty-two abodes are the abodes of the main female [deity].

Regarding the Emanation Body Wisdom Sky-Goer: [she] tirelessly manifests in whatever body is appropriate to benefit all sentient beings. Emanating in a form appropriate to each of the six classes of beings [residing] below the ground, on the ground, and above the ground, she gives doctrinal teachings in the language appropriate [for that realm].

In order to benefit sentient beings now in this place above the ground, the Wisdom Sky-Goer Sönam Peldren descended from within the Emanation Body and arrived in a place called Dam Shö, in the Nol district, in a low-lying place of the excellent place deity the Nyenchen Thanglha, in the dwelling place called Tashipa Jang Gyap. [She was of the] excellent and noble clan, the great male ancestral line of Dong, of the early, distinguished division of the Dong clan. Her father's name was Yöndak Ngoli, her mother was called Nasang Chötso, and as husband and wife the couple had four children: two boys and two girls.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folios 1b-4b: *na mo badza yo gi ni ye / spyir dus gsum sangs rgyas thams cad bskyed dang rol pa'i yum chen ni / mang du byon pa yod lags kyang / bcom ldan rdo rje rnal 'byor ma / gcig su nyid kyi 'gyur yin te / da yang rdo rje rnal 'byor ma la yang gsum du gsungs ste / don gyi rdo rje rnal 'byor ma dang / brda yi rdo rje rnal 'byor ma dang / rtags kyi do rje rnal 'byor ma dang gsum du gsungs ste / don gyi rdo rje rnal 'byor ma ni / smra bsam brjod med shes rab pha rol phyin zhes brjod bya'i don ni / snang stong grags stong rig stong dbyer med pa sems nyid kyi bzhugs tshul te / yum chen mo shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin ma yang zer / gzhi yi gnas lugs phyag rgya chen po bya ba de yin / brda yi rdo rje rnal 'byor ma ni / a ni yig 'bru kun gyis mchog / lte ba'i dbus nas 'byung zhing 'phro / mkha' 'gro ma rnams dbang du bsod / rje btsun ma la phyag 'tshal bstod / ces brjod bya'i don ni / lte bar gtum mo a thung gi tshul du 'od kyi phung por bzhugs pa de yin / rdags gyi rdo rje rnal byor ma la yang gsum du gsungs / ste / chos sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro dang / longs sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro dang / sprul sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro dang gsum du gsungs pa ni / chos sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro ni / 'og min du rdo rje 'chang la sogs bde gshegs thams cad bskyed dang rol pa'i yum chen du bzhugs pa rnams yin / longs sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro ni / o rgyan dza len rdha ra dang yul nyi zhu rtsa bzhi gnas sum cu so gyis ni gtso mo'i tshul du bzhugs pa rnams yin / sprul sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro ni / sa stong sa bla sa 'og rnams su rigs drug gang la gang 'dul gyi rang rang gi gzugs su sprul nas rang rang gi skad kyi chos don pa dang / sems can gyi don la snyel ba med par gang la gang lul gyi tshul du bzhugs pa rnams yin / da lta sa stong 'di na sprul sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro'i nang nas yul 'dir sems can gyi don du / ye shes mkha' 'gro bsod nams dpal 'dren byon pa'i yul la mtshan gsol 'dam shod snol ma'i ljongs / yul lha khyad 'phags gnyen chen thang lha'i gzhol / gnas mal la bkra shis pa byang rgyab bya ba der / rigs bzang khrung btsun pha chen ldong gi rus / khyed par nang tshan snga ldong rigs / yab la mtshan gsol yon badag sngo li bya / yum du gnas bzang chos mtsho bya ba dang / yab yum de gnyis bza' mir sprul pa'i sras / ming po gnyis sring mo gnyis dang bzhi /*



As is common for opening passages of Tibetan hagiographies, the authors of the text take great care to delineate a religious lineage for Sönam Peldren. This project—part map of a divine cosmos, part genealogy of a specific saint—is not just about tracing origins, however. Its greater import lies in the assertion of a specific worldview, replete with its own hierarchy, and then in locating its subject's pre-eminent place within the hierarchy of that world. One purpose of this opening passage is clearly to trace Sönam Peldren's ancestry. However, while the passage summarily provides a few facts about Sönam Peldren's human ancestry, noting her parents' names and claiming connections to the Dong (*ldong*) clan (one of the six original clans of Tibetan people descended from the mythical union of the monkey and the rock ogress),<sup>22</sup> Sönam Peldren's non-human lineage is delineated in far greater detail. According to this passage, while Sönam Peldren did have human parents, her "true" ancestry could be traced back through the three "bodies" (*sku*) of Dorjé Naljorma, and ultimately to the "Great Mother" emptiness itself, the source of all Buddhas, and a far more impressive ancestry to be sure.<sup>23</sup>

The opening passage of Sönam Peldren's biography is perhaps the text's most elaborate description of Sönam Peldren's relationship to a divine source via deity emanation; however, the biography's narrative voice emphatically echoes variations of the same theme throughout all sections of the biography. Many of these references to Sönam Peldren as an emanation take the form of brief verses of praise, such as hailing Sönam Peldren as "the *dākinī* who is the heart emanation of the Great Mother,"<sup>24</sup> "the supreme emanation form Sönam Peldren,"<sup>25</sup> and simply "the emanation called Sönam Peldren."<sup>26</sup> Other references to Sönam Peldren's origins mimic, in an abbreviated fashion, the sequential unfolding of emptiness into form

---

<sup>22</sup> See Gyaltzen 1996: 77-79 and Kapstein 2006: 33-35 for further discussion of this origin myth and its significance for Tibetan clan affiliations.

<sup>23</sup> As noted above, it is not uncommon for the opening stanzas of Tibetan hagiographies to equate their subjects with Buddhist deities. However, the length and detail of the description of Sönam Peldren's divine source strike me as noteworthy, particularly in contrast to the absence in Rinchen Pel's biography of a comparably detailed discussion of divine lineage. I am currently translating Rinchen Pel's biography in order to more closely compare these two texts.

<sup>24</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 45a: *yun chen thugs las sprul pa'i dAk+ki*

<sup>25</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 165b: *sprul ba'i sku mchog bsod nams dpal 'dren*

<sup>26</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 80b: *sprul sku bsod nams dpal 'dren bya ba de*

found in the opening passage of the biography, such as the following verse of praise for Sönam Peldren:

The Truth Body is the Great Mother Perfection of Wisdom, the  
Enjoyment Body is Dorjé Phakmo, and the Emanation Body is  
Sönam Peldren...<sup>27</sup>

By describing the various stages of the unfolding of the “Great Mother” emptiness into form, and labeling Sönam Peldren as a deliberate emanation of emptiness, Dorjé Naljorma, or Dorjé Phakmo, the text’s authors take care to repeatedly assert Sönam Peldren’s ontological identity as an emanation body.

### 3. Sönam Peldren’s Voice: Speaking Her Identity

In addition to this narrative assertion of Sönam Peldren’s emanation body status, the biography contains several passages of lengthy first-person quotations, in which Sönam Peldren makes explicit assertions about being an emanation of a deity. One such passage appears in the biography’s “inner” section, “The Clairvoyance Cycle, [or] The Inner Biography Concerning the Nature of the Mind of the Wisdom Dākinī Sönam Peldren,”<sup>28</sup> which contains descriptions of the last year of Sönam Peldren’s life. In this passage, Sönam Peldren’s husband Rinchen Pel calls his wife a “demon” (*dre*) after she loses a ritual dagger (*phur bu*).<sup>29</sup> Sönam Peldren’s lengthy and revealing retort follows:

Again one day, [Sönam Peldren] lost a metal ritual dagger, and Rinchen Pel said, “You are like a demon, not knowing how to keep even a little thing.”<sup>30</sup>

Again the Dākinī said, “Even if you call me a demon, I am not. Say anything about me: each person will bear the burden of their own misdeed.”

<sup>27</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 80b: *chos sku yum chen shes rab phar phyin dang / longs sku rdo rje phag mo dang / sprul sku bsod nams dpal 'dren dang / Again, beyond occasional references to Rinchen Pel as “hero” (dpa' bo), such lengthy prefaces are lacking in Sönam Peldren’s husband’s biography.*

<sup>28</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 45a: *ye shes mkha' 'gro bsod nams dpal 'dren gyi thugs rgyud gshis kyi gnas lugs nang gi rnam thar mngon shes skor bzhugs*

<sup>29</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folios 49a.

<sup>30</sup> Tentative translation.

Again Rinchen Pel said, "Well, if you aren't a demon, are you a god?"

Again the *Ḍākinī* said,

"I am a god, I am a god, I am definitely a god.

Although you don't see me as a god, I am a god:

for just as the Buddha subdued *Māra*,

so am I a god who protects all afflicted sentient beings  
with great compassion.

When you see me as a god, I am definitely a god.

I am a god of a god.

I am a god, a heart-emanation of the great mother

Dorjé Phakmo, the highest sphere of the supreme  
secret mantra.

I sold the dagger as if it were a cheap pot.

Look all you want: it isn't here."<sup>31</sup>

In this passage, Sönam Peldren makes the claim that whether or not Rinchen Pel recognizes it, she, Sönam Peldren, is as an emanation of Dorjé Phakmo. The exact relationship between Sönam Peldren's selling the ritual implement "as if it were a cheap pot" and her assertion of internal divinity is somewhat unclear: it seems that Sönam Peldren treats a religious object irreverently so as to illustrate the point that external appearances (such as her own her appearance as an illiterate, nomadic woman) should also be treated lightly.

The passage's primary relevance, however, lies in Sönam Peldren's unequivocal assertion of her divine identity as a deity or god (*lha*).<sup>32</sup> While the biography's opening passage, quoted in the previous section of this paper, traces Sönam Peldren's roots to Dorjé Naljorma, here Sönam Peldren references instead Dorjé Phakmo, the "Vajra Sow," as the source of her identity. In some ways, of course, this is not surprising: scholars such as Elizabeth English have

<sup>31</sup> Last line, tentative translation. *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folios 50b-51a: *yang nyin gcig mi la blugs pa'i phur bu 'gar yar cig yod pa de / bor nas mi snang bas / rin chen dpal gyis / 'dre 'dra ba re byed nas se ra re yang nya ra mi shes bdo zhus pas / yang dAk+ki'i zhal nas / 'dre 'dra le zer ba yang min / nga la ci bzlas 'dra yang rang rang gi sgrib pa re khur ba yin gsungs pa las / yang rin chen dpal gyis / 'o na 'dre min na lha gcig e ma yin zhus pas / yang dAk+ki'i zhal nas / lha yin lha yin lha yin nges / khyed gyis lhar ma mthong yang lha yin te / sangs rgyas kyis bdud btul ji bzhin du / nyon mongs sems can thams cad kun / thugs rje chen pos skyobs pa'i lha / lha ru mthong na lha yin nges / lha yi nang gi yang lha yin / yang rtse gsang sngags mchog gi klong / yum chen rdo rje phag mo yin [possibly a scribal error for "yi"] / thugs kyi sprul pa'i lha yin no / phur bu blun po'i [likely blugs pa, as in first line] zangs chung*

<sup>32</sup> Please note that throughout this essay, I alternately translate the Tibetan word *lha* as "deity" and "god".

extensively explored Dorjé Phakmo's close relationship, often indistinguishably so, to the Dorjé Naljorma who features so prominently early in Sönam Peldren's biography.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the wrathful Dorjé Phakmo is one of the preeminent female deities in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. The popularity of this Buddhist deity and her associated religious practices is such that the fifteenth-century historical survey the *Blue Annals* claims that "the majority of Tantric yogins in this Land of Snows were especially initiated and followed the exposition and meditative practice of the system known as Phag-mo gzhung-drug ['The Six Texts of [Dorjé] Phakmo']."<sup>34</sup>

What seems to be of significance here, then, is Sönam Peldren's insistence that she is more than what others perceive, even when those others are as familiar with her as her own husband. In this passage, and in others like it in the biography, Sönam Peldren bases her religious authority not on being a reincarnation of a previous human, nor on teachings received or realizations acquired through religious practice, but instead on the simple assertion that she is an eruption of the divine into this world. The boldness of Sönam Peldren's claim to divinity is exceeded only by the audacity of the manner in which she makes her assertion: in one short paragraph Sönam Peldren repeats, no fewer than eight times, the refrain, "I am a god" (*lha yin*).

#### 4. Sönam Peldren's Body: Being a God

The last example I present in which the Sönam Peldren biography uses the framing device of deity emanation to assert the religious pedigree of its subject is notable not just for its quotation of Sönam Peldren's speech, but also for its description of Sönam Peldren's physical actions. The passage in question also appears in the "inner" section of the biography:

One day, when [the nomad group] was staying on a sunny mountain range, the Ḍākinī discarded her top. When she got up she cut her thin belt and, discarding this, peeled off [her skirt.]

Rinchen Pel said, "All of your basic needs have been discarded: clothing, food, shoes, even your *rtsa re* [meaning unclear]. At the end you even undid your belt and cut it into a

<sup>33</sup> See English 2007 for a particularly thorough exploration of the deity. See also Allione 2000, 107-118; Willis 1987; Diemberger 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Roerich 1998, 390. This text is a meditation manual traditionally attributed to Lakṣmīnkārā, said to be the sister of king Indrabhūti and a teacher of Virūpa.

mere sliver. Now your entire body is uncovered and naked, [but] you don't even seem ashamed!"

The Dākinī replied:

"Severing the belt from the waist was severing the 'self' at the root.

Discarding clothing from my back was discarding the covering of the two [hindrances to meditation]: drowsiness and agitation.

Uncovering the naked body was uncovering naked awareness.

Displaying the vagina, the female sign, was presenting the basis of faith.

Singing this little song from my mouth is the dawning of realization in the mind.

Not engaging in religious practice is the shamelessness of experience and realization."<sup>35</sup>

This passage, and the actions it records, is intriguing on many levels. The notion of a woman stripping naked on a mountain range to demonstrate a religious teaching is distinctive. Moreover, the passage, like others in the biography, is notable for similarities to an episode in Milarepa's life story: not only does Sönam Peldren's seven-syllable verse mimic that of Milarepa, but the passage recalls the famous episode that appears in many biographies of Milarepa, in which the saint's clothes fall off his body during his practice of inner heat, after which he chastises his aunt and sister for feeling ashamed (*ngo tsha*) about his nakedness.<sup>36</sup>

While these similarities are intriguing, the image of Sönam Peldren standing naked and using her female body as a metaphor to illustrate tantric principles also calls to mind another image: that of a dancing, naked, and transgressive female tantric figure appearing at the center of her own maṇḍala, as is found in a variety of Tibetan

<sup>35</sup> Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar, Manuscript B, folios 60b-61a: *yang nyin cig nyi rar bsdad nas yod tsa / dAk+ki se stod phud nas yod tsa / yar 'gro ba langs nas song ba'i dus su / ska rag phra mo cig yod pa de chad nas / gos de phud nas shus nas byung ba'i dus su / rin chen dpal gyis / rang la dgos pa'i gos zas lham rtsa re yang mi byed nas / tha ma rang ska rag tsam yang mi byed the gu ba dag tsam de chad nas thal / da kun lus gcer bur 'bud nas ngo yang tsha rgyu mi snang zhus pas / yang dAk+ki'i zhal nas / rked kyi ska rag chad pa de / nga bdag rtsad nas chad pa yin / rgyab nas gos kyang bud pa de / bying rgod gnyis kyi gos kyang bud pa min / lus po gcer bur bud pa de / rig pa gcer bur bud pa yin / mo rtags bHa ga bstan pa de / dad pa'i rten cig bzhag pa yin / kha nas glu chung len pa de / sems la rtogs pa shar ba yin / tshul chos spyod pa med pa de / snyoms rtogs ngo tsha med pa yin gsungs /*

<sup>36</sup> This episode appears in stories recounting the life of Milarepa as early as the twelfth century in Lama Zhang's "The Life of Milarepa" (Tib: *bla ma mi la ras pa'i rnam thar.*) See Quintman 2006, 96.

Buddhist visualizations and artistic representations. The Tibetan canon contains many ritual texts dedicated to Dorjé Naljorma and Dorjé Phakmo in particular. In her extensive work on the subject, English describes and interprets these images of the dancing, naked Dorjé Phakmo maṅḍalas:

Altogether, Vajravārāhī reveals her passionate and abandoned nature through her exultant nakedness, her blood-red color, and her hair, which flies loose in defiance of socio-sexual constraint.<sup>37</sup>

By stripping naked on a mountaintop and delivering a lecture to her husband about the principles of tantric Buddhism, it is possible that Sönam Peldren or her biographers consciously used her naked body to reference iconographic depictions of either *dākinīs* in general, or of Dorjé Phakmo and Dorjé Naljorma in particular.<sup>38</sup> In so doing, Sönam Peldren not only literally embodied the rhetoric of transgression found in tantric religious practices, but also used her body to mimic the visual, artistic representations of wrathful female deities like Dorjé Naljorma and Dorjé Phakmo in order to provide a particularly literal Tantric teaching of her own.

### *5. Conclusion*

In closing, I would like to raise a few questions about the significance of these claims. Namely, are declarations that a Tibetan woman was a deity emanation really all that noteworthy? Stated differently, is it remarkable that hagiographers use the conventions of their genre to claim divinity for their subject? Is it so significant that a Tibetan woman used her speech to verbally assert her identity as a deity, and her body to physically mimic artistic depictions of naked dancing female Buddhist icons? After all, isn't belief in the very possibility that the divine can manifest in human form what underlies the tulku institution that is the subject of this volume?

The answer to these questions is twofold. On the one hand, no, it is of course not uncommon for a Tibetan religious figure to be equated with one or another Buddhist deity, usually by his or her biographers or community of believers. In fact, by the reckonings of some reincarnation lineage genealogies that begin to appear in the

---

<sup>37</sup> English 2002, 159.

<sup>38</sup> Thank you to David Germano for reading and discussing this passage of the biography with me.

late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, Sönam Peldren is an early incarnation of one of the most famous female tulku institutions in Tibet: the Samdhing Dorjé Phakmo, a reincarnation lineage that to this day invests its institutional power in a female tulku who is believed to be both an emanation of the deity Dorjé Phakmo, as well as the reincarnation of all the previous historical women who were emanations of that same deity. The Samdhing Dorjé Phakmo tulku institution's historical roots lie in the life of Chökyi Drönma (*chos skyid sgron ma*, 1442-1455/6), whose biography and history Diemberger translates and explores.<sup>39</sup> There is no evidence that Chökyi Drönma had any contact with or knowledge of Sönam Peldren; instead, Diemberger demonstrates that Chökyi Drönma masterfully drew on prevailing Tibetan beliefs in deity emanation, her royal family's extensive political ties, and her relationships with well-known religious teachers to establish both her own religious reputation and an enduring reincarnation institution.

A religious biography completed two years before the princess-turned-nun's death asserts that Chökyi Drönma's divine source allowed her to "choose" to take birth in a politically well-connected family. The text goes on to describe that Chökyi Drönma's true identity as Dorjé Phakmo was corroborated by many significant religious leaders of her day, including two with whom she shared close, public relationships: Bodong Choklé Namgyal (*bo dong phyogs las rnam rgyal*, 1376-1451)<sup>40</sup> and Thangtong Gyalpo (*thang stong rgyal po*, 1385-1464). The biography describes Chökyi Drönma's ordination ceremony, conducted by Bodong Choklé Namgyal himself; it names specific religious teachings and empowerments that he and other prominent teachers gave Chökyi Drönma over the course of her life, and describes their supervision over her meditation retreats.<sup>41</sup> The biography even includes a copy of a letter supposedly written by Thangtong Gyalpo and sent ahead of Chökyi Drönma on her journeys to "all the areas of the country, including the Four Horns of central Tibet, the three places called Chayul, Dakpo, and Kongpo, and the three places called Lokhathra, Minyak, and Churug Mon Atsara."<sup>42</sup> In this letter, Thangtong Gyalpo not only uses his personal influence and reputation to request "every local ruler in central Tibet" to "please welcome [Chökyi Drönma] and give her adequate support at her departure," but he even states explicitly that Chökyi Drönma's "secret name," or identity, is Dorjé Phakmo, echoing a sentiment that,

---

<sup>39</sup> Diemberger 2007.

<sup>40</sup> See Maher 2017 in this special issue.

<sup>41</sup> Diemberger 2007, 173.

<sup>42</sup> Diemberger 2007, 222.

according to the biography, had been previously uttered by Bodong Choklé Namgyal early in his relationship with Chökyi Drönma.<sup>43</sup>

It is in these very details of Chökyi Drönma's remarkable life, however, that we find a second answer to questions about the significance of Sönam Peldren's claims to deity emanation status. For it is the extensive corroborating details that accompany Chökyi Drönma's biography's claims of its subject being a deity emanation that highlight just what is *missing* from Sönam Peldren's biography.

Compared to Chökyi Drönma's life of privilege and social embeddedness, Sönam Peldren's biography paints a portrait of a dramatically different kind of life. The biography's opening passage, quoted in full above, contains a brief reference to Sönam Peldren's ancestral ties to the Dong clan. Beyond this single remark, references to socially, politically, or religiously powerful institutions or people are strikingly absent from the biography. The biography does not contain a single discussion of Sönam Peldren receiving religious teachings or instructions at any point in her life, from either human or divine figures. In fact, the text does not contain a single description of Sönam Peldren's having relationships of substance with any religious teachers at all: the text features only passing references to Sönam Peldren encountering religious professionals that depict the exchanges as transactional and perfunctory in nature, and as not including any formal transmission of religious doctrine, lineage, or education.

In addition to this portrayal of a life lived far removed from the circles of religious power, practice, and influence, the text lacks descriptions of episodes in which Sönam Peldren's religious knowledge or claims of divinity are validated by other figures. Indeed, whereas Chökyi Drönma's biography is notable for its depiction of a life of privilege, power, and esteem, Sönam Peldren's life story is characterized by its extensive descriptions of the contempt and doubt that the subject inspired in her husband, family, and nomadic community with her religious claims of internal realization, her "ugly" body, and her female gender, not to mention her impertinence and lack of humility.<sup>44</sup> Reading these accusations, the reader is struck by how unusual it is that Sönam Peldren's unconventional persona provided the material for sainthood: not only does Sönam Peldren appear to have been an illiterate nomadic woman without any access to religious figures or teachings, but the most pervasive theme of Sönam Peldren's life story is the consistent

---

<sup>43</sup> Diemberger 2007, 222.

<sup>44</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 60a: *ngan pa*.



doubt and sometimes contempt with which her family and peers met her claims and teachings.

The absence in the biography of references to contemporaries who conferred legitimacy upon Sönam Peldren's claims to divinity is distinctive. I suggest that what is unusual about the case of Sönam Peldren is not that she and her biographers draw on the hermeneutic of deity emanation, which as Wylie and van der Kuijp, as well many contributors to this volume, demonstrate is a practice with a long history in Tibetan culture, and one that seems to have predated Sönam Peldren by some centuries. Instead, I suggest that the biography of Sönam Peldren is unusual for its reliance on the hermeneutic of deity emanation to establish the religious pedigree of its subject, to the near-total exclusion of other means of religious legitimization. Whether it is hagiographical conventions tracing Sönam Peldren's source to a divine origin, or quotes of the saint herself verbally asserting her identity as Dorjé Phakmo, or descriptions of the saint's unusual physical miming of artistic representations of transgressive female deities, I suggest that what is striking about the biography of Sönam Peldren is its willingness to rely, at least rhetorically, solely on the hermeneutic of deity emanation to establish the religious legitimacy of its subject.

In this way, Sönam Peldren's biography seems to add a peculiar twist to van der Kuijp's observations about declarations of the deity emanation status of religious leaders observed in the Kakholma Testament and subsequent Tibetan religious institutions. Van der Kuijp describes deity emanation status as applied retroactively, in part as a means to lend a religious interpretation for the political and religious success of previous historical figures. In short, van der Kuijp observes that figures gained political, social, or religious success, and the hermeneutic of deity emanation was used post facto to both explain and reinforce that success. With Sönam Peldren, however, the reverse seems to have been true: throughout the life story of Sönam Peldren, the deity emanation hermeneutic was used not to explain the subject's religious, political, and social success. Instead, the struggle to attain such success seems to have been one of the defining aspects of the saint's life, and it was likely a force motivating the composition of her biography.<sup>45</sup> Instead, deity emanation functioned to both excuse and explain the subject's claims *despite* her lack of political, social, and, at least initially, religious success. In the case of Sönam Peldren's biography, it seems that deity emanation was an answer not to the question, "Who are you?" from faithful followers, but instead a rebuttal to the question, "Who do you think you are?"

---

<sup>45</sup> See Bessenger 2010, Chapter Two, for further discussion.

from skeptics. With few other means of legitimation available to her and her biographers, it seems that Sönam Peldren's sainthood was crafted with the materials at hand: a narrative, a voice, a body, and a shared belief that the divine can manifest in this world, even in the unlikeliest of places.

## Bibliography

### Tibetan-Language Sources

Rid bang bstan 'dzin, 2002. *Nags shod 'bri ru'i lo rgyus*. Ihasa: bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang.

Rin chen dpal. *Bsod nam dpal 'dren rnam thar*. Undated, unpublished manuscript.

Tsering, Tashi. 1994. "Introductory Notes on the Biographical Sketches of Six Incarnations of Gungru Khandroma." *G.yu mtsho* 1: 27-47.

Tsering, Tashi. 1993. "Bsam sding rdo rje phag mo sku phreng rim byong gyi mtshan dang 'khrungs gshegs ky lo khams star chags su 'god thabs sngon 'gro'i zhib 'jug mdor bsdud." *G.yu mtsho*, 1.1: 31-53.

### Western-Language Sources

Aziz, Barbara. 1976. "Reincarnation Reconsidered: or the Reincarnated Lama as Shaman." In *Spirit Possession in the Nepal Himalayas*, edited by John T. Hitchcock and Rex L. Jones, 343-360. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.

Bärlocher, Daniel. 1982. *Testimonies of Tibetan Tulkus: A Research Among Reincarnate Buddhist Masters in Exile*. Zurich: Tibet-Institute.

Bellezza, John Vincent. 2005. *Spirit-Mediums, Sacred Mountains, and Related Bon Textual Traditions in Upper Tibet: Calling Down the Gods*. Boston: Brill.

Bessenger, Suzanne. 2010. *Echoes of Enlightenment: The Life and Legacy of Sonam Peldren*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia.

- Brauen, Martin, editor. 2005. *The Dalai Lamas: A Visual History*. Chicago: Serindia.
- Chayet, Anne. 1985. "Women and Reincarnation in Tibet: The Case of Gung ru mkha' 'gro ma." In *Facets of Tibetan Religious Tradition and Contacts with Neighboring Cultural Areas*, edited by A. Cadonna and E. Bianchi. Firenze: Olschki Editore.
- Diemberger, Hildegard. 2007. *When A Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty*. New York: Columbia.
- English, Elizabeth. 2002. *Vajrayoginī: Her Visualizations, Rituals, and Forms*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Germano, David and Janet Gyatso. 2000. "Longchenpa and the Possession of the Dakinis." In *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David G. White. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gyaltzen, Sakyapa Sonam. 1996. *The Clear Mirror: A Traditional Account of Tibet's Golden Age*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.
- Gyatso, Tenzin (Dalai Lama XIV) 1991. *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama*. San Francisco: HarperPerennial.
- Jacoby, Sarah. 2009 (2010). "'This inferior female body': Reflections on life as a Tibetan visionary through the autobiographical eyes of Se ra mkha' 'gro (Bde ba'i rdo rje, 1892-1940)." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 32.1-2: 115-150.
- Kapstein, Matthew. 2006. *The Tibetans*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Maher, Derek F. 2017. "Revival and Renewal through Reincarnation: The Bodong Tradition, Then and Now." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 38: 104-118.
- Martin Braun, editor, 2005. *The Dalai Lamas: A Visual History*. Chicago: Serindia.
- Norbu, Thubten Jigme, and Colin Turnbull. 1968. *Tibet*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- My Reincarnation*. Dir. Jennifer Fox. Perf. Yeshi Silvano, Chogyal Namkhai Norbu. Docudrama, 2012. DVD.

- Quintman, Andrew H. 2006. *Mi la ras pa's Many Lives: Anatomy of a Tibetan Biographical Corpus*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Michigan.
- Trungpa, Chogyam. 1966. *Born in Tibet*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Tulku*. Dir. Gesar Mukpo. Perf. Gesar Mukpo, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Ogyen Trinley Dorje. Festival Media, 2001. DVD.
- Unmistaken Child*. Dir. Nati Baratz. Perf. Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho (Dalai Lama XIV), Lama Konchog. Oscilloscope Laboratory, 2009. DVD.
- Van der Kuijp, Leonard. 2005. "The Dalai Lamas and the Origin of Reincarnate Lamas." In *The Dalai Lamas: A Visual History*, edited by Martin Braun, 14-31. Chicago: Serindia.
- Wylie, Turrell. 1978. "Reincarnation: A Political Innovation." In *Proceedings of the Csoma de Koros Memorial Symposium*, edited by L. Ligeti, 579-586. Budapest: Akademiai Kiado.

