

THE THIRD DRAGKAR LAMA: AN IMPORTANT FIGURE FOR FEMALE
MONASTICISM IN THE BEGINNING OF TWENTIETH CENTURY KHAM

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Research on Tibetan nuns and nunneries is still in its infancy, and suffers from many shortcomings. One of the reasons for this situation is the lack of historical materials, be it texts written by Tibetan nuns or on their behalf. Even among the vast corpus of Tibetan biographies (*rnam thar*) and autobiographies (*rang rnam*), very few concern women, and even fewer nuns.¹ The same is true for the history of nunneries, so that for instance we have to rely on some highly mythical foundation stories, such as Gari Nunnery (*Gar ri a ne dgon pa*) near Lhasa (Lha sa), which oral history attributes to Phadampa Sangye (*Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas*, eleventh or twelfth century) without any historic evidence. Some scholars have suggested that women disappeared from the official narrative with the establishment of the Buddhist schools and the canonisation of Tibetan translations of Buddhist literature. These developments gave society a markedly clerical and patriarchal character.² Others think the hegemony of the celibate Gelugpa (*dge lugs pa*) school, which started at the beginning of the fifteenth century and culminated in the seventeenth century with the arrival of the Fifth Dalai Lama, may have been at the origin of the disappearance of women from the religious spheres and in the same time from literature.³

All the more surprising is the fact that we can find at least two lamas (*bla ma*) from a small Gelugpa lineage in Kham (Khams) who were very supportive of the development of nuns and nunneries in their region from the eighteenth century on. The name of their lineage is Dragkar (*Brag dkar*), "White rock," after their monastery's name, Dragkar Jangchubling (*Brag dkar byang chub gling*), situated few kilometres away from the city centre of Kandze (*Dkar mdzes*), located in modern Sichuan. The objective of this article is to present findings on the history of nuns and their nunneries based on the reading of the Third Dragkar Lama's writings in this light.

Sources

This paper will mainly draw from primary data found in the collected writings (*gsung 'bum*) of the Third Dragkar Lama, Lozang

¹ According to Schaeffer (2004: 52), only three or four out of the one hundred fifty currently known autobiographies are by women.

² Hermann-Pfandt 2003: 59.

³ See for example Chayet 1999: 65–82.

Palden (Blo bzang dpal ldan, also Blo bzang dpal ldan bstan 'dzin snyan grags, 1866–1929), comprising twenty volumes.⁴ Alag Zenkar Thubten Nyima (A lags gzan dkar Thub bstan nyi ma) has already drawn on it to write a short biography, but unfortunately he does not mention any activities of Dragkar Lama in favour of nuns.⁵ A research team composed of Tibetologists from Beijing and Sichuan has also made use of the collected writings for their survey of Tibetan monasteries in Kandze prefecture, published under the title *Khams phyogs dkar mdzes khul gyi dgon sde so so'i lo rgyus gsal bar bshad pa nang bstan gsal ba'i me long*;⁶ information on Dragkar Lama can be gathered under the different entries dedicated to the nunneries he founded. This data will be supplemented by information given by Western travellers and missionaries who met the Third Dragkar Lama personally at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Dragkar Lama lineage consists of five incarnations (*sprul sku*), the present and fifth being Lozang Tenzin Nyendrag (Blo bzang bstan 'dzin snyan grags, 1953–). Born into an aristocratic family named Chapa (Cha pa), he lives as a layman in Lhasa.⁷ Information on the second and the fourth lineage holder, Jangchub Gyaltzen (Byang chub rgyal mtshan, nineteenth century) and Lozang Thubten Palden Özer (Blo bzang thub bstan dpal ldan 'od zer, 1928?–1953?) respectively, is scarce. However, interestingly enough, the third incarnation Lozang Palden's collected writings include a short biography of his predecessor, the First Dragkar Lama Jampa Rabten (Byams pa rab brtan, 1735–1819).⁸ It includes a long passage recounting how Jampa Rabten, after his studies in Lhasa, introduced monasticism for women in Kandze, revealing problems the lama faced to convince people to let their women enter religious life. Despite this, the lama proceeded, and founded his first nunnery.⁹ Some blamed him for his actions; among them were monks who threatened to destroy the nunnery saying that the nuns'

⁴ The collected writings can be consulted on the TBRC-website under the reference W23608. Two printed editions exist also in Potala and in IsMEO; some volumes can be found in Oslo, brought by the Norwegian traveller Theo Sørensen (see Kvaerne: 1973). Several authors wrote during many years the biography of Dragkar Lama studied here. It is included in the volumes 17 and 18.

⁵ Thub bstan nyi ma 1986.

⁶ Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig zhib 'jug ste gnas kyi chos lugs lo rgyus zhib 'jug so'o, Krung go bod brgyud nang bstan mtho rim slob gling bod brgyud nang bstan zhib 'jug khang, Zi khron zhing chen dkar mdzes khul chos lugs cud and Dkar mdzes khul yig bsgyur cud 1995.

⁷ I am grateful to Tashi Tsering (Amnye Machen Institute) for this information. The Chapa family is a branch (*zur pa*) of the Shatra (Bshad sgra) family (private communication, Alice Travers).

⁸ Blo bzang dpal ldan bstan 'dzin snyan grags, volume 14, chapter "Smyung gnas bla ma rgyud pa'i rnam thar yig drug dang smyung gnas kyi phan yon bcas legs par bshad pa gser gyi phreng mdzes." The same text can also be found in the Norway collection brought by Sørensen, no. 189, 145 folios.

⁹ This may have been the first nunnery in Kham. For more information on the First Dragkar Lama, see my PhD dissertation, Schneider 2010: 79–81.

participation in village rituals caused them financial loss. This led to the compromise whereby nuns were forbidden to do most of these rituals. Nonetheless, the First Dragkar Lama founded altogether three nunneries: Nyinmo (Nyin mo) in Kandze township, Dragkar *jomogön* (Brag dkar jo mo dgon; also called Skar 'dzin srib mo or Brag dkar 'phel rgyas gling) in Kandzeshowship, as well as Tongkor Nenang (Stong skor gnas nang) near Tehor (Tre hor) township.

Similar polemics have accompanied the Third Dragkar Lama's life, and we present the practices and discipline he introduced into his various nunneries.

The life of the Third Dragkar Lama, Lozang Palden (1866–1929)

Early years

Lozang Palden was born on the first day of the first month of 1866 at Druglang Monastery ('Brug lang *dgon*, also known under the name 'Krigs lung *ri khrod*). His father's name was Samten Tshering (Bsam gtan tshe ring) and his mother's, Tsheringma (Tshe ring ma).¹⁰ When he reached four years of age, he was recognised as the reincarnation of Jangchub Gyaltzen of Dragkar Jangchubling in Kandze and received the full name Lozang Palden Tenzin Nyendrag Pazangpo (Blo bzang dpal ldan bstan 'dzin snyan grags dpal bzang po). He started his studies at the age of five, first under the guidance of the teacher (*dge rgan*) Dorje Bum (Rdo rje 'bum), then, at the age of nine, under Baphu Yongdzin Loden Chöphel ('Ba' phug Yongs 'dzin blo ldan chos 'phel) learning grammar, poetry, as well as sciences. He received his first ordination from Drungsa Lama Lozang Palden Tenzin Tshültrim (Drung sar *bla ma* Blo bzang dpal ldan bstan 'dzin tshul khriims).

In 1882, at the age of seventeen, he went to Lhasa where he continued his studies at Drepung Loseling ('Bras spungs blo gsal gling), Tehor *khamtsen* (Tre hor *khamtsen*). There, he received teachings in philosophy (*mtshan nyid*), studied the "Five Major Treatises (on emptiness)" (*Gzhung bka' pod lnga*) and its commentaries, Tibetan medicine, the religious teachings of Künkyen Longchenpa (Kun mkyen klong chen pa) and also teachings from the Sakya school (*sa skya'i gser chos bcu gsum* and *lam 'bras*) from the ex throneholder of Zhalu, Lozang Kyenrab (Zhwa lu *khri zur* Blo bzang mkhyen rab). During his stay in Central Tibet, he received full ordination from the Ganden throneholder, Yeshe Chöphel (Dga' ldan *khri chen* Ye shes chos 'phel).

At the age of twenty-two, he returned to his homeland (1887) and stayed at his monastery Dragkar Jangchubling pursuing his studies under different teachers and starting to teach himself. At that time the Hor states, to which Kandze belonged, were under the

¹⁰ TBRC file: P269.

administration of Central Tibet, a situation that would change some years later. Indeed, during the life of Dragkar Lama, the political situation in Kham was extremely fluid and complex, and this is reflected in political shifts during his life and activities.

In 1892, Dragkar Lama was invited by the nuns of Kandze (Nyinmo *anigönpa*) to assume his religious duties as the patron of their nunnery and to give them preliminary teachings (*sngon 'gro*). Around two thousand people joined the two week-long instructions, among them many nuns, but also monks, laymen, and laywomen. A notable participant was the princess of Degé (Sde dge), Chime Tenpe Drönme ('Chi med bstan pa'i sgron me), who had married into the Khangsar (Khang gsar) family, one of the hereditary ruling clans of the five Hor states; subsequently due to her great faith in the teachings, she decided to become a hermit nun (*bya bral*). Other women followed her example and renounced worldly life.

Dragkar Lama then went to the hermitage called Kardzin Nyinsib (Skar 'dzin nyin srib) where he stayed with his followers, teaching, and practicing for three months. According to the author of this part of the biography, the group of practitioners received plenty of donations and the atmosphere was harmonious causing many lay followers to consider not going back to work on their land, preferring instead to continue their religious practice.

However on one occasion, when the lama was absent, because he had to overlook his own monastery and residence (*bla brang*), people from Kandze came to force the residents out of the hermitage. They were criticising Dragkar Lama saying that he attracted too much attention from the population and that he was destroying their families, and that because of him farmers would not work anymore on their harvest, etc. Obligated to leave but eager to continue practice, his disciples joined the lama asking where he planned to go next, and informing him that they wanted to follow him. At this time, Dragkar Lama decided to go to the place called Malanang (Mā la nang), a retreat high in the mountains of Kandze. The Degé princess joined the group, as well as fifty lay and religious practitioners of the Khangsar house who previously supported the Kagyüpa (*bka' brgyud pa*) tradition.

In Malanang, the disciples built a new religious encampment (*chos sgar*): they constructed their residences and a throne for the lama out of slate rocks and boulders; the lama himself staying in a black nomad tent (*nag gur*). Many lay followers joined the religious group temporarily, some of them alternating between family members. They brought with them a great deal of donations. During summer time until mid-autumn, a vast number of people stayed in the religious camp, but in the winter, due to the cold, the followers of Dragkar Lama diminished in number. The lama decided to move to a lower altitude, and after having checked several possibilities, settled finally on the western side of the ruins of a Kagyü monastery called Chöying (Chos dbyings) a place that had facilities such as water, sun, and many auspicious signs.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Dragkar Lama's disciples were thriving, among whom many monks from other monasteries in the Kandze region. Consequently, the lama again became the subject of jealousy from several monasteries but also from the local nobility. Among the latter was the female chief (*dpon mo*) of Khangsar, Lady Jangcan Khandro (Dbyangs can mkha' 'gro, 1854–1935), ruler of a small state (one of the five Hor states in Kham) and mother of the then young Khangsar Kyabgön (Khang gsar Skyabs mgon), second of his lineage.¹¹ Being intent on keeping spiritual power together with the family's hereditary political power,¹² she decided to destroy the hermitage and to chase out Dragkar Lama, who in turn fled to the adjacent Nyarong (Nyag rong) accompanied by some of his disciples. However, later, Dragkar Lama is said to have met the Chinese *amban* (representative of China's Qing Emperor),¹³ who was on the road to Lhasa, and to have asked him to act as an intermediary and to help settle the dispute. Given the fact that the noblewoman had prevented the Chinese army in 1908 from passing through her territory, the *amban* decided to arrest her. She tried to flee to Lhasa, but she was captured on the way. According to Chinese sources, accusations against the Khangsar chief were numerous, the worst being political rebellion (among others, she tried to leave Kandze with her seal) warranting death by execution.¹⁴ If we believe the author of this part of the lamas' biography, Dragkar Lama asked the *amban* not to have her executed, but instead help him to rebuild his religious encampment. Finally the lady was only deprived of her possessions and lost her title.

In 1903, Dragkar Lama founded a new religious camp in Drango (Brag 'go): Getharlung (Dge thar lung). At the beginning it housed thirteen great scholars (from Minyag [Mi nyag], Tau [Rta'u], Drango, Kandze and one from Amdo), one hundred monks, one hundred nuns, and one hundred laymen and women. Later the number grew to more than a thousand people, comprising five hundred nuns. The sessions of practice and study were elaborate and strict discipline was observed.

During this time, Dragkar Lama also received some Western visitors. Their accounts are not very detailed, but they shed some light on the person and the political situation surrounding him.

¹¹ His full name was Blo bzang rgya mtsho or Thub bstan blo bzang 'jigs med rgya mtsho (1897?–?). The Khangsar family occupied the seat of the Kandzes' main monastery (TBRC G500 and W1997). Concerning the ruling family of Hor Khangsar, see Khang gsar ye rdo 2000: 114–134.

¹² See for example Goré 1923: 343.

¹³ The biography only mentions the title *amban* without giving any name. Most probably it refers to Zhao Erfeng who was on territorial request in the region at this time. See Wang 2006: 287–292.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 292.

Encounters with Westerners

In 1907 the French Tibetologist Jacques Bacot met Dragkar Lama in what he calls “his” little monastery situated higher up in the mountain than the main monastery and village of Drango.¹⁵ Bacot gives a description of the monastery and room where he was living, and tells us that the three hundred monks were all very learned, however he does not mention any nuns. Moreover Bacot stipulates that he was then in favour with the Chinese, and supportive of their politics, but that the lama may change his attitude due to the fact that his political views prevented him from going to collect donations in his homeland where the Khangsar chief had threatened to assassinate him. Bacot describes him thus: “He is a man of around fifty years [in reality forty], slightly obese, shows affability and exquisite manners.”¹⁶

Two years later, in 1909, Dragkar Lama befriended the Norwegian missionary Theo Sørensen who provided a description of the nuns staying with the lama in his monastery in Drango (probably Getharlung). Sørensen wrote:

There are two hundred nuns, mostly old women, connected with this establishment; it was pitiful to see these women, many of them looking almost imbecile, sitting outside their mud huts, or walking about with their prayer wheels. They all shave their heads and use the same kind of garments as the lamas, of whom there are one hundred in the same place. The head lama received us in a most friendly way, and allowed us enter his private room, where we had a long conversation together. He was especially interested in hearing our opinion regarding ‘transmigration.’ He had heard we had nuns in our country, which gave me an opportunity of telling him about our nurses and the good his nuns might do if trained for a similar work.¹⁷

The description of the nuns Sørensen leaves us is circumspect and seems rather misleading. It is probably more representative of his own attitude to women practicing religion than of the contemporary situation.

According to the French missionary Francis Goré,¹⁸ Dragkar Lama was in Nyarong in around 1910 when Zhao Erfeng, while chasing the representative of Lhasa, brought him back to Drango and appointed him to the superintendence of the thirteen main Gelugpa monasteries of the five Hor states.¹⁹ According to the same

¹⁵ Bacot 1988: 36–38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 37.

¹⁷ Kvaerne 1973: 10.

¹⁸ Goré 1923: 343, 346.

¹⁹ The Gelugpa presence in the Hor states dates back to the Fifth Dalai Lama. Thirteen main monasteries were founded (some of them having been taken over forcefully) at this time by the Gelugpa master Ngag dbang phun tshogs (1668–1746). See Dbyangs can snyems pa’i lang tsho 1983.

author, this appointment was renewed later by Zhao's successor, Dun Changhen.

However, in 1916 or 1917 the success of the new religious encampment in Drango, and Dragkar Lama's official position as superintendent, again attracted jealousy. Oliver Coales, a British consular officer stationed in Dartsedo (Dar rtse mdo) records that, "For the first years, everything went well because he does not seem to have pressed his authority. Although the appointment has been disputed by the lamaseries [*sic*] he succeeded in placing his own nominees in positions of authority in some of them."²⁰ But Dragkar Lama then slowly tried to introduce reforms in surrounding monasteries: for example, forbidding the monks from manual labour, forbidding them to keep arms or to store grains in the temples, and restricting visits from women. Those reforms together with the financial success Dragkar Lama enjoyed at this time provoked anger and unrest among the monks from the other monasteries and they finally decided to destroy the religious encampment and to disperse the followers.²¹ This caused great trouble, especially for the nuns who had nowhere else to go; indeed those from the Dragkar nunneries in Kandze area could return but many of the nuns had no nunnery to go, and were forced to settle in temporary huts and tents provided by a lady in Tau area. They were sad to leave their lama, but all he could do was to provide them some instructions for their practice.

According to Coales, the local Chinese magistrates, who were quite well established in Drango at this time, saw the ongoing disputes with a fearful eye, probably afraid of more disturbances. Therefore they decided to bring the case to the Frontier Commissioner of Dartsedo. There it was decided to remove the title of Superintendent from Dragkar Lama. However, the lama was given instead the post of Vice-president of the newly established Buddhist Society (Fo Chiao Hui) started by the Chinese Frontier authorities in Dartsedo. According to Coales, Dragkar Lama then returned to Drango, informing everybody that the new title was superior.

The British Consular Officer Eric Teichman leaves us with a different statement. According to his account the lama "got this position from the Chinese because of his influence and prestige among the Tibetan population."²² He further says that Dragkar Lama was not willing to take this new function and that this was the reason why "The Draga Lama has to be held a prisoner at Tachienlu to keep him at his post." Indeed, a year later, in 1919, the lama flew to Golog (Mgo log). At this time, Teichman saw posters calling for his arrest.

²⁰ Coales 2003: 204.

²¹ Note here the different financial appreciation from Jacques Bacot.

²² Teichman 2000: 69–70.

Exile and a return home

From 1919 to 1922, Dragkar Lama stayed in Golog, in a place called Dzirong Gyashog ('Dzi rong brgya shog), where the local ruler, having great faith in him, let him build a new residence. Several visiting nuns and carpenters helped him in this enterprise.

During his stay in Golog, he received visits from many more disciples. First, some fifty old disciples (*dge bshes*, *sprul sku*, monks and nuns) came, followed by two hundred more nuns from Kandze, Tau, Tehor, Tongkor, and Drango. At the time of their stay they decided to print Dragkar Lama's commentary on the "Unexcelled Continuity" (*Rgyud bla ma*) by Maitreya, accomplishing the work in a single day. They also helped with household chores in the new residence, collecting wood, cleaning, grinding flower, and preparing the offerings. After having spent some time with their lama, they returned home.

In 1922, when Dragkar Lama came back from Golog to Drango, people from the town and its monasteries showed repentance to the lama, confessing in front of him; among them the local ruler of Tehor, Ngödrub Tenkyong (Dngos grub bstan skyong), and a noble lady, Dekyi Chötsho (Bde skyid chos mtsho). After some discussion, they decided to offer the lama and his nuns a site to rebuild a nunnery in Machorong (Rma cog grong), at the place called Ngangang (Ngang sgang). The nuns went there and built a new temple (*gtsug lag khang*) as well as huts to stay, whereas the lama settled in Dragkar Jangchubling in Kandze. There again he met Theo Sørensen in 1922 who reports that Dragkar Lama was seriously ill and partially paralyzed. Being an old friend of the lama, he was aloud to pay a visit and Dragkar Lama wrote for him an introduction letter to the Kalön Lama (*bka' blon bla ma*), the monk cabinet minister.

Between 1923 and 1926, the new religious encampment in Ngangang flourished. The practice and tradition followed were the same as those in Getharlung and the other hermitages. Although absent, the lama had appointed nuns to give regular teachings, and he himself also came from time to time to give instructions.

Just before his death, in 1929, when staying in his home monastery, Dragkar Lama received the visit of seven or eight Chinese nuns sent by a disciple from China. According to the author of his biography, he gave them oral instruction and also offered them locks of his hair; the Chinese nuns, for their part, left donations. The biography does not mention any names, but those nuns are likely to have been disciples of Dayong (1893–1929) and/or Fazun (1902–1980), both of whom were important Chinese masters involved in the diffusion of Tibetan Buddhism in China.²³ Gray

²³ For these Chinese masters and their relation to Tibetan Buddhism, see, for example, Tuttle 2005; Bing 2008; and Wang-Toutain 2000.

Tuttle states that they personally visited Dragkar Lama's monastery in 1928.²⁴

Dragkar Lama died at the age of 63, in 1929.²⁵

*Religious activities and
discipline in Dragkar Lama's nunneries*

Those Westerners who visited Dragkar Lama's nunneries in Drango noticed the poor condition of buildings, residences, and religious edifices, in contrast to those of other monasteries in the surrounding area.²⁶ None of them however seems to have made further enquiries concerning their religious activities and teachings. Only Reverend Edgar, who visited one of the nunneries (he does not mention any name, but refers probably to Ngangang nunnery) after the lama passed away, reports what his Tibetan guide said concerning the nuns' practice: "This is true religion. I once had doubts about the wisdom of allowing such institutions, but I have none now."²⁷ This remark coincides with what we learn from the descriptions of practice and studies given in his collective writings.

Practice and studies

Right from the beginning Dragkar Lama's teachings held prominence not only among nuns, but also among lay followers and monks, some of them having come from famous monasteries with their own established teachings lineages. At first, when living in different religious camps near Kandze, the teachings were not organised in a systematically manner but seem to have consisted of different, mostly Gelugpa, teachings, such as instructions to *The Lamp of the Path of Enlightenment* (*Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma*), practical guidance to the *Stages of the Path of Enlightenment* (*Byang chub lam gyi rim pa*), the "Benefit of the mantra of Avalokiteśvara" (*Thugs rje chen po yi ge drug*). Fasting (*smyung gnas*) was also common practice for the nuns as well as for the lay people.

When in Getharlung, the teaching started to be more organised consisting of two periods and four sessions. The first fifteen days of each month were dedicated to religious assemblies, whereas the last fifteen days were spent in meditative studies (*chos mtshams*). For the nuns, the main subject was mental training in the stages of the path to enlightenment. Moreover, they studied the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

²⁴ Tuttle 2005: 111.

²⁵ There has been some discussion on the date of his birth being 1928 or 1929; according to the calculation of Tashi Tsering (Amnye Machen), it should be beginning of 1929.

²⁶ See for example Kvaerne (1973) and the German explorer Albert Tafel (1914) who both visited most probably Getharlung.

²⁷ Edgar 1932: 65. However, James Huston Edgar himself does not seem to be enthusiastic about the nunnery and the nun's lives.

(*Spyod 'jug*), the “Twenty Verses on the Commitments of *bodhicitta*” (*sdom pa nyi shu*), and the “Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion” (*bla ma lnga bcu pa*). Having received teachings in orthography, grammar, reading, and writing, nuns were also well versed in the Tibetan language. According to the author of this section of the biography, the nuns studied and practiced sincerely and without distraction. Thus, they followed approximately the same teachings and studies as monks. But in contrast to monks, the nuns had to carry out extra chores, such as serving tea during the religious assemblies, cleaning, and serving food at the lama’s residence as well as overseeing the upkeep of the temple, the courtyard, the printing house, and the *stūpa*. These household chores did not seem to affect the nun’s practices: according to the biography, several highly accomplished female practitioners emerged at this time. This harmony has also been related by Geshe Ngawang Dargye (*dge shes* Ngag dbang dar rgyas) to Hanna Havnevik. He stated moreover that two of the nuns from the big Khampa trading family Sadutshang (Sa 'du tshang) were particularly accomplished in debate (*mtshan nyid*).²⁸

When in Ngangang, the nuns continued to follow a similar teaching schedule to that of Getharlung, although in the absence of the lama teachings were mostly given by elder nuns appointed by Dragkar Lama himself.²⁹ Two new practices were introduced at that time. The first was the famous “Cutting practice” (*gcod*) which goes back to Machig Labdrön (Ma gcig lab sgron, 1055?–1149/1154?)³⁰ The teacher was the nun Lozang Dekyi (Blo bzang Dge skyid) and she taught the other nuns the melody of *gcod* as well as the gestures used and the rhythm for the instruments. Each nun had her own instruments consisting of a hand drum, a bell, and a trumpet made of human bones (*mi rkang gling bu*). For the actual *gcod* practice, the nuns travelled, begging on their way and sometimes practicing in cemeteries.

At the end of his life, in 1926, Dragkar Lama asked the nuns of Ngangang nunnery to produce a copy of the *Kangyur* (*Bka' 'gyur*) written with gold ink. The Narthang edition served as a model. A nun was responsible for the purchasing of black paper and some of the instruments, whereas a monk took the responsibility to purchase the gold. All the calligraphers were nuns—the author gives a long list of the names of nuns involved in the manufacturing process. A second edition was started just two and a half months later. After

²⁸ Havnevik 1995: 69.

²⁹ In the collected writings, several names of nuns teaching at this time are cited; they are referred to by the term teacher (*dge rgan ma*).

³⁰ *Gcod* means literally “to cut, to slice;” it is a technique of meditation which aims at eliminating the dichotomy between the thinking subject and the object of thought by means of processes which contain, in meditation, the cutting of its own body to offer it to beings. Dragkar Lama received *gcod* teachings from Chökyi Senge (Chos kyi seng ge, dates not known) when he stayed in the latter’s hermitage in Yarlung (Yar klungs), Central Tibet, for at least half a year, cf. Kollmar-Paulenz 1993: 32.

some time the lama decreed that the purchased paper was not appropriate, and decided to build a workshop so that the nuns could manufacture paper themselves. Two nuns supervised the workshop, and many others helped to make the paper. Three years later, a new batch of nuns trained as calligraphers.

From this short overview, it becomes evident that Dragkar Lama's nun disciples were not only engaged in ritual activities but also had access to training and even higher studies. Through the printing enterprise, they moreover participated in the diffusion of Buddhism. We will now examine the discipline he developed for the nunneries under his tutelage.

Discipline

Dragkar Lama wrote, in 1918, a discipline guide for his nun followers called "*Rab byung ma rnams la bslab khrims su bcas pa thar pa'i them skas*," literally "discipline for women who renounce together with the steps leading to liberation."³¹ Nuns from Dragkar Lama's nunneries continue to follow this guide today. To my knowledge it is one of the few regulations for nuns predating 1959 still in existence.³² It surely deserves a thorough study accompanied by a complete translation. However, at present, I will briefly summarise the principal themes.

The discipline guide starts with a long introduction where the lama explains why it is important to have rules, and why his disciples have to live according to them. He then proceeds in five points:

1. The first point gives an enumeration of the factors that hinder a woman from joining the retreat nunnery. In an abridged form it follows the *Vinaya* (*'dul ba*, monastic discipline) saying that a woman who wants to join the nunnery should not have any physical defects such as being too big, too small, have a handicap, etc.; she also should not be a liar, have debts, have broken the law, or be a disrobed nun, etc.; all these factors being causes of trouble for the lama as well as for the community.
2. The second point considers the manner in which the novice should address to the lama and her teachers and the way of

³¹ Included in the collected writings, vol. 14, chapter "Smyung gnas bla ma rgyud pa'i rnam thar yig drug dang smyung gnas kyi phan yon bcas legs par bshad pa gser gyi phreng mdzes;" see also Kvaerne (1973: 100) for the Sørensen collection.

³² I have only seen two other regulations for nuns predating 1959: a *bca' yig* (lit. "code of law") written by the Fifteenth Karmapa Rgyal dbang mkha' khyab rdo rje (1871/2–1921/2) for the nuns from Galo (Sga lo) nunnery (see Mkha' khyab rdo rje 1979–1981, vol. 8), and a *bca' sgrig* (lit. "arrangements") written for the Rinchengang (Rin chen sgang) nunnery included in Bod rang skyong ljongs yig tshags khang 2001: 209–215.

paying respect and honouring them and all the elders. This point is also developed in the biography of the lama.

3. The third point explains how the nuns have to study and gives a list of the main subjects of study. The same is also developed in the biography of the lama.
4. The fourth point is an instruction as to how to keep the vows according to the discipline and the necessity to rely on the teacher and on good friends.
5. The fifth and last point on daily activities is the longest, and also the most interesting for the study of Tibetan female monasticism. It develops different subjects such as sickness and death, for example; both, it is said, have to be dealt exclusively by the religious community and according to monastic rituals. It also gives a point of view from inside on the attributes and duties of a religious practitioner. We learn for example that the retreat boundary is a limit, which should not be passed without previous authorisation. It is also explained that the religious community should consider itself like a family (*nye rigs*), the members being according to their age, brothers (*ming po*) and maternal uncles (*zhang po*). This is not particular to Dragkar Lama's discipline, a contemporary regulation code for nuns written by the lama of a nunnery in Minyag insists in a similar way on the family relationship as a model for the religious community.³³ More generally the family serves in various religions and monasticisms as a metaphor for the construction of religious companionship even though it is the actual family who has been renounced when entering into religious life.³⁴

Moreover the discipline guide contains practical advice concerning, for example, how to protect oneself when travelling to one's hometown, or when going on a begging tour. The lama advises nuns to join businessmen or other "serious" travellers when going through dangerous places, whereas he stipulates that nuns should never go together with fully ordained monks (*dge slong*) or even talk to them; the mingling of both sexes being a great harm to the teaching, the lama, and the whole community. This particular rule, if it was observed, is perhaps very strict, at least compared to the situation that can be observed today.

It is also interesting to notice that at the end of the rules, the lama advises the nuns not to go to any other place, be it for pilgrimage, to meet other teachers and nuns or simply on a visit. He explains this restriction by stating that women are not stable, being easily agitated, careless, and distracted.

³³ See Thub bstan chos dar 2003: 38–44. For an analysis of this regulation, see Schneider 2010: 267–269.

³⁴ On the relationship of monasticism and family in different religions and places, see Herrou and Krauskopf 2010.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to draw a portrait and describe the activities of a lama from a Gelugpa lineage who successfully engaged in promoting female monasticism in the Kandze area of Kham. He may not have been the only lama in the region to have done so, and further research is necessary, but Dragkar Lama's biography reveals several important points for the study of Tibetan nuns which are in contrast to accepted ideas on female monasticism and its history. First, it indicates that women would equally engage in religious study and practice when it was rendered possible for them to do so. It also clearly shows that the common assumption that Tibetan nuns in the past were mostly engaged in ritual activity is misleading.³⁵ Moreover, we learn from the biography that some circles of Tibetan society at the beginning of the twentieth century held strong opinions against women engaging in religious life. This might be one of the reasons why Dragkar Lama advised nuns not to go outside of the retreat and forbade them any contact with fully ordained monks; besides the fact that a distance between monks and nuns is generally recommended to avoid temptation, his intention here might have been to protect the nuns from outside rumours. More generally speaking, the lack of support towards religious women seems to be the main reason why there were so few nuns and nunneries in this area of Kham at the time.

Some of these nunneries are still functioning institutions today. While I have only been able to visit one of the nunneries, research done by a team of Tibetologists from Beijing and Sichuan in the beginning of the 1990s indicates that four nunneries were reconstructed after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The authors of the different entries state that they follow at least partly the practices and rules introduced by Dragkar Lama Lozang Palden.

I conclude with a statement from a contemporary lama from Kham, the late Khenpo Jigme Phüntshog (*mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs*, 1933–2004), who was also of great assistance to nuns. He is said to have declared, "About one hundred years ago, Lama Bragdkar of Drango once accepted up to one hundred nuns, which is still considered a historical miracle."³⁶

³⁵ The Dalai Lama himself stated this assumption: "In our society, we have as a legacy from the past the notion that nuns engage in ritual only and do not study Buddhist texts. This should be changed." (Quotation from Lobsang Dechen 1999).

³⁶ Khenpo Sodarjey and Versluys (translator) 2001: 110.

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