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Women Returning from Death: The Gendered Nature of the *Delog* Role

by Alyson Prude
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This essay explores the relationship between *delogs* (*das log*) and women and reflects on what this connection adds to current understandings about gender stereotypes and religious roles available to Tibetan Buddhist women in the Himalayas.

But first, what is a *delog*? *Delogs* are typically defined as people who have died and returned to life. As opposed to a seconds or minutes-long near-death experience, *delogs* usually lie dead for several days, sometimes for a week or more. When they miraculously return to life, they report having toured the postmortem realms (*bar do*), witnessing the consequences of negative deeds and being charged with messages to deliver to the human world. Because scholarship to date has focused on textual narratives, *delog* “biographies” intended to inspire ethical behavior and devotion to the Buddhist Three Jewels, we currently know very little about the lives of these extraordinary people.¹ Here I present results from an ethnographic study of contemporary *delogs* which reveals a markedly different picture from that found in textual sources. The fact that a *delog*’s first death experience often initiates a continuing series of otherworldly excursions, for example, has been noted by Pommaret in the case of Bhutanese *delogs* but has yet to be recognized as a common feature of *delog* practice.² Studies of *delogs* that are based solely on written records also fail to recognize that the majority of *delogs* are women.

This research is based on fieldwork begun in 2004 and concentrated in north-central Nepal and the Sichuan and Qinghai Provinces of China between January 2008 and October 2009.³ During this time, I

¹ Epstein 1982; Cuevas 2007, 2008; Pommaret 1989, 1992, 1997. Pommaret’s work includes ethnographic data.

² Pommaret 1989.

³ I am grateful to the Fulbright-Hays, University of California Pacific Rim, and Council of American Overseas Research Centers programs for supporting this research.

was able to collect biographical information about twenty-four living or recently (within the past twenty years) deceased Tibetan and Nepali *delogs*. Among these, nineteen were female and five male.⁴ The remarkably high percentage of women in the *delog* role was reflected in popular perceptions of *delogs*. In Nepal, for example, a well-traveled Hyolmo trekking guide told me that Hyolmo Buddhists do not use the word '*delog*'; they always say '*delogma*' (the '*ma*' marking the noun as feminine) "because all *delogs* are women." Likewise, in eastern Tibet, those who had met or heard of *delogs* agreed that *delogs* can be male as well as female, but few people with whom I spoke could cite examples of male *delogs*.

Women's predominance as *delogs* is significant because there are few Tibetan Buddhist religious roles occupied solely or mainly by women. Yet since the *delog* role is not one that can be taken up at will but demands that a person die and return to life with information about other realms, all in the presence of witnesses for verification, how is it that Himalayan women undergo this extraordinary experience with greater frequency than men? The answer to the gender riddle does not seem to be a medical disorder to which the female body, as understood by modern Western medicine, is more susceptible. Literature about near-death experiences in Western and Japanese cultures indicates that women do not report near-death experiences more often than men.⁵ Neither are women more likely to suffer diseases that can cause *delog*-like symptoms, such as epilepsy or Klein-Levin syndrome (which mainly affects males).⁶ Instead, the connection between women and *delogs* lies in Himalayan Buddhist understandings of how and why a person returns from death, tantric ideas about male and female bodies, and the ways gender affects one's social and religious possibilities in the Buddhist Himalayas.

Note: The following analysis treats women and men as homogeneous groups, thus reifying categories that should be problematized. This is not oversight. Essentialized notions of women and the feminine persist in Himalayan Buddhist societies where biological sex and gender are viewed as inseparable.⁷ It is also important to note that the interpretations described here are largely male views, a fact that may be explained by the nature of the question. Examining the

⁴ Bhutanese *delogs* do not figure into these numbers. Pommaret (1989) reports a similar ratio of female to male *delogs* in Bhutan: four females and one male.

⁵ Bailey and Yates 1996; Carr 1993; Lundahl 1982; Osos and Haraldsson 1977; Sabom 1982.

⁶ Panayiotopoulos 2007; Roger, et al. 1985.

⁷ As Gyatso and Havnevik point out, "Even a bare physical or anatomical definition of woman as a sex in Tibetan history, as contained in traditional medical descriptions, is pervaded by gender and other loaded conceptions" (2005: 4).

relationship between *delogs* and women demands critical thinking, theorizing, and speculation, activities in which Himalayan women demonstrate less confidence. As Makley noticed in Labrang, asking nuns to participate in taped interviews “clashed with nuns’ own sense of illegitimacy as authoritative exegetes” and “challenged their ‘structural muteness.’”⁸ Makley sought to overcome this obstacle by soliciting stories and gossip from nuns, as opposed to philosophical explanations. Similarly, as opposed to issues of how and why, which women chose to avoid, the detailed *delog* life-stories that I collected, even those concerning men, were narrated to me, eagerly and enthusiastically, by women. (For their part, *delogs* were unconcerned with issues of sex and gender and did not speculate as to why there are more female than male *delogs*.)

Gendered Personalities and Sexed Bodies

Reporting on the Qinghai Tibetan region of China, Makley writes that “sex differences were seen to produce different mind-body relationships and to result in basic proclivities that differentiated male versus female abilities.”⁹ The perceived effects one’s biological sex has on one’s personality is perhaps the most straightforward emic explanation for the link between *delogs* and women. According to this line of thought, the personality and character traits a person must have in order to be sent back to life as a *delog* are linked to positive stereotypes of women.

Himalayan Buddhists share a widespread conviction that men and women “think differently.” A university professor in Xining cited this cognitive variation to explain the link between *delogs* and women. “Men are decisive,” he told me. “For men, whether or not to do something is simple. Comparatively, women’s minds are tranquil, and they take more time when considering what to do.” This disparity between men’s and women’s minds is said to entail gendered moral and spiritual aptitudes: women are patient, whereas men have short tempers and are quick to engage in violence. Other informants described women as sincere, spiritual, and having “pure hearts,” as opposed to men who do not engage as often in religious practices. Informants drew from these gender stereotypes to explain a person’s likelihood of becoming a *delog*. “Those who have great sins can’t be *delogs*,” the professor explained. “Women don’t usually

⁸ 1999: 185.

⁹ 2005: 269. See also Rajan 2015.

commit the five inexpressible sins.¹⁰ This is why *delogs* are usually women and rarely men.”

Although it is rare for anyone, male or female, to murder a parent or harm a monk, reports of men killing or seriously injuring each other in drunken knife fights and stories of husbands abusing their wives are ubiquitous throughout Tibet and Nepal. Likewise, the observation that women are more dedicated to Buddhist practice than men has been well-documented by ethnographers of Himalayan societies, and the idea that women are more religiously minded than men finds evidence in contemporary behaviors.¹¹ Among the group of Hyolmo Buddhists with whom I gathered one Sunday to read *mani* prayers, with one exception, all were middle-aged and older women. When we finished the recitations and the lama began to read the biography of *delog* Lhame Lhamchung (Lha mo lham gcung), nine women stayed to listen. The audience was thus entirely female, and the lama told me that it had been a group of women who commissioned and paid for the painting (*thang ka*) that he used to illustrate Lhame Lhamchung's story. Men, on the other hand, are known for drinking and playing cards, and the task of butchering animals falls to men, saddling them with the negative karma that results from killing. This relates to *delogs* because it is a person's positive karma and potential benefit to others that persuades the Lord of Death (Gshin rje chos rgyal) to dispatch him or her back to the human world. Because women are seen as maintaining a more positive karmic balance and engaging in more devotional activities than men, there is an expectation that women will more often be sent back to life as *delogs*.

Alongside the positive feminine qualities that the topic of *delogs* elicits is a belief that women are more sensitive and emotionally delicate than men. At a Hyolmo funeral in Kathmandu, I was sent away from the cremation site, along with the rest of the women and the children, before the lighting of the pyre. When I asked why women are not allowed to attend a cremation, a monk answered that unlike men, who are brave, “women might have nightmares.” Ironically, this perceived female weakness, namely, a tendency to succumb to one's feelings, provides women with another advantage for acting as *delogs*. The responsibilities of a *delog* necessitate a capacity to feel deeply and a willingness to convey emotion. Effective *delogs* must be able to communicate not just the facts but the affective quality of

¹⁰ The five inexpressible sins (*mtshams med pa lnga*) are killing one's father, killing one's mother, killing an *arhat*, drawing blood from the body of a buddha with cruel intention, and causing a rift in the Sangha.

¹¹ Gutschow 1998: 320; Majupuria 1990: 143, 236; Padma'tsho 2014: 187.

their experiences as they relay what they saw and heard during their journeys through the lands of the dead.

I came to appreciate the importance of empathy and expressiveness to successful *delog* practice when I met the *delog* Kunzang in Golok.¹² Upon mention of her *delog* experiences, she burst out crying. Later, she explained her weeping as brought on by memories of the suffering she has witnessed on her tours of the intermediate state between death and rebirth. I was moved by her outburst, and as I reflected on the incident, I realized the significance of emotional displays to the authenticity of a *delog*'s tales as well as to the larger soteriological goal of discouraging people from evil and inciting them towards virtue. When I discussed the incident with my Tibetan assistants, they cited Kunzang's tears as evidence that her words were true. In this case, the perceived masculine traits of controlling one's feelings and always speaking rationally turn out to be hindrances to the *delog*'s task, leaving women, who are believed to "have more emotional energy than men," to excel in the role of *delog*.¹³

Along with the belief that the sex of one's body influences one's behaviors and inclination towards religious practice, Himalayan Buddhists speak of women being more "open" than men. In Kunzang's case, this openness can be interpreted as her readiness to express her feelings. Other times, openness can refer to sharing power and information. According to the assessment of an educated and articulate Hyolmo monk, "If women were allowed to receive all of the [Buddhist] teachings like men, they would share them freely with everyone... and would not withhold them out of desire for power." In a similar vein, scholar Tulku Thondup described women as "by nature... mentally and spiritually open" and related this unguardedness to the probability of their becoming *delogs*.¹⁴

Yet another interpretation of women's "openness" lies in sexed characteristics of the female subtle, or yogic, body. As women and men are endowed with different physical bodies, they are also said to possess different subtle bodies. In particular, the channels of a woman's subtle body are said to be more open than those of a man's, an idea that has a long history in Indian tantric traditions.¹⁵ Open

¹² All names are pseudonyms.

¹³ Havnevik 1990: 148. In his biography of *delog* Dawa Drolma, Chagdud Tulku writes that her eyes overflowed with tears when she described the miseries of the lower realms (Dawa Drolma 1995: vii). I am not aware of accounts of male *delogs* that mention the *delog* crying or otherwise displaying strong emotion.

¹⁴ Personal communication, 11/16/2008.

¹⁵ Havnevik 2002: 280; Gyatso and Havnevik 2005: 21. Silburn summarizes the Kaśmiri Śaivite view: "A man's *nādi* [channels] are narrow, rigid, and not easy to expand," while "what characterizes woman is the expansion of the central way:

pathways through the subtle body are believed to facilitate meditation and make a person susceptible to spirit possession. Relevant to *delogs*, expanded channels make it easier for one's consciousness to leave the body to journey in the intermediate state and to return to the body so that the *delog* revives. Female bodies, possessing open and expanded energy channels, are therefore more conducive to *delog* experiences than male bodies which have more constricted pathways.

A slightly different version of this idea was voiced by a Dzogchen practitioner-monk in Golok. He described the difference between men's and women's channels in terms of speed and then explicitly linked this to the facility with which the consciousness can exit and re-enter the body: "Women's channels are very quick, very fast. For women, the consciousness (*rnam shes*) comes out easily; it's easy for it to come out and for it to return... A man's consciousness comes out more slowly. For men, it's difficult." To clarify, I asked him to characterize the channels of a *delog's* subtle body. "A *delog's* channels are quick," he replied. This reference to speed is surprising unless we remember the limited time frame within which *delog* operate. Hyolmo Buddhists tell the tale of a well-known *delog* whose impatient son threw her body onto the funeral pyre too early. After her corpse started to burn, her voice cried out, scolding her son and lamenting that now she would be unable to return to her body and thus to life. As this story illustrates, to revive as a *delog*, one's consciousness must re-enter the body "quickly," or there may be no body to come back to.¹⁶

The accounts of the relationship between *delogs* and women we have examined so far draw from relatively positive characterizations of women and the feminine. How can stereotypes that depict women as creating more good karma than men and being better suited to transmit messages that will encourage others towards virtue be reconciled with the unfavorable and condescending portrayals of women that are ubiquitous in studies of Buddhist women?¹⁷ One could argue that informants did not speak negatively to me about women because I am both a woman and a Westerner, that is, someone who

in her, the energy of the center... as well as the womb, is in constant expansion" (1988: 175).

¹⁶ See also the 17th c. story of Sangye Chödrom (Pommaret 1989). The Hindu practice of cremating immediately after death is cited by Buddhists in Nepal as the reason there are no Hindu *delogs*.

¹⁷ Aziz 1987; Gellner 1994; Gutschow 1998 and 2004; Havnevik 1990; Huber 1994; Makley 2002; Padma'tsho 2014; Reis 1983. In his interviews with Kathmandu Newars on the subject of witches and spirit-mediums, Gellner was told that women are morally weaker and have more negative karma than men (1994: 39).

likely values gender equality. While this may have influenced some people's comments, I do not believe it was a significant factor in their responses. Most of the scholars who have recorded negative attitudes towards women have been female, and I routinely encountered disparaging comments about women during previous research on Buddhist nunneries in Nepal.

The reason I did not encounter disparaging views of women when asking about *delogs* more likely stems from the difference in subject matter. Many of the existing studies of Himalayan Buddhist women have been studies of female monastics. But a *delog* is a very different figure from a nun. Whereas nuns represent a challenge to the hegemony of male monasticism, *delogs* pose little threat to male control of institutions and practices. Furthermore, in criticizing nuns, people must reference their uniquely female characteristics or risk also disparaging monks and monasticism in general. Questions about *delogs*, on the other hand, are not unavoidably gendered. Because the *delog* role is not exclusive to women, people who are critical of *delogs* can express their skepticism without referencing gender. In fact, informants who were dismissive of *delogs* often ridiculed Nyingma and Dzogchen practices or areas of Tibet where the Nyingma and Dzogchen traditions predominate (i.e., Golok) instead of targeting women in their critiques. In addition, because *delogs* occur mostly in Nyingma and Dzogchen communities, those who knew the most about *delogs* and were thereby the principal informants of this study were Buddhists associated with Nyingma and Dzogchen teachings, teachings that maintain a relatively appreciative view of women and allow for greater female authority. In particular, the respected female figure of the *khandroma* (*mkha' 'gro ma*), prominent in Nyingma and Dzogchen practice communities, was frequently cited in discussions of *delog* and gender.

Delogs and Khandromas

Although Buddhists in Tibet and Nepal often cannot explain why most *delogs* are female, they are sure of the empirical fact. When pressed to come up with an explanation for women's greater representation as *delogs*, the majority of informants referred to other gendered religious roles, specifically the male figure of the reincarnate lama (*sprul sku*) and the female figure of the *khandroma*. In the words of a young tour guide in Xining, "A *khandroma* is female, right? That

is why most *delogs* are female."¹⁸ The association between *delogs* and *khandromas* is so strong that when I encountered people who were unfamiliar with the term *delog*, the mention of *khandromas* would help them understand what I was asking about. The nature of the relationship between *delogs* and *khandromas* and the bearing that *khandromas* being female has on *delogs* being female, however, was a question informants struggled to articulate. As we will see, the connection is not straightforward, and the various parallels between *delogs* and *khandromas* reveal both positive and negative ideas about women and the feminine.

Like *delog*, *khandroma* (Sanskrit *ḍākinī*) is a somewhat indeterminate category that admits of various interpretations. In many cases, the title '*khandroma*' indicates a woman who possesses some unusual quality or ability, such as access to information that ordinary people do not have. When I showed a young tour guide in Xining a photograph of a female *delog* wearing a burgundy robe and large amulet box and clutching a massive prayer wheel, he commented that she looked like a *khandroma*. "Is she? Maybe she does divination. Does she? Maybe she predicts the future by looking at a mirror. Maybe she reads the scriptures every day, more so than other people. Does she do that?" he asked before offering his own understanding of what defines a *khandroma*. "People come to her to ask something about the future, and what she says is reliable," he explained, comparing *khandromas* to diviners. This understanding of *khandromas* is prevalent in Yushu where villagers consult the local *khandroma* about their deceased kin, a process known as "asking the door of rebirth" (*skye sgo zhu*). In these cases, *khandromas* function like *delogs* in that they provide information about individuals' rebirths.

Reporting the fate of the recently deceased is not, however, an exclusively female endeavor. Many male religious figures perform divination, and lamas are said to be able to utilize their clairvoyance to see people's rebirths. In these cases, the ability to offer information about the deceased does not lead to comparisons with *delogs*. Why not? A young Nyingma monk answered this question in three words: unlike *delogs*, "lamas don't travel." *Khandromas*, on the other hand, do. This characteristic of *khandromas* is reflected in the literal meaning of the term '*khandroma*': a female (*ma*) who goes or moves ('gro) through space (*mkha*'). According to this understanding of *khandromas*, like *delogs* who leave behind their physical bodies to embark on tours of the postmortem states, *khandromas* abandon their

¹⁸ Paul also reports an association between *delogs* and *khandromas* among Sherpas in Solu-Khumbu (1976: 143). As far as I know, there is no tradition of recognizing *khandromas* among Nepal's Hyolmo or Tamang populations.

corporeal forms to, according to the monk, “visit hell... [to] see who is suffering and bring back messages.” This surprising description of *khandromas* was echoed by a senior lama from Shachung Monastery who claimed that “a real *khandroma* will have the power to [die and] return to life.” It follows that, in a university-educated young man’s words, “*delog* is a kind of *khandroma* behavior”: both *delogs* and *khandromas* undertake extraordinary journeys to other realms and return to share their experiences.

Here is where we begin to understand the connection between *delogs* and *khandromas* and another reason *delogs* are expected to be female. In tantric Buddhism, relaying messages and acting as a go-between have long been depicted as tasks appropriate for women. In Indian tantric texts, the “celestial messenger” (Skt., *dūtī*) who brings inspiration and wisdom to her yogic partner is female. Likewise, in the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, the yogi’s muse, his female consort, is alternately called *khandroma*, *yoginī* (*rnal ’byor ma*), and messenger (*pho nya mo*).¹⁹ The last title, “messenger,” is especially relevant to *delogs* because, as Kunzang pointed out, a *delog* is simply “a postal worker,” someone who delivers news.²⁰ Likewise, in Tibetan tantric sources, we find women, both human and divine, serving as facilitators and “bridges” for male religious figures.²¹ When we consider what *delogs* (and many *khandromas*) do and realize that the task of relaying information from one party to another is gendered, the connection between women, *delogs*, and *khandromas* begins to make sense. Both *delogs* and *khandromas* share a predilection for journeying to other realms and they return with messages, a task associated with women.²²

¹⁹ See Wayman (1990) for a description of female messengers in Sanskrit and Tibetan-language Tantras.

²⁰ Holmberg (1983) has argued that the function of the Tamang shaman (Tamang *bompo*) is feminine since it is a mediating function and the mediators in Tamang society are women. Relatedly, according to Diemberger (2005), all oracles in the Nepal Himalaya south of Dingri are women, and in this region, being an oracle is a female role. Anecdotally, the accounts I heard of someone becoming possessed by and thus serving as the mouthpiece of the spirit of a deceased person (*shi ’dre*) were all stories of women.

²¹ Gyatso and Havnevik 2005: 20.

²² It is worth asking whether checking up on the dead, a form of continued caretaking, is also a feminine task? In terms of the *delogs*’ clientele, Pommaret (1989) noted that it was mainly women who attended the *delogs* she interviewed in Bhutan. Based on my fieldwork, among individuals who have personally consulted a *delog*, women outnumber men two to one. This ratio cannot be given too much weight, however, because in several cases the *delog* the patron consulted lived in a remote location, and women mobilized men to make the journey. It was therefore a man who met the *delog* and requested the information, but he was sent by and reported back to a woman. Since *delogs* are not the only reli-

In Golok, an outspoken lama lectured me about the gendered nature of Tibetan Buddhist religious roles when I asked him to explain why most *delogs* are female. "In order to understand why *delogs* are women... you have to understand method and wisdom," he told me. "You have to understand the nature of assistance." He illustrated these concepts by describing the relationship between *khandromas* and Treasure revealers (*gter ston*):

The men, the Treasure revealers, have the responsibility to bring forth the Dharma and reveal Treasures. They're sent from a Pure Land with the responsibility to spread the Dharma and give blessings. The work of Treasure revealers is to spread and practice new Dharma... No lama can reveal a treasure by himself; he must rely on a *khandroma* or a nun. If a lama finds a Treasure, he won't be able to retrieve it if he doesn't have a *khandroma* or a nun to help him. *Khandromas* are caretakers (*bdag gnyer*) of the new and old Dharma. They have the special ability to protect the new and other Dharma.²³ When lamas write Treasure texts, *khandromas* have the ability to help them complete their work. That's the purpose of *khandromas* – to help, to support the Dharma.

The lama's statement echoes a widespread Buddhist trend whereby men assume the active and creative tasks while women are assigned assistant, caretaking roles.²⁴ Attempting to summarize the lama's point, my assistant suggested: "A *khandroma's* main power, her special task, is to support, not practice, the Dharma. In a similar way, *delogs* have power only to support the Dharma."

Indeed, when we compare *delogs* to male figures, such as lamas, we notice the limits of a *delog's* abilities. Lamas can rescue a consciousness from hell and deliver it to a Pure Land, but *delogs* are unable to help those whose sufferings they witness in the lower realms. According to Kunzang, when another local *delog*, who is also a lama, visits hell, "he sings *mani*. When he sings *mani*, the cauldron tips over. He transports [the beings in the cauldron]." She also tries to do

gious figures consulted for birth signs (*skye rtags*), this data does not permit conclusions about the sex of people who request information about the deceased. It could be that women orient their questions towards *delogs*, who are also women, while men choose to consult lamas, who are also men.

One could also look at the sex of those who tell and retell *delog* histories. In my experience, the keepers of these stories are largely women.

²² Gyatso and Havnevik 2005: 20.

²³ Cf. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's statement that *khandromas* are "the female guardians of the Tantras" (Edou 1996: 103).

²⁴ Faure 2003: 125; Makley 2005: 270. This gendered division of labor can be traced to exoteric Mahāyāna as well as Tantric Buddhist texts that depict wisdom and emptiness as feminine and compassion and skillful means as masculine.

something, striking the cauldron with her staff while her dog “runs around and barks.” Unlike the lama, she is unable to lead the suffering to liberation. She can only witness their misery and report back to the living.²⁵ Looked at from this perspective, according to which *delogs* are powerless to alter the states of affairs they observe and can only relay information to support the activities of monks and lamas, the connection between *delogs* and women points towards limiting conceptions of women’s abilities.

When considered from another point of view, however, the link between *delogs*, *khandromas*, and women reflects more positive conceptions of women and the feminine. Most Tibetan Buddhist women who are known as *khandromas* are believed to possess above-average spiritual capacities. In these cases, ‘*khandroma*’ serves as a title and mark of respect. These *khandromas* are sometimes viewed as divine females or human women who “possess the consciousness of gods” (*lha gyi rnam shes*). As a university-educated man in Xining explained, it is the exceptional nature of a *khandroma*’s consciousness that enables her to send it out of her body at will to travel to other realms. Indeed, among modern Tibetan *khandromas*, a *delog*-like death experience sometime early in their life seems to be *de rigueur*. Sera Khandro (Se ra mkha’ ‘gro, Kun bzang bde skyong dbang mo, 1892-1940), Dawa Drolma (Zla ba sgrol ma, 1908-1941), Sherab Zangmo (Shes rab bzang mo, b. 1932), and Palchen Lhamo (Dpal chen lha mo, b. 1960s) all report journeys to the intermediate state in their (auto)biographies.²⁶ In fact, the expectation that powerful (Nyingma/Dzogchen) female religious figures will undergo a *delog* or *delog*-like experience is so prevalent that many Tibetans with whom I spoke insisted that the respected female teacher and *khandroma*, Tāre Lhamo (TA re lha mo, 1938-2002), had also been a *delog*.

In these cases, *khandromas* and *delogs* are related in that, according to a monk in Golok, “if a person has a normal human consciousness, she won’t be a *delog*. [A *delog*] must be someone who has the ability

²⁵ Kunzang’s testimony contrasts with Pommaret’s (1989) report of Bhutan where a female *delog* told her that she could and did rescue beings from hell. I never met a *delog* who claimed to be able to do this and who was not also a (male) lama.

²⁶ Sera Khandro’s account of the intermediate state is found in Kun bzang chos nyid dbang mo, n.d. I am grateful to Christine Monson for sharing this manuscript. Because Dawa Drolma was recognized as an emanation of White Tara and enjoyed widespread respect “for her extraordinary powers as a lama,” it seems her primary identity was that of *khandroma* (Dawa Drolma 1995: vii). Perhaps it is because “she was more famous for being a *delog*” that Chagdud Tulku chose the title *Delog: Journey to Realms Beyond Death* for her (auto)biography (Dawa Drolma 1995: vii). Sherab Zangmo’s multiple death experiences are reported in Tshangs dbang dge ‘dun bstan pa and Sku rgyab tshul khrims, n.d. I am grateful to Antonio Terrone for information about Palchen Lhamo.

to control her mind, to make it leave and return to her body." The idea that *delogs* control their death journeys contradicts the widespread conception of a *delog* as an ordinary individual who, due to past karma, undergoes an involuntary and uncontrolled death and return to life. The monk's description of a person who can eject his or her consciousness from the body at will coincides, instead, with Tibetan Buddhists' beliefs about the extraordinary powers of yogis, reincarnate lamas, and some *khandromas*.

Not only do the life-stories of *khandromas* often include death experiences, the confusion between *delogs* and *khandromas* is furthered by the fact that female *delogs* may become known as *khandromas* if they are highly esteemed in their communities. When I questioned him about a local *delog*, a writer in Derge explained that she was known, not as "*delog*," but as "*khandroma*":

According to you, we should call her a *delog*. But out of respect, people always call her "*khandroma*." First, she died and revived, [so she's] a *delog*. But, because after she became a *delog* she knew a lot of things, people call her "*khandroma*." When a *delog* knows everything, we call her "*khandroma*" out of respect, like we do for a lama's wife. So sometimes *delogs* become [identified as] *khandromas*, due to people using a respectful word for them.

The life of a now-deceased *delog* in Amdo reflects this process. When I asked her grandson if she was called "*khandroma*" after her *delog* experience, he answered by commenting on *khandromas* in general: "After she had made herself a better person (*sems pa de bzung btang nas*), everyone called her the emanation of a *khandroma*." We observe a similar process at work in the case of historical *delogs*. Lingza Chökyi (Gling za chos skyid) and Karma Wangdzin (Karma dbang 'dzin), two of Tibet's most well-known *delogs*, neither of whom seems to have been considered extraordinary before her *delog* experience, are referred to as *khandromas* in some versions of their (auto)biographies.²⁷

²⁷ *Ye-shes mkha'-gro gLing-za Chos-skyid kyi 'das log sgrun yig: The Return from Death Experiences of gLing-bza' Chos-skyid* 1985 and *Bya bral Kun dga' rang grol*. n.d.

When *delogs* are respected as *khandromas*, the two often share the further similarity of taking rebirth as part of incarnation lineages. Lingsa Chökyi, for example, returned as Delog Kunzang Chökyi Drolma (d. 1958) who then reincarnated as another female *delog* who lives today in Golok. Lingsa Chökyi is also believed to have taken rebirth in contemporary Bhutan as Delog Khandro Tayang, and Delog Karma Wangdzom (b. 1962) is believed to be the incarnation of the 17th century *delog*, Sangye Chödrom, herself the reincarnation of Karma Wangdzin (Pommaret 1989). In Kham, Delog Sherab Chödron is considered the incarnation of Delog Dawa Drolma.

The Status of Women and Delogs

In contrast to the emic explanations examined so far that present *delog* identity in largely positive terms, an etic analysis of women's predominance as *delogs* points to the marginal status that *delogs* occupy within the Tibetan Buddhist religious world. According to this perspective, the peripheral nature of the *delog* role makes it especially appropriate for Himalayan women given their disadvantaged status vis-à-vis men.²⁸

Tibetan Buddhist societies have a long history of patriarchy and androcentrism. Perhaps as a result, scholarly literature amply documents that modern Himalayan women are less educated, less likely to occupy positions of power in their communities, and in many contexts, subservient to men.²⁹ This general observation was supported by the explanation a Hyolmo mother gave for a line in her text of daily prayers. We were reading together when we came to a verse referencing a '*skyes dman med pa'i khams*,' literally, a realm where there are no beings of low birth. The term *skyes dman* is also a common way of referring to women, and that is how my companion glossed it. "Somewhere that there are no women is a very happy place," she explained. "Women have to take on everyone's sins (Nepali *pāp*); they have to raise the children. This refers to a place where no one suffers as do women in this world."

Like Tibetan Buddhist women who are said, even by men, to endure more hardship and misery than their male peers, acting as a *delog* is described as a bothersome as well as physically and emotionally difficult task. Due in part to the tortures they witness and the typically sorrowful news that they must convey to the living, *delogs* portray their death experiences as unpleasant and often painful. Likewise, they depict their human lives as filled with suffering. As Kunzang narrated the events of her life, she emphasized the motif of misfortune as she related a prophecy the local abbot made at her birth. "Poor thing," he said. "Name her Kunzang. She will suffer greatly. She will suffer greatly, but she will benefit Tibetans." Indeed, Kunzang faced daunting challenges in her early life, from

²⁸ The logic of this argument has been used to account for the high proportion of female spirit mediums in the Himalayas as well as women's prominence as shamans in South Korea and Buddhist-influenced regions of Siberia (Aziz 1978; Diemberger 1991, 2005; Hamayon 1994; Kim 2003; March 1979; Smith 2006). Havnevik 2002 argues against this view.

²⁹ Aziz 1987; Desjarlais 2003; Gutschow 1998 and 2004; Havnevik 1990; Huber 1994; Makley 2002; Padma'tsho 2014; Reis 1983; Prude 2014.

nearly starving to death to being imprisoned by Chinese authorities.³⁰

When Himalayan women first begin speaking of their postmortem journeys and interactions with the dead, they are usually dismissed as “crazy” and pressured to stop their “babbling.” In an effort to prevent Drugmotso, a *delog* in Golok, from talking more about her experiences in the intermediate state, her family stuffed her mouth with rags. When she continued to speak, they tied her up in a wool bag and beat her such that she lost several of her front teeth. Even after a prestigious lama recognized her as a *delog* and commanded the family to stop their mistreatment, a man who was angry with an unfavorable report Drugmotso delivered about his father bound and drug her behind his horse. Similar stories of abuse are common across the Himalayas. Along with being verbally attacked, Hyolmo *delog* Evie recounted being branded with a hot iron. Circumstances supposedly got so bad for a Sherpa *delog* that she is said to have been “taken by God” when she was forty years old: “because she was mistreated, she didn’t come back [from her last *delog* journey]. She stayed up there; she didn’t return.”

The autobiographical accounts that Kunzang, Drugmotso, and Evie related were stories of social ostracism and physical abuse. When we take their communities’ skepticism and active discouragement into account, the path to recognition as and the role of *delog* is less than attractive. Himalayan women’s lives, however, are expected to be difficult. Stories of women’s suffering often begin with being sent away to a distant village to marry a stranger. In her new household, a woman labors for an unsympathetic mother-in-law and bears children for a husband who is not required to treat her kindly. For a woman seeking an alternative to the hardships of being a wife and mother, the options are extremely limited, and it is virtually unheard of for a single woman to live by herself unless she is a nun. Yet, because female *delogs* are expected to be celibate, recognition as a *delog* enables a woman to avoid marriage without having to live within the constraints of monastic life.³¹ In addition, it affords her a remarkable degree of independence as well as economic benefits otherwise difficult for Himalayan women to obtain.

³⁰ For a summary account of Kunzang’s life, see Prude 2014.

³¹ Of the five female *delogs* whom I interviewed extensively, only one was a nun, but all five claimed to be celibate. In Nepal, Shantamāla swore that it was the Lord of Death himself who prohibited her, on penalty of rebirth in hell, from taking a husband. Such a threat, issued in the intermediate state by the one who would send her to her next rebirth, must have been difficult indeed for her parents to defy.

The social and economic benefits that women stand to gain by being recognized as *delogs* are one of the factors that accounts for the high proportion of women in the *delog* role. Among the *delogs* I encountered, all had benefited significantly from their status as *delogs*: in Golok, Kunzang lived independently in a small house with her teenage son. Due to her renown as a *delog*, Drugmotso had avoided marriage altogether and was able to support both herself and an attendant as she moved her nomad's tent when and where she chose. At Yachen-gar, Sherab Chödrön had her own room and a group of nuns who cooked and cared for her. She received teachings from the lamas that other nuns did not, and she had traveled to Chengdu and Beijing for medical treatment. In Nepal, Shantamāla had successfully eschewed being married and independently assumed possession of her parents' home. Finally, in Hyolmo, Evie's fellow villagers had built her a house and provided all her daily needs when they respected her as a *delog*. Since losing the confidence of her community, however, the stone and mud of her house had crumbled into ruins and she had been forced to rely on the reluctant hospitality of her nieces and nephews. Life was definitely better for her when she was regarded as a *delog*.

Drawing on Ortnier's argument that males can just as easily be excluded from positions of power and economic advantage as women, Cuevas objects to applying the "phenomenon of marginality" to account for female *delogs*.³² Certainly, men are not guaranteed power or privilege, and men do seek recognition as *delogs*. In Hyolmo, after growing up in a barn (Nep. *goth*) with parents too poor to feed him, a young Hyolmo man made the demeaning choice to search for work as a laborer in India. Several years later, as a result of a *delog* experience, he became famous throughout his community and was suddenly able to support himself, his wife, and their three children, albeit modestly, through his work as a *delog* and shaman (Hyolmo *bonpo*).

Yet, due to social realities in Himalayan societies, a disadvantaged man has more opportunities to better his situation than does a woman in the same position. When the Hyolmo *delog* left his wife and children in Nepal and took a dishwashing job in the U.S., his community in Nepal stopped respecting him as a *delog*. For him, however, life abroad and the potential to obtain a green card were more valuable than his *delog* status. In this example, we see that while both men and women may benefit from being recognized as *delogs*, be-

³² Cuevas 2008: 79. Based on his reading of literary *delog* accounts, Cuevas believes that female *delogs* were often from noble families and high social classes. This is not the case today.

See also Havnevik (2002: 281) who references Henrietta Moore in her parallel argument regarding women and oracle mediums.

cause Himalayan men have more avenues by which to gain respect and improve their economic standing, the opportunity to act as a *delog* is not as valuable to them. In other words, there may be fewer male *delogs* not because for physiological or ethical reasons men are less likely to die and return to life but because men are less interested in acting as *delogs*.

In fact, Tibetan Buddhists in Nepal say that *delogs* most often “appear” among the suffering and oppressed (Nep. *dukhī mānche*). This expectation is based on the fact that, because the *delog* experience is commonly understood to occur involuntarily, a *delog*'s access to extraordinary knowledge does not imply skill or special ability. As a result, the *delog* role is open to those who lack access to economic and educational resources. In their life narratives, Kunzang, Drugmotso, and Shantamāla all commented on their inability to write and their lack of religious education. Kunzang related how, as a young woman, she had begged her lama for teachings only to have him refuse. “Just meditate,” the lama told her and sealed her in a cave. Drugmotso professed to not even know how to meditate. “I don't understand anything about the true nature or the inner meaning of the Dharma. I don't even recite many prayers. I never stayed in a monastery to learn, and I haven't studied the scriptures. I haven't received a single instruction,” she lamented. Because acting as a *delog* requires neither religious training nor basic literacy, it is open to participation from people who have been unable to pursue education, notably women.

When this characteristic of *delogs* is taken into account, it becomes significant that the communications *delogs* relay are always someone else's words. As she related her life story, Drugmotso described her first missives from the dead as “babble” (*kha brla*) and “random things I said” (*kha nas 'dra mi 'dra cha ga yar mar ra bshad*). She emphasized the absence of personal motive and volition by expressing surprise that her charges were accurate:

Once, we carried the dead body of an old monk to our local cremation ground, but the vultures didn't eat it. People considered that old monk a pure and true renunciate (*dge slong*). At that time, I was saying various things [i.e., speaking as a *delog*], and I called that old monk a sinner. I said that he had murdered a person called such-and-such, and that it was impossible that his body would be eaten [by vultures]. Many lamas performed the ritual of consciousness transference (*pho ba*) for the murdered person and then for that old monk. Afterwards, [it was discovered that] the things I said were true; it *had* happened like that.

In Drugmotso's account, we see that even after her reports were corroborated, she distanced herself from the import of her testimonies.

A distancing strategy is typical of *delog* narratives. The autobiography of Sherab Chödrön frames her words as direct quotes from the Lord of Death, his workers, or the dead themselves:

A frightening black boy, the very embodiment of non-virtue, laughed freely and stood up. Piling many black pebbles in front of the Dharma King, he said:

"Lord of Death, Precious Dharma King, I know about this person. When he was in the human realm, he accepted many offerings on behalf of the dead. Not mindful of the holy Dharma, he deceived many black-headed people. He stirred up trouble among monks and *tantrikas* and injured many living creatures. He made offerings of both meat and blood... Please send him to the lower realms."

When [the boy] finished speaking and the workers of *samsara* measured [the dead person's] virtue and non-virtue, the accumulation of black [pebbles] was greater [than the quantity of white pebbles]. The Dharma King said this:

"*Dharmakāya*, Kuntuzangpo, think of [these beings]! Look on these miserable beings, these old grandmothers, with your eye of compassion. May pitiful evildoers like these one day encounter the Dharma. [Until then, they] must experience the suffering of Wailing Hell."

As soon as he said this, the workers of *samsara* [shouted] "Slay! Kill!" like the roar of a thousand thunderclaps and led [the deceased] to the lower realms.³³

By portraying *delogs* as passive witnesses, written accounts thus deflect responsibility from *delogs* for the content of their messages.

Related to the lack of agency seen in *delog* accounts, it is common for contemporary *delogs* to remain able to recollect their death experiences for only limited periods of time. After having completely revived or having consumed food or drink, many *delogs* deny any recollection of their experience and the information they delivered as they regained consciousness. A lifelong series of *delog* journeys, therefore, does not serve as an experiential education in the law of karma or Buddhist cosmology. Most *delogs* retain their sense of ignorance and inferiority, even in matters related to religion, throughout their lives.

At this point we must ask if the large number of female *delogs* is a recent historical development, a result of Himalayan societies' transition to modernity and the gender-biased nature of new economic

³³ Shes rab chos sgron n.d.: fol. 16-17.

opportunities? Pommaret reports that over the past two decades there are fewer and fewer *delogs* in Bhutan and acting as a *delog* is seen as a “backwards job” only worth pursuing to the most disenfranchised Bhutanese.³⁴ Per this line of thought, the high proportion of contemporary female *delogs* could be a result of recent cultural and economic changes which have given men, to a greater extent than women, new avenues to education, wealth, and power. As evidenced by the male Hyolmo *delog* who took a job in New York City, men have taken advantage of new opportunities and left traditional religious practices, like that of *delog*, to women. Relatedly, Cuevas found that pre-modern textual accounts of *delogs* can be divided equally in terms of male and female (six and seven respectively). He concludes that in the past, the *delog* role was not gendered.³⁵

The question of historical gender balance is one that cannot currently be answered, but evidence suggests that the *delog* role has long been associated with women. First, it is significant that many of the most well-known *delog* accounts, those of Karma Wangdzin and Lingza Chökyi in Tibet and Lhame Lhamchung in Nepal, are stories of women. In addition, the “original” and “best” *delog*, whether a historical person or not, is generally said to be Nangsa Obum (Snang sa ‘od ‘bum). Second, assuming that textual evidence accurately reflects historical reality is problematic. Scholars are well-aware that men are more likely than women to have their lives and experiences recorded in writing. Equivalent numbers of male and female *delog* texts, therefore, does not entail that historically there were equal numbers of

³⁴ Personal communication, 8/17/2010.

³⁵ 2008: 78-82. Cuevas does not identify the thirteen *delogs* whose narratives he included in his survey. My count of all individual *delogs* named in literary sources, modern and pre-modern, sums to thirty-one. Sixteen men: 1. Bla khri rgyal ba g.yung drung, 2. Bya bral kun dga’ rang sgrol, 3. Byams pa bde legs, 4. Byang chub sengge, 5. Chos kyi dbang phyug, 6. Dan ma sangs rgyas sengge, 7. Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan, 8. Dwags po bkra shis nram rgyal, 9. Khams pa a krung, 10. La phyi sprul sku, 11. Padma ‘phrin las, 12. Padma sku gsum rdo rje, 13. Rdo rje bdud ‘dul, 14. Rgyal ba g.yung drung bstan ‘dzin, 15. Rig ‘dzin dbang phyug, 16. Stag lha nor bu. Fifteen women: 1. Bsam bstan chos mtsho, 2. Bstan ‘dzin chos sgron, 3. Chos dbang rgyal mo, 4. Dbu za rin chen sgron gsal, 5. Gling bza’ chos skyid, 6. Karma dbang ‘dzin, 7. Lha mo lham gcung, 8. ‘Od zer bzang mo, 9. Padma chos skyid, 10. Rje btsun lo chen, 11. Sangs rgyas chos ‘dzom, 12. Shes rab bzang mo, 13. Shes rab chos sgron, 14. Snang sa ‘od ‘bum, 15. Zla ba sgrol ma.

These types of lists are problematic because the inclusion or omission of an individual depends on the compiler’s definition of *delog*. For example, Shugseb Jetsun Lochen (Rje btsun blo chen, 1853/65-1950/51/53), included here, is not typically cited as a *delog*, but she reports undergoing several *delog* experiences in her autobiography (see Havnevik 1999). Padma Trinley (Padma ‘phrin las), also included here, is called *Delog* in his (auto)biography, but his visions of the intermediate state occurred during meditation (“Das log dkar chags blang dor ‘byed pa’i lde mig” n.d.).

male and female *delogs*. Furthermore, if one chooses to read *delog* literature as history, one must consider all the individuals mentioned in the narratives when making claims about gender. In Karma Wangdzin's account, for example, when the Lord of Death sends her back to the human world, he sends two other people at the same time. Like Karma Wangdzin, both of these people are female.³⁶ When seventeenth-century *delog* Sangye Chödrom (Sangs rgyas chos 'dzom) arrives in the court of the Lord of Death, another woman who had previously been sent back to life is there as well.³⁷ The inclusion of all *delogs* mentioned in *delog* texts could thus alter the gender balance reflected in pre-modern *delog* literature.

Conclusion

To become a *delog*, one must undergo an incredible death experience and return to life to tell about it. Since both men and women die and a person's sex is irrelevant when facing the Lord of Death, it is possible for both men and women to become *delogs*. Nevertheless, the majority of *delogs* are female.

Emic explanations for the connection between *delogs* and women explain why women are more likely to die and return to life. According to Himalayan Buddhist beliefs about men's and women's personalities, men are quick to anger and prone to violence whereas women are patient and devote more time to religious practice. As a result, a woman is more liable to maintain the positive karmic balance necessary for returning as a *delog*. From a tantric perspective, on the other hand, the channels of a woman's subtle body are "open" and "quick" and therefore more conducive to the out-of-body experiences that *delogs* undergo. Yet another point of view relies on the similarities *delogs* share with the female figure of the *khandroma*: a predilection for undertaking extraordinary journeys to other realms, an ability to provide information about the deceased, and often the possession of divine attributes. Tibetan Buddhist ideas about sex and gender that link women to the *delog* role thus point to what Gyatso and Havnevik have described as a "homology" between gender stereotypes and certain religious functions.³⁸

Based on sociological considerations, it is also possible that women who have a *delog* experience are more eager than men to assume identity as *delogs*. This theory speaks to the observation that in Hima-

³⁶ Pommaret 1989: 75.

³⁷ Pommaret 1989: 62.

³⁸ 2005: 19.

layan Buddhist societies, women are structurally inferior to men. It follows that women do not necessarily experience death journeys more often than men but when they do, women more frequently adopt '*delog*' as a title and vocation because, due to the smaller number and limited desirability of alternatives available to them, recognition as a *delog* is a relatively attractive option. Gyatso and Havnevik argue that jobs viewed as insignificant or demeaning are particularly welcoming of women's participation.³⁹ According to this argument, we should see peripheral religious roles, like those of diviner, oracle-medium, and *delog*, often filled by women, and indeed this is the case.

In the end, our gender analysis is unavoidably circular, reflecting Bourdieu's observation that social structures and strategies tend to reproduce themselves to the point that "the body is in the social world but the social world is also in the body."⁴⁰ Attention to Himalayan Buddhists' theories regarding the connection between *delogs* and women reveals contradictory beliefs about both the status of *delogs* and women's talents and shortcomings. For someone who has respect for *delogs* and views their activities as authentic and important, the fact that most *delogs* are female can be evidence of women's competency and merits. Those who question the possibility of returning from death and are skeptical of *delogs*' claims can explain women's disproportionate participation as *delogs* to *delogs*' marginal standing vis-à-vis the institutions of Tibetan Buddhism and women's inferior place in Himalayan social hierarchies. In this way, an investigation of the link between *delogs* and women highlights the inseparability of religion and culture in Tibetan Buddhist societies whereby the adoption of *delog* identity allows women an opportunity to participate in religious authority while simultaneously reiterating gender stereotypes.

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³⁹ 2005: 13.

⁴⁰ 1990: 190.

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