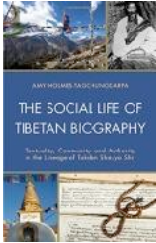


REVIEW: THE SOCIAL LIFE OF TIBETAN BIOGRAPHY

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Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa. 2014. *The Social Life of Tibetan Biography: Textuality, Community, and Authority in the Lineage of Tokden Shakya Shri*. Lexington Books. 221 pp. 6 figures, index. Series "Studies in Modern Tibetan Culture." ISBN 978-0-7391-6519-5 (hardcover, 81USD).

The book under review is a part of Lexington Books' series "Studies in Modern Tibetan Culture." The author, Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa, has a background in Religious Studies and researched the interrelationships between textual biography and social community networks of the Tibetan Buddhist lineage holder and Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen master, Tokden Shakya Shri (1853–1919) from Latokh, which at the time was a kingdom and one of five polities in Kham, Eastern Tibet, and today is in Chamdo County in the Tibet Autonomous Region. She interviewed contemporary students and family of Shakya Shri as well as translated excerpts from the master's biography, the *Garland of Flowers*. The Tibetan text is not appended, but interested readers can refer to the complete translation of the *Garland of Flowers* by Elio Guarisco (2009). An old black and white photo of the master, as well as photos of his community in Nepal and the stupas his followers helped to renovate, are included in the book. A map showing the regions of Shakya Shri's residences and spiritual influence would have been useful.

Holmes-Tagchungdarpa's analysis expands on existing scholarship on the biographies of visionaries, treasure revealers, and enigmatic Buddhist masters by providing an insightful discussion of a lineage holder outside conventional monastic establishments. She views a biography as a "social product, which has been created, and continues to be re-created, through an ongoing social process" (xiv). The book tells the story of a married yogi, who intensively practiced

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Buddhist meditation, became a visionary and treasure revealer, and taught many students from across the Himalayas and Tibet at the turn of the twentieth century. He had two consorts, with whom he had four daughters and several sons, the exact number of which is unclear. While the role of the two wives, following Tibetan tradition, remains in the background, some of the sons and daughters became instrumental in establishing Shakya Shri's lineage through monastic and non-monastic traditions as well as advantageous marriage alliances. Since Shakya Shri himself came from a nomadic background without an established family lineage, a legitimate lineage had to be created for the continuity of his teachings.

Holmes-Tagchungdarpa shows how such a lineage is established through social networking, marriage alliances, the restoration of Buddhist monuments in Kathmandu, as well as the writing and distribution of two published biographies. The two biographies that became instrumental in establishing the lineage are the biography of Shakya Shri himself, which was written shortly after his death in 1919 by Katok Situ Chökyi Gyatso (1880-1925), and the biography of Shakya Shri's son, Sé Pakchok Dorjé, who became a celibate monk. The interrelationship of these two textual accounts demonstrates "the diversity of different forms of authority within a single lineage" (137).

The book is well structured and leads us through the life of Shakya Shri not chronologically, but along the political and social networks that shaped his lineage. The introduction presents the various definitions of power that have been relevant in the context of expressing political authority, especially in Eastern Tibet during the nineteenth century, drawing on the work of Yudru Tsomu (2006). Tsomu contests the monolithic political authority that is often presented as characteristic for Lhasa and the Dalai Lama's Ganden Podrang Government, but that neglects the power structures and autonomy that existed in social groups living at the periphery of Tibet, such as in Kham. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa's focus is on these peripheries of Tibetan areas of power and authority, not the center. Her interest lies in localized forms of power. In her introduction, apart from a brief chapter outline, she contrasts forms of power

in Buddhism with forms of power in Tibet without creating an artificial dichotomy. She rather introduces these forms of power as a foundation to understand issues of lineage, agency, and memory involved in the writing and propagation of Shakya Shri's biography.

In Chapter One the author sets the stage by contextualizing her research within other Tibetan Buddhist biographies. She successfully analyses how certain literary devices "establish the efficacy of the biographical subject" (10). This analysis of how biographies become efficacious is woven into the consequent chapters and also includes how a published biography as a material object "travels" for that purpose, assuring a wider geographical area for a lineage to be established.

In Chapter Two we come to know the kingdom of Lathok in the politically charged spatial geography of Eastern Tibet and its complex history at the end of the nineteenth century. Torn between local political figures, religious hierarchs, and border struggles with China, Lathok is located far away from the central government in Lhasa. It was a place where a charismatic figure like Shakya Shri had to rely on local networks to flourish. Some of the local political figures sponsored him and thus took part in the creation of the lineage. The author carefully treads on the literature, describing nomadic societies in neighboring Derge and the region of Amdo further to the north and does not fall into generalizations due to the lack of material available on Lathok. Local deities, such as the pre-Buddhist mountain deity Yézu, form part of this complex social network with which Shakya Shri had to engage, also using ritual means to interact with and negotiate between such spiritual relationships, which were also deeply political. Shakya Shri, who was trained at Drugu Monastery, was patronized by the Lathok kings, who needed the support of the local monasteries and their heads to legitimize themselves as the "righteous Buddhist leaders" as well as rely on them as ritual and political mediators (35). The author explores how these contexts influenced the ways in which Shakya Shri's biography chose or silenced certain patterns of power.

Chapter Three introduces the teachers and close friendships that had a decisive influence on Shakya Shri. Here, the author

corrects some depictions by contemporary scholars of Rimé as a "non-sectarian movement," which are widespread and often misunderstood. Rimé is often mistranslated as "nonsectarian" and presented as a kind of religious "movement." The author argues that Rimé with its "unbiased attitudes" was not a "movement" but a broad approach to Buddhism that "had long been common in Tibet" (66). The reader also learns about the influential teachers from whom Shakya Shri received transmissions of Buddhist teachings during his lifetime. He used these teachers to secure certain patronages and to establish himself as a Treasure Regent for another prominent figure, Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (1820-1892). In analyzing these interrelationships, not just as political alliances but in terms of real friendships, Holmes-Tagchungdarpa shows that what matters in such collaborative networks across the divides of social and political status are also real sentiments between individuals.

In Chapter Four, the author proposes an approach to the visionary and miraculous events described in the *Garland of Flowers*, which she terms "internal objectivity," defined as an objectivity that is "internally construed within the literary genre of biography in Tibetan society" (98). The biography's author, Katok Situ Chökyi Gyatso, was not directly part of Shakya Shri's lineage and thus was considered as having a certain "objectivity" through which he could legitimize Shakya Shri's miraculous powers. This effectively added authenticity to the biography. The chapter explores visionary and meditative details of Shakya Shri's life and his performance of miracles as "literary devices" that were essential to create his lineage.

While reading this chapter, one is reminded of Tanya Zivkovic's book *In-between Bodies* (2014, based on her PhD of 2008), especially with regard to the post mortem manifestations of a lama's biography in relics and other religious artifacts. According to Holmes-Tagchungdarpa, the biographical descriptions of what happened after Shakya Shri passed away are extensive and important in the *Garland of Flowers* and include miracles surrounding his shrinking corpse, the ensuing relics, and the elaborate funeral with hundreds of attendees and sponsors. Their detailed descriptions are in themselves verifiers for an "authentic" lineage, or as Zivkovic

argues, a continuation of the master's presence. Likewise, the ensuing relics that help build relationships between disciples and the master after his death can also be viewed as an "expression and extension ... of the biographical process," described in Strong's *Relics of the Buddha* (2004:5).

Chapter Five brings us into contact with Shakya Shri's public works, especially the renovation of three popular Buddhist *stūpas* in the Kathmandu valley, and the way they were documented in the *Garland of Flowers* and in the biography by Shakya Shri's son. As is the case so often, biographies do not necessarily tell the details of how certain events happened, but rather record these events as proof of something else. Here the textual representations of the *stūpa* renovations "prove" Shakya Shri's religious dedication, which in turn supports the establishment of his lineage far beyond the borders of Kham and across the Himalayas. The renovations were definitely major undertakings, involving time, money, and manpower. They provided lay people, as well as various political rulers, opportunities to take an active part in building Shakya Shri's legacy, with their personal motivations ranging from merit-making to the consolidation of political and territorial power. Though not surprising as a finding, the author's handling of the material to show how a lama's memory becomes associated with key sites of Buddhism through a firm establishment in biographical writing contributes to the growing critical scholarship on Tibetan biographies.

The family contexts and "bone" lineage of Shakya Shri is closely analyzed in Chapter Six. This chapter has an engaging discussion on the appropriate terminology of whether Shakya Shri could be considered a "Ngakpa," "married lama," "lay-practitioner," "household-practitioner," or a "religious specialist" - terms often used interchangeably in the literature (138-141). Holmes-Tagchungdarpa argues for a more nuanced approach towards some of the stereotypes associated with these labels and demonstrates that Shakya Shri's position was too complex to be characterized by any one of these labels. This chapter also provides a more personal insight into Shakya Shri's family life and his wives and children. Building on Stutchbury's research into Tibetan writings and how the "women are

'disappeared' in the remembering of lineage" (141, quoting Stutchbury 1991:303), Holmes-Tagchungdarpa sketches their lives with whatever little information she could gather. She is critical of the conventional Vajrayāna reasoning that lamas require a woman as their female consort to "practice completion yoga and lengthen lifespan" (142). She detects the underlying androcentric approaches towards women, and also in their usefulness to create political and socially advantageous networks through marriage alliances.

The assigned role of Shakya Shri's first and long-term wife, Chözang Drölma, was as the "mother" of his spiritual communities (144). The second wife, the much younger Péma Tso, also contributed through sexual yoga to his health and lengthening of his life span until she disappeared from the scene in 1919. The introduction of his children (145-147) is confusing in the way they are counted (the fifth son is followed by the eldest daughter, followed by the fourth child, then the second daughter, then the sixth child, who was a son, ...). At the end of the section, one still does not know exactly how many children he had (I guess ten, four of them daughters).

The story of his son, Pakchok Dorjé, is well documented by Holmes-Tagchungdarpa. He became a prominent lineage holder and teacher, led the renovations in Nepal, and wrote one of the biographies, but could not pass on the "bone" lineage, as he was a celibate monk. While he fulfilled an important role as a charismatic successor for his father's teachings, the "bone" lineage was passed on by several of his elder brothers, who married. The author shows how a family with various social networks collectively and successfully consolidated the tradition of Shakya Shri.

Chapter Seven brings in fascinating descriptions on the life of Shakya Shri's disciples or "heart sons," from the perspective of five of his students. A powerful scene is sketched in front of the reader's eye, in which around 700 students of mixed gender and ethnicity, from varying monastic and non-monastic backgrounds from across the Himalayas and Tibet live in groups in the main retreat place of Shakya Shri in Kham. After hearing these stories, one expects a subsequent chapter on the contemporary accounts of current followers of Shakya Shri based on the author's fieldwork.

Unfortunately these lively descriptions are brief and only found towards the end of the conclusion, which leaves the reader with open questions and a wish for more details about the contemporary activities of Shakya Shri practitioners.

The book is very readable and well researched, but it is frequented with outlines and summaries, which is helpful for those who skim through the book, but repetitive in many places for those who want to read the entire book. Overall, the *Social Life of Tibetan Biography* is a timely contribution to the study of life histories of Tibetan Buddhist masters that will be of interest beyond the discipline of Religious and Tibetan Studies. I also recommend it to anthropologists working on biographies and oral histories, since Shakya Shri's life is a profound example of how a spiritual lineage can emerge and spread through unconventional means outside monastic establishments, and explores the importance of power, authority, and agency through local networks and relationships. The book is also a useful introduction to anyone interested in unusual enigmatic spiritual figures of Himalayan and Tibetan culture.

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