

When fraud is part of a spiritual path A Tibetan lama's plays on reality and illusion.

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There have been many complaints recently about the Tibetan lama Sogyal Rinpoche, both in the UK and in France. After a first charge brought against him in 1994 in California for “physical, psychological and sexual abuse” by a female disciple known as “Janice Doe” – a case which was settled out of court and covered by the media in various Western countries –, a second sex scandal broke out in the French press in late 2011. In a left-wing weekly magazine, a young attractive French woman explained how she spent several years at Sogyal Rinpoche’s ‘service’, in every sense of the term. The words used are crude and express a painful personal experience. This article was followed by many commentaries on several blogs and discussed a few days later on a national radio programme. A Canadian TV documentary, in a series about scandals in religions, also made allegations about Sogyal Rinpoche having a pattern of bullying and sexually using female disciples.¹ The Wikipedia page dedicated to Sogyal Rinpoche now includes (September 13th, 2013) a Controversy section, briefly relating both cases. This section appeared around 2008, when the French woman mentioned above started making herself known to journalists and ex-disciples. It mentions the 1994 10 million dollars civil lawsuit filed against Sogyal Rinpoche and states that:

it was alleged that he used his position as a spiritual leader to induce one of his female students to have sexual relations with him. The complaint included accusations of infliction of emotional distress, breach of fiduciary duty, as well as assault and battery. The lawsuit was settled out of court.

It also mentions the 2011 Canadian documentary. Links to the online articles are also provided. French and English new religious movements and ‘cults’ information centres (Miviludes and ADFI in Paris, Inform in London) have been asked by concerned families to clarify the issue. The main allegations have long been in the public domain; they had already been discussed in Western

¹ I have listed all relevant articles, blogs and other media at the end of this article.

Buddhist circles for more than twenty years. When analyzing the narratives of ex members of Rigpa, and the media discussing these cases, it becomes clear that ‘fraud’ is considered to be a selfish abuse of authority, the distorted use of a venerable Buddhist tradition in order for the teacher to indulge in his own materialistic and sensual pleasures, at the expense of naïve and trusting disciples.

However, all attempts to discredit the lama failed, and his organization is more influential than ever. This can be explained by sociological, legal and cultural reasons. First, it is certainly the case that Sogyal Rinpoche’s supporters have significantly more material and symbolic resources than their opponents, in terms of public relations, advocates, finances and prestige. Second, legally, it is very difficult for these young women to prove that abuse was committed by Sogyal Rinpoche. They often realize months or years later that they had been ‘abused’, it is materially nearly impossible to establish that a physical or moral violence was actually inflicted on them and that they were thrown into a relationship based on unequal and unclear premises. Thus the defendant can – and does – argue that their relationship was, at the time, based on consent. When asked to testify, Rigpa members suggest that these women were in fact actively seeking to get closer to their teacher and took great pride in being elected by him. In the end, it is their word against his, and, because of unequal resources, these women usually give up their claims to damages. Whatever the nature of their intimate relationship with Sogyal Rinpoche, they generally choose to forget. Thus, apart from the 1994 American lawsuit, there was no official recognition of any kind of abuse or fraud on the part of Sogyal Rinpoche. Third, as several authors have shown (Bishop 1993, Lopez 1999, Dodin and Rather 2001), Tibetan lamas are surrounded by an aura of moral perfection, making the case of an abusive lama almost inconceivable and rarely taken seriously.

Another kind of explanation may be given to the apparent difficulties in delegitimizing Sogyal Rinpoche’s reputation. It has to do with the teaching methods used in his dharma centres, which aim at leading the students to the contemplation of ‘reality’ beyond ‘illusion’ – said to bring enlightenment –, induce the students to view everything their teacher does or says as ‘enlightened

and compassionate activity'. After a brief presentation of Sogyal Rinpoche's organization, Rigpa, I will describe the teachings he gives on stage, once or twice a year in his Parisian centre. These teachings are representative of Sogyal Rinpoche's own pedagogical style, as they are given along the same lines throughout his whole organization. This study is based on extensive participation in the activities offered by the Paris Rigpa centre (2009-2011), and on formal and informal interviews with current and former members, which I have conducted for my PhD thesis in Anthropology.²

A new Tibetan Buddhist organization created for Westerners: Rigpa

Rigpa is an international Buddhist organization founded by Sogyal Rinpoche in 1978.³ Sogyal Rinpoche belongs to the second generation of lamas who came to teach in Europe and the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s, after a first generation of pioneers came in the 1960s. Born in Kham (Eastern Tibet) in 1947, he was recognized as a *tulku* (heir of a lineage of reincarnated lamas) by his uncle and spiritual master Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro, who oversaw the beginning of his religious training. This training was interrupted by the arrival of the Chinese in Kham in the early 1950s. Sogyal Rinpoche, still a child, followed his master into exile in India. There, he received a Western education, attending a Catholic high school and a Catholic college in Kalimpong. A few years later, he was granted a scholarship by Trinity College, Cambridge, where he came to study comparative religions in 1971. Along with this Western education, Sogyal Rinpoche continued to train in the Tibetan Buddhist traditions with the great masters of the previous generation of exiled lamas, notably Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Dudjom Rinpoche. He served as an interpreter and assistant to Dudjom Rinpoche and helped him organize the first Dalai Lama's visits to the West. Dudjom Rinpoche distanced himself from Sogyal Rinpoche in the late 1970s, for reasons his then students attribute to his promiscuity with female disciples, which Dudjom Rinpoche didn't approve of.⁴ In 1978, he created his own 'Dharma Centre' in Paris and called it Rigpa. A year later, he established another Rigpa centre in London. The

² My thesis, "*Ceci n'est pas une religion*". *L'apprentissage du dharma selon Rigpa (France)* (Eng. 'This is not a religion'. *Learning dharma within Rigpa*), will be defended in December, 2013. To be published.

³ www.rigpa.org

⁴ Interviews with ex-disciples, including the English journalist Mary Finnigan.

Tibetan word *rigpa* comes from the Dzogchen tradition, meaning ‘the innermost nature of the mind’. Because of his knowledge of both Tibetan and Western cultures, Sogyal Rinpoche is often presented as a mediator, creating a special connection between Tibet and the West. As such, he distinguishes himself from the first generation of lamas who came to the West in the 1960s and 1970s. Those only spoke Tibetan and knew almost nothing about Western culture. Sogyal Rinpoche is also the author of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (1992), a bestseller that brought him international fame. The success of this work gave considerable impetus to Rigpa in the 1990s.

The organization consists of numerous urban ‘study and practice centres’ and a few rural ‘retreat centres’. It is present in 41 countries worldwide, mainly in Western Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia. Its mission is to make ‘the Buddha’s teachings’ available to the largest number of people. Its training is thus presented as a ‘Tibetan Buddhism adapted to the modern world’, a tradition that is both ‘authentic and modern’. Buddhism is described as a ‘spirituality’, a ‘wisdom’ or a ‘science of the mind’, whereas the term ‘religion’ is briskly rejected. In fact, within Rigpa, Buddhism is mostly defined by what it supposedly is not: ‘this is not a religion’. To discover what it is, one has to ‘experience it’. This view is based on a Western construction of the diverse traditions inspired by the Buddha, which sees them as a unique, transnational, intellectual and individualistic ‘Buddhism’ that transcends cultural boundaries and doctrinal variety. Western construction of Buddhism emerged in the 1870s-1890s, as a result of cooperation between the native religious and political elite of Ceylon and the Theosophical Society (Masuzawa 2005, Lopez 2002, Sharf 1995), more specifically through the work of Henry Steel Olcott (Protero 1996). According to this representation, meditation is described as a non-conceptual practice, aiming at rediscovering the Buddha’s primary experience of enlightenment. Thus understood, meditation has nothing to do with rituals – despite them being essential in most Asian Buddhist traditions. Departed from its ritual context, meditation is then also disconnected from its cultural and doctrinal basis: reduced to an individual, universal and transformative spiritual experience, whether psychotherapeutic, cognitive or mystical, it can be practiced anywhere, by anyone. Sogyal Rinpoche

and all Rigpa members generally speak about Buddhism and meditation in the same way.

To mass audiences, Rigpa offers services that their brochures and websites describe as ‘meditation’; to a minority of members, the organization also includes the equivalent of a monastic university, called *shedra*. Sogyal Rinpoche reportedly also offers a modernized version of *dzogchen* to the most advanced of his students. *Dzogchen* is a Tibetan mystical tradition traditionally directed to an elite group of ascetics, specialists in tantric rituals. Their practices are still not well known, but Tibetologists indicate that they involve physical exercises (such as breathing or pressing the eyes), which have physiological effects (notably apparition of lights). *Dzogchen* is based on the Indian philosophical doctrine *Yogacara* (‘mind only’), according to which all phenomena, including the self, are projections of the mind. Similar to dreams, these illusions should be identified as such, allowing the practitioner to ‘wake’. As Yogacara-based Tibetan texts precise, this awakening from the apparent solidity of all phenomena leads to the sudden recognition of the eternal basis of the mind, called *rigpa*. This ‘innermost nature of the mind’ is described as pure and always accessible to any living being, though it is generally concealed by the innumerable projections the mind produces because it fails to recognize its ‘true nature’. The goal of *dzogchen* practice is thus to ‘recognize’ it. In Tibetan *dzogchen* communities, this ‘recognition’ actually designates the moment, in the ritual, when the master grants to his student a formal authorization to practice rituals, thus acknowledging his new status as ‘master’ himself. An important part of the teachings delivered by Sogyal Rinpoche relates to this objective, although the methods used are radically different: they do not involve canonical rituals nor physiological practices. Sogyal Rinpoche claims that the *dzogchen* tradition he transmits is ‘authentic’, while at the same time ‘universal and modern’.

All visitors who wish to become Rigpa members must register as ‘students’ and follow weekly sessions called ‘what meditation really is’. This course is a prerequisite for the participation in Sogyal Rinpoche’s retreats and so needs to be described here.

Introductory sessions: learning to ‘sit with Rinpoche’

The weekly course entitled ‘What meditation really is’ is aimed at people who want to

learn meditation in the Tibetan tradition. The sessions take place in the main hall of the Rigpa centres. This room is called ‘the shrine room’ and looks like a chapel. The walls are covered with silk paintings depicting Tibetan deities (*thangka*), photographs of Tibetan lamas are suspended from the roof and, at the end of the room stands a Tibetan altar with its usual components (one cup of drinking water, one cup of lustral water, flowers, incense, butter lamps, scented water, food, shell). Behind the altar is a throne, on which rests a picture of Sogyal Rinpoche, whom the newcomer has often already learned to recognize – either by visiting Rigpa websites or by reading the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Above this portrait, hangs the photograph of a statue of Padmasambhava, the Indian introducer of Buddhism to Tibet, and, at his side, pictures of Dudjom Rinpoche and Dilgo Dudjom, Sogyal Rinpoche’s two main teachers. Behind the altar, in front of a dark blue panel, stands a large statue of a sitting Buddha, covered with gold leaves. This is a reproduction of a statue located in Bodhgaya, the Indian village where Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment. This original disposition of pictures constitutes a simplified equivalent of Tibetan ‘refuge trees’, representing the lineages to which disciples belong. Students are thus implicitly told that their own lineage is composed of the Buddha, Padmasambhava, two deceased Tibetan lamas and Sogyal Rinpoche.

This composite altar also includes different technological objects: projectors, sound amplifiers, and a large TV screen. At first glance, the situation the newcomer enters is part of a rational, Western-style learning programme. Indeed, the individual is registered with the association as a ‘student’, pays for its annual curriculum (classes are held once a week throughout the year except during school holidays) and receives a course manual, which summarizes the topics addressed throughout the year. Courses are taught by former students of Rigpa called ‘instructors’; in front of them sit between four and fifteen people. The course begins with an introduction of all participants, including the instructors. The latter highlight the relationship which unites them to Sogyal Rinpoche, a relationship which the newcomers do not know yet. The relationship to the master is described as both desirable and painful. The explanations given by the instructors on the

lama and his teaching is formulated in a specific language, close to a sacred or secret language (Van Genneep 1914). This language, which replaces liturgical Tibetan, is characterized by a dichotomy between ‘us’, the students, and ‘they’, ‘the masters’, the most important of them being Sogyal Rinpoche. The former are characterized by ‘illusions’, ‘obstacles’, ‘blockages’ and ‘ego’, the latter by an ‘incredible love’, ‘omniscience’, ‘spontaneity’, ‘wisdom’, ‘fullness’, ‘peace’, ‘harmony’ and ‘perfection’. This worldview opposes the vast majority of beings, whose life is led by illusion, to a tiny minority of enlightened masters, no longer prisoners of the dreamlike quality of all phenomena because of their recognition of *rigpa*. Here, an implicit behavioral norm is suggested: devotion. The student learns that, in order to attract blessings and reach enlightenment, s/he must connect with the master through devotional feelings and behaviours. To justify the need for devotion, which was not supposed to be, at the beginning of the course, part of the ‘rational spirituality’ Buddhism supposedly is, the instructors translate these devotional standards of conduct into the language of science. Indeed, they use neuroscientific theories related to ‘mirror neurons’ and apply them to the spiritual encounter between master and disciples: when two people physically meet, their respective neurons adjust to one other, so when they are confronted to Sogyal Rinpoche’s presence, students’ neurons “resonate” with his, allowing them to ‘absorb’ his ‘atmosphere’, to merge his mind with his. Here appears a new form of *guru yoga*, a tantric ritual that includes prayers invoking the master’s powers and visualizations of the student becoming one with him. The TV screen thus leaves its usual speech-transmitting function to become a liturgical instrument, aimed at establishing a devotional relationship with the master. The device becomes a *mediator* between the students who watch and pray with the lama – considered as a supernatural being (all-knowing, pure love, able to manifest in various forms) – and the latter, who sends his ‘blessings’ through modern technologies. Used in this way, the TV screen can be seen as a modernized form of the ancient Asian tantric icon, through which deities are first contemplated as a two-dimensional image, before being ‘animated’ in various rituals and liturgies, that include codified formulas, visualizations and gestures (Strickmann 1996). In *Rigpa*, as we shall see, the same evolution happens to the master’s

image throughout the student's path: introduced to the students as the centre of their practices – and so assimilated to a deity –, Sogyal Rinpoche's televised image is the object of contemplation and prayers before being replaced by the physical manifestation of the lama on stage. Because of this continuity with the tantric model, I will call Sogyal Rinpoche's image on the screen an 'icon' and will describe the ways in which the progressive animation of this icon gives rise to various interpretations of the master's deeds, including the accusation of 'fraud'.

During the first lessons, the instructors give some brief information about Buddhism and meditation, preferably called 'sitting'. The term 'to sit' acquires a technical sense, referring to codified attitudes. Three types of injunctions frame the practice of 'sitting'. It is a physical posture (spine straight, legs crossed, hands lying on the knees, shoulders clear, head and chin slightly bent forward, the tip of the tongue touching the palate), a state of mind (watching thoughts and emotions without seizing them), both produced by a prescribed gaze (looking on the tip of one's nose or in the space in front of oneself). The instructors give specific instructions in this regard, the transgression of which is systematically pointed out. After having given these instructions and practiced 'sitting meditation' in silence during a few minutes with the students, the instructors announce that they will watch videos of Sogyal Rinpoche. They instruct students not only to listen to his words and try to understand their meaning, but, more importantly, to try and 'receive' the master 'as fully as possible', through hearing, sight, physical and emotional sensations the master generates by his 'atmosphere'. The particularity of Sogyal Rinpoche, the instructors explain, is that he teaches through his 'being' more than with his words. Sitting in front of him while focusing on his eyes is presented as an 'extraordinary' practice which accelerates the awakening process, because it puts the student's deluded mind in contact with the master's *rigpa*. It is always possible to 'sit' in front of a wall or an 'inspiring picture', but 'sitting with Rinpoche' is a more effective practice. That is why the largest part of the session involves watching the audiovisual image of the master. Introductory courses are thus built around this central moment of visualizing the master, materialized as an animated icon. Unlike other Western places of acculturation to Buddhism, which

offer teachings based on tantric rituals, on the study of texts, the recitation of mantras, a focalization on the breath, visualization exercises or pilgrimages to Asian sacred places, Rigpa proposes a special focus on Sogyal Rinpoche – a master whose most common mode of presence is the animated picture.

The “Crazy Wisdom” Theatre

We have just seen that what was advertised by the organization as ‘meditation’ was in fact a contemplation of the master’s animated icon – a practice called ‘sitting with Rinpoche’. This practice takes other forms, especially when the master comes and gives teaching retreats in the flesh, in his various centres. What differentiates ‘sitting with Rinpoche’ within the introductory sessions and ‘sitting with Rinpoche’ at events where he is physically present on stage? How does the initial materialization as an animated picture give way to another, more physical presence? What devices are used to make the master appear, and what is at stake in this new apparition?

Teachings by Sogyal Rinpoche during weekends at Rigpa urban centres are called ‘retreats’, although the participants are not residents but simply attend the event during daytime. The retreats take place in the same shrine-room, refitted for the occasion. Huge bunches of flowers are placed on and around the altar, incense smoke saturates the atmosphere, the TV screen displays a picture of a Padmasambhava statue and Sogyal Rinpoche’s photograph is removed from the throne. There is a festive atmosphere, made of excitement and nervousness. All participants, especially the organizers, await the master’s arrival with visible impatience. Some are dressed in party clothes, many women wear silver jewels and heavy makeup. The organizers (the centre’s managers) make an inspiring speech about Sogyal Rinpoche, emphasizing his greatness, but also stressing the confusing nature of his personality. At the beginning of each retreat, they say: “You mustn’t be surprised and draw the wrong conclusions about the way Rinpoche manifests, but rather remain open and always accept what comes with an open mind”. The way the master behaves on stage, they explain, must be ‘viewed as a mere appearance’, that is to say as an illusion created by the audience’s mind.⁵ Everything Sogyal Rinpoche says or does, the organizers announce, is

⁵ The instructors’ quotations here come from the notes I took during several retreats.

charged with meaning that lay *beyond* his physical manifestation. This hidden meaning must be associated with Sogyal Rinpoche's awakened nature: what he does on stage must be 'seen' as an 'expression of his compassion', an example of his 'unconventional way' to teach. The shrine-room, previously used as a classroom, thus becomes a place invested with a ritual dimension, to which instructors immediately attract the audience's attention (Smith 1982, Bell 1992): what appears therein is not reality but a mere projection of the mind. The viewer's duty is then to realize that what s/he sees and hears is but an illusion, the yoke of which s/he must free her or himself by seeing beyond the limitations of his or her own vision.

In the heat of the final preparations, the organizers announce several times the master's arrival, before he finally comes, at a point where he is no longer expected. The room, until then happily buzzing, is now suddenly silent. Sogyal Rinpoche's entrance is thus dramatized in the same way as for celebrities: the instructors are no longer teachers, but presenters, who repeatedly announce the master's imminent arrival, highlight the extraordinary nature of the event, indefinitely repeat and comment on his greatness and originality.

Once Sogyal Rinpoche is finally on stage (after long minutes or hours of waiting), the organizers stop talking and return to their seats at the forefront of the assembly. The lama is then at the centre of the audience's attention. The teachings will begin. Their theme has already been advertised weeks before: they usually focus on a topic linking Buddhism to daily life, such as "how to find peace in a hectic world" or "harmonizing relationships". While the audience expects him to get into the heart of the subject, as they see him do on the videos they watch during the introductory sessions, Sogyal Rinpoche begins to have personal conversations with the people sitting in the first row. These conversations, where he talks more than they reply to him, last for at least fifteen minutes. He asks them a number of questions regarding the course of the retreat, the lessons he must deliver today, about a tiny detail of the organization of a past event, or any other matter related to the functioning of Rigpa, matters that totally elude the audience. The latter often feel that they are facing an entrepreneur briefing his employees. People sitting at the forefront receive instructions to

perform material tasks (typing teachings, calling someone, cleaning or reorganizing the shrine-room, etc.). They are very strongly criticized, even ridiculed in public. Verbal violence is not uncommon. Now, the audience may well wonder whether this so-called ‘authentic and modern master’ is not, in fact, a ‘cult guru’.⁶ After this intriguing introduction, the lama finally begins his teachings on the announced topic. His English is fluent but rambling. He often interrupts his speech to make further personal remarks to one of his close disciples, speaking to them like a father, sometimes tender, but mostly authoritarian. Aware that this behavior may disconcert the audience, Sogyal Rinpoche sometimes stops to give explanations to the entire assembly. He then tries to clarify his behaviour toward his close disciples. He says that he is giving them ‘instructions’, the *apparent* nature of which is practical, the *reality* of which is ‘spiritual’. As such, these remarks, orders and scolding also concern the general audience, if they know how to look beyond appearances. When criticizing people sitting at the forefront, Sogyal Rinpoche is staging himself as the master in a close relationship with his disciples, to the attention of the novices, whose duty is to discover the ‘reality’ of this relationship. To do this, they should not approach this relationship ordinarily, by exercising common sense, but should rather consider it as an illusion created by their own mind: what seems to be a guru’s behaviour is actually no such thing; what looks like the relationship of a business leader with his employees has nothing to do with reality. This show resembles a ritual theater but, unlike ancient theatrical performances, it does not confront gods and demons, rather, as always in Rigpa, the person of the master, in his multiple forms. The mental plays put on stage are thus the new meaning given to the expression ‘sitting with Rinpoche’. However, the key to these plays, previously given by the organizers (‘seeing everything the lama does as an illusion’), has generally been forgotten by the audience, carried away by Sogyal Rinpoche’s entertaining show. In this original form of theater, the anthropologist might recognize a ritual innovation, based on the personal staging, by Sogyal Rinpoche, of the Yogacara doctrine – in other words a new *dzogchen* practice related to the vision of reality. The organizers do not reiterate

⁶ Quotations based on the notes taken during my participation at several retreats, and on personal conversations with students.

this interpretation and, therefore, doubts often arise in the mind of the participants: who exactly *is* that famous ‘authentic’ master who acts so strangely?

Securing the legitimate meaning of this paradoxical, ambiguous and polysemic representation of the master-disciple relationship is the object of ‘beginners’ sessions’, organized by the instructors. Tea breaks are organized when Sogyal Rinpoche unexpectedly leaves the stage and, during this free time, the instructors take the novices apart in a room upstairs and expose them again to the representation’s exegesis: what the audience has just witnessed on stage is nothing else than a ‘crazy wisdom master’, that is to say a teacher who uses unconventional and shocking pedagogical methods. ‘Crazy wisdom’ is a term coined by Sogyal Rinpoche’s main inspiration model, Chögyam Trungpa, an iconoclast Tibetan lama who came to teach Buddhism to young Americans in the 1970s (Trungpa 1991). These explanations are supported by new videos of Sogyal Rinpoche, which the instructors analyse. The master thus reappears in his usual form: the televised icon. But, unlike what they do during the introductory classes, the instructors are now focusing their comments exclusively on ‘Rinpoche’s unconventional behaviour’. Indeed, the video clips are specifically selected to allow such an exegetical development: they show a severe and humiliating Sogyal Rinpoche, whose words and actions are identified by the instructors as ‘crazy wisdom’ or ‘spontaneity’. ‘Crazy wisdom’ is described as a ‘skillful means’ intended to awaken the students. A ‘skillful means’ (*upaya* in Sanskrit) is term referring to any Mahayana method a master might use in aid to communicate the Dharma to individuals. ‘Crazy wisdom’ and ‘spontaneity’ displayed on stage by Sogyal Rinpoche are depicted, not as his *real* petulance or aggressiveness, but as an *artificial trick*, a gimmick he is wisely using to awaken his audience. At all times during the show, wisdom and compassion must be assumed and, as often as possible, publicly asserted. After commenting repetitively on the video clips, the instructors initiate group discussions with a question they ask to everyone (all participants first introduce themselves and then answer the question): “and you, what did you feel while seeing Rinpoche?” The answers are formulated in the language used within Rigpa, elaborating on the binary worldview students received during the introductory sessions (‘us

the unenlightened/they the great compassionate masters’). One is expected to speak of the necessity to ‘let go of the conceptual mind’, to leave the thoughts or emotions provoked by Sogyal Rinpoche’s manifestation ‘untouched’ and ‘unelaborated’ (as one does with thoughts and emotions emerging in the initial practice of ‘sitting meditation’), recognize and regret one’s ‘resistances’ to the master’s paradoxical behaviour. One should also conclude on a positive note, such as “Rinpoche is so impressive”, “I felt so much peace inside when I saw him”, “he’s so free”, “Rinpoche has an incredible love for us”... In case of a failure or refusal to adopt these linguistic patterns, the participant is stigmatized by the group: the other participants demonstrate animosity against them, the instructors put an end to emerging arguments with a ‘no karmic connection with Rinpoche’ decree. If they think the teachings are not ‘authentic’, such participants silently leave the group. Rarely do they publicly denounce them as a ‘fraud’: they might have wasted a few hundred euros for the retreat, but they generally do not feel they have been personally deceived; they do not portray themselves as ‘victims’ and so have no interest in launching a public crusade against Sogyal Rinpoche. Anyway, most participants accept the ‘crazy wisdom’ theatrical plays as pedagogical devices.⁷

These ‘beginners’ sessions’ are thus intended for the transmission of codified ways of saying – rather than ways of doing. What counts in the master-disciples’ relationship, the instructors teach to the novices, is not an actual behaviour – for the lama, most of the time, is physically absent – but a compulsory expression of feelings (Mauss 1921). Rigpa members must acquire these linguistic patterns to be able to recognize a master through the paradoxical experience of a comedy which says: “This is not an authentic and modern master, you must look beyond these surprising appearances; it is precisely because he *deceives* you that he is *in fact undeceiving* you”. At this stage, there is only one way to relate to the master and this is a linguistic one. There is no other, direct interaction between master and disciples. The closest relationship most Rigpa members can have with their lama is constructed through the staging of ‘crazy wisdom’ by Sogyal Rinpoche and,

⁷ This estimation comes from my participation in Rigpa’s events for more than two years and from my talking to many members and ex members during 6 years.

most importantly, through the inculcation, by elder students, of a special language and of a compulsory way to express devotion.

Interpreting the lama's deeds outside the ritual place: women and the 'secret mandala'

The closer, intimate relationships that reportedly happened behind the stage between Sogyal Rinpoche and some of his female disciples are surrounded with secrecy and have given rise to numerous interpretations and rumors. Although he openly claims, in an attempt to defend himself against accusations of promiscuity, to be a non-monastic lama, Sogyal Rinpoche is not clear about his actual personal situation. He does not have a wife or official concubine but rather seems to enjoy the company of several young women who constitute a group called 'the secret mandala' and are known only by a tiny minority. I discovered the existence of the 'secret mandala' when I talked to Rigpa members who either have (or had) high responsibilities within the group or who were part, as women, of the 'secret mandala' itself.⁸ These women are often identified as '*dakini*', 'sky travelers', a Tibetan term describing female deities or actual practitioners' consorts, who help visionary lamas to discover Treasure texts or objects (*terma*), through their physical manifestations or via sexual intercourse. During teaching retreats in Rigpa centres, one can usually notice four or five, rather pretty young women, sitting next to the throne, sometimes pouring Sogyal Rinpoche tea and disappearing behind the curtain separating the shrine-room and the lama's private apartments, and reappearing later to bring food, drinks or papers. Their apparitions are neither commented on, nor even mentioned, although they do contribute to the master's theatrical show, emphasizing yet another image: that of a feudal lord being served by servants and surrounded by a female entourage. Neither Sogyal Rinpoche (while on stage), nor the instructors (during the beginners' sessions), comment on the 'dakinis'' apparition, as they do for every other aspects of Sogyal Rinpoche's behaviour. Because it is being excluded from the set of acts identified as carrying a hidden, critical meaning in the spatiotemporal frame of the 'retreat' (Smith 1982), the presence of female servants

⁸ Personal interviews with French Rigpa officials (Olivier Raurich, Philippe Cornu), ex members with high responsibilities (G. Durand, M. Lecomte, P. Delanoë, F. Calmès, S. Boucher), former disciples (Mary Finnigan, Dominique Cowell, Jack Taghioff) and former « dakinis » (Mireille Durand, Nathalie Nim, Victoria Barlow).

becomes the only staged item that does not belong to Sogyal Rinpoche's 'crazy wisdom', and thus needs to be interpreted by the audience as 'real', that is to say as *real* female servants *really* serving a *really* powerful and authoritarian master. What does the 'dakinis' exclusion both from Sogyal Rinpoche's theatrical show and from the instructors' exegesis imply?

When asked about the issue, the high-ranking Rigpa members said that the women involved were students selected for their spiritual capacities and special devotion to the lama. Their intimate relationship with the master, though kept within the sphere of 'higher, secret teachings', is also said to result from their formal consent, so that the relationships in question can be identified as 'romantic relationships' between adults. Either 'higher teachings' or 'love affairs', relationships between Sogyal Rinpoche and selected women are mostly understood within Rigpa as 'great luck', the 'result of a good karma'. As for the women involved, they seem to accept – during several months or years – the various and contradictory meanings attributed to their relationship with Sogyal Rinpoche. They view the polysemy and contradictions of their position (are they mere girlfriends, special tantric consorts, simple servants, elected students...? If he is pure compassion, why is he behaving violently?)⁹ as the same expression of "crazy wisdom" they first got used to while attending Sogyal Rinpoche's theatrical shows. Following the instructors' and the master's prescriptions, they view the numerous tasks the lama asks them to perform (from house cleaning to sexual services) as 'apparently chores', but 'ultimately teachings'. If the service ordered is too humiliating, it is seen as 'a devotional test'. 'Dakinis' apply the prescribed exegesis to their own conduct until a series of incidents happen (for example, they discover they are not the only 'dakini', they feel disgust towards the sexual services demanded, they meet another man outside of the group, their husband asks for a divorce, they get a sexually transmitted disease, they experience depression...),¹⁰ which makes them lose their faith in the pedagogical dimension of their personal relationship with Sogyal Rinpoche. The very few women who started talking about their experience

⁹ The expression 'violent behaviour' is used by Mireille Durand in her account of her experience within Rigpa and by other ex Rigpa members. See the media references at the end of this article.

¹⁰ Personal interviews with Mireille Durand and other ex 'dakinis' who wish for their testimony to remain confidential. Also see the media material referenced at the end of this article.

to friends, relatives, lawyers and journalists, identifying their relationship to Sogyal Rinpoche as ‘fraudulent’, are women who could not reduce this relationship to one defined situation (either a love affair or a master-consort relationship), and who could no longer, at the same time, accept the ‘crazy wisdom’ exegesis, because their relationship with the lama went far beyond the usual intellectual play on words, as it dealt with their private, daily life and sexuality. Moreover, what was presented to them as ‘a teaching’ was not, unlike other ‘personal instructions’, publicly displayed on stage. In other words, their relationship to the lama, as women invested with domestic and sexual functions, was the only one not to be ritualized and to be kept away from the novices’ eyes.

Confronted with a situation that receives no convincing identification, either realistic (“I was just one of his mistresses”) or dogmatic (“all appearances must be seen as spiritual teachings”), these women seem compelled to identify themselves as victims of a betrayal. They then reinterpret their whole learning path within Rigpa – which was at first enthusiastically embraced – as a ‘mental manipulation’, from the contemplation of the animated icons to the ‘crazy wisdom’ theatrical plays to their own work as ‘dakinis’. They then conclude they have been fooled from the very beginning, and that the practices taught within Rigpa were nothing else than a ‘cultish personality cult’. The tantric model on which Sogyal Rinpoche elaborated his new teaching methods is then completely denied/rejected by these women and their supporters.

A new term thus appears at the margins of Rigpa, which was never before part of the language taught and used by the group: “fraud”, with synonyms common to this context – ‘mental manipulation’, ‘cultish behavior’, ‘personality cult’, ‘guru attitude’. They replace the positively connoted ‘crazy wisdom’, ‘spontaneity’, ‘skillful means’, ‘wrathful appearances’. Leaving apart the possible damages the relationships may produce on the women involved (the harmfulness or illegality of which can only be decided through psychotherapeutic and judicial means), the apparition of ‘fraud’ to describe Sogyal Rinpoche’ behavior towards his students can be explained by the breach of an implicit norm, rather than by a ‘breach of trust’ – since the key value to relate to Sogyal Rinpoche was never ‘trust’, ‘confidence’, ‘transparence’ or ‘sincerity’ but precisely

ritualized and institutionalized trickery. The implicit norm breached here has little to do with the much commented illusion/reality duality, but rather deals with very practical open/secret type of activities: to be deemed ‘teachings’ by the group, the lama’s words and deeds need to be identified as such through codified linguistic patterns before and after their materialization, by Sogyal Rinpoche himself, in front of an audience. Because they do not follow these implicit rules and happen outside the ritualized space and time of the ‘teaching retreats’, the intimate relationships between the master and his female disciples are logically bound to be labeled ‘fraudulent’. Had they been openly put on stage and discussed within Rigpa’s linguistic frameworks, these relationships would have had a clear status: ‘appearances hiding a transcendent truth’, a paradoxical expression of ‘Rinpoche’s love and compassion’, a pedagogical tool. But in the absence of such ritualization, their nature is not clear, neither for the women, nor for those who happen to learn about their existence. According to Rigpa’s ideological and ritual rules, they are not ‘teachings’ but ‘reality as it seems at first sight’: female students acting as domestic and sexual servants. The ultimate paradox of this situation is that the ‘fraudulent’ (*i.e.* secret) status of these relationships is also the reason why the accusations of deviancy are not taken seriously, both within and outside Rigpa. Because they happen in secret, with no other witness than the two parties involved, they can only be treated as ‘rumors’ and ‘private issues’.

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