SACRED FEMALE BIOGRAPHIES IN THE BON RELIGION: A 20TH CENTURY gTER-MA*

DONATELLA ROSSI

*The present contribution is focused upon a treasure-text (*gter ma*) brought to light by a lady called bDe-chen Chos-kyi dBang-mo, who was born in Nyag-[rong]-shod, the lower part of present-day dKar-mdzes (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan, in 1868. The text, discovered in 1918 at the holy mountain of rGyal-mo-rong, rGyal-mo Mu-rdo (mDo-khams/Sichuan), is entitled* mKha' 'gro rgya mtsho'i rnam thar gsang ba'i mdzod nyi ma'i snying po mun sel sgron ma, *The Secret Treasure of Biographies of the Ocean of Sky-Goers (Ḍākinīs), Lamp that Dispels Darkness, Quintessence of the Sun. So far, this inedited text seems to be the only Bonpo* gter ma *revealed or discovered by a woman. It consists of a collection of 16 biographies of female figures, including those of Maṇḍarava and Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal. The text is analyzed in its essential features, while the biographies are presented in an abridged form, and commented as to their specific and general patterns.*

INTRODUCTION

The second reprint of the bonpo canon in 192 *po ti* volumes was completed in 1989 in Eastern Tibet, under the supervision of Bla-ma Bon-sleb Nam-mkha' bsTan-'dzin from rTogs-ldan monastery of Amdo rNga-ba.[1] Volume 189 of this reprint, a xylographic text of 280 folios recto/verso, is without title, but is referred to in its colophon (fol. 277v4) as the *mKha' 'gro*

* This topic was first presented at the 8th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Bloomington, Indiana, July 1998.

1. For this see Martin, Kværne, and Nagano (2003).

rgya mtsho'i rnam thar gsang ba'i mdzod nyi ma'i snying po mun sel sgron ma, *The Secret Treasure of Biographies of the Ocean of Sky-Goers (Ḍākinīs), Lamp that Dispels Darkness, Quintessence of the Sun* (hereafter, *The Biographies*). This is a text discovered by a lady called bDe-chen Chos-kyi dBang-mo. According to the colophon (278r3 *et seq.*), bDe-chen Chos-kyi dBang-mo was born in Nyag-[rong]-shod, the lower part of present-day dKar-mdzes (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan.[2] The Chronology (*bstan-rtsis*) of the sMan-ri Abbot Nyi-ma bsTan-'dzin (1813–1875) places her birth in the Earth-Dragon Year (1868).[3] She was the consort of another treasure revealer (*gter ston*), who was also born in Nyag-rong, in 1864: Sangs-sngags Gling-pa.[4] Both discoveries of bDe-chen Chos-kyi dBang-mo and Sangs-sngags Gling-pa are mentioned by Shar-rdza bKra-shis rGyal-mtshan (1859–1934) in his *Legs bshad mdzod* (*The Treasury of Good Sayings*).[5] Sangs-sngags Gling-pa is credited with the discovery of *Yidam*-related texts, as well as of two hagiographies, one of Dran-pa Nam-mkha', in eight volumes,[6] and one of Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin, the son of Dran-pa Nam-mkha', in four volumes.[7] bDe-chen dBang-mo's discovery is mentioned by Shar-rdza as a *mKha' 'gro'i bka' thang*.[8]

A biography of Sang-sngags Gling-pa,[9] and a text on the practice of *gCod*, are also attributed to her.[10]

THE TEXT

The colophon of the text in question informs us that *The Biographies* were discovered in the Earth-Horse Year (1918) at the holy mountain of rGyal-

2. For her biography see Rossi (2008a).
3. See Kværne (1971, 239).
4. See Kværne (1971, 239).
5. See Karmay (1972, 189).
6. On this very important protagonist of the Bon religion see Karmay (1972, *passim*.; 1988, *passim*.); Kværne (1995, 119, 128–129), and also Rossi (2000).
7. See Karmay (1972, 346.8–28).
8. See Karmay (1972, 346.29–31).
9. *sKyabs rje thams cad mkhyen pa grub pa'i dbang phyug zab gter rgya mtsho'i mnga' bdag rin po che padma 'gro 'dul gsang sngags gling pa'i rnam par thar pa snying gi mun sel dad pa'i shing rta ratna'i chun 'phyang utpala'i 'phreng ba*, ed. Damchoe Sangpo (Dalhousie, 1981).
10. *Yum chen kye ma 'od mtsho'i zab gsang gcod kyi gdams pa las phran dang bcas pa'i gsung pod*, ed. Tshering Wangyal (Dolanji: Tibetan Bonpo Monastic Centre, 1974). For the liturgies and practice of *gCod* in the Bon tradition see Rossi (2006), Rossi (2008b, forthcoming).

mo-rong, rGyal-mo Mu-rdo (mDo-khams/Sichuan);[11] that the "yellow scrolls" (*shog ser*) were transcribed by a Lha-ris-pa g.Yung-drung Ye-shes in the Fire-Hare Year (1927); and that the text was printed thanks to the benevolence of various unnamed sponsors at the Bon-po monastery of Ye-shes-dgon, also situated in Nyag-rong.

The xylographic edition of *The Biographies* included in the second canonical reprint is clear enough, except for a very few folios which are in part too lightly impressed to read, or where a portion of the folio is not impressed altogether. Page numbers reproduce in Arabic the consecutive folio numbering (1–281 recto/verso). Folios are marginally titled KA — *sNying* [*thig*], recto, and *mKha' mgro'i rnam mthar*, verso.

So far, this inedited text seems to be the only Bonpo treasure-text (*gter ma*)[12] revealed or discovered by a woman. It consists of a collection of 16 biographies of female figures, including those of Maṇḍarava and Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal.[13] It has not been possible to place most of these figures in an historical context, except for those who are already well-known from other sources. Sometimes, a date of birth is given, but in a very vague way, such as "she was born on the Sheep month of the Horse Year" etc. (see *infra*).[14] The purpose of this contribution is to introduce this unique collection, as a preliminary step towards a deeper and more systematic work on the collection itself. Hence, I will present here some of the most salient patterns of *The Biographies*, and will paraphrase them in an abridged form.

THE BIOGRAPHIES HAVE SEVERAL PATTERNS IN COMMON

a. All the girls are of noble descent.

b. The parents of the girls are not always ardent believers, at the beginning. But they become so in the end, and in such a fashion, that is obviously meant to inspire faith and devotion in great and small people alike.

c. Father and mother have auspicious dreams before the girls are conceived. The presence of a cuckoo, in some of those dreams and in sub-

11. On this site see Epstein and Peng (1994), Huber (1998), and Karmay (1996).

12. See Martin (2001) and Gyatso (1996).

13. See Gyatso (2006).

14. As a side observation, the date of birth given for the *Dharmaraja* Khri-srong lDe'u-btsan, who is called Khri-srung lDe-btsun, when his name first appears in the text, is Fire-Male Horse Year. This date differs from the one found in the Dunhuang Chronicles, namely, Water-Horse Year, or 742 AD. The nearest Fire-Horse years are 706 going backward, and 766 going forward.

sequent revelatory situations, nicely suggests the atmosphere of hope, light and life that the bird itself is believed to bring in Tibet after a cold winter, an atmosphere paralleled by the spiritual renewal that the *mKha 'gro mas* will help to create in their native places.

d. The role of the queen-mothers virtually stops with their giving birth. But it is interesting to note that more than once the text states that these births happen without pain, possibly a consequence of bringing superior spiritual beings into this world.

e. However, not all of these girls are considered as superior spiritual beings, at least, not until a *Bram ze*, a member of the priestly caste, has confirmed that they are special. Without confirmation from this religious authority, the girls are "of no use" — as one of the father-kings declares. This fact is supported by the awareness on the part of most of these women of being trapped in an inferior body. Religion, ascetism and solitude appear as ways to rescue oneself from the bad destiny of being a woman, and reach the aspired, higher level of a male body in the next life.[15] The religious quest could also reflect a more prosaic need to escape a lifetime of dependence through an undesired and arranged marriage, something to which almost all of the protagonists are unwillingly subject to.

f. After having endured a miserable time because of their fathers or their marriage, rescue comes from a spiritual hero (*dpa' bo*) to whom they flee, and who accepts them as consorts. This heroic and idealized figure represents a power category that is as hierarchically unsurpassable as to obliterate disobedience to the patriarchal authority, and to oblige the king-fathers to eventually recognize and understand the lofty intentions of their daughters.

g. After the rescue, the ladies remain at home, or go to some retreat place to meditate, while the hero leaves for more spiritual adventures. They will enjoy the deep comfort of their faith, a leading role as chief of a *mKha' 'gro ma* assembly, and the certainty that they will continue to contribute to the benefit of sentient beings for many lives to come.

15. This wish for *integritas* to evolve from an inferior state can phenomenologically be paralleled to that of medieval female saints. For example, in her *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society ca 500 to 1100*, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg addresses the religious and secular conditions of medieval women in Europe. She devotes an entire chapter to the subject of "total virginity", and remarks that women, in their "espousal of virginity, […] often won the highest patristic compliment: they were praised for their spiritual virility, for progressing toward perfect manhood".

THE BIOGRAPHIES

The text starts with a description of the transcendental dimension of Kun-tu bZang-mo, where the mother Sa-trig Er-sangs manifests herself with her entourage, as the apotheosis of Insurpassable Wisdom. She is golden in colour, has one face and two arms, holds a mirror in her right hand, and a sword in the left.[16] Then we have a description of, and an invocation to Kye-ma 'Od-mtsho from the pure land of 'Og-min (5r2). She is considered as the personification of the ocean of Sky-goers; she is radiant, holds a skull and a dagger, and displays signs of supreme bliss.[17] Further (6v5), a manifestation of Sa-trig Er-sangs, bZang-za Ring-btsun, is invoked.[18] Her spouse is 'Phrul-gshen sNang-ldan.[19] She is the mother of 'Chi-med gTsug-phud,[20] who is prophesied to come at a later stage in this world to preach the Bon of Transmigration and Beyond (*'khor 'das kyi bon*) as the Teacher gShen-rab. After this mythical introduction, the biographies begin.

[1] *mKha' 'gro ma* **'Od-ma gSal-mdzes** (15r4) is born in eastern rTag-gzigs as the daughter of a king. The elder brother is made heir of the principality, while the younger one embraces the doctrine. She is given in marriage to a neighbouring prince. The princess is not satisfied with this arrangement, and complains with father that she, unlike her brothers, does not have a power of her own, and that she would like to embrace the doctrine as well. She insists that there is no difference between her and her brothers, since they are all of royal descent, and she cannot understand why she has to get the worst of the situation. She is determined to do something meaningful in her life, and practise religion. The father insists that her union is predestined, that women must abide by, and keep the rules set for them, and that in sum, by listening to her father's word, she will actually behave according to virtuous religious purposes. She does not comply, and following her younger brother's advice, goes to a retreat place to meditate. In three years, she obtains realization. She is offered a Wish-fulfilling Gem by the King of subterranean beings (Klu), and is invited to teach. She lives for hundreds of years, and is prophesied to reappear as different *mKha' 'gro mas* in Zhang-zhung and Bru-sha (Gilgit), to work for the benefit of beings, and spread the Bon doctrine.

16. For iconographic description see Kværne (1995, 25, 38–41).
17. bDe-chen dBang-mo's text on *gCod* meditation practice is inspired by this *Ḍākinī*. Cf. n. 10.
18. For iconographic description see Kværne (1995, 118–119, 126–127).
19. For iconographic description see Kværne (1995, 32, 64).
20. For iconographic description see Kværne (1995, 32–33, 64–65).

[2] g.Yung-drung **'Od-'bar-ma** (23r2), who is the emanation of Sa-trig Er-sangs, is born to a king in western India, in a place that borders Zhang-zhung. The king has only two daughters. The younger one gets married, and is given the reign as if a first-born son. **'Od-'bar-ma** has to marry as well, but she refuses, because she does not want to be under someone. The father insists that she has to listen to him, that there is no way out, and that her marriage must take place for the continuation of the family lineage. She refuses to do something that serves only what she considers as a mundane purpose. She wants to obtain salvation. The king is enraged, and throws her in prison, where she remains for five years. After this period of punishment, the father tries to marry her again, but she insists that she wants to practise religion, and eventually the father gives in. While she is in retreat, she receives a prophecy about her future, and in three years she obtains realization. She liberates many people during her lifetime, and is bound to reappear in the future for the benefit of Bon, and of all sentient beings.

[3] The great *mKha' 'gro ma* **'Od-ldan 'Bar-ma** (27r6) appears as the blessing of the supreme mother bZang-za Ring-btsun. A king and a queen in northwest India have auspicious dreams that lead to her birth at daybreak of the 15th day of the Sheep Month (the 4th month) of a Horse Year. She is extremely beautiful and lovely. She soon expresses her wish to dedicate herself to religious practices, which is granted by her parents, and departs to a secluded hermitage. Meanwhile, Sa-trig Er-sangs appears to Dran-pa Nam-mkha' of Zhang-zhung, saying he has to take 'Od-ldan 'Bar-ma as his consort. In an instant, he reaches her meditation place, a cemetery in India. Together, they perform ritual offerings. Somehow the king is informed of this meeting. He is enraged, and dispatches his army. Dran-pa Nam-mkha' reveals his identity, and stops the army. The couple flies in the sky, preaches teachings, and then flies to rTag-gzigs, and then to O-rgyan, conquering the enemies of the doctrine. Back to India, the couple conquers heretics, and performs miracles in several places, by assuming many different forms. After that, on the 10th day of the Monkey month (the 7th month) of a Monkey Year, two sons are born. The one generated from the right side of the mother's womb, of peaceful appearance, is named Rig-'dzin mThong-ba gSal-ldan;[21] the other, born from the left side, of wrathful appearance, is named Rig-'dzin mThong-grol.[22] The whole family goes to rTag-gzigs, O-rgyan, India, China, Ge-sar Yul, and Kha-che (Kashmir) to preach all

21. *I.e.*, Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin.
22. This is one of the Bon names of Padmasambhava. Cf. Blondeau (1985).

levels of doctrine, and to expose the fake ones. According to the prophecy of bZang-za Ring-btsun, the Immortal Padma mThong-grol will reincarnate as the Lotus-Born, at Dha-na Ko-sha in O-rgyan, to spread the Tantras of the Five *mKha' 'gro ma* Families, and swear spirits into obedience.[23]

[4] **mTsho-skyid Sal-le-ma** (37r4), emanation of the compassion of the Mother bZang-za, is born as a princess at the north-western border of the country of rGyag.[24] She wants to embrace the spiritual life. Her parents are happy about that, and advise her about a good place to go. She enters the ascetic life with two attendants, and meditates upon the essence of the Mind for a long time, until she sees the faces of all the deities. One day, a cuckoo lands on her right shoulder, and with a melodious sound, announces that she will bear a son. mTsho-skyid is puzzled, and thinks to herself: "What was that bird saying!? I've renounced the world, I'm here all alone without companion, I don't need a baby!" However, that very same night, she sees in her dream the deity gShen-lha 'Od-dkar, holding a swastika in his right hand, and a vase in his left, one-faced, and sitting on a lotus,[25] who proclaims: "I will bestow upon you the initiation of the Everlasting Wheel of Padma and rDo-rje". After some time, a son is born from her right ribs. She talks to her attendants, trying to convince them that, honestly, the child was conceived without a father, and that she doesn't know whether this is a divine miracle, or a demonic trick. The child starts to speak in Sanskrit; he declares that he is an Immortal Wisdom Holder (*'chi med rig 'dzin*), and that he wants to go back to his father's place, where he can learn the supreme Bon for the benefit of beings. He does so, and in 'Og-min he is taught the Supreme Bon by gShen-lha 'Od-dkar for twelve days. He is given the secret name of Ta-pi Hri-tsa.[26] He is also trained in the practice of the

23. This biography establishes a prophetic precedent for what seems to be the most important event narrated in the collection, namely, the appearance of Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal, and her role played together with Guru Padmasambhava in establishing the *Buddhadharma* in Tibet.

24. This biography is interesting inasmuch as it contains what could be considered as a Bonpo version of the birth and story of dGa'-rab rDo-rje. He is considered by *rNying-ma* followers as the first teacher to have transmitted the teachings of the Great Perfection (*rDzogs chen*) on this planet. For a detailed account of his life, and propagation of the doctrine, see the *rDzogs pa chen po snying thig gi lo rgyus chen mo*, by Zhang-ston bKra-shis rDo-rje (1097–1167), in the *sNying thig ya bzhi* by Klong-chen Rab-'byams-pa (1318–1363); *Bi ma snying thig*, Vol. 7, Part III, Text no. 1, Trulku Tsewang, Jamyang and L. Tashi eds. (New Delhi, 1971), 581 *et seq.* Cf. Dargyay (1977, 19–20), and Karmay (1988, *passim*).

25. For iconographic description see Kværne (1995, 25–26, 42–43, 63–64).

26. Ta-pi Hri-tsa is an important figure related to the Aural Transmission (*snyan*

Three Yogas (*yo ga gsum*)[27] in the presence of rDo-rje Sems-dpa' (Vajrasattva). He receives the initiation of the Supreme Vehicle, and is given the name Chos-dbyings dGa'-rab rDo-rje. After that, he returns to his mother's place. News of the child reaches the king's ears, who sends his minister to enquire. mTsho-skyid relates the miraculous story, saying that, at the beginning, she even left the child unattended for three days, but he did not die. She praises his very deep knowledge. To prove that, a debate is arranged at the king's palace with various learned people. dGa'-rab rDo-rje manifests his powers in all sorts of ways, developing faith in everyone, and making everyone happy. His fame reaches India. There, 'Jam-dpal bShes-gnyen,[28] thinking that dGa'-rab rDo-rje can not be more learned than he is, decides to confront him in a debate, and asks Shri Sing-ha to go with him.[29] They lose the confrontation. dGa'-rab rDo-rje empowers them, and entrusts them with the teachings. Later on, dGa'-rab rDo-rje goes back with his mother to her former retreat place, where he keeps a consort, and prophesies that at the time when the Tantric teachings will spread, mTsho-skyid will again come back to work for the doctrine.

At this point the text introduces the story of sNang-bzher sLod-po[30] (47v3), here called sNang-zhig Lod-po. Following his encounter with Ta-pi Hri-tsa, sNang-bzher sLod-po is cured of his proud attitude, and eventually unites with mTsho-skyid Sal-le-ma, to work for the benefit of sentient beings.

[5] **Co-za Bon-mo** (51v3), emanation of bZang-za Ring-btsun, is born in rTsang-po Dag-shod from the father Grub-Bon Gyim-bu Lan-tsha,[31] and the mother brDa-za mKhar-lCam-ma. The mother has a premonitory dream,

rgyud) of the Zhang-zhung cycle of the Bonpo Great Perfection teachings. For his biography see Chandra and Namdak (1968, 26.5–27.4). He entrusted the teachings in a "single transmission" form (*gcig rgyud*) to the VIIIth century master sNang-bzher sLod-po, for whom see also Chandra and Namdak (1968, 26.5–27.5). A partial translation of sNang-bzher sLod-po's life is found in Snellgrove and Richardson (1995, 101–104). See also Karmay (1972, *passim*). Cf. Rossi (1999).

27. Maha, Anu, and Ati.

28. *I.e.*, Mañjuśrīmitra. See Karmay (1988, *passim*).

29. See Karmay (1988, *passim*), and Gibson (1997).

30. See n. 26.

31. Namkhai (1995, 35) contains a translation of an excerpt from the *Grags pa rin chen gling grags*, a text attributed to Dran-pa Nam-mkha', where a Gyim-bu Lan-tsha is mentioned as being one of the Bon priests not banished by King Khri-srong lDe'u-btsan. For this text see *Three sources for a History of Bon*, ed. T. Namdak (New Delhi:Tibetan Bonpo Monastic Centre, 1972).

and as soon as Co-za Bon-mo is born, *mKha' 'gro mas* appear with praises and offerings. Beautiful beyond words, she knows the teachings without having had them explained to her. The story of gNyan-chen Li-shu sTag-ring is briefly described at this point, including the fact that he was originally born as a girl.[32] Li-shu sTag-ring decides that Co-za Bon-mo is a suitable consort for him, and teaches her his secret doctrines. When she asks him about her future, Li-shu tells her the places of her incarnations and her future names. He also predicts the decline of Bon in Tibet, the hiding of his Aural Transmission's texts in lHo-brag (southern Tibet), and their discovery by bZhod-ston [dNgos-grub Grags-pa], one of his incarnations.

Next we have the stories of six consorts of Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin (60v1), who was born at Khyung-lung dNgul-mkhar in Zhang-zhung as the son of Dran-pa Nam-mkha' and 'Od-ldan 'Bar-ma. After Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin's miraculous and multifarious demon-fighting feats are related, the biography of lHa-lcam Nyi-ma sTong-khyab (64v5) begins.[33]

[6] The divine consort (*lHa lcam*) **Nyi-ma sTong-khyab** is born as an Indian princess. Perfect in all respects, she tells her parents that if she does not accumulate virtues with her inferior female body, she will have no cause for obtaining a male body in the next life. She secretly departs, and meets with Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin. While her parents are worried to death, thinking that she has been abducted by some spirit, the couple masterly subdues demons in various Indian cemeteries. The king sends an army to bring her back, but realizing whom he has to deal with, he confesses his ignorance, and invites Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin to rule his country. He accepts, and accepts Nyi-ma sTong-khyab as his consort. When later she asks for tantric teachings, he bestows them upon her, after which she goes to meditate in a cave.

[7] The *mKha' 'gro ma* **Tshogs-bdag gZi-brjid lDan-ma** (72v5) is born without pain to the queen gNyan-lcam 'Od-'phro-ma at Grong-khyer Nag-po Dug-'gyed. The king, Dregs-pa 'Khor-lo, is not happy. He thinks that having a girl is of no use, so he entrusts her to a female servant, who was

32. Cf. Karmay (1972, 56–57). gNyan-chen Li-shu sTag-ring is a teacher connected with two very important Great Perfection cycles in the Bon religion: a) the Three Proclamations (*bsGrags pa skor gsum*, for which see the *rDzogs pa chen po zab lam gnad kyi gdams pa bsgrags pa skor gsum ma bu cha lag dang bcas pa* [Dolanji: Tibetan Bonpo Monastic Centre, 1973], and also Rossi 1999), and b) the *Yang rtse klong chen* (for which see the *Bla med rdzogs pa chen po yang rtse klong chen gyi khri gzhung cha lag dang bcas pa'i gsung pod* [Dolanji: Tibetan Bonpo Monastic Centre, 1973]). bZhod-ston dNgos-grub Grags-pa is credited with having discovered both cycles in lHo-brag, in 1100. Cf. Karmay (1988, 220).

33. Alias Nyi-'od sTong-khyab-ma, or Nyi-ma 'Od-'bar.

taking care of pigs outside the palace. The girl grows well and beautifully, with many miraculous signs occurring. The king hears that, and summons the girl to the palace. She responds by relating how bad her father was in his previous lives, and how bad he still is, and proclaiming that she is the head of the Sky-Goers' assembly, she refuses to meet with him. Obviously the king gets angry, and asks his minister to put the girl and the servant in prison. While they are in captivity, the king becomes ill. Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin appears in wrathful form at the palace, liberates her, and takes her as his consort. He also cures the king from his illness, but the king orders to imprison Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin. The minister objects, trying to make the king come to his senses. Eventually, after the couple performs a miracle, the king confesses, repents, and asks for forgiveness. Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin says he is not a saviour, and that he does not have the power to clear the king's bad karma. He advises the king to wholeheartedly enter the Path, and practise repentance and virtues as a payment and purification for his former karmic debts. The king then meditates for 300 years in retreat, and obtains the rainbow body (*'ja' lus*). After prophesying about his own appearance in Tibet, Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin disappears in the sky, while Tshogs-bdag gZi-brjid lDan-ma remains, teaching and practising.

[8] **Rin-chen dByings-phyug-ma** (90v6) is miraculously born in rTag-gzigs Gyim-shang Nag-po to a royal couple that did not have other offspring. The father gives her the choice of marrying or practising religion. She chooses the second, saying that although she has the inferior body of a female being, there is in fact no difference between males and females in the practice of virtue. Following the advise of a cuckoo, she reaches the hermitage where Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin was residing. He bestows upon her initiations and teachings. Together, they subdue evil spirits until she invites Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin to go back to her native place and teach the doctrine. He consents, saying that he will show up on the 10th day of an auspicious time. She goes back to the palace, and relates her story. Everyone is amazed, and gets ready for Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin's arrival, building a throne in the temple, and arranging offerings. He arrives, encourages them to practise, prophesies that Rin-chen dByings-phyug-ma will be reborn as one of his tantric friends in Tibet, and bestows teachings that Rin-chen dByings-phyug-ma transcribes and finalises in writing.

[9] *rGod lcam*[34] **gTsug-gi Don-'bar-ma** (97v4) is born as the daughter of the king and queen of Za-hor after they had auspicious dreams.

34. Bon equivalent for *mKha' 'gro ma*.

Miraculous signs appear at her birth, like nectar falling, flowers blossoming, rainbows. She pronounces the Tibetan letter A three days after being born. When she grows up, she declares that she does not want to be involved in mundane life. The parents take her to a priest, who says that she really is special, and that it is inappropriate to go against her destiny. Nonetheless, the father decides that she has to marry, and gives her the choice of various suitors. rGod-lcam-ma says that it is because of her past bad karma that she is in a female body now, and wants to have a chance to practise. Her father insists that she has to marry, and without consulting her, gives her in marriage to the king of Kha-che (Kashmir). Meanwhile, Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin hears a voice in the sky suggesting him that he should find rGod-lcam-ma, so that he may obtain the fruition of his tantric practice. A cuckoo informs him that she is in Kha-che. rGod-lcam-ma despises her political marriage and regrets her condition. She has an apparition of Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin, who comforts her, and gives her courage. Somehow she manages to escape, and meets with him. When the father-king hears that, he becomes unhappy. He is very concerned about the negative consequences that could be produced by the failure of the marriage-alliance he concocted, so he orders to capture her. A negotiation takes place between the king of Za-hor and the king of Kha-che, who is really annoyed, with the Za-hor minister having to run back and forth to avoid a serious conflict. At this time, the couple is subduing Rakṣas in a cemetery where Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin imparts teachings, entrusting their preservation to his consort. After the father-king is informed of her whereabouts, he finally understands, and is very happy. He goes in pomp to pay homage to the couple, confesses, repents, and invites them to the palace to give teachings. The king offers his kingdom, and everyone is happy, except, of course, the king of Kha-che, who has lost his wife. He gathers an army to invade the country of Za-hor. The father-king is worried, and asks Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin for help. The couple transforms itself into a gigantic Garuda, and reduces the king of Kha-che to mercy. Everyone takes the vow of enlightenment. Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin tells rGod-lcam-ma about their past karmic connections, and that she will be reborn again as his tantric consort.

[10] (117v5) In Zhang-zhung, the king of sPu-gur, Rin-chen dPal-ldan, dreams of a cuckoo. The bird tells him that an emanation of Sa-trig Er-sangs will soon appear to tame sentient beings. After nine months, on the 10th day of a Dragon Year, a girl is born with miraculous signs. The father takes her to a priest, who names her **Nyi-ma sGron-gsal**. The *mKha' 'gro ma* is asked to marry but she refuses. Her father then agrees to her going

to a retreat place, where she remains for nine years. Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin comes to her, and tells her that she is to be her companion for the practice. Gossip reaches the king about her being with a young man. The king is ferocious, because she seems to have abandoned the ascetic life, and orders that the couple be captured. Eventually however, the king realizes his mistake, repents, confesses, and offers everything to Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin. The couple then moves to various locations, and in each place accomplishes different spiritual actions. Then Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin takes the form of a vulture and disappears, while Nyi-ma sGron-gsal remains on earth as the head of a *mKha' 'gro ma* assembly.

[11] '**Jang-za Gar-byon** (132r3) is born in 'Jang.[35] The king has a premonitory dream; the girl shows signs of greatness immediately after her birth. Later on, she reaches a place where Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin was meditating. She requests to become his tantric partner, and he tells her that one day her aspiration will be fulfilled. Eventually, they become a couple, and together conquer many spirits, subterranean beings in particular. The king meets the spiritual master, and everything ends well.

[12] The biography of **Maṇḍarava** begins at folio 140v5. First however we are informed that the son of the immortal Dran-pa Nam-mkha', *i.e.* the great Wisdom Holder g.Yung-drung mThong-grol (*i.e.*, Padmasambhava/Padma 'Byung-gnas), is born from a lotus stem at Lake Dha-na Ko-sha, in order to set onto the Path beings who are difficult to tame. The king has a dream, and a girl is born on a Monkey Year. The king is not happy, so he confines both mother and daughter to the female quarters. The girl grows beautifully, and after one year, she is taken to a priest, who bursts into tears at her divine sight, and calls her Maṇḍarava. When the king understands that his daughter is indeed special, he becomes very happy, and spreads the news far and wide. When she grows up, everyone would like her in marriage. But if the king himself chooses the groom, he could make other suitors unhappy, so he lets her decide. She decides not to marry at all, and goes to practise in a cemetery. Padma 'Byung-gnas then comes to her, and when the king hears of their encounter, he is enraged, and gives orders to burn them alive. But the couple miraculously appears, unaffected, amidst the flames on the lake. The king confesses, repents, and offers everything to Padma 'Byung-gnas.

There follow various feats and taming actions involving Padma 'Byung-gnas and the *mKha' 'gro mas* **bKra-shis Kshi-'dren** from Bengal

35. Present-day Yunnan Province, Lijiang area.

[13] (166v2), **Ka-la Siddhi** [14] (173r6), and **Sha-kya Dhe-wa** [15] (180v6) from Yang-le-shod.[36]

[16] **Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal** (195v6) is born on the 10th day of the Monkey month of a Bird Year.[37] She wants to practise the doctrine, her parents agree and dismiss all suitors, but eventually she is given in marriage to the king of Tibet. A brief dynastic history is related up to Khri-srong lDe'u-btsan, and about the way in which Bon and gShen priests were instrumental in maintaining peace in the country through harmonious relations with the local spirits. The king's past life and the story of the Bya-rung Kha-shor stūpa (Boudhanath Stūpa) are related. Padmasambhava is invited to Tibet to tame the twelve brTan ma goddesses of the earth.[38] The subduing feats of Padmasambhava are described in most dramatic terms. Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal has a premonitory dream about him. They meet and she is totally blessed. He takes her as his consort. The king offers his kingdom to him, invites scholars, the translators' work begins, the monastic order is established at bSam-yas. The king suddenly falls ill. At first *Chos* formulas and scriptures are used, but to no avail. Padmasambhava says that the royal Bon protectors (*sku srung*) are to be summoned to save the king's life. They are invited to bSam-yas, but to no avail either. Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal reiterates that Bon and gShen royal protectors are necessary, suggests to invite those who live in the North, and to tell them that it is Padmasambhava who explicitly invites them. They at first refuse the invitation, on the account that the deities and protectors worshipped by the ancestors are annoyed at this turn of events; but eventually they accept, hoping that through their intervention the suppression of Bon will possibly be avoided.[39] They consent to go, but in exchange, they request that a Bon temple (*lha khang*) be built in bSam-yas, and that the king promise to respect Bon and make no difference between Bon and *Chos*. The priests clear the king's illness, and a *lha khang* is built in bSam-yas. Further, Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal and the other 24 disciples receive teachings from Padmasambhava, and show signs of spiritual accomplishment. Meanwhile,

36. Modern Parphing, Kathmandu Valley, Nepal.

37. See Gyatso (2006).

38. For this class of goddesses see Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956, 181–198). Cf. Gyatso (1987).

39. Shar-rdza bKra-shis rGyal-mtshan quotes an account from the Northern textual Treasure (*Byang gter*) which states that it is Co-za Bon-mo who goes and invites the banished priests from the North. See Karmay (1972, 100).

Vairocana[40] and Vimalamitra[41] tell the king that if Bon is not taken out of the picture, they will not preach the *Buddhadharma* (*chos*) anymore. The king is caught in a great impasse. He decides to settle the question with a doctrinal debate between the parties (248v3). They end up even. The king does not know what to do, then suggests a contest of magical powers (251v4). They end up even again. At this point Padmasambhava intervenes, and states that Bon and *Chos* are equal, and that they have to be equally respected. Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal reiterates the idea. However, the king does not officially proclaim that. The Bon and gShen priests realise the dramatic reality of the king's personal decision, which runs contrary to the tradition of his ancestors. sNya-chen Li-shu sTag-ring and Co-za Bon-mo enter the scene, and prophesy the decline of Bon, and the hiding of Bon texts. The king falls ill again, and there is nothing to be done about it. Bad omens appear everywhere. Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal asks Padmasambhava to save the king's life and fix all the troubles and negative events that started to occur after the king made up his mind on *Chos*. Eventually *Chos* is established in Tibet. Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal is entrusted with Padmasambhava's teachings that she will hide in due course. Padmasambhava departs to the Southwest. Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal hides both Bon and *Chos* texts in all the various locations where she meditates, including bSam-yas. Future emanations of her Body, Speech, Mind, Qualities and Action are described. The Tibetans implore her to stay, but she says she has to perform more taming work towards the Southwest, and disappears in the sky.

At the end of Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal's biography we read that it was the translator Be-ro Tsa-na himself who wrote these biographies in his symbolic language (*Be ro'i brda yig bris*), and that following direct instructions from Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal (*ye shes mKha' 'gro mtsho rgyal zhal gsungs bzhin*), he hid the text in the Padma sPungs-pa cave, a sacred place of Mother Tantra transmission,[42] situated northwest of the mountain rGyal-mo Mu-rdo, in rGyal-mo-rong. A *mkha' 'gro ma*, bearing the name of dBang (277r4), *i.e.*, the treasure revealer bDe-chen Chos-kyi dBang-mo, is prophesied to appear as a further emanation (*yang srid*) of Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal.

40. On whom see the *Be ro'i rnam thar 'dra 'bag chen mo*. Excerpts from this text, and a relevant discussion are found in Karmay (1988, 17–37).

41. On whom see, *e.g.*, Karmay (1988, *passim*).

42. For the Mother Tantra in the Bon religion see Martin (1994); cf. Rossi (2007).

CONCLUSIONS

The Biographies represent a very interesting source-material for the study of religion and gender within the Tibetan context. As a first observation, however, one may object that, in fact, this collection is not focused at all upon female spiritual beings, but, rather, upon the way in which two great (supposed) brothers, [43] and spiritual heroes, Tshe-dbang Rig-'dzin and Padmasambhava, are helped by various female partners to perform their feats. With the exception of a few biographies, the spiritual role played by these female beings does not come forth as the primary one. Nevertheless, as the biography of Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal, which is the longest one of all, shows, when these female beings take action, their role becomes a truly indispensable one, under various respects. That, I think, is one of the most important underlying message of *The Biographies*, a message that could perhaps also reflect an unstated, albeit crucial, need for a higher degree of outspoken recognition about the role constantly played by women, within the contexts of the socio-cultural history and spiritual expressions of the Land of Snows.[44]

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43. For this see Karmay and Nagano (2001, viii).
44. See Gyatso and Havnevik (2005).

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