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To cite this article: Hildegard Diemberger (2021) Gender, kinship and relatedness in fifteenth-century Tibet: The biography of Chokyi Dronma (1422–1455) through anthropological eyes, *History and Anthropology*, 32:2, 211–230, DOI: [10.1080/02757206.2021.1905244](https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2021.1905244)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2021.1905244>



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Published online: 03 Aug 2021.



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Gender, kinship and relatedness in fifteenth-century Tibet: The biography of Chokyi Dronma (1422–1455) through anthropological eyes¹

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ABSTRACT

A 15th century Tibetan biography offers a rare glimpse into the life of the Tibetan princess Chokyi Dronma (1422–1455), who experienced marriage, childbirth, the death of her daughter and eventually became a Buddhist nun and a famous spiritual master. Recognised as an emanation of the Buddhist deity Dorje Phagmo, she became the founding figure of Tibet's most famous female reincarnation line. Written close to the events by one of her fellow monks and rich in daily life details, this account offers an ideal opportunity to explore gender and kinship practices among Tibetan rural elites of the time. It also gives a rare insight into the hurdles that women faced when they decided to challenge social and cultural conventions to pursue spiritual aims.

An anthropologically informed study of this manuscript offers a unique opportunity to explore kinship terminology and practices as well as particular instances of kinship politics at a time in which marriage alliances were essential for the relationships among Tibet's regional polities. It also offers useful insights into kinship networks that underpinned patronage practices, highlighting the often mis-recognised importance of women (including their role in printing projects). Finally, it enables the exploration of Tibetan spiritual kinship and reincarnation contributing to wider debates in the anthropology of kinship and relatedness. Substances and spiritual principles appear to be symbolic fields connecting past and present – they constitute the backdrop for practical negotiation not only in Chokyi Dronma's biography but also in many other historical sources and ethnographic cases.

KEYWORDS

Tibet; biography; gender; kinship; relatedness; reincarnation

Introduction

A fifteenth-century Tibetan biography offers a rare glimpse into the life of a Tibetan princess, Chokyi Dronma (1422–1455), who experienced marriage, childbirth and the death of her daughter, and eventually became a Buddhist nun, a famous spiritual master and the founding figure of a female reincarnation line. Written close to the events by one of her fellow monks and rich in daily life details, this account offers an ideal opportunity for

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the present investigation of gender and kinship practices among Tibetan rural elites of the time. At the same time, by giving a vivid description of the hurdles that women faced when they decided to challenge social and cultural conventions in order to pursue spiritual aims, it can also speak to wider perspectives, looking at Tibetan materials from a comparative angle.



Chokyi Dronma/Dronme (1422–1455), manuscript illumination Photograph: Hildegard Diemberger

Methodologically, this paper explores an important historical source, harnessing the interface between history and anthropology. From a historical point of view the biography of Chokyi Dronma provides detailed information on kinship in fifteenth-century Tibet, including particular instances of kinship politics at a time in which marriage alliances were essential to the maintenance and the reproduction of relationships among regional polities. At the same time, an anthropologically informed study of this document offers unique insights into kinship networks that underpinned patronage practices, highlighting the often-unrecognized importance of women (see e.g. Willis 1985)– including but not limited to their role in the introduction of printing (on some of these aspects cf. also the contributions by Signori and Lutter et al. this issue). Most importantly, this life account offers an opportunity to understand subjective perspectives within social processes of the time, highlighting different viewpoints, moral dilemmas, reflections, transformations, individual agencies, room for negotiation and the role of narratives. Whilst the hagiographical narrative aimed at celebrating an exemplary character, thereby remaining somewhat problematic as a source for understanding exactly ‘what happened’, its features addressing the audience of the time must have resonated with the people and their life experiences, that is, were at least recognizable and understandable to them. From such a point of view this biography can be explored in a manner similar to examinations of European hagiographies (see, for example, Lutter *in press* and Signori, this issue).

An anthropological approach to the study of this document in the light of wider debates on 'kinship' and 'relatedness'² also offers new insights into reincarnation 'genealogies' and Tibetan connections between religious practitioners conceived as spiritual fathers (*yab*, lit. 'father'), spiritual mothers (*yum*, lit. 'mother') and spiritual children (*thugse*, *thugs sras*, lit. 'child of the spirit'). Linking the reading of the biography to contemporary kinship practices in Tibetan society, this paper analyses two forms of Tibetan relatedness: the establishment of Chokyi Dronma's female-reincarnation line as the Tibetan deity Dorje Phagmo, and current forms of spiritual kinship as practised in Buddhist monasteries in some Tibetan areas of China. Both cases challenge the conventional boundary between kinship and non-kinship relations, as they are predicated on the assumption that relatedness in this life, including what is normally understood as kinship through birth (that is, 'biological' ties), is part of a wider array of karmic relations that connects all living beings in previous, current and future lives until the attainment of enlightenment. In addition, parenthood through *karma*, which includes the conceptualization of the master-disciple connection as a filial relationship, coexists with and relates to Tibetan genealogical theories based on the transmission of bone and flesh from parents to children. Bodily substance as an idiom of relatedness can be interpreted in different ways in different Tibetan contexts, so as to provide the rationale for patrilineal, matrilineal, bilineal and even non-lineal attribution of children to parents, the allocation of parental responsibility and the transmission of assets, roles and privileges (on the wide range of respective cultural practices in general, cf. Duindam, this issue). Rather than strict rules, substances and spiritual principles appear to be symbolic fields connecting past and present – they constitute the backdrop for practical negotiation, as clearly illustrated in Chokyi Dronma's biography and in many other historical sources and ethnographic cases. Against the background of this strategic ambiguity of Tibetan relatedness, I eventually look at forms of disambiguation that caution against any essentializing and 'othering' search for a coherent cosmology and unified set of rules underpinning Tibetan kinship practices.

Exploring Chokyi Dronma's biography as a textual source

The manuscript of the biography of Chokyi Dronma is a unique source, the original of which is currently preserved in the Tibet Museum of Lhasa.³ It is incomplete and, since the final part of the narrative and the colophon are missing, its dating and authorship had to be reconstructed on the basis of internal evidence and other Tibetan sources.⁴ According to this analysis (see Diemberger 2007) the text was written by a male disciple and companion of the princess who was born in the same region and followed her during her peripatetic life until her final journey to the holy site of Tsari in south-eastern Tibet, where she died aged 33. As is common in the Tibetan *namthar* (*rnam thar*) genre, the text of the biography is underpinned by a soteriological morality. Informed and sometimes even shaped by Tibetan Buddhist tropes that take the life of the Buddha as the exemplar of reference, it is in some ways reminiscent of hagiographies in the Christian tradition. However, this particular text contains a great deal of detail that reflects the biographer's first-hand experience of the events and his familiarity with people and places. As pointed out by Stanley Tambiah, commenting on Buddhist biographical narratives of forest saints in Thailand, it is the blend of literary tropes and actual memories that makes some of these narratives so powerful:

In the midst of the formulaic episodes and miraculous apparitions ... [biographical masterpieces] present enough details about the particular man or woman acting in a place and at a time in the company of credible persons. Such achievements contribute to the sincerity and emotional appeal of the entire masterpiece, which fuses memorabilia and mirabilia. (Tambiah 1984, 127)

Buddhist tropes clearly informed the writing of the biography as well as Chokyi Dronma's own life choices, and it is virtually impossible to disentangle the narrative of what actually happened from what was selectively and creatively remembered in hindsight in the process of writing and what was added to build up Chokyi Dronma's Buddhist persona by referring to pre-existing literary tropes. Reading the biography both 'along' and 'against' the grain (Stoler 2009), paying attention to the detail that is irrelevant to the soteriological aim of the narrative and even contradicts it, as well as to the vision that informs its flow, is particularly rewarding. From this point of view, Chokyi Dronma's biography is an exceptional work, as Tibetan biographies tend to be more formulaic; it can be read as a life narrative, an archive of intertextual references and even as a 'biogeography'⁵ that shapes the sense of place in the landscape she inhabited and travelled through.⁶ One of the oldest extant Tibetan biographies of a female spiritual master, it became fairly influential before being withdrawn from circulation (presumably in the seventeenth century)⁷ and being deposited in the library of Drepung Monastery in Lhasa where it was retrieved in the late twentieth century and transferred to the Palace of Nationalities in Beijing. Offering one of the rare examples of a fully ordained *gelongma* (*dge slong ma* Skt. *bhiksuni*) in Tibetan Buddhism, it has recently acquired new popularity in relation to the debates that advocate women's access to full ordination (Mohr and Tsedroen 2010).

Chokyi Dronma: the devout princess who complied and transgressed gender and kinship norms of her time

Chokyi Dronma⁸ – known as Konchog Gyalmo in her early life – was born in 1422 as the first child of the Tibetan king Thri Lhawang Gyaltsen (1404–1464) and queen Dode Gyalmo, who ruled over the region of Mangyul Gungthang in south-western Tibet.⁹ At that time Tibet was nominally governed by the Rinpungpa rulers but was basically fragmented into a multitude of regional powers, involved in conflicts and alliances that were often supported by marriage arrangements among the local elites. In addition, monastic centres and spiritual masters acted as powerful mediators and sometimes political power-holders whilst being tied to aristocratic families through various forms of patronage. These political-religious elites seem to have been literate, in a system that privileged men but did not fully exclude women (on comparable European settings cf. Lutter et al, this issue).

Beyond the predictable trope of the extraordinarily talented child, in a passage describing how Chokyi Dronma learnt to read and write from her mother, the biography seems to indicate that literacy was accessible for elite women:

At the age of four she started to be taught how to read by her mother by looking at a model of letters (*ka dpe*). As she started to read the first letter *ka*, she was able to continue reading the *kha ga* spontaneously without any instruction. She thus became able to read and write perfectly. (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folio 5v)

The description of the way in which she learnt the Tibetan alphabet is plausible in its practicality and is reminiscent of current learning practices among Tibetan children. This detail, which is consistent with biographical accounts of other high status women of the period such as Kuntu Sangmo (1464–1549),¹⁰ is crucial, as the acquisition of literacy at a young age offered Chokyi Dronma an essential tool in life and provided the basis for her own commitment to the spread of literacy, especially among women (particularly nuns). This is also corroborated by her dedication to supporting the editing and printing of texts later in her life (see Diemberger 2016, 267–308). The reading of Buddhist scriptures informed her decision to become a nun. For example the biography states that the *Lalitavistara*, which tells the story of the Buddha, is quoted as a source of inspiration for her decision to abandon worldly existence:

... the princess read the *Lalitavistara*, which describes the great deeds of Prince Siddhartha. He gave up his queen and all forms of worldly pleasure, and went to the forest and meditated under a tree. While reading this she developed great faith and regretted deeply that she was still involved in worldly matters. (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folio 36v)

Had she been a man, this passage would be fairly unremarkable. The fact that she was a woman who could actually read the text and follow in the Buddha's footsteps with her life path shows that the biography was taking the Buddhist 'soteriological inclusiveness' (Sponberg 1992, 3–29) seriously, and this was certainly not uncontroversial (see below). Before opting for a full dedication to spiritual life, however, Chokyi Dronma had to negotiate her secular life as a princess and the biography offers unique insights into the day to day life of an elite woman of her time.

At the time of Chokyi Dronma's birth, the kingdom of Mangyul Gungtang desperately needed an heir after a series of murders in the royal family had put her father Khri Lhawang Gyaltsen on the throne at a young age (see Diemberger 2007; Everding 2000). The fact that she was a girl and that her next sibling was also a girl may have had an impact on the way she was treated in her early childhood, as female rulers were rare but not unheard of in the history of her kingdom – most prominently Lha Rinchen Tso (thirteenth–fourteenth century) and Gugema Konchog Gyalmo (early fifteenth century) who were powerful female regents ruling the kingdom at crucial times (see Everding 2000). Chokyi Dronma's situation changed radically when her father took a second wife who produced a male heir, Thri Namgyal De. This is clearly illustrated in a passage of this biography:

While [Chokyi Dronma] was staying at Gonpashag,¹¹ a junior wife of the king, one of the sisters from Bongdzog,¹² gave birth to a son, [her brother] Chenneba [alias Thri Namgyal De], fulfilling local aspirations. Reacting to her anxiety of having had only two daughters, [Chokyi Dronma's mother] spoke bitterly to the Venerable [Chokyi Dronma] and her sister calling them 'two female misfortunes'. The precious Lady of Prosperity [Chokyi Dronma] said: 'Mother! Please come here! Let us make a plan for all of us; mother and daughters'. Her mother was surprised and asked: 'Please tell me what you think?' She told her mother: 'Although since I was a little girl I have wished to become a renunciate, in the first part of my life I will become a married woman because of the karma accumulated previously [...]. Anyway in the first part of my life I will lead a secular life fulfilling your expectations, as my mother. In the later part of my life I will take the vows and will fulfil my hope regarding my future existence. But, please, do not call us 'misfortunes', I am an excellent one! The mother was greatly surprised and pleased with this, and faith was spontaneously awakened in her. (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folios 7v–8r)

The biography often reveals the tensions that Chokyi Dronma experienced throughout her life: she had to choose between fulfilling the mundane expectations of being a good princess and the spiritual aspirations that drew her towards abandoning worldly existence. Beyond the trope of the early wish to embrace monastic life, this passage gives important clues about the political setting in which she was born and the kinship practices of the time. Her father was a relatively weak king and the kin group of his second wife was important on the political scene, as they were linked to a polity located south of the Mangyul Gungthang kingdom in a strategic position along the trading route that crossed her homeland connecting Kathmandu to Lhasa (see Diemberger 2007). The representatives of this kin group were considered uncle-ministers (*zhanglon*, *zhang blon*) according to a political structure reminiscent of the Tibetan Empire.¹³ Reflecting a deep entanglement of kinship and politics, this structure was predicated on marriage alliances among predominantly patrilineal kin groups and gave particular political relevance to maternal uncles (*zhang*) while women as connectors were both weak pawns and (at times) powerful agents (see Gingrich et al., this issue, for comparable but different settings of elite isogamy in Muslim contexts of theologically defined law). As a recurring theme against the backdrop of this political structure, the biography shows Chokyi Dronma's awareness of the weakness of her mother, whom she felt compelled to protect throughout her life. It is remarkable, however, that Chokyi Dronma was able to navigate this situation proactively, shaping her own life itinerary and ultimately acquiring enough power and wealth to support her.

As a young girl, Chokyi Dronma was relatively powerless and, as was customary, her destiny was to be sent as a bride to a neighbouring kingdom. Her father received a marriage proposal from the ruler of southern Lato, a kingdom immediately to the east of Mangyul Gungthang:

The king received a request [for his daughter] to marry Tshewang Tashi, the son of Situ Lhatsen Kyab, the ruler of Southern Lato.¹⁴ Her father accepted this request thinking that this would benefit everyone and ordered the venerable lady [that she should go to Southern Lato as a bride]. [When she heard this] she said to her father: 'I do not want to contradict my father's order this time. However, having now accepted to go for the sake of the living beings, later, when the right time comes, should not I take the monastic vows?' Laying her hand on the statue of Gurkyi Gonpo (Panjaranath)¹⁵ [and thus calling on him as a witness] she took an oath to this effect. (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folios 10v–11r)

Keeping in mind that the biography was written in hindsight, reconstructing memories and blending them with Buddhist tropes, it is not surprising that she is depicted as an extraordinarily devout princess and as an exemplary bride as well as a strong personality showing hints of the sacred transgressiveness embodied by the tantric deity Dorje Phagmo. The wedding is described in great detail, combining extraordinary epithets and descriptions with much more ordinary features of Tibetan marriage rituals as they are still practised in Tibetan areas today. During the ceremony she received gifts and shed tears before departing for her new home, where she was welcomed in a solemn way. Subsequently, the biography states that at the age of 18, that is, in 1440, Chokyi Dronma became pregnant:

When she was nineteen [that is, eighteen according to western reckoning] she became pregnant. The Great Situ, the queen and the prince took very good care of her, treating her like the apple of their eyes. They had religious services performed regularly for her and had the whole

retinue thinking only about her. When the time for the delivery came, as the sun was rising, she gave birth, without any harm, to a perfect daughter. Tsencham [the mother-in-law] came and asked: 'Did you have a good delivery? Did you suffer any pain?' The glorious woman [that is, Chokyi Dronma] answered: 'The birth was easy and I did not face any hardship; the baby is a girl.' Tsencham said: 'The most important thing is that your body is in good condition. There is no difference between boy and girl. The marriage relation with the Changpa [that is, the rulers of the neighbouring kingdom to the north] is continuing. Later you will give birth to one child after the other.' She spoke in this way to please her. (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folios 26r–v)

Despite the hagiographical framework, the narrative is realistic in reporting that the words of the mother-in-law were spoken to please Chokyi Dronma, countering the predictable disappointment with the gender of the child with observations about the good physical condition of the princess and commenting on the fact that daughters were an asset in marriage alliances. In fact, Chokyi Dronma's mother-in-law belonged to the ruling family of northern Lato, the Changpa (lit. the northerners). As Chokyi Dronma's father-in-law's mother also belonged to the same ruling house, she was clearly referring to the continuation of an established kinship pattern.

After the visit by her mother-in-law Chokyi Dronma, her husband, with whom she had a difficult relationship, came to see her. According to this narrative he was a follower of the Bonpo religion, which is understood in this context as a generic label for pre-Buddhist religious traditions of Tibet¹⁶:

Then Tshewang Tashi came to see her. [...] Later he suggested that Yundrung Lingpa, a great Bonpo master, should become the child's teacher. The Lady of Prosperity [Chokyi Dronma] replied: 'Had this child been a boy, you would have had the power to decide. The child being a girl, according to marriage agreements about possessions (*nor la 'dum 'dug pas*), she will take refuge in the Jewel of Buddhism.' The parents took affectionate care of their new-born child. Nannies provided food, milk and play. The monks of Gyade monastery performed religious services and court attendants further fostered her growth in another auspicious room. (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folios 26r–27r)

While Buddhism had already been solidly established in Tibet for many centuries, there were areas in which the Bonpo religion continued to be practised – often in competition with it. Chokyi Dronma's husband is portrayed as a keen Bonpo follower, which puts him at odds with his wife's devotion. This passage reveals a tension around the control over the religious upbringing of the daughter, suggesting that the husband would have preferred her to follow the Bonpo religion, to which he was committed. However, Chokyi Dronma claimed the right to make the decision in relation to her female offspring, revealing elements of bilineality in the kinship system. The phrase used in this context refers to the negotiation about possessions that come along with the marriage, referring not only to goods but also to rights and responsibilities in relation to people.

According to the biography the baby princess was well looked after. Nannies seem to have been a regular presence at court in terms of childcare. Chokyi Dronma herself had been looked after by a nanny, as was her daughter. Underpinning all this is clearly a class structure with its conventions ruling social interaction. In addition to gender, issues of class and rank appear often in Chokyi Dronma's biography: on the one hand this was something that she tried to challenge in the name of the Buddhist soteriological project that transcended all social distinctions; on the other hand she harnessed the benefits of her social status to further her aims from patronage to political and religious leverage (on differing yet comparable aspects in Christendom cf. Lutter et al, this issue).

Chokyi Dronma belonged to the elite. Valued as an asset in the context of marriage alliances she was treated accordingly. This position offered some room for manoeuvre, especially in the name of religion (for example her sister was able to refuse marriage and become a nun). However, several other passages show that women of a lesser standing had a much harder destiny and infanticide of baby girls was not unheard of. These were the attitudes towards women that Chokyi Dronma consciously opposed after becoming a highly influential nun. Remarkable statements are attributed to her:

'Generally there is no significant difference between those who succeed in being born as male and those who fail and are born as female (*kye gyal pam*).¹⁷ However, from now on, I will focus on supporting Buddhist practices for women, [especially those who follow a religious path], as they are the most trustworthy among women.'¹⁸ Then she offered one *sho* of silver to every male and female (*kye gyal pham*) member of the monastic community and offered a great feast. Holding the banner of liberation she took the vows as a real novice (*getsulma, dge tshul ma*). Thus from being part of a family she became without a family and received the ordination name Adrol Chokyi Dronma. (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folio 46r,v)

Chokyi Dronma's experience was both unique and yet comparable to that of other Tibetan female spiritual masters who became 'authorizing referents' for later generations (see Gyatso and Havnevik 2005; Jacoby 2014; Schaeffer 2004). The worldly order that these women challenged was in many ways shaped by kinship rules and practices and the relevant expected behaviour. From this point of view their experience can be fruitfully compared and contrasted with that of European medieval women (see, for example, Bynum 1992, and Signori, this issue).

Female renunciation challenging a worldly order shaped by kinship relations

Women played an important role as mediators and sometimes acted as quasi 'ambassadors', brokering relationship between polities or between different constituencies within the same polity (see also Diemberger 2016, 267ff). Chokyi Dronma was often active in this capacity. When her daughter was still very young (aged one or two), Chokyi Dronma left for her homeland to mediate a conflict between her father and her brother, who often clashed because of the ambition and rough character of the young prince and because of the fact that they were supported by different constituencies in their kingdom. At that time, Chokyi Dronma left her daughter behind, in the care of her in-laws and the court. During her absence her baby daughter died. Not long after her return, Chokyi Dronma decided to give up secular life for good and embrace the spiritual pathway of a nun.

The struggle to leave worldly life and become a nun was far from easy. Chokyi Dronma had to assert herself against both her family of origin and the family she had married into.¹⁹ Her struggle was the source of a great deal of anxiety for the people around her and even triggered a war between the two neighbouring kingdoms. The biographical narrative reports many critical voices, giving the impression that she was not popular and at times clearly controversial. The dramatic narrative outlining the events that led to her abandonment of worldly life are clearly informed by literary tropes but are also rich in specific detail that seems to reflect memories of direct experience. This includes powerful descriptions of scenes in which hair, a well-known Buddhist personal symbol (Obeyesekere 1981),²⁰ plays an important part: she challenged her family by publicly tearing her

hair out and throwing it at the feet of her parents-in-law in anger; she subsequently offered a remaining tuft of her hair to the lama to be cut in the monastic initiation ceremony. In doing so she was evoking both the narrative of an earlier Indian female *mahāsiddha*, Laksminkara, who feigned madness, tearing her hair out to avoid marriage, as well as Buddha's gesture of cutting his hair when leaving royal life at his father's court. The significance of this gesture cannot be overestimated, as the offering of the hair involved in 'refuge taking' in Buddhism implies the acquisition of an entirely new identity reflected in a new name. This is also reflected in the way the biography highlights the separation between Chokyi Dronma's worldly life and her subsequent monastic life with the only subdivision in the entire narrative.²¹

After leaving her royal residence, Chokyi Dronma reached Bodong Chogle Namgyal, her spiritual master, in the Porong Pemo Choding monastery, where she became a novice with the name Chokyi Dronma and after a while obtained full ordination as *gelongma* (Skt. *bhiksuni*). She thus became one of the very rare instances of Tibetan female full ordination – a rare exemplar within a tradition that generally does not accept full ordination for women, reflecting a hotly debated topic in Buddhist circles.²²

Bodong Chogle Namgyal and Chokyi Dronma are often referred to in the biography as *yabse* (*yab sras*), lit. father-child, referring to the link of spiritual kinship that was entailed in the master-disciple relationship and had connected them for many lives. This was addressed by Bodong Chogle Namgyal when his decision to give a woman access to the monastic setting was challenged. The biography reports an event that took place shortly after Chokyi Dronma had joined the monastery and had taken the vows as a novice under his mentorship.

Once a person, who looked like a Hor²³ and was nicknamed 'beautiful beard', came to [meet Bodong Chogle Namgyal] to get a blessing from him. On that occasion he commented that there was a girl like the apple of the eye of both Ngari and Southern Lato, who had cut her hair and entered the doctrine corrupting it. When meeting the Lord he asked: 'Did you consider this?' The Lord answered: 'She took advantage of fortunate connections from previous ages. You do not have any such connections, how are you able to criticise me? She does not want to become the queen of Ngari and Southern Lato, she prefers to become the protector of all living beings. I did not corrupt the doctrine. In fact it is people like you, without virtue, who are corrupting the doctrine. Get out!' (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folio 47r,v)

The theme of connection through *karma* from previous lives returns several times for example, Chokyi Dronma on a later occasion commented:

My respect for the lama is a result of karmic traces from earlier times. After taking the vows I thought that I needed to learn how to rely on a lama ... Thanks to these auspicious circumstances I am now able to do well all great and small things without struggling. (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folio 89r,v)

The theme of connections through *karma* returns also when Chokyi Dronma's companion, Deleg Chodren, is surprised by the treatment of someone they encountered on the way to Tsari, who received basic hospitality. On that occasion:

Deleg Chodren, considering the poor food that they were given [by their host] and the [extraordinary] instructions that [Chokyi Dronma gave him and she] had never given to anyone before, thought: 'Before she has never said even a single word about these teachings. Is he someone who has karmic links with her?' (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folio 144v)

The network of people who surrounded Chokyi Dronma included those with whom she was connected through birth, such as her mother and sister, as well as a wide range of disciples with whom she was connected through karmic links. After becoming ordained as a nun, Chokyi Dronma went on to become a powerful patron of religious deeds, including the printing of Buddhist texts and works of engineering. All these activities were heavily dependent on these networks, which provided all kinds of material and spiritual support and included many women as well as men. Elsewhere I have illustrated how women's presence, which was significant, could be erased in the process of transmission of the narratives attributing deeds to historical personalities (see Diemberger 2016, 267ff).

Chokyi Dronma's karmic connections and networks also turned out to be important when later in life she was recognized as the emanation of the Buddhist deity Dorje Phagmo (Skt. Vajravarahi),²⁴ establishing a female reincarnation line that has lasted to the present day – her twelfth re-embodiment is currently the head of Samding monastery in southern Tibet.

Kinship and reincarnation in the life of Chokyi Dronma: the establishment of a reincarnation lineage

In 1455 Chokyi Dronma died after having travelled with her closest disciples from her homeland in south-western Tibet to the holy shrine of Tsari. The death of this remarkable woman, a religious leader belonging to an ancient imperial lineage, left the people around her in great anxiety: they were all dependent on her, spiritually, emotionally and financially, for she was a key part in the patronage network that supported the religious community. The biography of a spiritual master closely connected to her reports what happened in the wake of her death and tells that at the age of five Chokyi Dronma's reincarnation, Kunga Sangmo, arrived at the capital of Chokyi Dronma's kingdom and 'recognized' her mother. 'Then she told a lot of events from her former life, just as if she had woken up from a sleep, which raised general surprise' (*Biography of Thangtong Gyalpo*, pp. 308–309).

Kunga Sangmo was seen as Chokyi Dronma reborn in a female child who would be brought up as a re-embodiment of the princess by the people who had been close to her in her previous life. It was the first time that a narrative of reincarnation spurred action by people searching for the rebirth of a deceased woman considered to be an emanation of the deity Dorje Phagmo. This process also provided the framing narrative of the entire biography, where it is stated that:

Two months before conception, her mother had a dream of a naked girl white as a conch shell, who wore only a bone ornament. This girl said, 'Please let me come in!' Later the mother told this dream to the father, the king, who decided that a lama should be consulted. [The lama] said that this was a prophetic dream announcing the birth of a precious emanation body (*tulbe ku, sprul ba'i sku*). (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folio 2v)

This prophetic dimension would come to fruition much later when Chokyi Dronma, after having accomplished many deeds, was formally recognized as the embodiment of the tantric deity by her spiritual master:

The Great Lord said: 'Do not call her just the beautiful Daughter of the Gods, she is also the Queen of all Knowledge.' [...] 'It should be understood that the Great Woman is the mother of

all Buddhas, the Phagmo Dorjechen (lit. Varahi with the Vajra, that is, Vajravarahi). Think about this!' (*Biography of Chokyi Dronma*, folio 64r, v)

While Chokyi Dronma was recognized as Dorje Phagmo in adulthood, the process of identification of a female child as an embodiment of this tantric deity would henceforth take place shortly after death. Repeated for many generations, this created Tibet's first and most famous female reincarnation line. However, Chokyi Dronma's time was relatively early days for the Tibetan institution of reincarnation: the custom had started some two centuries earlier with the Karmapa reincarnations, and the Dalai Lama's reincarnation line had not yet been established.

Although the Tibetan Buddhist notion of reincarnation transcends kinship and any other worldly bond, in practice it is deeply entwined with it. In the Tibetan context shared bodily substance, paternal bone and maternal flesh/blood, have provided the rationale for the attribution of children to parents and to wider kin groups throughout Tibetan social history. However, this idiom of relatedness can be just one element among different complementing and even competing narratives that define people's identity and sense of belonging.

After being identified as the rebirth of Chokyi Dronma, Kunga Sangmo confirmed her identity by recognizing a fundamental kinship tie from her previous life: the relationship to her former mother. Chokyi Dronma's mother had indeed been an important presence in her daughter's life beyond childhood, not only as someone she needed to care for but also as an asset within a wider female network that supported her deeds. Kunga Sangmo's visit was therefore an important form of validation through the re-enactment of a fundamental kinship tie. It was, however, Chokyi Dronma's spiritual companion, Deleg Chodren, who took on important parental duties concerning this girl and this can be gleaned not only from the role she plays in Chokyi Dronma's biography but also from other historical sources (see Diemberger 2007).

The way in which the establishment of the reincarnation line was managed clearly was informed by Tibetan ideas of kinship as well as Buddhist spiritual notions of embodiment and re-embodiment of Bodhisattvas – highly achieved spiritual beings seeking enlightenment for all sentient beings. Terms such as *kyegyu* (*skye brgyud*), literally 'line of births', used to refer to a reincarnation line: this reflects Tibetan idioms of relatedness by birth in which 'bone-lines' (*rugyu*, *rus brgyud*) and 'flesh/blood-lines' (*thaggyu*, *khrag brgyud*; *shaggyu*, *sha brgyud*) define the ways in which individuals are related to their parents and to the relevant kin groups. In practice, reincarnation lines, like lineages based on kin define the way in which political titles, estates and social relations are passed on from one generation to the next. Based on traces left in a child's memory from the previous life, the relationship to specific people or objects is one of the tools used to identify a child as a reincarnation of a deceased spiritual master. The re-enactment of relationship is therefore one of the distinctive features of the institution of reincarnation. Once a child is recognized as a reincarnation by religious authorities who, partially or fully, take over parenting functions, his or her life is entirely reframed in light of this discovery and related to a string of previous embodiments. This is what seems to have happened to Kunga Sangmo: she was given a Buddhist name and was brought up by the network of disciples of Chokyi Dronma (this is corroborated by several historical sources). Since then the process was repeated up to the twentieth century.

The institutionalized form of reincarnation, with a committee searching for candidates, testing them and then looking after the incumbent is a prerogative of those beings considered to be emanations of *bodhisattvas* who keep reincarnating in this world to lead all living beings towards enlightenment. These are usually leaders of religious communities and have the title of emanation-bodies (*tulbe ku* or *tulku sprul sku*). Common people are also considered to be part of the revolving cycle of rebirths in Samsara but they are considered to have less control over the process. Whilst links from previous lives are acknowledged as having an impact in the current life, they rarely imply a transfer of parental functions and a full redefinition of social identity, as in the case of an institutionalized reincarnation. In the case of common people, narratives referring to links from previous lives tend to be applied to a given situation in hindsight – whether this is the joining of a monastery or what in English we would call an ‘adoption’ – rather than driving action, that is, the active search for a reincarnation. This clear distinction between *bodhisattvas* and common people raises a fundamental question: What kind of ideas of parenthood, reincarnation and kinship provided the background against which a reincarnation line could be established?

Elsewhere (Diemberger 2007), building on the work of Leonhard van der Kuijp and my research on the Samding Dorje Phagmo, I suggested that Tibetan ideas of royal ancestry and lineages blending with Buddhist ideas of reincarnation of Indian origin played a part in the establishment of reincarnation lines, an institution that has no precedent in Buddhist India. I also suggested that Tibetan ideas of reincarnation merged ethical Buddhist reincarnation, which transcends kinship, with that of small-scale societies closely tied with the reproduction of kinship ties (see Obeyesekere 2002). These processes are only conceivable from a historical point of view if we consider people’s agency in dealing strategically and reflectively with particular concepts that describe relations as well as their ability to produce, transform and even merge framing narratives.

The complex relationship between reincarnation and kinship is compellingly illustrated by an episode reported in the *dBa’ bzhed*, the chronicle of the foundation of the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet in the ninth century. This narrative reports the case of a Tibetan dignitary who performed funerary rituals for his son and daughter who had suddenly died. According to divination they were both reincarnated: the boy was reborn as a god in the realm of gods; the girl returned to the human realm as a boy born to the same mother. In this way one of the two children returned within the same kinship context – something that can be seen as challenging from a strictly doctrinal Buddhist point of view, as noticed by Anne Marie Blondeau (1997: 193–220). This narrative of rebirth within the same kinship setting reminds us of ethnographic cases from Mongolia and Buryatia, where Tibetan Buddhism has been practised for centuries. Here, for example, a girl was considered to be the rebirth of her maternal uncle and dressed accordingly in male clothing, or a child who had died in a fire was reborn to a different family, bearing on his body the marks of the accident, and was subsequently ‘given back’ to the original family (Empson 2007, 58–82). Even though such striking examples of transfer of parental functions on the basis of reincarnation are rarer in Tibet, narratives of ties from previous lives appear frequently in relationships that are established as a rediscovery of pre-existing social bonds and may underpin the decision to join a monastery.

A few years ago, Lobsang Yongden, a Tibetan scholar who was an ex-monk from Kumbum monastery and a social anthropology student at Cambridge, offered a particular perspective on this issue. In an essay on kinship and relatedness he described his

relationship to his monastic tutor as similar to that towards a parent: a lifelong tie with reciprocal moral obligations. This link was considered to have originated in previous lives and to have been revealed when the tutor-pupil relationship was established. In our discussion, it emerged that the term he used to address his tutor, paternal uncle (*akhu*), which is the common term of address for a monk in that region, in this case reflected not only the wider connection between monastic centres and lay communities but also a different temporality of relatedness and an ambiguity concerning paternity that is inherent in Tibetan kinship practices.

In brief, relatedness over time, across different reincarnations may complicate the setting in which parental rights and obligations are understood. We shall return to this point after having revisited some of the peculiarities of Tibetan kinship in light of recent kinship and relatedness debates.

Flesh and bone kinship: the body as a rationale for the attribution of children to parents

Tibetan kinship has attracted attention from a wide range of schools of thought in anthropological investigations that focused on flesh and bone as bodily substances describing relations including Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949), Godelier (2012 [2004]) and many others. In her analysis of Tibetan polyandry, largely inspired by structural-functionalist approaches, Nancy Levine observed that:

Some writers argue that Tibetans *have* patrilineal descent; others say they *had* patrilineal descent [...] and some find no more than bilateral kinship. Nor does the recourse to Tibetan sources provide much help, for all relevant kinship concepts are described in terms of the same idiom: *ru*. (Levine 1988, 38; italics added by HD)

Rather than a problem, this ambiguity can be seen as an opportunity to understand the polythetic and flexible character of Tibetan kinship (see also Fjeld 2021, 103–130). Tibetan idioms of bodily substance can be used in different ways in different contexts; while most of the times they legitimize patrilineal or bilineal transmission of goods and rights, they can coexist and underpin systems that we would have traditionally defined as matrilineal, non-lineal, house-centred etc.²⁵ and sometimes combine more than one system within the same community. Looking at vernacular notions, not only at their meanings but also at their performative use, that is, what they do in specific settings, is therefore a fruitful way forward.

Earlier, following Godelier, I looked at the attribution of children to parents in the name of bodily substances such as bones and blood/flesh (Diemberger 1993, 88–127). This set of ideas, which can be found all over Tibet and across Inner Asia, is vividly represented in a Tibetan medical illustration. A famous seventeenth-century Tibetan embryology *thankha* shows that flesh/blood and bone are both bodily components linking the child to parents and kin groups through the way in which the production of human life is conceptualized: the semen of the father produces the bones, which are defined with a term (*ru* = bone) that also refers to paternal kin ties; the blood from the mother produces the flesh and the shape of the body, which are defined with a term (*sha thag* = flesh and blood) that refers to maternal kin ties. Both substances are depicted so as to reflect this theory and the attribution of the child to parents and kin groups as a ‘natural’ given.

This medical *thankha* illustration also shows the principle of consciousness (*namshe*), which migrates from reincarnation to reincarnation as an essential component of the human being. Pushed towards a reincarnation by the past *karma*, it may bear traces of relationships from previous lives. The semen depicted in form of actual bones and the blood depicted as a body shape, and most importantly the inclusion of the principle of consciousness, clearly point to the fact that nature cannot be seen as separate from culture or society and the material from the spiritual. Ideas of relatedness may therefore help to capture this complexity, as suggested by Janet Carsten: ‘the indigenous statements and practices of relatedness are infinitely more dynamic and creative (or destructive) than an analysis of kinship predicated on a straight forward division between biological and social domains would imply’ (Carsten 2000, 24).

The ways in which the components of the human being are conceptualized defines the way in which a child is attributed to parents and shapes his or her personhood and social belonging. Often an ideology of bone passed on from father to children conveys a sense of belonging to a patrilineal kin group, and this is reflected in name-giving rituals soon after birth according to which the child is socially born as a member of the ‘bone’ line. However, this is certainly not the only possibility, and even where this is the case there may be an important discrepancy between rules and practice. For example, observing the high incidence of uxori-local marriages among the Khumbo, a Tibetan group in north-eastern Nepal, I was reminded of Bourdieu’s practical kinship (Bourdieu 1977, 35–38): despite a strong patrilineal ideology expressed in virilocal marriage rules and rituals, kinship practice was clearly driven by a wide range of factors that brought elements of bilineality and bilaterality to the fore as well as the house as the social focus (cf. Duindam, this issue).

In Sogpo, a Tibetanized Mongolian enclave in Qinghai, I encountered widespread narratives of Mongolian bones defining the identity of the people living in that area. As only very few people knew any Mongolian, this feature (rather than language) was emphasized as defining the ethnic identity of people and villages in that area. Inter-marriage between Tibetans and Mongolians, however, was common. When I asked the son of a Mongolian father and a Tibetan mother about his ethnicity, I predictably received the answer that he was Mongolian because of his bones. When I asked the son of a Tibetan father and a Mongolian mother, I was given the less predictable answer that he too was Mongolian. In this case, he said, it was the Mongolian land that mattered. Initially I was puzzled, but I then realized that this was clearly linked to the local sense of place and history as well as the implementation of Chinese minority nationality policy: the choice of what mattered was driven by contextual priorities. These and many other cases show that ambiguities and multiple idioms of relatedness apparently open up spaces for individual strategies and negotiation that shape practical kinship as part of a wider set of relations.

Tibetan distributed parenthood

The widespread practice of fraternal polyandry provides a powerful example of Tibetan flexibility, as it entails an unavoidable ambiguity in the definition of paternity with a blurring of boundaries between paternal uncle (*akhü*) and father (*apha*) and with paternal responsibility distributed between them. This feature is evident in Tibetan communities that practise polyandry but is more widespread than that and it can be rooted in ideas

of shared bones. This is also reflected in genealogies like that of Queen Tashi Tsering of Sogpo, who appears in the relevant local history as the daughter of her father but was born four years after his death (see Dhondup and Diemberger 2002, 197–224).

Further ambiguity arises from the blurring of boundaries between what we would consider ‘spiritual’ kinship as clearly distinct from ‘natural’ kinship, with the ideas of spiritual father and spiritual child (*yabse*) rooted in the transmission of teachings and in links through karma from previous lives as reflected in the biography of Chokyi Dronma and many other examples.

Whatever the practical arrangement, in addition to the narratives of bone, blood, house and land, the revelation of karmic ties from previous lives can provide a powerful way of reconfiguring the position of an individual in relation to whoever does the parenting. Such a narrative emphasizes the agency of the child even before his or her birth and makes the ‘natural’ parents only one option among others, one that might eventually be overshadowed by other connections. The agency attributed to the principle of consciousness of the child in Tibet recalls the Inupiat whalers of northern Alaska described by Barbara Bodenhorn (2000, 128ff), where a child chooses where and when to be born (and, at times, to be adopted). Here, parents are the ones who do the parenting and are not necessarily restricted to one set of people so that the biological relationship results as optative. It is significant that in the Inupiat context the term for ‘kin’ can be rendered in English as ‘addition’.

Among Tibetans, within a wide range of kinship systems and within an even wider range of practical arrangements, parenting therefore appears as something that can be distributed over more people. The parents through birth are just those of this life, but other parenting figures can add on or even supersede them according to different rationales spanning multiple lives. Parenthood can thus be distributed in ways that at times corresponds but at times jars with kinship imagined in the Euro-American settings. An exploration of Tibetan examples may thus contribute to the cross-cultural exploration of kinship and relatedness, keeping in mind that ‘one kin relation is not just categorically distinct from another but frequently comes into being performatively, through active differentiation’ (Strathern 2014, 48). This is particularly relevant when people choose among different options in the vocabulary that describes and enacts relations.

The disambiguation of relatedness

So far, we have seen that ideas of relatedness can overcome the boundary between ‘natural’ and ‘spiritual’ kinship, help in understanding how people can be connected over different lives, and how parenthood can be distributed among more people than just a father and a mother. Can all these relations then be seen as forms of relatedness without any further differentiation? Tibetans can deploy a range of strategies of disambiguation within kinship and within different forms of relatedness that caution against such an approach.

For example, in order to distinguish a classificatory sibling from a sibling who is a child of one’s own birth parents there is the common descriptive sentence: *pha chig ma chig gi* (of one father and one mother).

Another disambiguation strategy is the switching between different reckoning systems. In spring 2011 I met an Aya priest, representing a territorial and ancestral cult widespread

in the area where Chokyi Dronma was active. According to his account he belonged to a tradition that was transmitted ‘through the bones’.²⁶ He had been ‘adopted’ by his childless paternal uncle, a powerful Aya priest. When referring to this paternal uncle, with whom he grew up, he kept calling him ‘*pha-la*’ (father), using a household-centred terminology. However, when asked about this, he specified that actually he was his ‘*akhū*’, his paternal uncle. He then switched to an ego-centred way of describing the relationship, with more individual detail but strong emphasis on the shared bones. In the same area, the abbot of a Gelugpa monastery noticing an approaching thunderstorm started to perform Aya hail-preventing rituals. He explained to me that he had to carry out this ritual task because of his Aya ‘bones’ inherited from his Aya ancestors, even if this ritual practice contrasted with his position as a member and leader of the monastic community – an identity based on karmic links from previous lives, religious commitment and training.

All these instances in which people can use ambiguity and disambiguation performatively according to context caution us against any essentialising and ‘othering’ search for a coherent cosmology and set of rules underpinning Tibetan kinship practices. Taking into account precedents within the specific communities and social networks, bones, blood, house, land, karma can link former generations to the new ones within competing or merging narratives that bring together the natural and the social, the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the economic, the religious and the political.

Conclusion

Looking at the biography of Chokyi Dronma with anthropological eyes, it has been possible to explore gender and kinship practices in fifteenth-century Tibet. As shown through an analysis of particular instances, this life account offers insight into subjective perspectives and social processes of the time. It thereby is highlighting different viewpoints, moral dilemmas, reflections, transformations, individual agencies and room for negotiation as well as the crucial importance of narratives. A multi-layered reading of this story through different methodological lenses is therefore rewarding, especially when combined with intertextuality and ethnography. At the same time, the study of this biography has offered the opportunity to reflect more widely on key notions that have been deployed in Tibetan societies for many centuries, exploring them in light of wider debates on kinship and relatedness. Rather than strict rules, bodily substances and spiritual principles appear to be symbolic fields connecting past and present – they constitute the backdrop for practical negotiation, as clearly illustrated in Chokyi Dronma’s biography and in many other historical sources and ethnographic cases. From this point of view the narrative of Chokyi Dronma’s life is not only a thing of the past but also a presence in current Tibetan religious and political life – especially but not exclusively as a gendered exemplar.

Notes

1. This paper reflects research from a string of collaborative projects. After an initial exploration supported by the Austrian Science Fund, the life story of Chokyi Dronma became the focus of a dedicated project supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (*A Tibetan Woman-Lama and her Reincarnations: a Study of the Samding Dorje Phagmo*, AN11783/

APN19407) and a subsequent project focusing on the introduction of printing technologies in Tibet (*Transforming Technologies and Buddhist Book Culture* AH/H00159X/1). Over the years, many scholars in Tibet and all over the world have contributed to this work; most importantly I wish to thank the late Gene Smith, who drew my attention to the manuscript of the biography, Leonhard van der Kuip, who made it accessible to me, Pasang Wangdu and Yudru Tsono as well as Sonam Tsering and Tsering Dawa, who provided invaluable assistance in the process of translation, revision and analysis of related historical sources. Any mistakes are all mine. Tibetan terms are given as they are pronounced except for instances in which Wylie transliteration is useful or significant.

2. I am referring here to the debates triggered by Janet Carsten's suggestion that the term 'kinship' could be usefully substituted with 'relatedness' so as to widen the scope of anthropological research. Rather than taking for granted the notion of 'kinship' with the relevant assumptions about 'biology' it sought to interrogate it in light of what 'being related' implies in local contexts and to use this as the basis for comparative analysis (see Carsten 2000). This move inspired by Schneider's critique of kinship and kinship studies triggered a range of responses that pointed out its limitations; reflecting this debate and other related developments it has thus become common practice to speak of 'kinship and relatedness' (see also the editors' introduction to this theme issue).
3. This manuscript (Tibet Museum No. 4281) was transferred to the Tibet Museum after having been kept at the Palace of Nationalities in Beijing, where it had arrived from the library of Drepung monastery in Lhasa.
4. The most important among the sources that have helped in this work are the *Biography of Thangtong Gyalpo* and the *Bo dong chos 'byung* (*The History of Bodong*). The biography of Thangtong Gyalpo is a life narrative of one of the masters with whom Chokyi Dronma interacted and was written in 1607 on the basis of pre-existing sources, including a version of the biography of Chokyi Dronma. The *Bo dong Chos 'byung* is a history of the religious tradition to which Chokyi Dronma belonged and was written in the early 17th century (see Diemberger 2007).
5. In his book *The Old Ways*, the award-winning writer and scholar of English literature Robert Macfarlane describes the entanglement of life and place that led him to physically follow in Edward Thomas's footsteps, using the paths as a route to his past. Inspired by Walter Benjamin, who floats the idea of representing his own life cartographically, "setting out the sphere of life – *bios* – geographically on a map" he reflects: "I have come to imagine Thomas' 'sphere of life' as a kind of way map and so I retold it . . . : not an act of biography, exactly, but perhaps one of biogeography" (Macfarlane 2012, 32–33).
6. "Early scholars of Buddhism . . . noted the central role of place and pilgrimage in the development of the Buddha's biography. Studies of East Asian traditions have explored the relationship between Buddhist lives and places . . . Yet little attention has been paid to the relationship between sacred geography and narrative in the context of Tibetan life writing" (Qunitman 2008, 365).
7. When the Fifth Dalai Lama established his rule over Tibet, promoting the hegemonic power of the Gelugpa tradition to which he belonged, many texts seem to have been taken out of circulation and deposited in libraries such as that of Drepung monastery (see Kapstein 2006). The biography of Chokyi Dronma may have been one of them since explicit and implicit references to this text do not seem to appear in other sources after the seventeenth century.
8. The name Chokyi Dronma was given to her when she was ordained as a Buddhist nun in Porong Pema Choding monastery. Her original name as princess of the Mangyul Gungthang kingdom was Konchog Gyalmo.
9. For a detailed discussion of the history of this region, see Everding (2000).
10. Kuntu Sangmo's biography indicates that she became literate at a young age as she lived for long periods with her aunt, who was a nun. Later in her life she used to travel around reading scriptures as a religious service to households. She also became a promoter and manager of printing projects (see Diemberger 2016, 267–308).
11. This is a reference to a place south of the capital where Chokyi Dronma spent some of her childhood with her mother.

12. The name Bongdzog is both a place and a clan name referring to people inhabiting the Rasuwa Valley in Nepal. This points to a marriage alliance between Chokyi Dronma's father and the neighbouring polity to the south (see Diemberger 2016, 295).
13. As the Tibetan empire was created by the rulers of the Yarlung valley taking over numerous pre-existing petty kingdoms, the relevant ruling families became integrated into the imperial political structure. Some of these lineages became known as clans (Tib. *ru*, lit. bone [lines]) providing queens to the royal lineage and as ministers of the empire. Given the high status of these maternal uncles (*zhang*) of the royal offspring, the figure of the uncle-minister (*zhanglon*) was extremely important and combined a kinship order with an imperial political structure based on territory and administration. On the term *zhang* and Tibetan imperial marriage practices and politics, see also Dotson (2004), 75–99.
14. Situ Lhatsen Kyab was a ruler of southern Lato, the region immediately north of Mt Everest, in the fifteenth century. His father Situ Chokyi Rinchen (died 1402) established the capital in Shekar and was celebrated in the local history *Shel dkar chos 'byung*. See Wangdu and Diemberger (1996).
15. Protector of the Sakya tradition, see de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956), 49–51.
16. The term 'Bonpo' can be used in a variety of ways in different contexts and within different classifications of Tibets religions. From a Buddhist perspective it is often used in a derogatory way to indicate pre-Buddhist religious traditions and practices (often associated with practices such as animal sacrifice that are condemned by Buddhists). However, the organized Bonpo religion co-exists and shares many features with Buddhist traditions as discussed in the wide-ranging literature on the subject.
17. This is rendered by the metaphorical expression *skye rgyal pham*, meaning "male and female" and alluding to the fact that a male rebirth is a better rebirth than a female one.
18. *skye sman thams cad kyi blo btod pa'i bud med mams kyi bstan pa la phen pa cig bgyid pa yin*
19. This narrative is reminiscent of Christian hagiographical traditions: see for example Saint Clare of Assisi (see, for example, Bartoli 2010). Like Clare of Assisi, Chokyi Dronma became a referent for later women who followed her example of withdrawal from worldly life and fulfilment through support of spiritual deeds; see Diemberger (2016), 267–308.
20. See Obeyesekere (1981) for a wide-ranging discussion of hair as personal symbols in Buddhism.
21. In the English literary translation (Diemberger 2007) I had to add more subdivisions for the sake of clarity.
22. See, for example, Mohr & Tsedroen J. 2010; Lekshe Tsomo (2004).
23. Hor indicates Mongols or other people of Central Asia.
24. A form of the female Buddhist deity Vajrayogini, see English (2002).
25. In western and eastern Tibet as well as in Bhutan there are examples of house societies where the house and all the relevant entitlements and obligations are passed on matrilineally.
26. When discussing his tradition, the Aya priest pointed to the bones of his body whilst referring at the same time to "bones" as genealogically transmitted substance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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