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# Buddhist women masters of Kinnaur: Why don't nuns sing about nuns?

Linda J. LaMacchia

Correspondence: linda.lamacchia@  
faculty.umuc.edu  
Humanities and Social Sciences  
Departments, University of Maryland  
University College, 3501 University  
Boulevard East, Adelphi, MD 20783,  
USA

## Abstract

In Kinnaur—a Himalayan tribal district of Himachal Pradesh, India, on the Sutlej River and at the Tibet border—Buddhism has been practiced, along with indigenous local Hinduism, for at least a thousand years. From ancient times too, Kinnauras have loved to sing and dance. In Kinnauri villages, *jomos* (celibate Buddhist nuns) and *lamas* (who in Kinnaur are male religious specialists and most often married) tell the story of Buddhism by reciting prayers and texts, performing rituals, teaching basic Buddhism, and also, significantly for this paper, by composing and singing songs for their disciples and others. Since the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan monks and nuns first came as refugees to India in 1959, some Kinnauri nuns and monks have gone to study with them in Dharamsala (where the Dalai Lama lives) and elsewhere. So nowadays, both ancient traditions and modern curricula coexist in Kinnaur, and Buddhist women masters transmit Buddhism in various ways.

This paper asks and attempts to answer two questions: (1) Are there Buddhist women masters in Kinnaur, and if so, what are they like? (2) Do nuns sing about nuns, and if not, why not? (An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> annual DANAM conference 2013 in Baltimore, Maryland (in conjunction with the American Academy of Religion annual meeting) in Session 2, entitled "Buddhist Women Masters". And LaMacchia 2013b ("Basic Buddhism in songs: Contemporary nuns' oral traditions in Kinnaur," <http://www.sakyadhita.org>) discusses in greater depth the way in which Kinnauri nun *gurus* compose and sing songs as a method of teaching basic Buddhism.) Using as methods fieldwork research (from 1995 to the present)—participant observation and recorded songs, life stories, and interviews—I argue that there are valid, authentic Buddhist women masters—nun *gurus*—in Kinnaur, but their mode of being masters—ordinary and celibate renunciants—is different from the mode of the reincarnate male *gurus* they typically sing about in their songs—extraordinary and non-celibate. The paper describes several contemporary women masters and applies traditional definitions of a master to them (citing Gampopa, the Third Dalai Lama, and others), as well as subcategories suggested by me, and quotes two songs that shed light on the ways in which Buddhist masters are (or are not) perceived and presented. In response to the second question, Why don't nuns sing about nuns—or rather, why is there only one song about a nun, the song of the exemplary renunciant Nyima Zangmo—the paper concludes by suggesting that this simple and understated song may be quite powerful if (as Thapar claims) renunciation, and especially female renunciation, is seen as a form of resistance to the norm which is household life, and if (as I claim) a celibate *jomo* represents renunciation better than typically non-celibate Kinnauri male *lamas* do. I offer another, rather speculative possibility, too:

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that her name Nyima, meaning “sun”, may link her subliminally to reincarnate *lamas*, said to emit light rays.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Himalayan religion, Oral traditions, Women masters, Nuns, Kinnaur

### **Buddhist women masters of Kinnaur: Why don't nuns sing about nuns?**

Kinnaur is a Himalayan district of Himachal Pradesh, northwest India, on the Sutlej River at the Tibet border. Kinnauras have practiced Tibetan Buddhism, along with indigenous local Hinduism, since the great translator Lotsa Rinchen Zangbo built temples in Kinnaur in the tenth century. One of my informants pointed out that this means, because *jomos* and *lamas* are needed to keep the temples open, there must have been *jomos* and *lamas* in Kinnaur for at least a thousand years. *Jomos* are celibate Buddhist nuns, ordained or not, and in Kinnaur the word *lama* refers to *male* religious specialists, who are typically married. Some *lamas* are reincarnates (*tulkus* in Tibetan), but no *jomos* are. From ancient times, as recorded in Sanskrit literature, Kinnauras have loved to sing and dance, and because Kinnauri is an oral and not a written language, singing oral traditions is an important way to transmit news, history, and Buddhist teachings. In general, women are the composers and singers of Kinnauri language songs (*gitang*), and nuns compose and sing religious *gitang*. In contrast, Tibetan and Kinnauri male *lamas* may compose Tibetan language religious songs, called *mgurma*.

Though Kinnaur is an isolated tribal area, small (the size of Delaware), and sparsely populated (little over 84,000 in 2011), it is of interest for us here not only because of its long Buddhist history, rich oral traditions, and many *jomos*, but also because of its strategic location. In his 2009 book on Kinnaur, R. S. Pirta (2009: 28) writes: “a western Himalayan community provides the perfect integration of global and regional issues. ... the Kanaoras ... have been a crucible for infinite social and cultural elements pouring from a vast region spanning from the north Indian plains to the Tibetan plateau”. And a Kinnauri scholar expressed the opinion that since 1959 when the Dalai Lama and many Tibetan followers came as refugees to India, Kinnaur has been at the center of Buddhism and no longer at the periphery.

Significant for this paper's topic is the difficulty that Kinnaur's geographic isolation creates for nuns' and monks'—but especially nuns'—access to education, both secular and religious. Until recently, a curriculum of advanced studies in Tibetan language, Buddhist texts, philosophy, and debate was not available in Kinnaur. Monks who were able to left Kinnaur to study at monastic institutions in Tibet, and then later, when Tibetan refugees and the Dalai Lama came to live in India, at the monasteries that were reestablished in south India, Dharamsala, Nepal, and elsewhere. Not many nuns were able to do so, owing mainly to nuns' greater lack of resources and greater family obligations relative to monks. In recent years, two small nunneries that offer Buddhist studies programs have been established at Meeru and at Ponda, both located in lower Kinnaur.

This paper asks and attempts to answer two questions: (1) Are there Buddhist women masters in Kinnaur, and if so, what are they like? (2) Why don't nuns sing

about nuns? The answer to the first question is that there are and have been for a long time Buddhist nuns who have been qualified ordinary women masters in Kinnaur. This is a plus for nuns. But the answer to the second question is that nuns do not usually sing about ordinary masters. And so except for one song, about a model nun Nyima Zangmo who was both an ordinary nun and probably taught other nuns as well, nuns do not sing about nuns. In answering these questions, I will present examples of Buddhist women masters of Kinnaur as well as examples of the Dharma teaching songs they sing. Using as methods fieldwork research in India from 1995 to the present—in the form of journal notes, participant observation, life stories, interviews, and recorded songs—and also using traditional Tibetan Buddhist textual definitions and additional categories that I propose, I argue that there are valid, authentic Buddhist women masters—nun *gurus*—in Kinnaur, but their mode of being masters—as ordinary teachers and celibate renunciants—is different from that of the reincarnate male *gurus* they typically sing about in their songs—extraordinary teachers and typically non-celibate. (For an account of nun *gurus* and disciples in Kinnaur, see also LaMacchia 2008. For an account of Buddhist nunneries in Himachal Pradesh, see Nguyen Thuy Tien 2010.)

Part I defines a Buddhist master using traditional definitions as well as my suggested three subcategories that apply to Kinnaur. Part II presents examples of contemporary Buddhist women masters of Kinnaur. Part III presents two songs that shed light on nun *gurus*' roles and self-perceptions. Part IV attempts to explain why nuns don't sing about nuns, and also, in conclusion, suggests why the one song about a named nun in Kinnaur might be so popular.

### **Gender issues and relations between nuns and monks**

The two questions this paper poses in turn raise issues of gender status and of the relations between monks and nuns that are too complex to go into in any depth here. In brief, Kinnauri Buddhist institutions and practices are patriarchal and hierarchical. Most often the village hierarchy puts male *lamas* at the top; for example, male *lamas* may occupy the foremost seats in a group ritual that includes both monks and nuns, a male *lama* will lead the ritual, and the village head *lama* is always male. But also, most often, male *lamas*, both married and celibate, work closely with nuns. In daily life, nuns and male *lamas* often perform rituals together. Male *lamas* are nuns' relatives, their brothers, cousins, uncles, fathers, and sometimes nuns' teachers. And nuns are male *lamas*' relatives, their sisters, cousins, aunts, and sometimes monks' teachers too, typically when the monk or male *lama*-to-be is young. For example, in Lippa, a Drukpa Kagyu village in central Kinnaur, the contemporary nun Hirmal (see below) was taught by her father (a former monk who studied in Tibet), and in turn she taught all the young male *lamas*-to-be in her village. Later, she taught her father's *tulku* before he went to Sikkim to study. On the other hand, although most often the relations between monks and nuns are cooperative rather than competitive, laypeople may be more judgmental about nuns than about male religious specialists. A nun told me that laywomen would not sing about a good ordinary nun, but they would sing about a nun if she broke her vows, that is, got married. For example, in the popular courtship song, the Song of Sonam Dupke, a male *lama* of Lippa Village persuades his nun cousin to give up her vows and marry him.

A discussion of gender issues would also need to consider other Kinnauri cultural and religious contexts. For example, in the local religion of Kinnaur, the cult of the *devi-devta* (goddess-god), which Kinnauri Buddhists also subscribe to, the goddess Chandika is regarded as most powerful. Although only men, no women, form the retinues of village gods and goddesses, Chandika is ranked senior to the other gods and goddesses, who are her siblings. Another issue to consider is polyandry, which was common until recently in Kinnaur. This marriage system, in which several men, usually brothers, share one wife, seems to allocate more power to the wife than do other marriage systems, such as polygyny and monogamy.

Greater access to education will bring change. It is too soon to know how monks and nuns' roles and relative authority will be affected by advanced monastic education, which only has become available to women in recent years. The Kinnauri nuns in the first group of nuns who will become advanced monastic degree holders (*geshemas*) will only complete their exams and be awarded their degrees in 2016 and subsequent years, so they have not yet returned to Kinnaur. It remains to be seen whether they will accept teaching positions outside Kinnaur, in the larger monastic institutes for nuns, or whether there will be a demand for their teaching expertise in Kinnaur. (For gender issues related to Buddhist nuns elsewhere, see Salgado 2013.)

## I. Definitions

What is a Buddhist master? In Sanskrit and Hindi, a *guru* (Tibetan: *bla-ma*) is a spiritual teacher, a person with some degree of mastery of Buddhist knowledge and practices. She/he may also be a meditation master. She is not the same as a saint (or *siddhi*) but can be. She/he may be a lay practitioner or a renunciant of the settled monastic type or of the forest wandering type (to use what Reginald Ray 1994 calls the “threefold model”).

Tibetan Buddhist texts note that masters are of many types and that their specific characteristics and qualities differ according to school, sect, and level of teachings. As the Third Dalai Lama (16<sup>th</sup> century) wrote in *Essence of Refined Gold*: “In general, the qualities of the various masters of the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana methods are manifold” (Mullin 1987: 62). The current Dalai Lama comments on this: “In general, the more powerful the method being applied, the more qualified must the teacher be. For instance, one must rely upon a *guru* who is a fully enlightened Buddha in order to engage successfully in the final yogas of the Highest Tantra, whereas a disciple requiring guidance through the lower instructions basically only needs to search for someone well grounded in scriptural learning and insight into the relevant practices” (Mullin 1987: 59).

The Third Dalai Lama lists these six basic qualifications of a master: training in 1) ethics, 2) concentration, 3) wisdom, and 4) scriptures. 5) Number 5 states that the master must have an “awareness that can perceive emptiness”. 6) But number 6 seems to modify this difficult requirement by saying that at least the teacher “should have more learning and realization than does the disciple” (Mullin 1987: 62).

In the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Gampopa (12<sup>th</sup> century) classifies spiritual masters into four categories (1998: 71): 1) ordinary spiritual master; 2) bodhisattva spiritual master who has attained certain *bhumis* (or “grounds”); 3) Nirmanakaya spiritual master; and 4) Sambhogakaya spiritual master. Significantly for my argument here—that there are and for a very long time have been Buddhist women masters in Kinnaur—Gampopa

concludes that the “ordinary” master is most beneficial: “By meeting ordinary spiritual masters, receiving the light of their teachings and shining it on the path, one will gain the opportunity to see the superior spiritual masters. So therefore, *the greatest benefactor for us is the ordinary spiritual master*” (1998: 72; my italics).

Holding the *bodhisattva* vow is also important for a spiritual master. Gampopa’s translator, Konchog Gyaltzen, explains: “[I]f the spiritual master has received bodhicitta vows, has practiced it for some time, and cherishes it..., then he [sic] may be trustworthy even if he [sic] is not a scholar or very articulate” (Gampopa 1998: 21).

Today’s large monastic institutions may have several categories of master. Georges Dreyfus lists the four types specified at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, India (where he studied for the *geshe*<sup>1</sup> degree, which he completed in 1985): 1) root teacher, also called residence teacher or worldly teacher; 2) scholastic or text teacher; 3) tantric *guru*; and 4) spiritual friend (Sanskrit, *kalyanamitra*). Even worldly teachers can be classified as *guru*, he says, because they too give spiritual instruction. The relationship with all of them is personal, and students may even live with the teacher, but only the tantric *guru* is “given ... quasi-divine status” (Dreyfus 2003: 61).

### **Three subcategories of ordinary women masters in Kinnaur**

It is useful to see that nun *gurus* in Kinnaur meet the qualifications for Buddhist masters specified in traditional authoritative definitions. But if we look at actual nun teachers in Kinnaur, we can see differences among them. Taking Gampopa’s first category, “ordinary spiritual masters” as a reference point, I would like to propose three subcategories of Buddhist women masters in Kinnaur, based on the level of study reached by the master; for example, the teaching methods that are used, the subjects that she is able to teach, and who her students are, as follows:

- 1) A typical traditional village nun *guru*;
- 2) A highly respected village nun *guru*, one possessing special skills; and
- 3) A nun *guru* with advanced secular or monastic degree (i.e., Ph.D. or *geshe* degree).

All of these are considered to be “ordinary” Buddhist masters. In part II, below, I will give examples of nuns who fit these subcategories. (Note that in defining a *guru* and discussing the *guru*-disciple relationship, these other sources may also be useful: Lempert 2012; Sopa 2012; Wach 1988; and Yogananda 1985).

## **II. Examples of nun *gurus***

Who are the Buddhist women masters of Kinnaur and how do these definitions and categories of Buddhist masters apply to them? My first two examples are Chosem Dolma of Bure Village (lower Kinnaur) and Upal Devi of Kanum Village (central Kinnaur).<sup>2</sup> I met both of them in 1996 and stayed at their village nunneries for several days at a time, that year and over the years since then. Both belong to the previous generation of nuns, and the disciples of both have now completed their monastic studies and started to teach younger nuns. I recorded their life stories in 1996. (Chosem Dolma spoke to me in Hindi, which I can speak; Upal Devi spoke in Kinnauri, with her nephew, who is a university professor, translating). I have also interviewed several of their disciples at nunneries where they are studying, and also teaching, in Dharamsala (where the Dalai Lama lives) and in Kinnaur.

The two nun *gurus* have much in common: they both gave their nun disciples a firm foundation in reading Tibetan, memorizing and reciting texts, and understanding basic Buddhism. Both nuns were the head of their village nunneries—Upal until she died three years ago<sup>3</sup> and Chosem Dolma still is. In both cases, most of their disciples left—typically after seven or eight years (several after twenty years)—to pursue advanced studies in Dharamsala and elsewhere in a modern monastic curriculum (the five great texts and so on; see Dreyfus 2003), some up to the *geshe* level. Their disciples have stayed in touch by phoning and visiting even after leaving many years ago; they still speak of their *gurus*' "good character" and "good discipline" and of all that they learned from them. Significantly, Chosem calls her disciples *sati* (companions) not disciples (*chela*), because she says her knowledge is not much more than theirs. Both nun *gurus* struggled to get a Buddhist education, which was not easy in Kinnaur at that time, and faced many obstacles. Both composed or sang *gitang* as one method of teaching basic Buddhism. Both were ordained as novice nuns (or *getsulma*, the highest level available for women in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, even today). Both are credited with other special achievements, too. In Chosem Dolma's case, she was said to have single-handedly restored Buddhism to her village when it was in decline, by teaching the young nuns from surrounding villages who came to live with her, and by building the first Buddhist temple in her village, using her own land, resources, and labor. In her life story, she recalled:

At 12 or 13 years ... Negi Rinpoche-ji came to our house ... [ji is a Hindi honorific]. Rinpoche-ji asked me, 'Is the hair to be cut or not?' Then I said, 'Take it off.' ... after that I went looking for Negi Rinpoche in Benares. At that time I was about 17 or 18. In this way, bit by bit, with much difficulty I began to read [Tibetan] a little bit .... Then, meanwhile, from Tibet, the Dalai Lama arrived in Dharamsala. Then I went on pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya, Benares, Dharamsala, to Upper Kinnaur ... If some pilgrims came, I'd go with them. After that a little understanding came to me. When understanding came, I was already 25 years old. When I was 25, having gone to Dharamsala I became a Rabchungma ... first Genyen ... then Rabchung, then Getsulma vows he gave.<sup>4</sup>

Inspired by Tibetans who were building houses and temples in Dharamsala around the Dalai Lama, Chosem Dolma determined to build a Buddhist temple, using her own family resources, in her mostly Hindu village. But the other villagers criticized her, she said: "No one gave money. No one told me how to do it. No one helped me. And the villagers said, 'What did she build? Why did she do this? Where did she get the money? Who is giving it?'" (LaMacchia 2008: 196.)

In Upal Devi's case, she and two nun companions, called Siam and Boti, traveled on foot to Tibet—an arduous journey of several months through high, cold mountain passes—to seek teachings from monks at Tashi Lhungbo monastery. Before the Chinese takeover, Tashi Lhungbo had a connection to Kinnaur since many Kinnauri monks had studied there. But such an undertaking was unusual for nuns, and the monks refused to teach her. (She said later that their refusal was more painful than all the frostbite and other hardships she had experienced on her journey to Tibet; see LaMacchia 2008: 189.) So instead, she studied for three years with nuns at a nearby nunnery. The teachers there did not teach her philosophy and logic, but she did learn Tibetan

from them, learned how to read it, and memorized Tibetan prayers and texts before returning to Kanum. There she devoted the rest of her life to teaching and supporting the nuns in her village nunnery.

What kind of masters are these two nun *gurus* of Kinnaur? Using the third Dalai Lama's sixth qualification, both teachers had "more learning and insight into the subject concerned" than their disciples did. Using Dreyfus's categories, the nun *gurus* of Kinnaur belong to categories number 1, 2, and 4—residence teachers, text teachers, and spiritual friends—but not to category number 3; they are not tantric *gurus*. Most encouragingly, in Gampopa's terms, they are "ordinary spiritual masters", which he describes as the greatest benefactors for us beginners on the Buddhist path. I don't know whether Chosem Dolma and Upal Devi had formally taken the *bodhisattva* vows—one of Gampopa's requirements. But both of them devoted their lives to helping others, not only running the nunnery and teaching their own disciples but also counseling all those laywomen and others who came to them with problems. In terms of the three subcategories proposed by me, Chosem Dolma and Upal Devi belong to the first subcategory. Chosem Dolma and Upal Devi are examples of a typical traditional village nun *guru*.

### **Applying the three subcategories to Buddhist women masters of Kinnaur**

In category 1, a typical village nun *guru*, the definition fits both of the above two examples described in this paper so far: Chosem Dolma and Upal Devi. They taught their own village *jomos*, plus *jomos* from nearby villages, and they advised lay women who came to them (and in Chosem Dolma's case, still come) with problems. They taught their students how to read, memorize, and recite Tibetan texts, prayers, and rituals. They taught basic Buddhism topics, such as impermanence, suffering, karma, rebirth in the six realms, and taking refuge in the *guru*, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha (see LaMacchia 2013b). In terms of teaching methodology, their style was traditional: their students practiced reading by reciting out loud and memorizing. Another method, particular to Kinnauri nuns, is to compose and sing Kinnauri language songs (called *gitang*) to teach the Dharma. Not all village nun *gurus* do this, but Upal Devi and Chosem Dolma did.

In category 2, a highly respected village nun *guru* with special skills, suitable examples are Hirmal Jomo of Lippa Village and Spello Jomo Chattan Mani (d. 1996) of Spello Village. Spello Jomo had the reputation of being both a good scholar and a good practitioner. For example, Khenpo Thupten Wozer, abbot of a hermitage near Manali, praised her ability to answer questions about both philosophy and history. Interestingly, she also sang the songs of Milarepa as a form of Dharma teaching. She had studied and practiced in Tibet for five years with the *lama* scholar Kyunglung, who mentions her in his autobiography. She also received complete ordination (*gelongma*) from him (see LaMacchia 2012). Her nun disciples praised her practice of Chod, and the speed at which she could recite the ritual. She also gave the Nyungne (fasting) vows to villagers. One of her disciples compared her explanations of Nyungne to the Dalai Lama's public talks. Notably, one of her students was a monk from outside Kinnaur, to whom she taught Shantideva's text *Bodhicaryavatara*. When the monk translated the work into Hindi and published it, he acknowledged his teacher Chattan Mani in the foreword (Shantibhikshushastri, tr. 2011).

Hirmal's father had been a monk scholar, and he had passed on his knowledge to his only child, Hirmal. So she could not only teach her students how to read Tibetan texts, but she could also teach her students Tibetan grammar and how to write Tibetan. Here

again, Hirmal sang songs, not Kinnauri language songs (*gitang*), but Tibetan language Dharma songs (*mgurma*). Indeed, at Losar when *lamas* and nuns danced in front of the village temple when I was there in winter of 2010, Hirmal sang the *sung-gur* that they danced to (which I recorded). Hirmal had many nun disciples (who still continue to visit her many years later), and had taught all the *lamas* of Lippa when they were young. She also taught her father's *tulku*, before he went away to study in Sikkim.

In category 3, a nun *guru* with advanced secular or monastic degree, there are very few examples. I know of one nun from Ropa Village who finished a Ph.D. in Sanskrit a few years ago and afterwards was invited to teach overseas. Then there are the nuns who are in the first group of *geshemas* (female holders of *geshe* advanced monastic degrees), who have studied outside of Kinnaur for many years and are still in the process of taking their *geshe* exams. We will not know for some time where they will be teaching in the future and to whom.

### III. Two songs

The following songs demonstrate the contrasting ways in which a *jomo-guru* and a *lama-guru* are presented. Both songs were sung in Kinnauri by middle-aged nuns in 1995, recorded by me, and transcribed and translated by Professor Ramesh Chandra Negi (Mathas). Since that time, nuns from different parts of Kinnaur have sung four more versions of the song of Nyima Zangmo for me (one less than three years ago, in 2013). The singer of this example, Tenzin Choeden of Hango Village, sang the song for me near Manali at Pangaon Hermitage. She did not know who the song's composer was and had learned it from her "great grandmother" (possibly a senior village nun), she said in Tibetan, with a young nun from Bhutan translating. Here is her song:

#### The song of Nyima Zangmo<sup>5</sup>

1. "*Goli go hona, haya be hona*. [Kinnauri songs traditionally begin with these meaningless syllables.]
2. If we go to the lower side, we will reach Tashi Gang temple.
3. There, *lamas* and *jomos* are gathered.
4. What type of meeting is going on?
5. At that meeting they said, 'We will build a temple.'
6. On the foremost seat of the *lamas*,
7. We can see Brother Changzod Chenmo.
8. On the foremost seat of the *jomos*, we can see Sister Nyima Zangmo.
9. Nyima Zangmo said, 'Brother Changzod Chenmo!
10. I will become a *jomo*.'
11. Changzod Chenmo said, 'Beautiful Nyima Zangmo!
12. You cannot become a *jomo*.
13. You are a rich man's daughter.
14. You have many ornaments.'
15. Nyima Zangmo said, 'I am not proud of my ornaments.
16. They will only be a burden in the next life'".

This song is widely known in Kinnaur, and it is the only song I have recorded (among more than thirty songs sung by nuns) whose focus is renunciation and whose subject is



a particular, named nun. One purpose of Kinnauri language songs (says Professor Ramesh Chandra Negi) is to pass on some news. Newsworthy here is, first, that though Nyima Zangmo is rich, beautiful, and marriageable, and despite family opposition, she is determined to become a nun. The next news: she does become a nun and even head nun, “on the foremost seat”. The third news is the purity of her renunciation: (1) Her motive relates to karma, cause and effect, and her goal is a good rebirth. (2) She is not becoming a nun for secular reasons such as security, a motive laypeople may accuse *jomos* of having. (3) Instead, she says, living a worldly life (wearing jewelry) won’t help her in the next life (implying that becoming a *jomo*, by removing jewelry among other things, will help). Finally, though the song does not say this, as the head nun, she probably taught the younger nuns. So she was an “ordinary” (see above) good nun and Buddhist master.

Note that the meaning of the nun’s name, Nyima, is “sun”, which could link her to *lamas* who emit rays of light in the songs sung about them, such as the one that follows. It would be interesting to explore the significance of her name in relation to the popularity of her song, although so far I have heard only literal explanations that place Nyima Zangmo in a particular historical context, for example, that she was born to a wealthy family in Leo Village and that her brother Changzod Chenmo was the village head *lama*. It would be difficult to prove that the symbolic resonances of her name are factors in the song’s popularity, insofar as the singers themselves are not aware of these resonances.

The nun *guru* Chosem Dolma (see above) had composed this next song example twenty years earlier and in 1996 sang it for me in Bure Village. The song contains many Tibetan words related to Dharma: *ramnas*, *dasang*, *rinpoche*, *jimlags*, *semcan*, *monlam*.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, though Chosem Dolma had built the temple, invited the 13-year-old boy *lama* to consecrate it, had a small throne built for him (she told me), and greeted him with this song (she also told me), the song does not mention these contributions, focusing instead on the special reincarnate *lama*, Lotsa Rinpoche.<sup>7</sup> Here is an excerpt:

### **Song of Bure temple (excerpt)<sup>8</sup>**

8. “Now the temple is ready. What shall we do about the consecration?
9. We will do the consecration and invite Rinpoche.”
10. We invited the Rinpoche, Lotsa Rinpoche.
11. To invite him we went to Kangra, Dharamsala
12. To the Dialectics School.
13. We bowed down three times
14. At the feet of Lotsa Rinpoche.
15. “O Lotsa Rinpoche, we invite you to Bure.”
16. Rinpoche said, “I will come very happily.”
17. After requesting him to come, we reached Bure monastery.
18. When Rinpoche arrived, we saw a lot of light...
  
22. In front of the Rinpoche there was light like the sun.
23. We requested Rinpoche, “In this remote country,...

27. Please liberate all beings....

29. O Lotsa Rinpoche, please protect us well.”

What do we learn about the *lama* from this song? We see that he was studying at the monastic Institute of Buddhist Dialectics. He is qualified to consecrate a temple and is reputed to be not ordinary but extraordinary. He is a lineage *lama*, the current reincarnation of Lotsa Rinchen Zangbo. He merits a personal invitation and prostrations. Light radiates from him. And he can liberate all beings and protect the villagers. Though not here, in other songs about him and other special *lamas*, such as Yulgyal Tulku and Negi Lama, light also emanates from their mother’s womb. For example, in another song about Lotsa Rinpoche in 1996, three of Upal Devi’s disciples studying in Dharamsala sang this praise to his mother:

The beautiful Yudon, what a womb she had.  
In her womb the sun [i.e., the reincarnate *lama*] arose.<sup>9</sup>

### **Songs reflecting actual lives**

How do these and other nuns’ songs reflect nuns’ actual lives? I suggest that they do this in a number of ways, a few of which are the following<sup>10</sup>:

- 1) There are no female *tulkus* in Kinnaur. Similarly, there are no female *tulkus* in the songs, but there are songs about the contemporary *tulkus* in the longest lineages: Yulgyal Tulku (d.) and Lotsa Rinpoche, as well as about Negi Lama, the first *lama* in a recent lineage.
- 2) Nun *gurus*, even the best educated and best practitioners, the most reputable nuns, are considered “ordinary” nuns, and therefore not sung about, except for Nyima Zangmo, who was also an “ordinary” nun.
- 3) Nuns (called *jomo* in Kinnaur) are all celibate, whether or not they have taken nuns’ vows. This is in contrast to male *lamas*, who are more typically married. Therefore the model, ordinary nun Nyima Zangmo represents celibacy and renunciation, but the extraordinary male *lamas* of the songs do not generally represent celibacy and renunciation.
- 4) Buddhist women in Kinnaur are more devoted than men (many of whom follow a form of local Hinduism), and are especially devoted to the reincarnate *lamas*, who are all male. Therefore, their songs praise male *lamas*.
- 5) Perhaps most importantly, the songs nuns sing teach basic Buddhism. And so by composing and singing the songs for their disciples, Kinnauri nuns are teaching basic Buddhism and thereby demonstrating themselves to be Buddhist women masters.

### **IV. Conclusion: Why nuns don’t sing about nuns**

Why don’t nuns sing about nuns? The issue is complex, but I would argue that it is because there are different modes of being Buddhist masters in Kinnaur—and in Tibetan Buddhism—both in songs (as seen above) and in actual lives. Nun *gurus* such as Chosem Dolma and Upal Devi and most male *gurus* are ordinary. But reincarnate

*lamas (tulkus)* are extraordinary. I asked a Kinnauri monk and university professor, Ramesh Chandra Negi, how Gampopa's levels applied to *lamas*. He answered that most masters are the "first level teacher" (ordinary). The second level, *bodhisattva*, "can see emptiness directly. So this is very difficult." The last two levels are "beyond the world." Of the Nirmanakaya master (level 3), "Buddha Shakyamuni is the best example. And in the same way, if *tulkus* are real [!], then they are also in this category. In this way, Lotsa and all the *tulkus* can be included in this category" (personal communication 2013). In songs, ordinary nuns (apart from Nyima Zangmo) are not the focus, but then ordinary *lamas* are rarely sung about and then only in their own village area (e.g., Kangyur Lama of Ribba Village, whose special achievement was to bring the multi-volume Kangyur from Tibet to Ribba, and Lama Sonam Dupke of Lippa Village, whose courtship is the object of songs).<sup>11</sup>

Earlier I asked another Kinnauri professor why nuns don't sing about nuns. He answered that it was because there are no famous nuns in Kinnaur, which I took to mean that all Kinnauri nuns are ordinary. Then I asked a *jomo* why nuns don't sing about Spello Jomo, who was the best known scholar-practitioner among the *jomos* in Kinnaur until her death in 1996. She answered, "Because she was an ordinary nun," and added, "Laywomen would sing about us if we broke our vows" (see, for example, the Song of Sonam Dupke, endnote 11).

More than a few questions remain. Why is "The Song of Nyima Zangmo" so popular in Kinnaur? But also, why do nuns sing only one song about a nun (and that one is understated)? Why does the only song praising a renunciant focus on a nun and not on a monk or celibate *lama*? Perhaps as Thapar (1978) said, renunciation is a "counter-culture", and a threat to social norms. Perhaps in Kinnaur, praising a *lama's* renunciation might seem to be a criticism of most other *lamas* and *tulkus* who are married and not celibate. Perhaps Nyima Zangmo and her pure renunciation are powerful enough to encompass all the other ordinary renunciants in Kinnaur too, both *jomos* and *lamas*.

Another reason may be her name, Nyima Zangmo, which is Tibetan for "sun" and "kindness (feminine)", that is, "Kind Lady Sun". It is possible that on an unconscious and symbolic level, this meaning of her name links her to songs about reincarnate *lamas*, whose bodies emit rays of light and whose mothers' wombs are filled with light ("sunrise in the womb") during the reincarnate *lama's* birth. In this case, Nyima Zangmo would represent on a deeper level not only ordinary but also extraordinary masters, not only celibate renunciants, but also non-celibate *lamas* and their mothers. This is a theory that would explain more forcefully the popularity of "The Song of Nyima Zangmo" all over Kinnaur. Yet it would be difficult to verify this interpretation and this deeper unconscious meaning, since the singers-composers of the song do not seem to be aware of it, and so far have only told me that the song is about an ordinary nun.

Whatever the case, in Nyima Zangmo's song, *jomo* singers do not claim any extraordinary signs for her, but at the same time, they perform again and again this song of a model nun, someone like themselves, in loud and clear voices. And from their *ordinary* Buddhist women masters—Chosem Dolma, Upal Devi, Hirmal, Spello Jomo, and other typical and highly respected village nun *gurus*—*jomo* disciples (in Gampopa's words) continue "receiving the light of their teachings and shining it on the path" (1998: 72).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>A *geshe* degree is the monastic equivalent of the Ph.D. and is awarded after a monk or nun has studied for many years (typically twenty years or more) and, at the end of this time, has passed a series of examinations over the course of several years. Only the best monastic students are eligible to sit for the *geshe* exams, and these exams and the degree itself have only been available to women for a few years. For example, Kinnauri nuns at Jamyang Choeling Institute in Dharamsala have been taking their *geshe* exams for several years. When they complete their fourth and final set of exams in 2016, they will be part of the first group of Tibetan Buddhist nuns to obtain the degree, apart from the very first nun awarded the degree in 2011, Venerable Kelsang Wangmo.

<sup>2</sup>Earlier and more detailed versions of Chosem Dolma and Upal Devi's life stories are told in LaMacchia 2008. Their photos appear both there and in the video "Buddhist Women Masters of Kinnaur: Gurus, Disciples, Modern Curriculum, and Traditional Songs" at the link <http://youtu.be/8x8oW4fvBLs> (LaMacchia 2013a).

<sup>3</sup>Upal Devi died at the end of 2012. She was about 80 years old.

<sup>4</sup>Negi Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen (also called Khunu Lama) was a highly respected scholar, writer, and teacher in Tibet and India and had western disciples too. Khunu means Kinnauri and Negi is a common last name in Kinnaur. LaMacchia 2008: 194–95.

<sup>5</sup>For Kinnauri language transcription, see LaMacchia 2008: 263.

<sup>6</sup>Defined as follows: *ramnas*, consecration; *dasang*, monastic college; *rinpoche*, title for high *lama*; *jimlags*, blessing; *semcan*, sentient beings; and *monlam*, prayer.

<sup>7</sup>Interestingly, about fifteen years ago, Lotsa Rinpoche built and has since maintained a nunnery in Ponda Village in Kinnaur, within walking distance of Chosem Dolma's village (Bure). Here, nuns can study a modern monastic curriculum (of Tibetan grammar, Buddhist texts, philosophy, logic and debate, English, and other subjects).

<sup>8</sup>For the complete song transcription and translation, see LaMacchia 2008: 235.

<sup>9</sup>The three nun singers were from Kanum Village in central Kinnaur. They belonged to Gaden Choeling nunnery in McLeod Ganj (Dharamsala), and their names were Thupten Choezing, Tenzin Nangsal, and Tenzin Tsono.

<sup>10</sup>Note that these comments are based on more than thirty Kinnauri language songs recorded by me between 1995 and 2013. See LaMacchia 2007, 2013a, 2013b, and 2014.

<sup>11</sup>For example, in the Song of Sonam Dupke (sung and recorded for me by laywomen of Ropa Village in Kinnaur), about a *lama* of Lippa Village, the *lama* courts his cousin, who was a *jomo*, a celibate nun. Though *lamas* can marry and still remain *lamas*, if *jomos* marry, they cannot remain *jomos*.

Received: 20 January 2015 Accepted: 23 March 2016

Published online: 09 May 2016

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