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# *Journal of Religious Culture*

## *Journal für Religionskultur*

Ed. by / Hrsg. Von Edmund Weber  
Institute for Irenics / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik  
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

ISSN 1434-5935- © E.Weber – E.Weber@em.uni-frankfurt.de

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No. 27-11 (1999)

The Life of Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche  
(1865-1951)

By

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Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche was presumably born in 1865 and died in 1951 and was one of the most famous female religious masters in traditional Tibet. Among her various religious roles were those of pilgrim, professional singer of manis (mani pa), healer, a messenger from the land of the dead (*‘das log*), yogini, nun, lineage-holder, visionary, performer of miracles (*sid-dha*), emanation, treasure-finder, religious teacher and head of a nunnery. In short, she had all the signs and charisma of a holy person. She was popularly known as Jetsun or Ani Lochen (A ne Lo chen), and among her several other names Rigdzin Chönyi Sangmo (Rig ’dzin chos nyid bzang mo) was frequently used.

The main textual source regarding Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche’s life is her autobiography (271 folios). Lochen was repeatedly requested by her disciples to tell her life-story, but only in 1937, when she was requested by Drubchen Dawa Dorje Rinpoche (Grub chen Zla ba rdo rje rin po che), whom she recognized as the reincarnation of her root-lama Pema Gyatso (Padma rgya mtsho, 1829-1889/90), did she consent. Although she started telling her life-story in 1937, she abandoned the project and apparently did not take it up again until about twelve years later, in 1949, when she again was requested by Drubchen Dawa Dorje and four named disciples. Lochen told the story of her life up to the 25th day of the 11th month of 1949. The nun-teacher Thinlay (rGan ‘Phrin las) wrote the draft and it was completed by Dawa Dorje Rinpoche.

Lochen’s autobiography is oral in character, she started telling her story when she was eighty-four years old, and although events are chronologically ordered, she sometimes goes back and forth between geographical areas and incidents and the editors were not always able to arrange episodic narrations in the order of their occurrence. By and large, indications of time and dates are haphazard or for the most part lacking. Occasionally she tells us how old she is, of

the death of a famous lama or of an historical event and these sparse references give us pegs on which to fasten a fragmentary historical reconstruction. Most dates given here are thus highly tentative.

In the hagiographic genre, certain themes (*topoi*) often recur, resulting in some biographies being very stereotype, containing little specific information about the person in question. In the case of Ani Lochen's autobiography we certainly find similar themes (*topoi*) as those elaborated in many Tibetan biographies. There are numerous examples in biography; there were miraculous signs at Lochen's birth, she grew faster than ordinary children, was drawn towards religion exceptionally early, had supernatural abilities in learning and could communicate with and pacify wild animals. Like most Tibetan autobiographies the important themes in Lochen's biography are the pilgrimages, accounts of meritorious religious deeds such as the building of religious monuments, the printing of sacred texts, the encounters with important lamas, religious teachings received and given, meditational retreats, visions and miracles. As such Lochen's biography follows the standard pattern. Nevertheless, the degree of individuality is high in Lochen's life-story, particularly in the description of her childhood. While in the second half of the biography, when Lochen is established as a religious master, the biography conforms more to that of other religious masters. The last part of the text is more of a summary of important religious teachings received and given.

The closeness to the main actor of this hagiography is due I believe, to several factors. First of all it is an autobiography and thus a first-hand source to a woman's life, no matter how idealized. Many sacred biographies in Tibet have been put into writing only long after the death of the saint in question, and these biographies tend to be very mythologized. Secondly, our biography is told from the mouth of a person outside the scholastic and monastic milieu, hence its oral, straightforward style. I tend to believe that a biography written in a scholastic environment would be subjected to more censorship and to a higher degree be molded to fit a standard pattern. Furthermore, since the text gives the story of the life of a woman, it does not tell of sanctity already achieved in former lives, so typical of most Tibetan male biographies. Women in the Tibetan tradition were hardly acknowledged as incarnations of highly realized beings. Being born a woman has, in Buddhism generally, but also in Tibet, been conceived as an inferior birth.

Ani Lochen spent the first forty years of her life on pilgrimage in the Himalayas. She covers large geographical and cultural areas and her closest relations during the first half of her life were her Sherpa mother from Yolmo in Nepal, her father from the noble Kheme (Khe smad) family in the Chongye Valley in Central Tibet and a Lama originating from Amdo. At the age of c. forty Ani Lochen settles more or less permanently at Shugseb, near Longchen Rabjampa's (Klong chen rab 'byams pa, 1308-1363) cave at Gangri Thökar (Gangs ri thod dkar) south of Lhasa. From then on she only sporadically leaves for shorter pilgrimages and now she devotes her life to meditation and teaching.

#### CHILDHOOD PILGRIMAGES WITH HER PARENTS 1865-1877

##### TSOPEMA

Lochen was born at Tsopema/Rewalsar in India presumably in 1865, but before her birth, her mother had a vision of her deceased husband, the Drukpa Lama Kaliwa ('Brug pa Bla ma Kha li ba), telling her to wander without direction through the kingdom (*rgyal khams*). The mother was apprehensive as she did not know other than her native language, but decided to exchange her household-life with that of an itinerant pilgrim. For the Nepalese mother, impor-

tant places of pilgrimage were Kailash, Muktinath, Tsopema and Gasha Khandroling (Lahoul).

It is interesting to note that the mother carried stones on her back to or around Tang Phagpa (Tang 'Phags pa) and Gasha Phagpa (Ga sha 'Phags pa), statues of Avalokiteshvara in Lahoul, in order to become pregnant with a son. The stones carried on her back are referred to as *bu rdo*, 'boy stones' or 'son stones.' Thereupon the mother had various visions and dreams, miraculous things happened and she was certain that she would give birth to a lama-tulku or a fine boy (*bu legs pa*).

The daughter is born at Tsopema in 1865. This holy lake and nearby mountain(s) are connected with Guru Rinpoche and Mandharava. For several years Lochen and her family stay at Tsopema during winter and at the Kanika (Ka ni ka) stupa in Sani Monastery in Sanskar during summer, and if the family had a home in Lochen's childhood, it would be Tsopema. Lochen's family roams the valleys of Lahul, Spiti, Kulu, Rampur and Sanskar. They visit the Garwal area of Uttar Pradesh where she says that the Buddhist religion did not flourish, and they go to Ladakh to see religious dance ('*cham*) and make pilgrimages to the Vairocana murals of Alchi (Ab ji). They also proceed to Tibet proper, to Guge, which is described as a place where Buddhism thrived, to Barga Tasam (Bar ga rta zam) to recite mani and to pay homage to the Avalokiteshvara statues in Khorchag ('Khor chags/Khu char) south of Taklakot. The mother also takes her daughter to her birthplace in Yolmo north of Kathmandu and they proceed through Mustang and Kyirong visiting sites of pilgrimage on their way.

From her birth Lochen was carried on the backs of her parents, later she rode a goat, occasionally a donkey, but mostly she moved about on foot. In her childhood she walked barefoot, sometimes with bark from the Somaratsa tree tied around her sore feet. Steep cliffs, narrow paths, shaky bridges and violent streams were the main physical obstacles during her childhood travels. She almost slipped into abysses more than once and nearly drowned thrice. Every time she says that miracles saved her. I am amazed that Lochen not once, throughout the biography, mentions the icing winds and the low temperatures during winter and how terribly cold she must have been sleeping in tents, grass-huts and caves along their many pilgrimage-routes.

The main traumas during Lochen's childhood pilgrimages, however, seem rather to have been of a psychological nature, caused by an unpredictable, violent and often drunk father. On every other page we hear of the little girl's constant anxiety and fear. Although he initially doubts his daughter's sacred nature and wants to abandon her, the father keeps sending Lochen to lamas to educate her. The father is eager to make his daughter a professional *maöipa*, partly it seems, for her to make an income. The girl has a beautiful voice and is a great success at her childhood religious vocation, but the father violates norms for decent behaviour and people in Sanskar are outraged when he made the little girl dance for food and clothes. He is loosely attached to his family, he comes and goes with various women, and eventually the parents split up. Despite his dubious character however, the father has a strong religious quest and like Lochen's mother, his need to visit sacred shrines and holy people seems insatiable. We hear that he later reappears when Lochen is in meditation-retreat near Sangri (Zangs ri) in the mid-1890s and the father eventually settles at Shugseb, the nunnery/monastery which eventually became his daughter's permanent residence.

The mother, with whom Lochen had an exceptionally close relationship, is positively described throughout the *rnam thar*. Poverty was a constant threat that she tried to mend by collecting berries and seeds, she fries bamboo shoots in oil pressed from bear excrement, she

works here and there as an agricultural tenant and shepherd and by selling off her jewelry. The mother never doubts her daughter's sacred nature and seems to have had great ambitions on her behalf ever since her birth and escorts her around the pilgrimage-sites of the Himalayas. She even runs away with her daughter when a young man wants to marry her in the hills of Nepal as she fears that in-marrying with the "hill-people" would spoil her religious career.

## THE RELIGIOUS MILIEU

The religious orientation of Lochen's parents seems to have been a mixture of Nyingma and Drukpa Kagyu. This prepared the ground for the daughter's later choice of a root-lama practicing religion according to the Nyingma tradition. Moreover, the cult of Avalokiteshvara seems to have been the main core of Lochen's and her mother's religious practice.

In Spiti, Lochen Rinpoche meets a mainpa who tells her that Avalokiteshvara is the mightiest among gods and that Lochen herself is Drolma or Machig (Ma cig lab sgron, 1049-1155). He praises her voice and tells her that her melody goes back to the *manipas* of the past, especially to Ratnabhadra. Subsequently he teaches the girl several biographies, among them that of Nangsa Obum (sNang sa 'od 'bum), and she learns them by heart. While in Ladakh the father takes her to Tashi Namgyal (bKra shis rnam rgyal), the head lama of 'the king of Ladakh,' with whom she studied writing and the biographies of 'das log Khampa A drung (Khams pa A khrung, b.c. 1508), GyalpoYulha Legpa Döndrup (rGyal po gyu lha legs pa'i don grub) and others. Here she is given a religious painting (*thang ka*) and a book, part of the ritual paraphernalia of the mainpa.

All through her childhood pilgrimages, from the age of six, the young Lochen encourages others to the recitation of manis in a beautiful voice. In Ladakh people were in awe because *Dharma* was preached by a child still sucking milk from her mother and everyone wept from compassion. Once, presumably in Spiti, she tells us that a crowd of about 1000 gathered to listen. Her most prominent lay patron, Khampa Tashi, erected a throne for her in front of which he offered a mandala. Once in Rampur (Ram spur) she is invited by the king who had heard of her fame. She is placed on a high throne and requested to encourage to the recitation of *mani* for a large crowd. Because Lochen was so small and not visible in the crowd, she had to carry a long cane in her hand. She also recites mani for 'the Ladakhi king' and became his favorite and she says that faith was generated in everyone who heard her.

Lochen conceives of her childhood activities as one consisting in propagating the Doctrine and spreading the worship of Avalokiteshvara. She says that she planted the seeds of liberation in the minds of all the people she met, heard, remember and touched in the valleys of Lahoul, Spiti, Kulu and Rampur. Wherever she sings manis, Lochen is offered gifts in abundance, such as food, woolen and cotton cloth and sometimes silver. In nomad areas she is occasionally given sheep and goats and these are brought along on their pilgrimages. We get acquainted with the "intelligent" female goat Lhakhen (Ra ma La mkhan) which Lochen rides when small. Animals brought on pilgrimage accumulate merit too, perfectly consistent with the Buddhist conception of existence. Ransomed sheep are called *tshe lug* (life-sheep) in Central Tibet, and there are other observations of *tshe lug* with bells around their necks belonging to "the entourage" of *manipas*.

The *manipas* thus seem to be a group of professional reciters whose repertoire not only contained the *mantra* of Avalokiteshvara, but also autobiographies of saints and particularly of 'das log. They also taught basic religious doctrines and lead itinerant lives. Jetsun Lochen informs us that her title 'Lochen' has nothing to do with the great 'lotsavas' (i.e. translators) of

the past, but is rather the title for humble mani-beggars' in Western Tibetan dialects. It is also clear that *manipas* and reciters of '*das log*' belong to both genders, although it seems that women predominate. Lochen Hangdra who teaches Ani Lochen the skills of the *manipa* describes himself as 'nothing but a poor beggar' and this is also Lochen's self-conception and how she is described by others.

#### PILGRIMAGE WITH HER MASTER PEMA GYATSO, 1877-1890

The time spent with her root-lama Pema Gyatso sets the next stage for Lochen's pilgrimages and her religious vocation. Pema Gyatso was probably born in Amdo in 1829, and he was a personal disciple of the famous Shabkar Tsogdrug Rangdrol (Zhabs dkar tsogs drug rang grol, 1781-1851) who was firmly based in the Nyingma tradition, but strongly influenced by 'the Eclectic' '*Ris med*'- movement.

#### KYIRONG

Lochen met her lama in Kyirong in the late 1870s, where he stayed near Okar Drak (O dkar brag) with his disciples. Here the mother and daughter settle in one of the numerous caves nearby.

#### NUPRI

We do not know how long Lochen stays in Kyirong, but from the context it seems to be about a year. After Kyirong the group proceeds to the He or Heri (He ri) hermitage in Nubri. Lochen states that by Heri there is a hidden valley blessed by Guru Rinpoche which resembles Tsari. In this hermitage, which was situated on the face of a mountain, Lochen did a sealed meditation retreat for three years. One of the religious practices she focused on was a Guru sadhana of Milarepa. The hidden valley (*sbas yul*) mentioned by Lochen is probably the one called Kyimolung (sKyid mo lung) situated in a side-valley to the east in Kutang and described in more detail by Michael Aris (1975,1979). According to Aris, Milarepa was the first historical figure associated with this hidden valley

#### MUSTANG/THAK

Pema Gyatso and his followers proceed to Thak, and due to various incidents here, Pema Gyatso finds Lochen to be self-conceited and punishes her by stamping 'dog' (*khyi*) with a hot iron on her forehead. Thereupon she is banished from the group and sent to Pokhara. Ani Lochen is filled by remorse and grief; she misses her lama terribly and soon returns to Thak and is reunited with her lama and his group.

#### KAILASH

Pema Gyatso received a message from his lama Dharma Senge, the crazy lama from Kham, that Shabkar's incarnation was heading towards Central Tibet and Kailash and he tells Pema Gyatso to go there to meet him. The group set out for the holy Moutain, they circumambulate the lake Manasarovar and visit several of the monasteries along the way. The students start a meditation retreat in Dzutrul Phug (rDzu 'phrul phug) where they practice yogic breathing, they eat nettles to survive so that their urine turns blue and taste tea for the first time. Not familiar with tea, Ani Lochen and her mother boil the leaves, throw out the juice and eat the tea-leaves believing they are vegetables. Apparently Shabkar's incarnation never turned up and the group returns to Nubri and stay there for some years.

## THE KATHMANDU VALLEY, LABCHI AND DINGRI

When Lochen is c. twenty years old Pema Gyatso and his group proceed to the Kathmandu valley where they white-wash the three stupas and print their guide-books (*dkar chag*). Then they go towards Dingri, and stop some months at the famous Milarapa retreats, Potinyima Dzong (Po ti nyi ma rdzong) and they visit a number of other sites connected to Milarepa in this area. Most of the disciples are sent on pilgrimage to Labchi (La phyi) while Lochen herself heads towards Dingri Langkor (Ding ri glang 'khor), the residence of Padampa (Pha dam pa, d.1117), and Tsibri (rTsi b ri). Lochen says that in all the directions in this district, Shabkar's image protruded on the stupas and even the *maöi*-walls (*man thang*) were full (of his image).

## CENTRAL TIBET

Thereupon Pema Gyatso and his group head towards Lhasa, via Sakya, Tashilhunpo and Gyantse. On the 22th day of the ninth month, the day of Buddha's descent from the gods, possibly in 1887, they reach Lhasa, where they have an audience with the young 13. Dalai Lama (1876-1933). Now Pema Gyatso wants to find a permanent residence for his group and sends Lochen off to search for it. The Padmasambhava cave Sangyang Drag (Zangs yag brag) on Riwo Tsenga, Tibet's Wutaishan, sacred to Manjushri attracts their attention, and the lama settles there for long meditation retreats. Also Gangri Thökar, connected to Longchen Rabjampa, is considered suitable.

## WOKA/LOYUL

While Pema Gyatso is in meditation retreat at Sangyang Drak, Lochen wanders around and proceeds, apparently alone, on pilgrimage and to beg, as far east as Woka ('Ol dkar) and Loyul (lHo yul). She also goes south of the Tsangpo, to E-yul, to the Shagyang (bShag byang) estate. She returns to Sangyang Drag and alternates between this hermitage and Lhasa for some time. Shabkar Rinpoche's incarnation arrives in Lhasa (c.1888-1889) and is invited to Sangyang Drag where he stays some months. From him, Lochen receives empowerment and oral transmission of *rTa phag yid bzhin nor bu* and the complete volumes of Shabkar's writings. The religious teachings received at this occasion were to become crucial for her later religious practice and her status as a Nyingma master. On his way to Lhasa, Pema Gyatso becomes ill from food-poisoning and dies on the 17th of the second month, possibly in 1889 or 1890.

## THE GROUP

The group of disciples gathering around Pema Gyatso in Kyirong are referred to by Lochen as religious companions (*mched grogs*), which seems to refer to the immediate group of fellow disciples, but also to a larger group of adherents of Shabkar. It is difficult to estimate their number, but Lochen speaks of them as many. She names about twenty, but the group must have been considerably larger. They are both men and women, but it appears that the majority was female.

Lochen's description of Pema Gyatso fits very well with what we know about lamas in the Nyingmapa tradition. He is described as humble and clad in ragged sheep-skin and although not explicitly mentioned, we may assume that he kept his hair long, as did his master Shabkar and several of his own disciples. When he stayed in Kyirong in the late 1870s he had a consort, she is mentioned twice, but never by name. Rather than in monasteries and institutions of

learning, the lama stays with his entourage in caves and pilgrim-sites mainly associated with Padmasambhava, Milarepa and Shabkar. He emphasizes meditation and retreat for his students and keeps strict discipline. We never hear of lavish contributions to the lama (like in the case of Shabkar), although large crowds seem to have gathered when he taught. Lochen tells us, slightly exaggerated, that once when he was teaching religion in Nubri, around 100.000 people attended. Pema Gyatso's entourage moved about as a group, occasionally they split up into smaller units to perform meditational retreats, pilgrimages or to beg (*so sbyong*).

When she met her lama, Lochen was clad as a beggar, but after receiving instruction on yoga and breathing-techniques in Thak in the late 1870s and until her ordination as a novice in the early 1890s, her standard outfit was a «single piece of cotton.» She made her yoga outfit, meditation trousers and meditation ribbon, from her mother's bedding which she dyed in the appropriate colour, and she wore a cotton monastic shawl (*gzan*). While in Mustang/Thak word spread rapidly of her qualifications and people were puzzled that one who was so famous looked like an undernourished beggar.

When the group arrived in Lhasa around 1887, she still wore her cotton cloth and had to buy a felt *chuba* from a friend to be allowed an audience with the 13. Dalai Lama (Thubten Gyatso (1876-1933)). During a pilgrimage to Ganden she tells us,

"Because I was wearing only a piece of cotton, it was said that I was a female ascetic (*a tsar mo*) and many people gathered to watch."

It seems that this group of mountain-dwelling hermits was a relatively rare sight around Lhasa and the nearby Gelugpa establishments. We also hear of unconventional behaviour by some of the members of the group. Yamdrok Thrulshig Rinpoche ('Khrul zhid Rin po che), another of Lochen's main lamas, tells her to tie her hair on top of her head and circumambulate the Barkor naked. We also learn that Lochen's friend Ani Tsultrim (A ne Tshul khriims) made prostrations for the preliminary religious practice naked. Apparently Pema Gyatso's disciples were not ordained as we know that the *Vinaya* (i.e. the monastic rules and regulations) contains minute regulations for hiding the body, particularly the female. Lochen always kept her hair long, also after being ordained in the early 1890s. This was also true for at least one of her companions, Ani Changchub (Ane Byang chub), and people gossiped saying they were laywomen in monastic robes.

Lochen was faithful to her root-lama Pema Gyatso until his death, and with him, her religious practices change direction. From being a *manipa* and reciter of '*das log* stories, she now professes a more defined Nyingma orientation. There seems to be no conflict here, all through her life Lochen continues her activities as a *manipa*, but other religious practices are integrated in her repertoire, mainly those of the Nyingma school and its terma tradition with emphasis on *siddha* practices and transmissions of teachings originating from Padmasambhava, Longchen Rabjampa, Shabkar and other great teachers of this religious tradition. The side-stream of *gCod* from Machig Labdron receives special attention all along, which also does Mind-training (*blo sbyong*) with its root in the Kadam/Geluk tradition.

## MOTIVES FOR TRAVELLING

The main purpose of Pema Gyatso's and his retinue's travels was to make connection with places sanctified by great religious masters in the past and to perform prolonged meditations at such "powerful" sites. When Lochen was about fourteen years old, she started a three-year retreat in Nubri and another one at Sangyag Drag at the age of twenty-five. In between she

performed meditations lasting for several months at the time, some were sealed and some performed in total darkness. The lama gave religious instructions to his group and to the general public and Lochen, too, taught and sang manis along her way. They practiced *gCod* at cemeteries and fearful places (*gnyan sa*) to turn back obstacles such as illness and epidemics. This was their explicit purpose for going both to Nubri and Mustang. Once in Nubri we hear that an illness said to have been caused by black magic nearly wiped out the group of fellow devotees. Lochen says that even the dogs turned mad. As they were *gCod pas* called on to cure diseases, we are not surprised that they were infected. In fact illness was conceived as a major threat and we hear of unidentified diseases, fevers and small-pox. Food-poisoning caused her lama's death and nearly took Lochen's and Pema Gyatso's consort's lives. All through the biography long life rituals (*zhabs brtan*), warding off obstacle rituals (*bsun bzlog*) and *gCod* are performed to control sickness believed to be caused by disorder of the elements, inauspicious times, black magic, and various other obstacles.

### LOCHEN'S STATUS

Lochen was harassed during the first phase of her stay with Pema Gyatso, as the self-confidence of this child-manipa who had been celebrated as a saint ever since her birth had to be broken. Despite being physically abused and ostracised by her lama, the young girl stubbornly continues her religious practices. As their relationship develops Ani Lochen becomes Pema Gyatso's closest disciple and she follows him everywhere as his servant. Lochen's physical condition in her youth must have been remarkable. When travelling with Pema Gyatso in Central Tibet in the late 1880s she was called 'the Tantric Lama's donkey.' She states,

"Without fear or embarrassment I carried the burden of the Lama's *tsampa*, the weight of five *khal* of barley, besides mother's and my own luggage, to Lhasa and other places, near and far, day and night, wherever we went."

At another occasion Lochen again talks about her strength and says that she could carry seven loads of sheep (*lug rgyab*), and later, when her mother became sick on a pilgrimage in Yarlung and Chongye in the mid-1890s, Lochen and her nun friend alternately carry her on their backs. No wonder that Lochen's legs fail her after numerous slips on narrow paths with enormous loads on her back.

### INDEPENDENT PILGRIMAGES

After Pema Gyatso's death, Lochen alternately spends the winters in Sangyang Drag and the summers at Gangri Thökar. She is ordained a novice and immediately afterwards sets out on pilgrimage with her friend Changchub. She performs a strict three-year retreat and some shorter meditations at Sangyang Drag before she sets out on a combined begging and pilgrimage tour to Lhoka, possibly in 1894. This trip was to last for several years.

Together with the Lady of Shagyang, Lochen plans to head towards Tsari (possibly in 1896), but they change their minds and go on an extended pilgrimage to the South. They proceed to the holy sites in the Yarlung valley and go to her father's native place Chongye. Thereupon she returns to Lhasa, possibly in 1897/98. The following years she spends at Sangyang Drag where she performs dark meditation, she stays in a cave at Chagpori (*lCags po ri*), goes to Nechung, spends a couple of months in Lhodrag and wanders around in Nyemo. When the Younghusband soldiers arrive in 1903/1904 she collects her things at Sangyang Drag and settles at Shugseb.

During the period after her Lama's death and until she settles permanently at Shugseb, Lochen Rinpoche's religious status is further enhanced. She now combines the role of the recluse and that of the ordained monastic. It was Kham Lama Sangye Tendzin (Bla ma Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin), a personal disciple of Peltrul Dorje Chang (dPal sprul rdo rje 'chang, 1808-1887), who advised her to get ordained. It seems that Lochen now comes more directly under influence of the Gemang (dGe mang) movement from Eastern Tibet, with its emphasis on Ny-ingma monastic scholasticism and the *Vinaya*. Lochen continues, however, to receive impulses from crazy *siddhas* like Thrulshig Rinpoche and Taklung Matrul Rinpoche (sTag lung Ma sprul Rin po che) that pull her in another direction. At times we sense a conflict here and she tries to keep the crazy lamas at a distance, but Lochen herself manifests saintly madness and her mother and friends fear for her sanity. They discuss whether she has acquired the *siddhas* of clairvoyance (*mgon shes*) and the ability to move without hindrances.

As time goes by Lochen also acquires a prominent position among her fellow disciples, and we hear that she sends them here and there. Once when she requests Pema Gyatso for religious teachings, she is placed in the centre while her companions sit around her in a circle. In Lhasa she is asked to read Prajnaparamita in 8000 verses for the noble Lhalu (lHa klu) family and receives a full bucket of grain as fee pr. day. She also functions as house-lama for the Lady Shagyang when on pilgrimage in E-yul in the late 1880s and when Pema Gyatso is seriously ill, she is told by Shabkar's incarnation to perform 'the warding off obstacle rituals' all by herself.

#### ESTABLISHING A NUNNERY AT SHUGSEB, 1904-1933

When the disputes over the custody to the run-down Shugseb monastery are finally resolved, Lochen and her fellow female companions settle here permanently. The first years are filled with hard work as Ani Lochen and her fellows repair the damaged buildings and statues. We hear about struggles of poverty in what was to become one of the larger and most famous nunneries in Tibet. The female hermits continuously go to the villages to ask for alms and they even beg for the butter in the villagers' tea and eat the offering cakes used in temple rituals.

Lochen has close contact with several masters during these years, among them several "crazy *siddhas*," but eventually Lochen's mother hands the responsibility for her daughter's spiritual welfare to Semnyi Dorje Rinpoche. When her mother dies (possibly in the early or mid-1920s), Ani Lochen has a serious depression and wants to take her own life. She is, however, taken care of by Semnyi Lama who advises her to withdraw for prolonged meditation retreats. During her time of seclusion, several important religious masters and disciples come to see her, but are unable to obtain audiences and Semnyi Rinpoche is accused of hiding Ani Lochen away.

During her long retreats, Lama Semnyi Rinpoche takes charge of the day to day affairs at Shugseb and when old, he selects Ogyen Chödrom (O rgyan chos 'dzom), another great female adept, as his successor. She is, however, taken as the consort of a lama and withdraws to a cave on Gangri Thökar, but dies shortly afterwards (c. 1933). Eventually the lama allows Lochen to end her retreat and to teach, and there were many, both from the Lhasa aristocracy and ordinary people, who came to see her for religious instruction, empowerments and initiations, for death rituals and general advice.

## ANI LOCHEN, THE MASTER AT SHUGSEB, 1933-1951

After Lama Semnyi's death, Lochen intends to leave Shugseb to settle at Jomo Khareg (Jo mo mkha' reg), a holy place in Tsang connected to Yeshe Tsogyal.. She is however, persuaded to stay to take responsibility for the nunnery and by now about 300 women stay here permanently to practice religion and, in addition, Lochen says she has many thousand disciples. In the early 1930s Lochen Rinpoche advises the female recluses to take formal ordination as novices and thus the nunnery-hermitage is further institutionalized.

At this stage of her life, Lochen Rinpoche seems to feel greater self-confidence and she recognizes the reincarnations of both Semnyi Rinpoche and Ogyen Chödrom. She brings the incarnation of Semnyi Rinpoche to Shugseb where she personally teaches him and Jigme Dorje Rinpoche is presently the master at Shugseb. Lochen Rinpoche's status as a religious master is recognized by some of the most influential clerics of the day. Both the regent Reting Rinpoche (1912-1947) and the King of Lingsang (gLing tshangs) arrives c.1939/1940 and Lochen Rinpoche exchanges religious teachings with these two masters. Also the young incarnations of Taklung Matrul and Thrulshig Rinpoche come to Shugseb to renew religious teachings transmitted to Lochen by their own former incarnations. In the 1940s, the 16th Karmapa (Rang byung Rig pa'i rDo rje, 1924-1981), Shechen Rabjam Rinpoche (Zhe chen rab 'byams Rin po che) and the father of the 14th Dalai Lama come to see her. Disciples who become very close to Lochen Rinpoche in her old days were Chogdre Dorje Dradul (lCog bkra s rDo rje dgra 'dul) and his wife Lady Namgyel Drölkar (lCam rNam rgyal sgrol dkar) who arrived in Shugseb in 1939. Among prominent nuns, Tsering Drölkar (Tshe ring sgrol dkar) from the Taring family and Gen Thinley, who died in Drapchi prison after the Chinese occupation, deserve to be mentioned.

Drubchen Dawa Dorje Rinpoche from Kham was invited to Shugseb in the end of the 1930s and he stayed there for shorter and longer periods until Lochen Rinpoche's death. He is called for when Lochen is sick and nurses her affectionally and is recognized by Lochen as the reincarnation of her first root-lama Pema Gyatso. There were many who requested Lochen Rinpoche to tell her life-story, but it was Drubchen Rinpoche and Gen Thinley who were granted the privilege to record it. The autobiography ends in 1949, two years before Lochen Rinpoche's death.

## GENDER RELATED ISSUES

Throughout her life Lochen Rinpoche has a strong connection to saintly women of the past and highly qualified female religious specialists of the present. Her first encounter with a great female spiritual master was the nun Lobsang Drolma (bLo bzang sgrol ma) from Amdo. She became the head lama for the king of Mandi because she was said to have secured the sonless king an heir. It was Lobsang Drolma who prophesied about Lochen's spiritual connection with Pema Gyatso and Shabkar. In the mid-1880s Lochen meets one of the Sakya Jetsunmas and is greatly impressed and she has close contact with the Ragshag Jetsunmas (Rag shag rje btsun) in Lhasa. In the early 1890s Lochen goes twice to meet Gyagari Dorje Phamo (rGya gar ri rDo rje phag mo, fl.1886-1890) at Gangthö and wants to stay with her.

The connection to "the female" is clearly manifested during Ani Lochen's independent pilgrimages starting in the 1890s. Now, she increasingly plays her own role as a female hermit-nun and there are no male lamas to pull her their ways. She seeks out pilgrimage sites connected to holy women like Yeshe Tsogyal and Machig Labdron and stops over at nunneries and associate with nuns, e.g. in Lab in E-yul she stays in a nunnery which followed Shabkar's

tradition called Gongla Lame (dGongs bla bla med). Her main patron during this time is a noble woman, the Lady of Shagyang.

Because she is herself a woman with great spiritual power, she is approached to perform rituals to goddesses. When on pilgrimage to the talking Tara at Dophung Chökor (rDo phung chos 'khor), she is requested to recite Tara prayers for a week and is offered grain as payment. When on pilgrimage in Dragyul, she arrives at a place where a lama is making a Khandro statue and Lochen's arrival is regarded as a good omen. Lochen obviously has some special connection to Sangri Kharmar (Zangs ri mkhar dmar), famous as the residence of Machig Labdron. She can move miraculously to a large rock in the middle of Tsangpo which had auspicious signs connected to Machig. Because of her "spiritual closeness" with Machig, she also starts a major building project at Sangri Kharmar, a *maöi*-wall around the Tsuklakhang, a very meritorious activity it seems, because gods, lamas and people in the Sangri area are said to assist willingly and the auspiciousness of the mani-building is so great that it produces rain in this arid area.

As Lochen's fame spreads she is also called on to perform specialized religious rituals, e.g. to read *Bardo Thödol* (*Bar do thos grol*) for the dying abbot at Sangri. At Sangri Kharmar she is called to perform a ritual (*chang bu zhabs rim*) that no one else there knew how to perform and a master of *Zhiche* (*Zhi byed*), Nedo Chöpa (gNas mdo gcod pa), maintains that Lochen is the wisdom dakini Machig Labdron and as such she becomes known to everyone present. Ever since she was a little girl, people has connected her to the great Machig Labdron and thought of her as an emanation. In the second half of her life, her status as an incarnation is confirmed by several great masters like Matrul Rinpoche, Gangshar Rinpoche (Gang shar Rin po che), the King of Lingsang and the 16th Karmapa. Finally Lochen Rinpoche herself comes to believe that she is an emanation of the great Machig Labdron.

There thus seems to be a number of specific religious functions and roles to fill for a woman religious practitioner and we see that femaleness is considered an asset in certain situations. It appears that the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism has greater scope and more willingly accepts female religious talent through their close association to what may be termed "folk-religion." Special roles for women, like the *manipa* and the *'das log* are integrated into the religious repertoire as well as women's important roles as hermits and consorts.

Apart from the few female role-models Lochen Rinpoche was able to identify with, all the Rinpoches, lamas, *siddhas*, abbots and mediums she came across on her pilgrimages were men, and we get a definite impression that Lochen's way to mastership was not an easy one. At times, her female gender was a strong impediment. Once when Lochen has visions (*dgongs gter*) of ritual texts in Thak and a local deity supplies her with birch bark and ink so that she could write it all down, the male teacher Chösang kicked her head and burned her writings telling her that such compositions were not allowed for her. Another time in Lhasa, monks from Kyetshel (sKyed tshal) Monastery in Sikkim were jealous because she functioned as the house-lama for the noble Lhalu family and they tried to defeat her in a debate. Crestfallen they have to admit that she was indeed learned. When Dharma Senge was dying, his disciples did not allow her an audience, nor did they hand over to her the religious objects Dharma Senge bequeathed her. When she wanted to offer gold for his statue, the physicians at Mentsikhang (sMan rtsis khang) did not accept it saying that her gold was of an inferior quality. When Lochen wanted to settle at Shugseb together with Semnyi Rinpoche and fellow female companions at the turn of the century, they were told that only the lama and his attendant were allowed to stay.

Lochen is not concerned with issues like "the exclusion of women" and seems to accept this as an established fact, although she mentions it here and there. At several of the larger monasteries she visited, such as Tashilunpo, Gyantse, Ganden and Tsechogling only her lama and his male companions were allowed to stay, while Lochen and her 'ani' friends had to find alternative housing. When at Sangri in the mid-1890s, she wanted to enter the temple of a protective deity (the Sangri *btsan khang*), but was thrown out by the caretaker who told her that women were not allowed to enter. The question of exclusion of women at sites of pilgrimage needs more research, but there are numerous indications that women were considered inferior religious practitioners and that they may even bring defilement to holy sites. This pertinent remark on gender made by the Nyingma master Kathog Situ Rinpoche may serve as an illustration. Kathog Situ visited one of Lochen's and her companions' main site for meditation, Sangyag Drag in 1918-19, he describes the Padmasambhava caves, the statues and the surroundings in great detail, but concludes,

(...)«there are all these wonderful and splendid sites, but due to (all the) nuns staying there the area is not a suitable/happy place.»

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#### ABBREVIATIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

*rJe btsun rnam thar. Autobiography of the Shug gseb rje btsun rig 'dzin chos nyid bzang mo. Gangs shug ma ni lo chen rig 'dzin chos nyid bzang mo'i rnam par thar pa rnam mkhyen bde ster.*

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*TJ = The Tibet Journal*

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