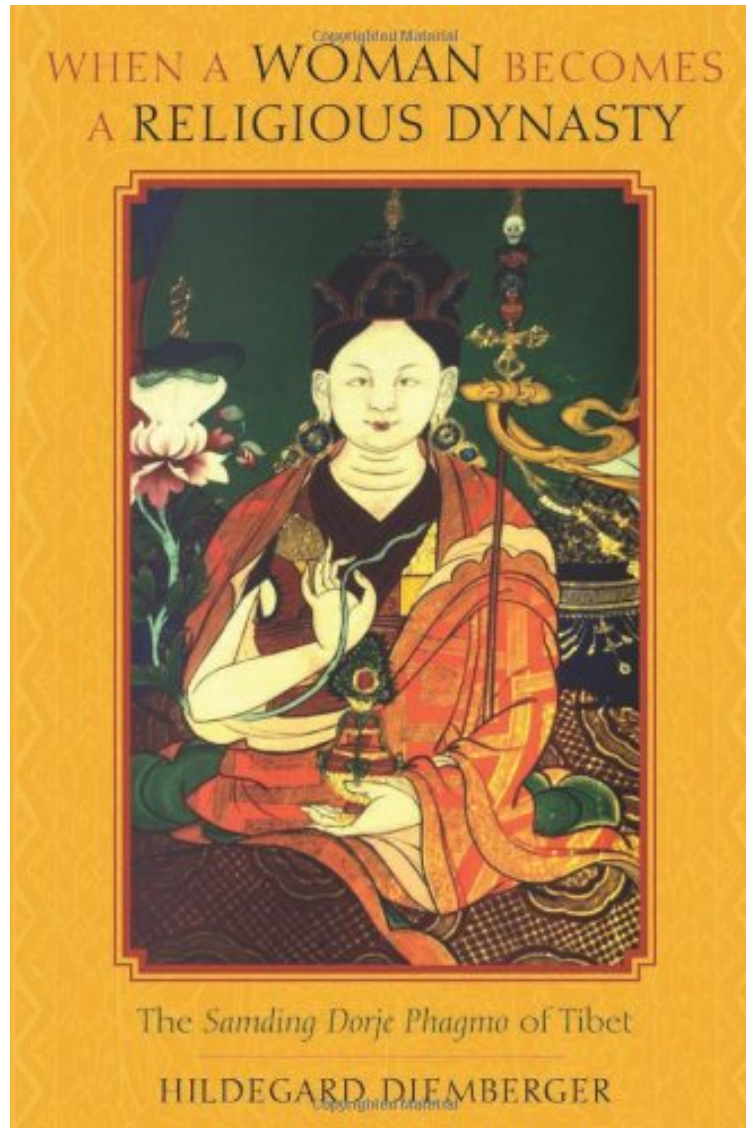


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When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty: The Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet

Hildegard Diemberger Ph.D.

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#1058259 in Books Diemberger Hildegard 2014-06-10 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.10 x 1.00 x 6.201, 1.35 #File Name: 0231143214416 pages When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty The Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet | File size: 56.Mb

Hildegard Diemberger Ph.D. : When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty: The Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty: The Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet:

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Well-researched, fascinating book. By Jonathan

Homrighausen Diemberger's dense and well-researched book explores the life of Chokyi Dronma, the first and most important lineage of female lamas in Tibet. Some background: Tibetan Buddhism is unique in that its lineages - leaders of schools of Buddhism, abbots of monasteries, etc. - are not done by choosing a successor or by passing the power onto one's child, but by finding the reincarnation of the lama who has died. This centuries-old practice is how, for example, we got the Dalai Lama. According to Tibetan belief, he is the fourteenth reincarnation of the same bodhisattva, in this case an incarnation of the celestial bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Like any other mode of passing on authority, lineage by reincarnation is subject to manipulation. Diemberger, an anthropologist at Cambridge, focuses on how these politics - especially gender politics - play out in the biography of fifteenth-century lineage founder Chokyi Dronma. Chokyi Dronma herself was a Tibetan princess who, after the death of her only child, left behind her husband and his despised family to pursue a life devoted to the dharma. At first her husband would not let her leave, but she shaved her head - some say she scalped herself - and her possibly-insane devotion persuaded him. In time she came to be recognized as an incarnation of Dorje Pagmo (aka Vajrayogini), one of the most important female deities in Mahayana Buddhism. She studied under lama Chogye Namgyal and used her great royal wealth to act as a great patron of the arts and sciences during the time of what Diemberger calls a "Tibetan Renaissance." Soon after her death, her disciple Thangtong Gyalpo wrote her biography. Diemberger argues that he wrote it to legitimate the search for her successor, as the biography is full of references to how Chokyi Dronma was like Vajrayogini and how her rebirth lineage was prophesied during her life. Most tantalizingly, the end of the book is lost. Dronma was about to ascend Tsari Mountain, a holy site forbidden to women, which leads Diemberger to suggest that the end was censored because it flouted religious convention. Somehow I've ended up reading a pile of books about women and religion this year. I'm beginning to see some commonalities in how women are depicted in the three religious traditions I am reading around. First - the theme of insanity. Dronma had to feign insanity to make others take her religious devotion seriously. This seems to be something women have to do in different religious traditions, perhaps because their agency would not be taken seriously otherwise. When St. Jerome writes about his patron Paula the Elder, he cites her abandonment of her children - surely insane - as proof of her great devotion to God. In early Christianity as in Tibet, women had more obstacles to renunciation, and had to be more drastic in proving their desire. Like Paula the Elder, Chokyi Dronma was born into the elite, and her fame as a patroness would not have been possible had she not had a lot of money to give away. Elitism rears its ugly head. One of the projects she sponsored were a series of iron suspension bridges around Tibet, built by tantric master and civil engineer Thangthong Gyalpo. Some of these still stand, supposedly made of an alloy resistant to rust. Last but not least, the problem of finding women's voices in history. Chokyi Dronma's biography was written by one of her male disciples. Most of the texts in *Lives of Roman Christian Women* were written by men. Even when they are esteemed, women's own voices are often lost to history. I am suspicious of efforts to uncover these voices, as they often seem to be inventing just as much as uncovering. Thankfully, Diemberger has one way of overcoming this problem: the fact that the Dorje Phagmo lineage is still alive and well in Tibet, as is her famous Samding monastery, rebuilt after its destruction in the Cultural Revolution. Diemberger does a great job of bringing the book back to the present and the continuing enigma of Dorje Phagmo. Oh, and the photos don't hurt.

In the fifteenth century, the princess Chokyi Dronma was told by the leading spiritual masters of her time that she was the embodiment of the ancient Indian tantric deity Vajravarahi, known in Tibetan as Dorje Phagmo, the Thunderbolt Female Pig. After suffering a great personal tragedy, Chokyi Dronma renounced her royal status to become a nun, and, in turn, the tantric consort of three outstanding religious masters of her era. After her death, Chokyi Dronma's masters and disciples recognized a young girl as her reincarnation, the first in a long, powerful, and influential female lineage. Today, the twelfth Samding Dorje Phagmo leads the Samding monastery and is a high government cadre in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Hildegard Diemberger builds her book around the translation of the first biography of Chokyi Dronma recorded by her disciples in the wake of her death. The account reveals an extraordinary phenomenon: although it had been believed that women in Tibet were not allowed to obtain full ordination equivalent to monks, Chokyi Dronma not only persuaded one of the highest spiritual teachers of her era to give her full ordination but also established orders for other women practitioners and became so revered that she was officially recognized as one of two principal spiritual heirs to her main master. Diemberger offers a number of theoretical arguments about the importance of reincarnation in Tibetan society and religion, the role of biographies in establishing a lineage, the necessity for religious teachers to navigate complex networks of political and financial patronage, the cultural and social innovation linked to the revival of ancient Buddhist civilizations, and the role of women in Buddhism. Four introductory, stage-setting chapters precede the biography, and four concluding chapters discuss the establishment of the reincarnation lineage and the role of the current incarnation under the peculiarly contradictory communist system.

Exhibits that rare combination of meticulous historical research and lively prose in recounting a tale that is sure to intrigue readers. (Holly Gayley Buddhadharma) A significant contribution to Tibetan cultural history and gender studies. (Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*) There are too many points of

interest in this brilliant and often innovating book to be mentioned here. (Anne Chayet Historian)About the AuthorHildegard Diemberger is director of the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit and a fellow of Pembroke College at the University of Cambridge. She has published extensively on the anthropology of Tibet and the Himalayan regions and, with Pasang Wangdu, has coauthored the translations of the Shel dkar chos 'byung and the dBa' bzhed.